Gaming Horror’s horror: Representation, Regulation and Affect in Survival Horror Videogames

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Theorising Horror and game media has been largely Frankensteinian in nature: suturing together discursively diverse models in an effort to articulate an elusive, excited feeling of vertigo that certain formations create and wherein physical sensation and hermeneutic vitality interrelate. Through their generic demands, horror games explore ways to play with, and against, game media’s normative expectations of mastery and its concomitant representational, symbolic, and emotional contours. Conceptions of affect provide an important dimension to our understanding of how Horror has formed around certain enticements, patterns and sensations: this more-than-meat or -machine, sensing and definitional corporeality is fundamental to consciousness, experience, creativity and agency. In this sense, affect is best understood as *potential*, the force that produces sensation and which grows in intensity to prepare the body for action. Affect’s ‘prior’ status, however, does not make it immune from outside sources or constructs, structures and patterns which might be thought of as of the mind; indeed such patterns are more likely to grow out of our physiological apparatus and, in an evolutionary sense, affect must have some connection to mind if it is to act in relation to signs of danger. It is on this basis that Horror is able to go about its affective business, both textual and cultural. Yet, contrary to any rhetorical compulsion to polarise, focus on affect does not require structuralist and representational approaches to be cast adrift in a sea of redundancy. Instead, I advocate against totalising, monist manoeuvres and understandings of affect that regard it as sealed off from representation (along with the historical plane of culture, textual and hermeneutic evolutions and convolutions); my position is that affect can be generated by and is effected by representation and the symbolic.

While we might want to deemphasize the textual and cultural formation of Horror for the purpose of seeing better the role played by affect, it is nonetheless hard to distinguish absolutely between the representational and non-representational, much as it is between material and meaning. Representational and non-representational elements within a fiction work in concert to gain currency with affect. Fiction creates a hermeneutic frame that has a very specific and fundamental effect on affect generation, wherein stimulus is judged on the basis of learning, creating a further affective feedback loop which has its own colour and intensity (my position here is admittedly freighted within game-maker rhetoric). It is therefore vital that the textual machinery of Horror fiction in an audio-visual context is not disregarded as unimportant in consideration of affect; cultural locatedness and hermeneutics are required to grasp the holistic, textual effect on affect. In Horror-based video games, emotion and its control, representation and sensorium come together in new and powerful ways to act on affect.

The formations arising out of the specific material of digital games have suited well the “gamification” of Horror. With a media that relies on regulated and coordinated physical input from players, altered affordances materialize that work productively and uniquely at the seam of affect. Using novel textual means to discomfort the player is important to this, working closely with the sense of expectation that comes from familiarity. Horror art generally seeks to disguise the representational frame that helps to mark it out as *fiction* as a powerful means to intensify its affective effect, a trick that requires novel textual deftness to mislead hermeneutic expectations; games follow this suit. In the Lovecraft-inspired game *Eternal Darkness* (2002) for example, the console on which the game is played appears to malfunction, a means of attempting to break through the representational frame and minimise the distinction between player and the character they play (perhaps succeeding before it is recognised as a textual device). What this hiatus does is to prevent the player from playing: the primary ‘act-on-the-situation’ contract of games is undermined, lending a palpable sense for the player of helplessness, their hands no longer able to enact will through the suddenly lifeless controlling device. This sense is also exacerbated by the theme and narrative of the game which focuses on the loss of a controlling grasp on the nature of reality (nothing is what it seems) and the concomitant ’reality’ of occulted forces. These features prepare the ground for the way the game plays with representation to provide a sensory means of shaking any firm sense of mastery and control. In this holistic sense, the game works ‘widdershins’ (as a means of creating greater intensity) on affect’s preparatory role as a call to action made possible through a disruption of both normative game *and* genre grammar.

Horror’s drive to provide powerful sensations by, however successfully, calling into question its fictional status has a long history. A beginning is found in the 18th century with the animated magic created by the moving parts of the Phantasmagoria, a development on Magic Lantern optical technology, which broke the convention of pictorial stasis and enhanced the spectacle and believability of séances. Grand Guignol theatre of the 19th century boasted the solicitation of violent physical reactions by creating realistic horror effects. Appealing to a wider audience, and distanced by the virtue of the written word, Sensation fiction deployed a combination of real settings, secret-driven plots and fractured identities to appeal ‘directly to the reader’s nerves’ (Gilbert, 2011, p. 2). In all these cases the *mode* of representation is instrumental to the creation of affect, evident precisely because of the incremental requirement for novelty. While these formations permitted their audiences to act only in the context of the fiction through imagination, Horror videogames call on players to perform in regulated and coordinated ways on situations that arise. This additional level of engagement provides a key to understanding how videogame formations prove so forceful in catalysing the type of affect associated with Horror.

Videogames are systems built around a set of outcomes and arrays of feedback events that are contingent on a player’s momentary responses and (ideally well-timed and precise) actions. Feedback might be procedural yet it is also representational, symbolic and sensory. It provides negative and positive reinforcement which works invisibly on affect’s subtle body (odd then that game culture has been characterized, cued by William Gibson, as driven by a desire to be rid of the body). A leading pleasure of games is that they provide an ordered, predictable system which afford players a multi-sensory, clearly demarcated *affirmation* of their skill, competency and autonomy, thereby providing a counterweight to an arbitrary, unpredictable and anxiety-inducing real world. Game pleasure is homeostatic, tying into the drive towards closure or resolution – showing the symbiosis of representation and affect. The sense of affirmation promised by games works with, and against, the fear of failure or stasis. As such, we might place the *feeling* axis of many games on a continuum between frustration and elation. A game’s material and textual configuration are designed around self-affirmation through the conduit of player performance.

As Bergson argues (2004)[1896], the physical passivity imposed when watching a film produces its own affective intensity. Because we cannot act on a virtual situation outwardly, the energy that is generated turns inwards where it is transformed and strengthened, occurring through the very nature of virtuality. If this is the case, what of games? If players are afforded the capacity to take (regulated) action, is less intensity generated? I believe the answer is no because of the need for regulation. Here we cut to differences between playing a digital game, doing things in real life, and watching a film. Currently, and this is likely to change with new user interface technologies, games require a player to make tightly measured movements in response to what occurs on screen. Agency is distilled within these tiny controlled actions: if we get out of hand, we fumble and fail. A player’s hands in conjunction with the game controller are strongly implicated in this reciprocal and sensory matrix (Kirkpatrick, 2009). Hands often respond before a player is fully conscious of a need to act. With such sub-routinized skill in ascendency, many games proffer experiences that affirm a player’s mastery through the unification of physical and cognitive control albeit it in limited context. Affect that affirms autonomy and self-determination is promised through the framework of acting and doing as a hero would, enabling players to inhabit the guise of the ideal-ego. Self-affirmation is *not* however the foundation of the most interesting types of Horror. While the more populist action-based Horror games (*Painkiller*, *Killing Floor* or *Dark Dungeon* for example) present players with the ostensible goal of besting evil and working towards achieving a reinstatement of the status quo, other games defer, undermine or diminish the sense of such mastery.

Survival Horror games work against this normative game grammar of mastery, seeking alternative palette of affect. Survival means scraping through, simply to face yet another dire situation, rather than providing any clear signification of dominance and moral distinctions are obscured. Intense and complex experiences that do not rely simply on a sense of triumph or unproblematized achievement are conjured up from the transformative and interdependent capabilities of representation and performance. Given that games are predicated on giving a player agency within a structured situation, it is equally possible to take that agency away to generate a strong and direct sense of loss and vulnerability. *Silent Hill* provides a classic example as it deliberately interferes with player performance by taking away the power to see what is coming and removing a player’s ability to read real space sound cues. The game removes the cues that players expect to use in order to manage and contain situations. Unnerved and blinded, unable to act as efficiently as would be expected, tallies with the use of tropes of claustrophobia found across Horror and Gothic fiction to stimulate affect to produce sensation and emotion. Panic is of course a highly effective way to disrupt a player’s sense of self-assurance. *Left 4 Dead* intensifies this through its internal (and occulted) game AI that ‘watches’ player’s performance, by throwing a horde of zombies their way when it detects that players might be gathering resources or re-grouping to improve their performance. The effect is that the usual sense of autonomy and self-determination that games promise to create is shaken. Less generically-determined games such as *The* *Stanley Parable* play on players’ expectations that they should read, trust and follow the representational cues provided by a game; comfort and autonomy is lost through the game’s twist on the unreliable narrator. *Bioshock* too also showed player-characters through a twist in its story-line that far from affirming autonomy and self-determination, they were in fact conditioned to respond in regimented and regulated ways. These two games use expectations of both representative and performance cues to create affect in the realm of Horror.

The most effective and affective Horror games might then be said to make a play through representation and performance to work against the usual Vitruvian coordinates of games (used to work with the types of affect associated pleasure, agency and assuredness). In these games, it becomes manifest to players that they dance possessed according to the rhythm of the Other – felt perhaps through an experience of a game’s ‘occulted’ programming, as well as the pulse of our not-so-owned corporeality. In place of the informative pleasures of self-affirmation and a clockwork universe, the ‘pleasure’ here is far more complex and transformational, succinctly emblemized by Roger Caillois’ term ‘Ilinx’, indicative of ‘a state of dizziness and disorder’ (2001, p. 12). The power of game media for Horror is therefore that it has the potential to generate formations – though an inter-relation between representation and performance – that are geared towards creating a pervasive experience of vertigo of the type that Lovecraft identifies as the most affecting form of Horror. Horror’s horror cannot be countenanced without placing focus on affect, yet affect must also be regarded in relation to text and context, representation and the symbolic.

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