

The Gamification of Gothic Coordinates in Videogames

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Abstract

Videogames may rely on the highly logical nature of computing technology, but that does not mean they are immune to the dark touch of Gothic; far from it. Gothic themes, characters, stories, and environments can be found across a wide range of videogames, from puzzle games to multiplayer online games and from shoot ‘em ups to strategy games. More wide-ranging and focused work is certainly required as there is a major lack of sustained scholarly engagement with Gothic in videogames.¹

In an effort to begin the task of remedying this and as part of a more extensive project (a book entitled 'Gothic Games' [forthcoming]), this paper plots some initial coordinates of the domain, locating some of its major features, and provides a framework for evaluating the uses of Gothic in games. The foundation on which this analysis rests is an amalgam of two materials. The first is comprised of concepts, models and ideas that have been developed specifically for the analysis of videogames within what has become known as Game Studies. The second is drawn from concepts, models and ideas developed for the analysis of Gothic within what has become known as Gothic Studies. Game and Gothic Studies are both based in the Humanities and share through the lens of Cultural Studies a common attentiveness to the formation and reception of certain types of texts and their “meaning potential”; laden with signification and organized around patterns, texts both carry and are constitutive of culture. As Mikko Lehtonen puts it, “texts are not stuck on top of the rest of the world, as messages detachable from it, but participate in a central way in the making of reality as well as forming our image of it”(2000, 11). Gothic Studies evaluates texts, the way they are used and engaged with across a range of media and cultural practices. Game Studies focuses specifically on the formal specificities of games and the way they are played and engaged with. This paper calls on material from both provinces to fulfil its primary aim of understanding the effect that videogame media have on the appearance of Gothic in games and to stage its argument that videogame media has the capability to produce a powerful and compelling addition to Gothic fiction’s arsenal of affect.

Keywords: games, Gothic, gamification,

This paper pivots on an expanded use of the verb “gamification”. Gamification’s definition extends beyond its use in the context of Serious Games (where game-like features are used to change behavior, such as encouraging workers to save energy in the workplace) and can be used in addition to describe the process of adapting a text, activity, genre, mode or style into game form. While this paper takes the position that Gothic is always rhetorically constituted, it claims there are more coherent claims on the nomenclature than others, and that these must be identified if we are to understand in what form Gothic appears in games. To make for more internal coherence, it is necessary to begin by situating the work in this paper in relation to work in both Game and Gothic Studies.

Scholarly work on videogames has grown apace since the first flush of books and articles that came out in the early 2000s. Setting out the terms of this new field of academic study meant that much of the foundational work adopted a generalist approach by necessity. Espen Aarseth (2003) and Jesper Juul (2001) for example focused on what was common to all videogames and in so doing privileged computing, rules and game mechanics over the descriptive, adjectival and representational aspects of games. By contrast Janet Murray (2001, 2003) focused on games as story-based “cyberdramatic experiences”, an approach that helped spark the “narratology/ludology” debate.² So dominant did this debate become that it obscured or discouraged other approaches to the academic study of games within the Arts and Humanities. This preoccupation with the (problematic) relationships between game rules and story, mechanics and representation, alongside the aspiration to ascertain the universal principles of videogames, left little scope for the investigation of more niche aspects. The situation was further intensified by the denouncement of work that mapped older methods and concepts such as those developed within literature or film studies onto games. Ignoring the value of comparative media analysis, Markku Eskelinen (2001) and Aarseth (2003) pronounced that such endeavour ignored what was radically new and different about the medium of videogames.³ This combative milieu, where rhetoric served in the creation of opposing poles, was not favourable to the study of something so apparently narratological and representational as the presence of Gothic in games, even though aspects of Gothic appeared in a range of well-known commercial games around that time.⁴

More conducive to the study of Gothic in games is a “textual” approach, notably Marie Laure Ryan’s work on immersive, interactive worlds as texts (2001). Craig Lindley (2002) too

advocated a more holistic approach to games, seeing story, rules and mechanics as unified whole, an approach echoed in Barry Atkins' *More Than a Game* (2003). Building on their earlier work and applying Roland Barthes' expanded notion of cultural artefacts as text, Atkins and Krzywinska's introduction to *videogame/player/text* (2007) argued for the textual analysis of games. They did so not just in terms of story and representational gambits, but claimed code, rules and mechanics as intrinsic to the creation of games as "readable" textual artefacts. I would add that 'reading' is often an integral part of playing a game, thereby acting itself as a core game mechanic. Atkins and Krzywinska also noted that games require a player/reader to kick them into action, thereby activating the semiotic, kinetic and affective energies that constitute player experience. Diane Carr extends this text/player synergy by arguing for the importance of taking into account the situated nature of play (2007), an idea developed more sharply in her work on disability and games (2013) which concentrates on the embodied player and the differences in play through the particularity of that embodiment.

⁵ Graeme Kirkpatrick argues for a balance between semiosis and experience, suggesting that fixing exclusively on the 'meaning' of games elides the fact that our pleasure in playing games, as with playing with a ball, may originate in something more plastic: "Video games do not have to 'mean' anything to be popular and their popularity can be intelligible without reference to interpretation." (2011, 17) The sum of such scholarship provides a more nuanced understanding of the complex relations between videogame, player and text and it is symptomatic that the analysis in this paper attends to the experiential "doing" element of what it is to play a game in order to make its argument that games have the capacity to bring a new dimension to Gothic--even if that capability is by no means fully realised. A more rounded approach to the study of games is preferred because it takes into account how games are made, how they are played and how they draw on and are constitutive of culture. Most importantly, textual analysis deployed within this paper allows us to evaluate the types of intertextual patterns and rhythms used to produce and articulate Gothic in games. It further permits evaluation of the impact which the characteristic features of digital games such as interactive, cybernetic, haptic, kinetic and embodied dimensions, have on the way that Gothic is actualized ludically. The movement away from an exclusive rules-centric take on ludology (the study of games) towards more diverse approaches has widened the horizon of Game Studies, thereby enabling work that is more focused on individual games and genres and as well as on topics such as gender and philosophy. This extended range provides the vista required for this initial analysis of how videogame grammar shapes the articulation of Gothic.

Every game is comprised of systems that define and manage a player's actions. Most videogames 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 governs the disposition of a game's spatiality and perspective. Therefore, to progress within a game, a player must actively engage with the particular demands set for him or her by the design of a game's mechanics. These 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 along with the interface controls. The specific horizon of interactivity, the particular scope of feedback mechanisms and the precise arrangement of the interface configure around the overarching game concept. In addition to the characteristics of a given gaming platform and the market intended for that game, all these factors play a critical role in the particular way that a game "gamifies" Gothic. It is methodological consideration of these elements that provide part of the framework for *evaluating* the success of that endeavour.

Conceptual Unification: Evaluating the Gamification of the Gothic

Making a systematic address of how the primary elements of a game treat their Gothic subject only proves productive and transcends taxonomy if an *evaluation* of that treatment is framed by a notional and coordinating sense of what is meant by Gothic. I began this work with an intuitive sense that there are vast variations in the effective, and indeed affective, use of Gothic in games and as work for this study progressed that sense has intensified.

Definition is therefore no simple task, especially considering that Gothic has spanned such a breadth of mood, time and location. As Fred Botting notes "[t]he diffusion of Gothic forms and figures ... makes the definition of a homogeneous generic category very difficult" (1996, 14). In his discussion of the uncertainty in scholarly definitions of the Gothic, David Punter writes that there is a "significant resistance to canonization" (2000, ix), suggesting that there is no one text that substantiates Gothic. It is therefore largely agreed within recent scholarship on the topic that Gothic is brimful of vertiginous, acute tangents and perplexing ambiguities. Platonic ideals might therefore serve badly if we want to celebrate the sheer variety of its many incarnations, or if we want to mirror that flux in the grain of our scholarly writing. Yet it is nonetheless necessary to pin some basic principles to the board if we're to sharpen our understanding of Gothic in games and indeed endow the term "Gothic" with meaning both

generally and in a ludic context. Games can be regarded as constituted through grammar. Videogame makers select elements from established game grammar to construct the particular vocabulary of that individual game. The same can be said of Gothic. As with games, a set of conventions emerge cumulatively and proliferate from similar texts, sounding the structural beat to which story, style and theme dance. This does not mean an individual convention is stable or foundational however, and we can make useful application here of the structuralist axis of substitution and the plasticity that this affords to any meaning-producing system.⁶ Nonetheless, too radical a change to the overall pattern leads to hybridity and unfamiliarity. In some cases this produces something innovative and experimental, as with Mark Z. Danielewski's dizzying and exemplary novel *House of Leaves* (2000). But other examples simply weaken, rather than reinforce, any claim on Gothic.

A whole range of games certainly draw on Gothic patterns, but is a superficial presence enough to term a game Gothic in meaningful way? Gothic's capacity for constant and definition-bruising reinvention is evident through the ease of its adaptation into game form ("gamification"). Alongside Science Fiction, Gothic vocabulary is very commonly called upon by game developers making digital, blended (part digital) and other types of games (card, board, live-action and table-top games). It is perhaps most meaningfully present in games that seek the status of art and pursue the creation of an experience of the sublime, such as *The Path* (Tale of Tales, 2009) and *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2012). It is also present in those games that utilize the sensationalist qualities of the supernatural to provoke a brooding sense of dread for a player, such as the case with the Silent Hill series (KCET/Konami, 1999–present), *Fatal Frame* (Tecmo/Wanadoo, 2002), and *Dead Space* (EA Redwood/EA, 2008). Gothic tropes also appear in games that do not seek to discomfort players and which may be best defined as "cute", as is the case with *A Vampyre Story* (Crimson Cow/Autumn Moon, 2008) or the Burtonesque *MediEvil* (SCEE, 1988). With these games we have to scrutinise the function of their Gothic elements to evaluate their claim to the nomenclature "Gothic games". Gothic is best regarded as central to their overall concept in games where Gothic themes are woven into story, game mechanics and representational style. In other games, representation and iconography might draw directly on Gothic but cannot be said to pervasively inform gameplay and/or story. *The Secret of Monkey Island* (Lucasfilm Games, 1990) for instance makes use of the supernatural and Gothic tropes but any potential for Gothic affect is lost because of the game's pervasive comedy and light-hearted playfulness.

The articulation of Gothic in games is then no different from other media in the sense that it appears in a host of differently mediated and handled ways, ranging in intensity and deployed for various purposes. Investigating the edges of Gothic, where style might not be underpinned by a more pervasive means of producing the affect of apprehension, helps to better understand what conditions are required to include a game under the label “Gothic Games”.

Gothic Co-ordinates

What then can be claimed to be some of the major coordinating nodes of Gothic? An obliging place to start is the effect of a Gothic milieu on story. Manuel Aguirre argues that Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* makes use of the structural components of the Hero’s Tale, reconfigured to stage the alternative journey of the “false hero”; “a hero who is not a hero” (2013, 11), the one who fails, who succumbs to entropy, the figure of tragedy⁷. The presence of this structural pattern and its particular reconfiguration provides our first major coordinate for defining and evaluating Gothic in games⁸. As Aguirre puts it, “Gothic abides by fairy tale narrative rules; it is only that Gothic individual who crosses over into the Other is no real hero.... A key to Gothic thus resides in its centring the flawed character as protagonist...[while] the standard hero of traditional tales is often demoted to a helpless or passive stance.” (ibid.) This latter point benchmarks a structural patterning that appears in relation to themes and economies of agency in a range of Gothic games and which provides a pivotal node in the process of judging whether the use of the grammar is simply replication or innovation. Examples of games drawing on false hero structures include *American McGee’s Alice* (Rogue Entertainment/EA Games, 2000), *Planescape Torment* (Black Isle Studios/Interplay Entertainment, 1999), *Shadow of the Colossus* (Team Ico/SCE Japan, 2005/2006) and indie games, platformer *Limbo* (Playdead/Microsoft Game Studios, 2010) and roguelike *The Binding of Isaac* (Headup Games, 2011). The ‘false hero’ is therefore are first coordinate.

Our second coordinate is a particular use of *Mise-en-scène* which can be symptomatic and spatially locative of the journey of the “false hero”. Haunted, disquieted and uncanny spaces abound as “representations of estrangement” made strange not by some property of the space itself but as products of the cultural imagination (Vidler, 12). Numerous games make use of Gothic locations, typically haunted houses, spooky woods, crypts and graveyards, derelict

buildings, attics and cellars, without recourse to the “false hero” pattern begging a question about the strength of a given game text’s claim on Gothic.

Our third coordinate is the representation, production and simulation of a related group of psychologically affective emotional states: paralysis, claustrophobia, vertigo, alienation, estrangement, dread, discomfort, disorientation. Games often attempt to provoke such feelings for players and these may arise logically in some cases from game mechanics and story type, aligned often to the return-of-the-repressed structure as well as through the particular deployments of elements of *mise-en-scène*. Like adventure, comedy or romance, Gothic fiction carries a certain affective expectation, although many games that make cursory use of Gothic tropes have no intention to create a pervasive Gothic affect.

The mode of representation, best termed “style”, is our fourth coordinate, encompassing the aesthetic choices made in the realisation of *mise-en-scène*, the types of adjectives used, the objects chosen and used or the type of lighting for example. Style also includes the aesthetic rationale behind the choices made to organise the delivery of a story and is therefore manifest through editing, phrasing, elisions, use of time, auditory and visual elements, such as colour palette. It is important to note that it is not so much the individual components in themselves that comprise Gothic, but how these form patterns and how those patterns draw on the ‘word-board’ of previous Gothic texts and artefacts. Style and *mise-en-scène* commonly come together to produce indirect, environmental story-telling in the context of games. This mode of delivery is linked in to a player’s traversal of the game space and contributes to the creation of a stronger sense of presence within the game world for a player, thereby providing a foundation potentially for the generation of affect.

Out of such configurations emerge different flavours of Gothic that have their own distinctive patterns: Fairy Tale Gothic, Victorian Gothic, American Gothic or (even) Weird, for instance. These Gothic patterns might be juxtaposed with other generic, affective or stylistic patterns to form hybrids or to create meaning through difference; Martin Wills, for example, argues that “Dickens uses Gothic to isolate certain spaces to mark them off” (2012, 22). In addition to which, there may be a largely uniform Gothic style yet with no use of a Gothic “false hero”, or there may a Gothic treatment of a genre (science fiction for example, *Doom 3* is discussed below in this context). There are therefore games that use some aspects of Gothic demonstrating the value of Wills’ exhortation that, ‘[i]t is not where Gothic might be found that is important by why it is found, what it is employed to do’ (Wills, 17). Function therefore

provides our fifth coordinate, helping us to evaluate the potential uses of Gothic in games; for example localised use of Gothic helps reinforces the notion of “home” in *Lord of the Rings Online* (Turbine/Midway, 2007-present) as it does in Tolkien’s works. Gothic is used in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004) with the Undead race to demonstrate moral relativism and in a different context it provides the means to fuse together an ambiguous mix of power and objectification in *Bayonetta* (Platinum/Sega, 2009/2010).

Before going on to look in more depth at particular games as examples of prevailing trends and linking these to our five coordinates, it is useful to our purpose of defining the ‘Gothic game’ to illuminate the specific ways that genre designations operate in videogames. This is necessary because game genre is defined by different means than those used to classify genre in other media. Greater clarity here serves as a means of underlining the unique formal particularities of videogames that shape their engagement with, and articulation of, Gothic.

The genre of a game is generally defined around either the point of view taken by *a player* in a game (“third person”, “first person”), or by the types of activities that define game play (“real time strategy game”, “point-and-click adventure”, “role-playing game”, “puzzle”, “tower defence”, and so forth). It may also be defined on the basis of a mix of these features (an “online first-person tactical shooter” for example). These labels have been established mainly by the game industry as marketing tools, such as retail categories, and those categories are consolidated and popularised through games journalism. Newer genre designations have developed around the game literacy of a target market. The nomenclature “casual games” describes those games made for non-traditional players, as opposed to “hardcore games”, so named because they purport to be designed for consumption by regular or enthusiastic gamers. Many games do however also draw on genres established in other media (western, horror, sci-fi, soap, fantasy). For the sake of clarity, in the context of games these transmedial genre labels are best named “milieu” (King and Krzywinska, 2002). We are then able to speak of a first-person shooter such as *Doom 3* (id/Activision, 2004), set in space with demonic monster enemies, as having a science fiction/horror milieu. Milieu encompasses character design, narrative, atmosphere, and iconography; while genre is defined in the special case of games mainly by aspects of gameplay type or the mode in which a game is played. It is important to note that Gothic in this definitional schema is not just found in milieu (setting), but is also found in the gameplay mechanics and computing configuration from which *a player*’s actions originate. The co-presence of both, alongside our five coordinates (story/character, *mise-en-scène*, affect, style and function), provides a

methodological measure by which to identify games that are most pervasively and meaningfully Gothic in character. An application of this method follows.

Evaluating "Gothic" Puzzle Games

Midnight Mysteries: Salem Witch Trials (MumboJumbo/Avanquest, 2010) (*MM:SWT* from here on in) is a recent representative of a well-established genre of point-and-click, find-the-hidden-object, puzzle games, a genre which Clara Fernández-Vara argues (2009) has been overlooked in academic writing on games. Such games use many different themes but the *Midnight Mysteries* series of games specialize in stories that weave their fiction around American Gothic writers of the 19th century. The first-person point-and-click puzzle genre has traditionally targeted the 'casual' gamer and rose to popularity with *Myst* (Cyan/Broderbund 1991), a commercially successful game critically lauded for its immersive qualities. Given the early prominence and longevity of the format it has some dedicated followers, although it is not a genre popular with console gamers looking for a more action-packed game experience. Nonetheless, the genre has acquired renewed life through the widespread popularity of hand-held devices, particularly the iPad, that in many cases lack the graphical resources needed for 3D-based games mainly developed for PC or console gaming. More specifically, *MM:SWT* represents games that place and combine elements of American and populist Gothic vocabulary in the context of a 2D graphical environment, even if some of the models are made using 3D software and using particle effects (fire and smoke in particular). In this context there is minimal use of animation, mainly reserved for low resource effects such as picking up and finding objects or to highlight some aspect of the storytelling. Added to which, simple game mechanics engage players through puzzle-solving with a linear story.

In drawing on witchcraft in American history and fiction, the title signals strongly the Gothic nature of the game. Acting as a detective and making use of first person perspective (in a game this is equivalent to first person narrative), a player seeks to resolve the mystery surrounding the unexpected death of writer Nathaniel Hawthorne in a snowstorm⁹. The game makes use of events and places in the author's real life, plus references to his literary works, which are hung on a return-of-the-repressed narrative structure that originates thematically from the various sins of the founding fathers. As such the game calls on a familiar American Gothic variation on a narrative structure common to Gothic generally. It does so in a recursive way through a literal evocation of American Gothic authorship, which is further

synonymous with the disturbed psycho-geography of Salem, thereby signifying that the supernatural has broken through the protective magic circle of fiction into the 'real' world. The game's story and ludic structure plays on a mystery about Hawthorne's life that has buttressed biographic scholarship on the author; it is claimed that Hawthorne was possessed of a dark secret, with various claims as to its nature, typified by Philip Young's contentious *Hawthorne's Secret: An Untold Tale* (1984). In the opening scene of the game, Hawthorne appears to a player as a ghost chained and barely able to speak—a quiet, unquiet ghost, seeking help from a player to be put to rest. On agreeing to help him a player is transported to the past and begins the task of piecing together the story. As is typical of a great deal of American Gothic fiction, it is events of the ancestral, colonialist past that trouble him. It is a commonly held belief that in real life Hawthorne added a 'W' to his name to divide him from an ancestor, Jon Hathorne, a judge who sentenced hanging in the Salem Witch trials. In the story of the game, this 'W' becomes the scarlet letter of Hawthorne's eponymous novel and in a rather fuzzy plot twist he is murdered as a result of a curse laid on his family by a Wabnaki shaman for the theft of their land. In a way typical of populist American Gothic, two sources of the return of the repressed are overlaid: patriarchal and colonial oppression are yoked together as a means of appeal to a contemporary Gothic subcultural sensibility.

Young (1984) argues that Hawthorne's dark secret was incest and it is this, rather than the more acceptable sin of adultery, that lies at the base of the novel *The Scarlet Letter*. As a piece of populist puzzle-fiction, the game avoids this Oedipal dimension of Gothic preferring instead a more palatable version of the return-of-the-repressed as colonialist/patriarchal narrative. Such well-worn troping provides the game with several strata of ready-made meaning but betrays the complexity of Hawthorne's novels in which original sin is consonant with the human condition. By contrast, the game's Jon Hathorne is cast as a straightforward Grand Guignol villain, although unlike popular story structures there is no diegetic hero character. Hawthorne enacts Gothic role of the 'false hero', with his lack of bravery, compromise and plea for a player's help. It is however a player who acts as Hero of the piece: should they solve the game's fairly puzzles a player overturns the sins of the fathers to lift the curse and allow Hawthorne's ghost to rest. This task comes at little risk to, or effort from, a player; the puzzles are easily solved and can be ignored completely if a player fails to complete them within a specified time. Within the frame of my evaluative meta-reading this becomes emblematic of the way that the game evokes Gothic monstrosities only to disavow and bury them: resolution goal orientation is an approach common within popular Gothic

texts and no less so in games. The interpellation of a player as hero of the piece is then where the game parts company with our first coordinate of Gothic and indeed from the pessimistic essence of Hawthorne's novels.

The *mise-en-scène* of *MM:SWT* is laden with Gothic configurations. The Salem setting for the game is the most prominent, with its court-house, graveyard and surrounding twisted woods, prison-house and witch's cottage. These provide the context that transforms ordinary objects, such as a cooking pot or doll, into Gothic ones. The game's objects are both ludically charged and highly economical adjectival devices for storytelling, affordances activated by the use of a player's pre-knowledge of Gothic patterns and tropes. Acting as verbs within the game's hidden object puzzles layered and obscured, in other puzzles they are combined with other objects or used in certain orders to facilitate progress. Objects are therefore over-determined and auratic elements that are integral to the game's deployment of the hermeneutic code. These heavily over-determined, occlusional and intensively gothicised objects function ludically, narratively and intertextually. "Reading" these magical objects is core to a player's engagement with the game; *mise-en-scène* is no longer simply "setting" or a means of storytelling but instrumental to the game's ludic structure. However, despite the auratic quality of the game's objects, the sum of the attentive reading demanded of a player is nonetheless resolution and mastery thereby producing a form of affect akin to gratification and self-satisfaction that sits counter to the types of affect outlined in coordinate three expected of Gothic.

In *Midnight Mysteries: Salem Witch Trials*, the mainly cold and murky colour palette creates a melancholy milieu, lantern-light acts as a memorial to comfort and is oft overpowered by the electric-blue of lightning or the glowing outlines of the many ghosts that populate the game. The game's visual style, our fourth coordinate of Gothic, combines high resolution, photographic texture-based images with far more cartoonishly drawn figures. This odd juxtaposition moves us worlds away from the cel-shaded, cheerful saturated primary colours of the Mario games for example; the mainly cold and murky colour palette creates a melancholy milieu, lantern-light acts as a memorial to comfort and is oft overpowered by the electric-blue of lightning or the glowing outlines of the many ghosts that populate the game. Movement is limited to the collection or combination of objects and there are a few simple three frame animations that lend the game an appropriately antique quality by invoking the minimal moving parts animation of magic lantern slides. In an otherwise meditative game,

infrequent use of animations accompanied by sound works on occasion to startle a player, providing a schlocky, shallow entry into Gothic affect. High resolution images do however make the activity of find-the-hidden-object trickier and the presence of rich visual enigma-laden detail chimes with the ornamentation that often characterizes Gothic. As such the style of the game might be said to seek a visual approximation of Poe's adjective-encrusted prose. Games such *MM:SWT* do not depend on combat for their attraction; instead their pleasures are more analytical. Deductive reasoning and observation underlie the main tasks set by the game, a player is invited into the role of a Dupin or Sherlock Holmes. Rationality and logic are valued over carefully timed actions or manic button-bashing. Where games such as this are well designed, the puzzles are contextualized in such a way that a player should not have to guess or trial solutions. Careful observation is what the game asks of a player, even if the game provides safety mechanisms for failed challenges. Rationalism is a core driver of the momentum of gameplay and when conjoined with a strong sense of resolution further mitigates against the spirit of our coordinates of Gothic; there is no attempt in this game to undermine a player's sense of mastery and unmitigated success. The function of Gothic here is therefore to lend meaning to play and to provide intertextual correspondences that will appeal to a target audience. Reaching beyond the simple evocation of iconography, what is perhaps most pervasively Gothic in terms of function is the way in which the hermeneutic code is written recursively to connect gameplay and story through the frame of the occult. There is *some* unity of concept but any Gothic affect as defined by coordinate three is over-ridden and contradicted by the affect of resolution and mastery.

While *MM:SWTs* has a somewhat tenuous foothold on Gothic when measured against our coordinates, it is helpful to compare the game to a similar example in the same genre but which has an even weaker relation to Gothic in terms of gameplay, character and style principally because of its comedic approach. *A Vampyre Story* ostensibly occupies conventional Gothic grounds in terms of narrative trajectory and certain characters - although it is telling that there is no false hero. A vampire tries to escape from her maker's castle to follow her dream to become an opera singer. However, this scenario is not cloaked in the gloom of existential melancholy or the vibrancy of the grotesque (when compared to the existential crisis of Frankenstein's monster for example); instead, it is all played for laughs. Cel-shaded two-dimensional characters underline the cartoonish approach, underlined by incongruous accents (a bat with a broad Brooklyn accent for example). The game's choice of verbs (the objects employed to solve puzzles) are often comic and wacky, only barely shaded

darkly: for example fruit and nuts collected earlier have to be crushed in a torture device to make oil used to help open a lock. The game is delightfully playful yet it is only the iconography that links it to Gothic in the terms of our coordinates. Boundary crossing here is not of the order of existential transgression: crude puns and bodily humor earths Gothic, sending-up and exposing its 'emo' artifice as preciousness through fleshy, life-affirming comedy. It is therefore only in the use of *mise-en-scène* that this game accords with our coordinates making far fewer connections therefore than *MM:SWT*.

Another point-and-click puzzle game, *Drawn: Dark Flight* (Big Fish, 2010), presents a helpful, further contrast to *A Vampyre Story* and *MM:SWTs* that hinges around a tightly unified fantasy world. The real world is not signified by a real place or by a historical time or figure as it is in *Midnight Mysteries*, nor as a parodic counterweight to fantasy as in *A Vampyre Story*. Located as a faraway place, it is a land falling from light through lifeless shadow into darkness. To restore color and vitality, puzzles must be solved, the solutions to which are presented as a creative act on the part of a player – drawing objects for example. As such, emphasis is placed on making changes through gameplay to the graphical and textural surfaces of the game, rather than opening doors or other more usual game play tasks. In this the game makes strange familiar game vocabulary and in addition marks out its aesthetic artifice: a tendency within Gothic to mark itself out as fantastic and in so doing producing the vertiginous effect of *mise-en-abîme*. The creative colourisation of the puzzle-solving also shifts emphasis away from the deductive reasoning mechanics that characterizes many such games. The puzzle-solving here is, therefore, referential within the game's system (rather than drawing on real-world knowledge as in *MM: SWT*), accruing thereby a whimsical ethereality well-suited to the sensibilities of a Gothic palette. Yet the game nonetheless pivots around restoration, bringing back colour, vibrancy and life. Once again, a player is hero. What can be said here is that the 'false hero' becomes a pivotal feature for defining and evaluating Gothic in games when there are other features present that draw on Gothic vocabularies. When missing and when overrun by arrays of affordances for bolstering a sense of mastery and unproblematic empowerment, correspondences with our other coordinates become weakened. The propensity of games to play towards such pleasures and the implication of this for the gamification of Gothic is discussed in what follows.

Winning, Agency & (not) Death

“a plank in reason broke and I dropped down, and down – hit a world at every plunge and finished knowing...” Emily Dickinson

What we are seeing here is a problem in the ability of these games to adhere fully to our coordinates of Gothic. Games and puzzles are built on the notion that there is a solution, a winning condition, and many games that we might easily call Gothic, such as *Midnight Mysteries*, are therefore caught up within a polarization between the generic vocabulary of games, where players are catalysts for redemption, and the inescapable sense of loss and entropy that characterizes Gothic. There are however different ways that winning can be treated and contextualized while still making use of generic game vocabulary, providing thereby a means to develop a specifically Gothic winning condition that grows out of story and function. Herein winning would not be triumphant, instead melancholy, experienced as a type of loss of something, someone lost—as occurs in *Primal* (SCEE, 2003) where Jen fails to save her boyfriend and loses something of the vulnerability that makes her human, or, perhaps, simply surviving in a metaphysically disturbed and physically hostile world. The total rejection of any winning conditions in a game may push the grammar too far and in ways that are simply aggravating to players, as with roguelike Indie game *Don't Starve* (Klei Entertainment, 2013, 2014). Here there is no way to win, death is permanent and there is seemingly no overarching aesthetic framework to justify the absence of a winning condition, other than difficulty that is the rational outcome of an entropic game mechanic (having said this the game has however sold over 1 million copies to date, demonstrating an interest in counter-normative game vocabulary).

For those who have only a limited knowledge of games and their diverse forms, videogames are often emblemized by the first-person shooter. Rather than the gentle and observational mode taken by point-and-click games, these noisy, frenetic games are characterized by action and combat. This mode has an important effect on the meanings produced by the use of Gothic tropes. *Doom 3*, for example, demands deft, timely reactions from players if they are to avoid being “fragged” by monsters. Here, as with other horror-based games using similar game mechanics, the gameplay verbs are located more firmly in the strident sphere of action-adventure, militating against the principle of the false hero. Nonetheless, in seeking to unnerve a player, and in using the game space as a kind of haunted house, Gothic is apparent, coloring the use of a staple science-fiction “alien invasion” narrative. Rather than etiolated

grey-eyes, the game's aliens are wrought into the guise of demons, as in earlier Doom games. The game's adjectives colour its verbs. Moving through a darkened spaceship with limited vision, finger on trigger but aware of limited ammunition supplies, proves a tense and suspenseful business and in terms of affect this certainly feels under the aegis of Gothic. Even if when repeating a section of the game *a player* knows what is around the corner, he/she still has the pressure of making sure he/she acts correctly this time around, providing a strong source of suspense of a type only imagined in other media. Noises of upcoming threats also create a sense of impending dread and even as we defeat one set of monsters, a new set spawns with such volume and relentless regularity as to seem generated by the Big Other. Such devices, working alongside the grimy textures and brown-red-black colour palette, certainly call on the fear mechanics of Victorian Gothic and Grand Guignol, even if the accent of the activity is geared by a sense of mastery of technology, space, and threat. However, winning in this context is vastly different to the quiet winning in *Midnight Mysteries*, even if in both games winning is marked as heroic (either as an action-based hero or as a rationalising hero). One of the features of winning is its allegiance with bolstering for a player a strong sense of agency. The "affect" coordinate of Gothic identified by this paper is predicated on precisely the opposite and affect makes potent our other coordinates and provides the basis on which we can say that there can be no conventional straight-forward, cost-free heroics or winning. So how might games that have some form of claim on Gothic cope with this seeming intractable problem? To address this, a closer look at the functional specificities of videogame form is required.

Videogames have an important difference from games played with cards or on boards. When board or card games are played, each player must be in possession of knowledge of a game's rules to play the game. In the case of videogames, rules are embedded in the logic-based machinations of an invisible computational layer. Players see and feel the effects of those rules but not often the rules themselves. More generally, and as a constituent of their unique character, videogames act as complex feedback systems: a player's actions produce feedback from the computational system and vice-versa. This reciprocity is often termed the "cybernetic" dimension of games and it is the basis of interactivity. However, the "occulted" nature of a videogame's rule-keeping systems, which determine the scope of *a player's* field of possible actions, also have a secondary dimension (as I have argued elsewhere, Krzywinska, 2002). Their hidden yet controlling and deterministic character yields potentially an important evocative textual function, especially when placed in a pervasive

Gothic context. This highly resonant and modally apposite consequence might, further, help to explain the popularity of Gothic in games. Under Gothic aegis, a game's algorithmic system accrues a mysterious, godlike power that steers choice, behaviour and morality through arrays of determinants and positive or negative reinforcements (a feature used thematically and resonantly in *Bioshock* [Irrational Games/2K Games, 2007]). The knowledge that a game has an occulted layer that presides with such potency over a player's actions and which determines the extent and appropriateness of those actions provides the key for unlocking the potential of a special functional bond between videogame form and Gothic, and which gives additional scope for a player to experience in a ludic sense the position of the false hero.

Not all horror-based games pass easily into the category of Gothic, as we've seen. The on-rails shooter series *House of the Dead* (Sega, 1996–present), for example, has a player shooting hordes of zombies that pop up somewhat as one might expect of a shooting gallery in a fairground. There is no free-form exploration, just hair-trigger gunplay at a pace set by the game. *Dead Rising*, a shooter that draws heavily on Romero's zombie films, does allow a player some degree of freedom to roam and solve puzzles, acting as punctuation between bouts of shooting hordes of zombies in and around a shopping mall. This game bears similarities to *Left 4 Dead* (Valve/EA, 2008), where the format is extended into small-group multiplayer game mode played over the internet. Games such as these, where a player is afforded a sense of immediacy and quick victory despite the presence of zombie hordes and a survival mechanic, make for a gameplay experience that is not so easily described as Gothic. Players have little agency even they are interpellated as heroes. In many respects these games have more in common with action genres and, in the case of *Left 4 Dead*, squad-based shooters. The effortless action of mowing down hordes of zombies, aliens, or demons plays against their Gothic iconographic heritage. Gameplay is a largely mechanical and guilt-free operation unhampered by complex characterizations, ambiguous morality, or rich narrative. This is not however Grand Guignol as the emphasis is on containment and not the passive frisson of fear, a position that Shaviro persuasively argues for (1993). Through their use of tropes established within popular fiction, these games can be regarded as providing a more-than-symbolic means of mastery over that which represents the other or the return of the repressed. I argue that this lies in opposition to the logic of our coordinates.

Survival horror, a name used by developers and publishers to differentiate these games from other horror-based games, stands in significant contrast to such “pseudo-gothic” games. The difference might be characterized as that between a confident major key and a cautious minor. This does not make survival horror any less affectively geared, however, as Perron notes, “People playing survival horror remain thrillseekers” (2009: 141). In survival horror, the character through which a player interacts with the game is far more hapless than heroic and stumbles unintentionally from the sphere of normality into nightmare, constituent of the role of the false hero. He/she struggles to survive rather than exhibiting flamboyant and superhuman skills of strength, agility, or expert weapon use. In *Silent Hill*, for example, the main character seeks out his missing wife in a town twisted and possessed by the return of the repressed; puzzles must be solved and clues looked for, and where fighting occurs it is often clumsy, awkward and limited by meager supplies of ammunition; a player-character acts out desperation, panic and confusion. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has argued that Gothic is emblemised by claustrophobia, often channeled through metaphors around “live burial” (1986: 5). Survival horror games use and amplify this metaphor in ways that action-based horror games do not. The metaphor is hard baked into gameplay, as well as into narrative, representational and thematic dimensions – hooked in therefore to all five of our Gothic coordinates. In games such as this Gothic is distilled into a player’s capacity to act, or more precisely not-act, through his/her character and through the game’s interface. The live-burial metaphor is found, for example, in the blinding and disorienting fog that cloaks the eponymous *Silent Hill* and it has an important restrictive effect on a *player-character’s* sphere of agency. This fog reduces a player’s capacity to act decisively in and on the game world, as I have argued elsewhere in writing about agency in horror games. Unable to see more than a few feet, players are forced to rely on the presence of white noise emitted from a portable radio to signify that a monster is close by. Yet the radio’s small one-directional speaker cannot reveal the direction from which a monster comes. A player must swing the in-game camera around, looking left, right, up, and down, to engage effectively with an incoming monster. Throughout the game, activities are accompanied by discordant and unnerving sounds that serve to signify the town’s disturbance. There is no raucous heavy metal music to inflate a sense of supremacy, as in *Painkiller* (People Can Fly/Dreamcatcher, 2004). In addition the player-characters of the first two *Silent Hill* games are despite effort unable to enact redemption, cannot win as they fail to bring back their loved ones and restore normality. Instead, they are embroiled in an endless dream cycle of horror; survival is simply deferral of the inevitable rather than triumph and it is strongly intimated that a player’s

character is implicated in creating the situation, a trope taken up by *Alan Wake* (Remedy/Microsoft, 2010, 2012), the eponymous author, and false hero, of his own Gothic horror. The false hero logic of survival horror games ensures their place in the history of Gothic fiction.

Claustrophobia and the sensation of inaction and panic is then a principle coordinate of Gothic and it is also found in other game types. Escape-the-room games (digital and material) also weave the claustrophobia metaphor into the organization of space and gameplay. In other games, timed puzzles can produce a similar sense of panic, and in all cases panic reduces a player's control and thereby reduces their sense of agency. In the multiplayer online game *The Lord of the Rings Online* for example, player-characters are often stricken with dread when encountering evil and become unable to move – dread is formalized into a statistical game mechanic and is completely in keeping with the franchise's close relationship to horror. This device and its affect keys tightly into Gothic even if the franchise draws on other traditions and genres.

“To act” (and to act in a timely and correct manner) is the leading currency of interactive games and “to be unable to act” is Gothic articulation, or perversion, of this currency in games. In *Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth* (Headfirst/Ubisoft, 2006), a player-character must often run from situations rather than stand and fight. There is no gun provided early in the game, no chance to prove an unconditional action hero. Following Lovecraft's pessimistic mythos/ethos on which the game is based, the game places a player-character as subject to events rather than their master. This is symbolized by periods of madness and fear that interfere with a player-character's ability to act. Core to creating the sensation of claustrophobia, a palpable sense of vulnerability is essential to Gothic's affective intent. In many games the opposite pertains; for many players pleasure is found in the sense of invulnerability they generate. In the gendered economics of popular culture, vulnerability is often represented by a female character, which Carol Clover argues provides a means of allowing men to experience fear safely at one remove (1992). In some Gothic games, female characters are played against gender trope as skillful and resourceful: for example, Alice of *American McGee's Alice* is highly rational and capable even if the entire world has become irrational and nightmarish, while Jen in *Primal* (SCE, 2003) develops demonic attributes in her quest to save her kidnapped boyfriend. In these cases there is an altered relationship with power afforded by play against gender convention. The presence of a player-character as false hero is the lynchpin on which a game can transform into a more affectively potent and

pervasive Gothic configuration. Games are repeatedly sold to players as affording agency and skill, where the deft practice of hand-eye coordination and acute timeliness is rewarded with positive feedback; these work in contradistinction to existential dread, claustrophobia, paralyzing fear, and an inability to act that are constitutive of Gothic. Within the ‘hero’ structure of many games, Gothic elements are mobilized, but only to be overcome and mastered; the Other recompartimentalised, the real of the body and difference subdued and normative notions of human sovereignty reinforced.

This rhetoric of human mastery is also apparent in the way games regularly mobilise technology within their diegesis. Gothic has had a special relationship with technology – from that used to build a medieval cathedral through to Frankenstein’s monster and the communication devices used to narrate and fight the arch-vampire Dracula. As with *Dracula*, Gothic games too involve technology in their diegetic content as extensions of the senses and agency. In *Fatal Frame* for example, the normative game rhetoric of shooting is shifted to photography – a camera made by an occultist becomes a weapon with which to dispense with ghosts. *Typing of the Dead* (Sega, 2000), in every way a zombie shoot-‘em-up, has a player type words that appear above zombies’ heads to kill them (providing us with a “Goth” typing trainer). Both these games use technology as a means of dispensing with that which represents the irrational, the out-of-order, the imps of the perverse – a trope that is so heavily over-determined that it acquires the status of *mise-en-abyme*. The distancing capacity of cameras, as formularized by Susan Sontag (1977) can be said in *Fatal Frame* and *Dead Rising* (Capcom, 2006), to provide for players a means of disavowal of the “real” of the diegetic situation, providing therefore a sense of mastery over the other; rather than a threat to the human, as occurs frequently in science fiction, here technology works for increased agency. It should not be forgotten that the screen itself acts as a kind of camera in the context of most games. In this way, threats that arise through the rhetorical flourishes of Gothic provide a chance for *a player* to manage and control fear, by virtue of various distancing devices and modal frameworks. In *Fatal Frame* and *Dead Rising*, in-game camera technology indicates how “games of fear” might be regarded more generally in terms of their psycho-dynamics: a means of extending the reach of human agency and supporting the ego in its efforts to retain a sense of control of and purchase on the world, time and others. This can be contrasted with the fearful, anti-human technologies of other Gothic fictions where technology becomes a portal for the unnameable to pass into the rational world, or acts as a means to provoke hubris. or where it becomes individualized, demonic, either possessed or

seeing humans as invasive pests, as in *Event Horizon* (1997), Donald Cammell's *Demon Seed* (1977) and *Lawnmower Man* (1992). Unlike cinema, games rarely demonize technology and this may well be a genetically-derived maneuver. Games have an anti-Gothic, rationalist motor which may be said to mirror the fact that game developers are firmly embedded in "geek" culture and therefore regard technology as in their control and extending their own agency and human reach into the world, rather than curtailing it. Gothic "other" of technology returns instead in many games as enigmatic dark magics and Manichean binary structures (where good-versus-evil leads all too easily to anti-Gothic hero structure). It is the realm of the supernatural rather than science fiction that we most often find Gothic within the context of games. But the invisible driving mechanism of the whole (un)merry-go-round of our Gothic coordinates and thereby our evaluative method is the real of death.

Death in real life is the final act of curtailing our agency (even if the effects of our acts might be felt after our demise). Many games provide a denial of the finality of real death and it becomes simply a prompt to try harder to learn what the game requires for a player to progress. Death has a very and functional presence in games as feedback mechanism. It is not the source of wonder and liminality as it so often is in Gothic, even if it often has a plot mechanic function it also has a metaphysical and sublime dimension. Being killed in a game often means for a player-character that they are returned to an earlier save point. When a player-character "dies" they return, but in the most un-Gothic of ways; they do not haunt the screen (although this might be said to be the case in *Dark Souls 2*¹⁰) and in and of itself the return is "canny" rather than uncanny – canny in the sense that you get to retry and re-write your game history. This raises a question around the nature of death in Gothic: has it to be signified as "real" for any returns from that state to be meaningful? The ghost of Hawthorne for example, in *MM:SWT* is the result of a real death – underpinned by historical fact. However, the heroic player-character cannot die and is never in danger of doing so. In combat-based games, being "killed" is essentially a movement back in time, so that a player can attempt that section of the game again and "live up" to heroic status, following a trajectory of perfection, as is the case for a player-character in *Doom 3. Painkiller* gets around the problem of death trope by making a player's character already dead and doomed to repeat. In most games, and in echo of Freud's notion of the death drive (2003), a lack of progression is constitutive of how death signifies - a form claustrophobic inability to act. As such, in games death is given meaning through an oscillating movement between action and inaction and progress and stasis (Krzywinska 2002, 2009). To prevail is to progress

effectively denying the real of death that gives Gothic its fearful symmetry. The way in which death is realized and how it is tied to the game mechanics has then an impact on the realization of Gothic and a game's claim on the nomenclature. I would offer the following: the more meaning and intensity assigned to death, the more intently are activated our five coordinates and therefore the more intently "Gothic" a game can be deemed to be.

Conclusion

The reuse of Gothic patterns lends familiarity and intertextual depth; as Michael Gamer notes, Gothic acts as "marketing tool for writers anxious to gain access to popular reading audiences" (Gamer, 29). Such patterns are clearly useful for the game industry which has relied on clear communication with its target market to get a return on their development investment. In game terms the use of ritualised textual patterns also has the function of manifesting the "magic circle", Huizinga's term for the way that we enter a different mindset and social relation when playing a game (1971). In this sense the conflation of "Gothic" and "Game" becomes a fast track means of constructing the space of the Other, where normal utilitarian functioning is given over to something for its own sake; but what function this evocation has for constructing Gothic affect remains variable and is all-too-often lack-lustre when not fully realised conceptually. We might therefore be celebrating the mutability of Gothic mistakenly, when in fact that mutability is testimony to misappropriation and recombination conducted for commercial, rather than aesthetic, gain. Such misappropriation undermines the affective potency of Gothic; the latter achieved only when the forces of entropy are stitched into to every aspect a game, into story structure, character arc, *mise-en-scène*, affect, style, function and where each of these are integrally plugged into game mechanics. When this occurs we *can* confidently use the term "Gothic Game" in a meaningful and apposite manner. *This* Gothic can be mobilized to put into question reified assumptions and fictions that we use to shore up and solidify our existence. In some few videogames, with room for more, Gothic becomes a mode through which the very borders and capabilities of this new expressive medium can be explored, as Kirkland suggests videogames are "developing new modes of storytelling, combining modes and media" (2009: 76). With their coded base, easily manipulated by the cognoscenti, their branching narratives, and provision in some cases of tools for adding to their content, games share with Gothic the appeal of collective myth and a type of immersion and participation that disturbs and transforms. While Gothic certainly pulls in a different direction from some of the normative features of videogame vocabulary, particularly the idea that games can be "won" and where

death equates to “trying again”, games are nonetheless pregnant with potential to exploit for affective ends a dynamic relationship between action and inaction, progress and stasis, that produces a new and powerful ways of experiencing the transformational vertigo of the sublime Gothic. This experience extends far beyond the bounds of representation to produce affect, moving into the plane of a player’s sense of self and agency and felt most palpably through the inability to act when it is most required. Game designers need therefore to be braver in their engagement with Gothic, take up the torch carried by *Dear Esther* and create the type of sophisticated Gothic found in novels such as Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* or in the poetry of Emily Dickenson.

¹ While there is work focused specifically on horror games, such as Perron's collection *Horror Video Games* (2009), there is no book or edited collection on the topic of Gothic in games. The author has however written several articles on the Gothic in games including entries in *Blackwell Guides to the Gothic*.

² Ludologists claimed that game mechanics were what defined games, not story. Now, most game scholars regard stories (where they are present) as important elements of the game-play experience that give meaning to the procedural elements of games. For a useful précis of the narratology/ludology debate and the building blocks of Game Studies see *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance and Game* (2004)

³ An odd stance to take, as a comparative approach has proved very useful in efforts to reveal what is new and different, as is evident, for example, in Henry Jenkins’ work on transmediality and media convergence (2006) and that undertaken more generally within the Comparative Media Centre at MIT).

⁴ Examples include *Phantasmagoria* (Sierra Online/Kronos, 1995), *Myst* and *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*. (id/Activision, 2001)

⁵ As well providing a framework for uncovering some of the normative assumptions of earlier work on games and indeed in terms of games themselves, Carr’s work on ability and disability is also highly relevant to the articulation of the Gothic in videogames.

⁶ Applying with some caveats Saussure’s axes of langue and parole to genre, Rick Altman writes, ‘language is... dependent on a different selection of paroles’ (1999, 174).

⁷ For the purposes of this essay, the hero and the false hero *could* be either male or female.

⁸ *Warcraft* and *World of Warcraft* players might recognise Arthas’ journey from Hero to False Hero as one way that this game calls on and makes use of the Gothic.

⁹ Hawthorne (1804-1864) is the author of novels and short stories, such as *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and *The House of Seven Gables* (1851) set mainly in New England and which presents the Gothic through a lens of corruption, sin and the moral weakness of humanity.

¹⁰ Thanks to Jack Hackett for drawing my attention to *Dark Souls 2* (From Software/Namco, 2014).

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