Formations of Player Agency and Gender in Gothic Games

Tanya Krzywinska, Falmouth University

Digital games are an established feature of contemporary popular culture. They are no longer confined to desktop computers or consoles. We find them embedded in social media, on our smartphones and tablets. While digital games *were* designed for and played by those with high levels of technological and gaming literacy, they now reach into a far wider market, with elements of games employed in advertising, business, training and education, as well as consumer and communications cultures. Freed from the constraints of learning to use interfaces such as keyboards or game-pad controllers and from expensive, dedicated hardware, games have extended their invitation to a more varied range of people. In addition, it is also increasingly easier to make games, with simplified drag-and-drop interfaces provided by game engines such as Unity. As a result, games are losing their technological opacity and extend beyond the tastes and competencies of the traditionally male-dominated market (Ofcom, 2014). While these developments are positive and create a broader and more gender-inclusive participation with digital game media, game development companies are nonetheless still largely populated and led by men. Resistance to equality-driven change is also in evidence, with mainstream news channels in the closing months of 2014 giving voice to misogynist voices claiming to represent gamers, angrily expressing a minority desire to preserve games from "feminist insurgents". Representations of gendered embodiments, psychological profiles and role functions within games commonly make use of stereotyped and often gender-exaggerated modes to attract players. This is particularly the case in big-budget high risk games made for the "Triple A" market which target male players (such as the Grand Theft Auto or Call of Duty series for example). Less risk-averse and lower-budget games do design for other markets however. As such, powerful, agentic and often complex female characters are not completely absent from the field of games. Within this group there is a particularly high proportion that draw on the Gothic, often sold under the rubric of horror or fantasy. Game development companies often use Gothic as form of branding to attract a pre-established market, in so doing they take advantage of Gothic fiction's appeal across the gender divide to reach beyond the usual male market for games. As distinct from other games, there are also a relatively high percentage of Gothic games that are designed by women. An early example is the story-rich point-and-click game *Phantasmagoria*, released in 1995, designed by Roberta Williams in which the female protagonist battles with a demon who has possessed her husband. Another later example is *Primal* (2003) designed by Katie Lea in which a young woman discovers during her search for a kidnapped boyfriend that she has a range of demonic powers. Gothic games that provide powerful and complex female playable characters are not limited to female lead designers however*,* as indicated by *American McGee's Alice* (2000) and *Bayonetta* (2009).

Aspects of Gothic supplies for these particular games a basis for a departure from the dominant use of either male playable characters or playable characters designed simply to function as empty vehicles for entry into a game's diegetic space. Gothic games generally call on the generative traditions and forms of previous Gothic fictions, but *Phantasmagoria*, *Primal*, *American McGee's Alice* and *Bayonetta*, in particular draw from those narratives that are told from a woman's point of view and which, as a result, can be claimed under a cultural rubric as "Female Gothic" (Moers, 1976). Very specifically, they call on Anne Radcliffe's imprisoned and pursued heroines, the stand-and-fight heroines found in some of Angela Carter's work and perhaps more directly from that employed by Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. In all these cases – including Radcliffe – agency, enacted, imagined and constrained is pivotal to narrative and character arc, as well as the types of resonances that are likely to be read into and off these configurations. Not only do such characteristics explain the considerable appeal of Gothic for game developers and audiences, but they also motivate the presence of representations that break with conventional alignments of function and gender that is

more commonly present in games, even if such disruptions are ameliorated through some form of conditionality. While the "subversions" of game conventions cannot be claimed as "Feminist Gothic", they nonetheless express issues and tensions around gender and agency current with contemporary culture through the medium of participatory media and they are games that actively invite the interest of women and girls. Given that games have very often been designed by men to appeal to the pleasures and competencies of men and boys, it is noteworthy that aspects of Gothic have been used to seek to engage what the industry called a few years ago a "new" market, i.e. women and girls. Within this context, the deployment of Gothic formations can therefore enact a form of agency for female players, which provides, in this relativist sense, an extra power to fracture conventional gender alignments that has consolidated within the risk averse context of digital games. On this basis, the core argument of the chapter is that certain iterations of Gothic *can* be used very effectively in games to disquiet and demythologise thoughtless formations of agency and gender that are perpetuated within many games.

It may prove helpful to readers unfamiliar with digital games to sketch out the diverse use of the scope of the Gothic in games. Gothic formations can be found across game genres: Role-playing, First and Third Person Shooters, Survival Horror, Casual, Action-Adventure, Stealth and Strategy, as well as platforms: mobile, console, PC, or they may be used in games made by any size of development studio. It is therefore clear that Gothic offers useful cultural capital for game developers and designers, acting often as form of branding. To make some sense of this field, I'll begin by dividing Gothic-inspired games into five distinctive groups which span across game genre divides. The first includes those games that are designed to appeal to the traditional shoot-em-up and beat-em-up market, such as *Outlast* (2014), *Painkiller* (2004), *Quake 4* (2005) or the dandy-esque Devil May Cry franchise[1]. These games offer fast-paced action, affording a strong but easily-acquired sense of conquest for the player. Characters are often quickly sketched and the storyline minimal, usually a zombie apocalypse or similar, and linear. These games tend to privilege action and have mainly male playable characters who are in pursuit, rather than pursued. As such, in a conventionalised and game context as well as in a performative sense, these games can be claimed aesthetically as male, but their muscular and triumphant nature splits them off from Robert Miles' scopophilic definition of "Male Gothic" (Miles, 2009: 55), typified by Lewis' *The Monk* (1796) and locates them more appropriately within "hero" based fictional formations, which have greatest purchase in contemporary culture through Hollywood's action movies. The second group are those games that combine action-adventure format with Gothic storylines and iconography, such as *American McGee's Alice* and *Primal*, although *Bayonetta* however draws on elements of both groups. It is in this group that there is a good proportion of games with female protagonists, and all adopt a female point-of-view, as such I claim them as a "Female Gothic" in the context of games and it is from this group that most of the games discussed in the chapter are taken. Games within these two groups are often made by established studios and require considerable investment to make. The third group includes those games that employ Gothic iconography and which are designed for the casual game market. Examples include the Plants versus Zombies series and Zombies, Run!, a suite of gamified, motivational running apps. "Casual games" is a generic terms used within games journalism and by publishers to describe games that are easy to pick up and play, games that do not have complex interfaces and which do not demand much time commitment from their players. They are defined in opposition to "hardcore" games. There is an implicit, rhetorical gendered distinction here that should be noted wherein casual games are feminised as a means of trivialisation (Kubik, 2012). Often casual games are small-scale productions that require less investment, expertise and labour to make yet are designed to appeal across a wide market. As might be expected because of their casual nature, few such games take the Gothic route in more than superficial sense. The fourth group is comprised of "indie" style games that seek experimentally to explore and re-invent both Gothic and game-structures, such as *Among the Sleep* (2014) in which the player takes on the guise

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[1] Note to editor: I am using italics for individual titles and single quotes for franchises.

of a toddler, *Dear Esther* (2012) a game expressly made to approach horror games from an atmospheric rather than action perspective, *Limbo* (2010) which calls on the aesthetic visual style of Lotte Reinger's silhouette fairy tale films and where the central character, coded as male is pursued, Radcliffe-style and dies very often, and *The Path* (2009), a multi-outcome, minimal-action game version of Little Red Riding Hood. Most "Indie" games are made within small teams of game designers for a niche market often trading on their non-standard art work or game mechanics, this means that they can take more risks and are likely to be more experimental in terms of their deployment of Gothic formations. The last, and fifth, group is made up of games that seek to undermine the agency of the player, and provide therefore a counter-weight to the more conventional approach of the first group. This "Weird" group draws on the discomfiting aesthetic of HP Lovecraft and equates to the "horror" which is typified by Lewis' *The Monk* aesthetic that Radcliffe suggests is different to her own brand of Gothic and which Miles describes as 'physicality observed with "libidinous minuteness"' (Miles, 2000: 42). There is no muscular, noisy and spectacular action or triumph in this group as there is in the first group and as such can be claimed as a "Male Gothic" aesthetic in the context of games. Examples include, *I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream* (1995), *Deadly Premonition* (2010) a homage to David Lynch's *Twin Peaks*, and the multiplayer online game *The Secret World* (2012), to which we might add the various game adaptations of Lovecraft's stories such as *Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth* (2005).

While games draw on traditions of the Gothic found in other media, there are certain features of game media that shape the way that Gothic elements may be articulated. Unlike other media, games require physical participation and as well as certain literacies that are unique to digital games. In a game a player's actions and choices are contingent on the design of a game's core mechanics. This instrumental feature means that the type of experience that games are able to offer players is well-disposed to themes that pivot around agency and mastery. Every game is comprised of an array of different systems that define, address and manage a player's actions. The implications of the ways that a game controls and manipulates a player's behaviour will however signify in diverse ways for different players, with gender differences likely to play a part in the way that control is understood and interpreted. Most digital games possess an interface and are composed of rules, progress arcs and winning conditions. Each game tailors these elements according to its own design logic which, in turn, govern the disposition of a game's spatiality and perspective. Therefore, to progress within a game, a player must engage actively with the particular demands set for them by the design of a game's mechanics and semiotic cues. Such mechanics range from the simple to the complex, encompassing what a player has to do in a game as well as the various elements of computing behind delivering the game to screen in concert with the effects of using the interface controls. These mechanics dictate the specific horizon of interactivity, the particular scope of managerial feedback mechanisms delivered by the game and the precise arrangement of the interface. These aspects are all configured around an individual overarching game concept. Negotiation of the meanings of these structures for both player and developer tie, whether acknowledged or not, into often implicitly gendered definitions of action, ineptitude, mastery and failure; the meanings of which are situational. As is evident in Gothic fiction throughout its history, agency and its lack are among the principle verbs (and "anti-verb") on which a vocabulary of gender and sexual difference are produced, reproduced and acquire currency. What types of agency, how it signifies and in what sphere it acquires currency may however change. This lacing together of formations of agency and gender has sources in foundational texts such as the Bible and the Koran and is operative rhetorically and socially. While not immanent and constructed through social, cultural and economic paradigms, the allegiance is still nonetheless evident across many of the world's cultures. It might therefore be thought of as a grand narrative on which Gothic rests. Materialist, feminist, structuralist and psychoanalytic models might approach agency and gender from different perspectives, yet they share the premise that gender difference (much like other modes of difference such as class and race) is organised around an economics of agency. Hélène Cixous makes the agenda plain:

'Organisation by hierarchy makes all conceptual organisation subject to man. Male privilege, showing in the opposition between activity and passivity, which he uses to sustain himself. Traditionally, the questions of sexual difference is treated by coupling it with the opposition activity/passivity' (Cixous, 1989: 102). She is careful to historicise oppositional troping of gender according to passivity and activity, yet such convergences persist in mimetic fashion, thereby allowing fiction to find dramatic effect in playing with such roles and as such is able to explore divergence between gender expectations and experience. As Kosofsky (1980) argues, a central plank of Gothic is a thematic and iconographic focus on inaction and lack of agency, emblemised by claustrophobia and burial alive: given that games promise players action and agency, this discrepancy seems somewhat unpromising. Yet often it is working with this promise that game designers can begin to challenge what might be thought of as games' central pleasure, a sense of agency as mastery. Agency can however be cast in diverse ways – contingent or individualist for example - and can be operative across different spheres: in terms of character and/or story, or in terms of ludic mechanics and/or player agency. Moral choices, for example, might be centralised to the ludic design of a game rather than simply side-lined as they often are in the fast-paced zombie style shooters. Gender contextualises the articulation of agency in games, feeding back into the design logic of a game, and playing a role in the way that player choice is managed and Gothic influences the ways in which this might occur.

Radcliffe's foundational model of the pursued and terrified heroine is acted out in a range of different Gothic games, in the interactive context of *Phantasmagoria* (1995) for example. This point-and-click game worked with limited computing resources and its innovation was to overlay filmed footage of the player's character, Adrienne Delaney played by actor Victoria Morsell, onto computer generated images. The use of real footage made more convincing Adrienne's frightened reactions to events than was possible with computer animation at that time. In accord with the Radcliffean model, Adrienne is pursued by her demonically-possessed husband until she is killed by him or dispatches the demon through right actions enabling her to leave the house. The player is aware that the game provides a way to do this and has to work through the clues on a trial and error basis. As such Adrienne is likely to "die" at the hands of her husband-demon many times, a repetition that diminishes both death and dramatic tension and which importantly places agency with the player who can also act, if they wish, sadistically siding not with Adrienne but with the demonic; players can of course have it both ways – killing her and saving her at the same time. In a Carter-esque twist on Radcliffe's model, Adrienne finally lures the demon into a subterranean bloody chamber where she, in concert with a player, is able to dispatch it and finally leave the confines of the house. In this sense Adrienne has agency on the external world and events in narrative terms, in her active, investigative approach which is practically focused towards coping, prevailing and expressing herself. Here there is a clear departure to Radcliffe's model, where agency for the heroine lies mainly within the sphere of the imagination. This departure is partly related to the nature of game media where players act through mediation of characters. In addition, it is also fuelled by Angela Carter's re-conception of the Gothic "heroine", made in the mode of Sade's active Juliette rather than passive, suffering Justine, and leading to Whedon's contemporary expression of the Female Gothic in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003).

Making use of Manuel Aguirre's analysis of Shelley's *Frankenstein* (Aguirre, 2013), I have argued elsewhere (Krzywinska, 2015) that the notion of the false hero, as a figuration of tragedy and entropy, is important to understanding the way that a Gothic game can work against the convention of unqualified mastery as a dominant mode of figuring agency in play in many videogames. For Aguirre, 'a key to Gothic…resides in its centering the flawed character as protagonist...[while] the standard hero of traditional tales is often demoted to a helpless or passive stance.' (Aguirre, 2013: 11). In the use of such weirdling figurations, games can move from the conventional alignment of agency and action with representations and embodiments coded as masculine through the ability to

act decisively and masterfully on and in situations. In *American McGee's Alice* the active, rational position is represented not by a scientist or muscled hero, or a caring Dad coping with the Apocalypse as in *The Last of Us* (2013), or even by a protective maternal female of the type discussed by Yvonne Tasker (1993). This game's Alice is not going about rescuing anyone at all, as Tasker argues is the condition for the action heroine in Hollywood, and there are no explicit surrogate children. Alice encounters situations and characters that cannot be made sense of, yet retains a clear-sighted yet contrarian grumpiness which establishes her individuality for the player. While Alice is contingent on the player for her agency to play out, the player is also contingent on her for their agency in the game. The designers did however miss a trick here. If this contingency had been noted *diegetically*, then the game could have moved widdershins on usual hero-style game conception of agency as individualist action. Alice has a helper, the Cheshire cat, who comments on progress and gives hints; yet as Alice is false hero, so her helper is a false helper: he's unpredictable and sarcastic, and with his silky tones and demonic features characterized in the guise of Radcliffean villain rather than as helper. Contingency-based agency that counters the hero model goes a little further in *Primal* as Jen works more fully in partnership her gargoyle companion to solve puzzles to act on the world and to help save her boyfriend. While actions used in playing as Alice bear comparison to that used to play Lara Croft in the Tomb Raider games, the meaning of those actions are recast through the Gothic milieu of *American McGee's Alice* and acquire a strange, quietly desperate and deeply unheroic cast. And, while Lara Croft is merely a one-dimensional hero-machine with few signs of possessing subjectivity, Alice is most clearly possessed of a willful subjectivity in part by virtue of her textual heritage. Her subjectivity and will are strongly signified verbally and in terms of the way she is animated showing her reactions to the topsy-turvy world that she seemingly unwillingly inhabits. In addition, it is hinted at that this world is of her own imaginative making. And, unlike Lara, Alice talks throughout game play. Alice, Bayonetta and Jen share their thoughts and feelings with their companion helpers, in all cases assuring the player that they are meant to be regarded as separate, living-breathing and thinking others. These characters express how gender and agency are often figured in contemporary culture for the way that gender and agency are often expressed in contemporary culture, not through civic or political action but instead, filtered through the lens of Gothic culture, through the display and performance of quirky, conventionally unconventional individualism.

Alice, Bayonetta and Jen are not therefore just false heroes because they differ from mass-produced, masculinized hero-cyborgs found in many games. Through deployment of Gothic grammar each have something demonic or witchy about them which shapes the articulation of their agency. Physically small and slender, Jen of *Primal* discovers that she can transform into different, clawed and muscular demonic forms that allow her to fight physically. Alice uses her toys to destroy without remorse and inhabits a world that is not formed around a simple good-versus-evil binary. Bayonetta is a laconic witch working on the side of darkness, who in graceful balletic moves kills untold numbers of aggressive Angelic beings before breakfast. These formations are figured around worlds and scenarios that permit the centralization of the false hero figured as empathetic women and girls, rather than narratological cyphers. They provide examples of how when placed within weirdifying quotation marks, a more diverse figuration of character agency can be drawn. While the condition for agency here seems to be some kind of madness, recalling the debate between Clement and Cixous (1986) on whether hysteria can be regarded as a feminist strategy, what *is* clear is that the Gothic role of false hero provides an alternative model to hero-based games for building, at least, a wider, more diverse vocabulary of character agency than that typified within shooter and adventure game format. For all these characters agency comes at the cost of some aspect of their humanity as each acquire something monstrous; this is, as in Angela Carter's becoming animal version of fairy stories (as with 'The Tiger's Bride' for example) certainly liberating and libidinal, but there is palpable, Frankenstein-styled, cost. Sanity and family in the case of Alice and the female protagonist of *Phantasmagoria*, both of whom are simply trying to survive a nightmare. In contrast,

Jen comes off the best of the bunch. She is able transform *at will* and her powers are deployed in pursuit of saving her beleaguered boyfriend. This is not successful however, preserving her status as false hero. This ending is interesting, certainly Gothic in tone, and must be understood in a medial context within which most games are motivated to allow the player to triumph over adversity and therefore master potential threat to their ego. Apart from the more Radcliffean ending of *Phantasmagoria* where Adrienne bests the demon male presence and steps out of the bloody chamber house into sunlight, these other "Female Gothic" games offer no resolution, coupling or triumphant pay off. Alice may even be her own enemy, cast as other through the image of the Red Queen and Bayonetta is a quirky oddity, perhaps by virtue of its Japanese authorship, wherein the traditional western iconography of angels versus demons is reversed; but it is only in this game that the denouement involves Bayonetta killing her father and spared death by being saved, rather than persecuted, by a queen who punches the Creator into the sun in an echo of the rescue of the girl in Angela Carter's version of Bluebeard 'The Bloody Chamber' (1979).

The notion of a "Female Gothic" in the context of games is not designed here to suggest that gender or sex is immanent. Instead it is used to show how gender is constructed and performed through the texts that comprise culture. It also provides a means of bringing gender back to the (game) design board in a theoretical milieu where some critics, in a premature application of Donna Haraway's speculative post-human model, emphasise and celebrate digital game players as post-human (Keogh, 2014), a position that while tantalising, and hinted at when playing online in the skin of an avatar of no-gender or differently gendered, nonetheless elides the pervasively embodied and experiential nature of gameplay (Kirkpatrick, 2011; Carr, 2007, 2013), as well as the rhetorics in which that embodiment is conventionalised and understood socially and culturally. When playing a game we may not be represented in the game space as "woman" or even as human at all, but our lived, socialized experience interweaves with the pervasive constructions that name and claim us and how we use our bodies as women or men, even if we resist or contradict those. If games so often articulate agency in terms of heroism and individualism, there are however other economies of agency that are at work on games generally and which acquire something further through a Gothic frame.

Left 4 Dead 2 (2009) is a Zombie Apocalypse game that by virtue of its co-operative nature might represent a difference to the usual conception of agency as individualist found in many shooter-style games. Working in teams of four, players are represented in the game by an unlikely alliance between a redneck teenaged boy, a twenty-something African-American woman, a large, middle-aged African American man and a wide-boy white man. Together they must survive various scenarios of a Zombie Apocalypse. Ostensibly they work together and in concert with their players to clean up the mess, listening out for different types of special monsters that threaten in different ways to wipe out the team. While co-operation is certainly required, effect agency is often contingent on concerted action and there is no distinction between the differently embodied characters in terms of their capacity to act effectively, the game nonetheless deploys attributes found in more conventional shooter that encourage competition between players in terms of kill rate. Should one player-character die then there is no game mechanism to assure that the other players go back to retrieve them, weakening the games claim on agency through contingency. In the end it's still about individual survival even if the characters exhibit some attributes of the false hero (a feature that calls on Romero's anti-heroic *Night of the Living Dead* [1968]). Here we see the pull of the gamic convention to figure agency in a way that emphasizes competition and individualism. By contrast in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Chaos Bleeds* (2003), a solo player game, "the big bad" can only defeated with the help of *all* the Buffy gang who the player plays one at a time. Contingency is perhaps most apparent in multiplayer games with large worlds where it is difficult for every player inhabitant to be figured as hero/saviour and takes on a Gothic form in multiplayer online game *The Secret World* (2012). Here players have to work together supporting each other with their different

skills in order to undertake dungeons. This ensemble-playing is though derived from classic table-top RPG rather than specifically from Gothic literature, although Joss Whedon's Buffy series is informed by the practice and directly referenced. *The Secret World* does however give the player a strong sense of weird isolation and humility, even though a player is chosen by a faction to fight, their efforts are contingent on that faction's resources and support. A player is also just one among many and while small victories might be won, there is a strong pessimistic sense that no amount of fighting will prevent the demise of the human world, limiting therefore any sense of personal agency. In addition to which it is extremely difficult to ascertain the moral alignment of factions or groups for whom the player works; this makes choices seem random and therefore alters the "heroic" condition of agency more usually found in games. This is an excellent example of how a game makes use of contingency and moral ambiguity to drain meaning from any winning condition and its concomitant sense of unbounded agency and mastery. Power is localized and contingent for humans and put into perspective in relation to the Big Other that stalks the defiles of the game. In this context conventional alignments of masculinity and power suffer most and it is perhaps no coincidence that it is long term resident Norma Creed who holds out longest when all the "menfolk" of Solomon Island have died or turned inhuman. In this game and in the other games discussed above that emphasise a contingent model of agency, an untroubled, unilateral approach to power becomes untenable and, by virtue of the Gothic frame, is both bounded and comes at a cost, felt palpably within the agency offered to a player.

I want now to turn to the value of seeing games where player agency is eroded and undermined in terms of a "Male Gothic". In a media context which sells itself on giving players agency in a game, Gothic can be deployed in such a way as to undermine the standard pretence of unconditional agency for a player. It is often in these games that the player is embodied in the game not as a woman but instead as male and it seems logical to assume that this is because women are less potent signifiers of effective agency than men. Game media has some unique, characteristic seductions, the principle one of which is that it offers (at least) the illusion of agency and action to a player, of whom more appropriately controlled physical action is demanded than that of the reader or spectator. Agency and action are the core affordances of games, while in thematic terms a lack of either is integral to the Gothic. While this might appear to be a severely contradictory, dissonant show-stopper, an apposite combination can produce a visceral and engaging experience. In giving the player the capacity to act, to become an agent, indeed promising them that pleasure, provides the context within which any abrupt curtailment of that agency can have potentially a powerful, visceral emotional and psychological impact. For example, in Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth, fear is used as a mechanic to prevent a player from taking action, placing that player very palpably in the shoes of Radcliffean heroine who can only imagine resistance and in a game convention sense gendering the player as female/feminine. Such a possibility arises because games are far more than simply representational artefacts: a player's performance and physicality are deeply implicated in the equation.

Games are commonly defined by the presence of a winning condition. Winning conditions afford players an unconditional sense of progress and achievement. They might be temporary or terminal affairs. Games generally work, in an operant conditioning sense, on the basis of giving a player positive feedback that leads to the achievement of a set goal. Players win in *A Vampyre Story* by working through the puzzles one-by-one to release Mona from the island-castle where she has been imprisoned by the Dracula figure, so she can pursue her aspiration to become an opera singer; the narrative alongside the feedback mechanics work to make players feel good to have done so. The systems and structures of games such as these are also designed to create an appetite to continue to play by giving bursts of pleasure as challenges are overcome thereby shoring up a player's sense of agency. As such, games can be regarded as highly loaded performance management devices wherein certain behaviours are enforced and reified. But it is possible in games to play *on and with*

such devices. Revealing the manipulative nature of games and the illusion of player agency within the diegesis is achieved and wryly deployed in the Deco-Gothic styled dystopian first person game *Bioshock* (2007), a game that I claim here for "Male Gothic". The player-character is told half way through the game, to great dramatic effect, that they've been mind-controlled throughout: what of agency now? Rather than accruing a bolstered sense of agency for the player, as in commonly pursued by games, it is clear that the player has instead been played. This maneuver certainly pulls the rug out from any allegiance between any pleasurable experience of mastery and control and conventional definitions of masculinity. The game's various endings are far from triumphant and in the cases of two of the three endings culminate with condemnation of the actions of the player-character who will have just followed the expected path used within most games by killing the threatening and demonic-looking Little Sisters that populate the game. This play on conventional gamic agency reveals it as contingent, fragile and illusory. *Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth* also operates with a different, decidedly weird, model of agency for its players. Players are highly vulnerable throughout and for large part of the game they can only run from dangerous situations and try to avoid being paralyzed by fear in face of the monstrous other. Winning is simply surviving rather than triumphant overcoming. Breaking the definition of agency as player mastery is also themed in *Eternal Darkness* (2002) which tries to convince the player – not just the character they play - that they are going mad and haunted: the player is addressed *as* a player during the game when it appears that the game console has been switched off and removing an agency over the game's controller. More recently, horror games for the Oculus Rift, such as *Alone in the Rift* (2014) and *Dreadhalls* (2014) have exploited the physical and perceptual effects of a 360 degree immersive virtual space to play with and on player agency and in so doing call on the aesthetics of "Male Gothic" by placing emphasis on scopophilia – the rift is strapped around the eyes and by re-embodying a player in their own skin and then creating an experience that finds its thrill by putting a player beyond their own physical and perceptual agency. When agency is so contested and contingent in our real lives, it is perhaps no small wonder that the virtual offerings of mastery within games has proved so seductive; yet games and particular Gothic games that actively engage with entropy – the arch-enemy of agency and progression - are capable of figuring agency and mastery against dominant game conventions. Such games can provide the affective and embodied experience that lead us to ask if we have any personal or social agency and whether meaning and identity have not just simply been coopted to boost the overweening consumerist ego.

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