



***MONSTROSITIES MADE IN THE INTERFACE: THE
IDEOLOGICAL RAMIFICATIONS OF 'PLAYING'
WITH OUR DEMONS***

A Thesis submitted by

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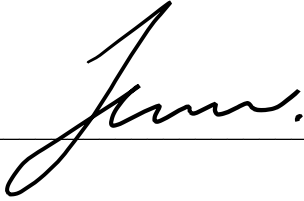
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Abstract

Using *procedural rhetoric* to critique the role of the monster in survival horror video games, this dissertation will discuss the potential for such monsters to embody ideological antagonism in the ‘game’ world which is symptomatic of the desire to simulate the ideological antagonism existing in the ‘real’ world. Survival video games explore ideology by offering a space in which to fantasise about society's fears and desires in which the sum of all fears and object of greatest desire (the monster) is so terrifying as it embodies everything 'other' than acceptable, enculturated social and political behaviour. Video games rely on ideology to create believable game worlds as well as simulate believable behaviours, and in the case of survival horror video games, to simulate fear. This dissertation will critique how the games *Alien: Isolation*, *Until Dawn*, and *The Walking Dead Season 1* construct and themselves critique representations of the ‘real’ world, specifically the way these games position the player to see the monster as an embodiment of everything wrong and evil in life - everything 'other' than an ideal, peaceful existence, and challenge the player to recognise that the very actions required to combat or survive this force potentially serve as both extensions of existing cultural ideology and harbingers of ideological resistance across two worlds – the ‘real’ and the ‘game’.

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Introduction

Research Aims

The interplay between the rules (game mechanics) and fiction (narrative) within the video games *Alien: Isolation*, *The Walking Dead Season 1*, and *Until Dawn* allows for the monster/s in each game to supersede the need for an overarching, ideological superstructure of control which would seek to empower or disempower the protagonist in accordance with its social, political, and cultural agenda. Instead, the primary threat, or antagonist within the game becomes a force beyond traditional ideals, becomes 'other' - a hostile entity devoid of ideological rationality. In the face of such a threat the player is left to be the sole source of ideological rationality who must affect the processes and outcomes within the game world if they are to triumph against the horrors 'programmed' into the fiction. This antagonism between the monster and the player, simulated via the procedures and rules governing any video game world, is symptomatic of the ongoing, unresolvable antagonism between the player and their 'real' existence, revealing the potential for video games as *techne*, a procedurally generated space in which the player can consider what they are willing to do to survive the horrors of the game and by extension the horrors of their 'life'.

Research Questions

1. How do survival horror video games manipulate the rules and procedures necessary to 'create' and 'play' a video game to arouse fear in the player?
2. How does the interface between the player of survival horror video games and the horrifying experiences simulated within the game world reinforce or challenge discursive formations of power?
3. How do the fictional worlds within survival horror games rely on ideology to position the player to see the monster as 'other'? Why use the role of the monster in this way?

Methodologies

Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman¹ suggest that the study of games can be attempted via five distinct approaches: game, player, culture, ontology, and metrics. Studying the game itself would involve a detailed analysis the structure and techniques responsible for the player experience, focusing on comparison of aesthetics and playability. Analysing the player would be more sociological in nature, much like examining the culture behind a game and within a game (subculture) through interview, observation etc. Considering games from an ontological perspective seeks to conduct philosophical enquiry into the relationship between rules, fiction, and the player. Finally, the data-driven focus on metrics is often employed by game developers to establish the statistical relationship between game design and player behaviour.²

For the purpose of this textual analysis of *Alien: Isolation*, *The Walking Dead Season 1*, and *Until Dawn*, analysis specific to the game and ontological approaches are favoured in order to critique survival horror video games as forms of rhetoric³ seeking to perpetuate social, cultural, and political ideology. To play the chosen games with a critical perspective, Dominic Arsenault and Bernard Perron's *Magic Cycle*⁴ will serve as an interpretative framework to discuss the actual act of playing the games and the processes involved in accessing any meaning within; and Ian Bogost's *procedural rhetoric* seeks to examine the way in which video games are able to influence the player's attitudes about who they are, their place in the world, and even how the world functions.⁵

The Magic Cycle provides a schematic for what is involved in the playing of video games and offers a visual representation of the interpretive efforts undertaken by players of varying levels of experience, hoping to interpret games of varying design and purpose. This methodology demonstrates how video game and player are

¹ Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al. 2016, pp. 11-12

² *ibid.*

³ Bogost 2007

⁴ 2009

⁵ cited in Cummings 2015, p.18

inseparable - a hybrid of “actual and virtual, flesh and machine”⁶ who enacts and interprets in a single function - “not a purification of player on one side and character on the other, subject on one side and object on the other, reality on one side and virtuality on the other, experienced on one side and interpreted on the other.”⁷ The player’s experiences are neither exclusively textual nor just embodied, but rather *textually embodied*,⁸ requiring a hybrid means of interpreting this new phenomenon.

Procedural rhetoric is one such hybrid method of interpretation, aligning with the “general ontological” approach to interpreting discursive formations of power in video game fiction and exploring the potential for video games to cultivate existing ideology OR promote alternate ways of thinking. Together, the Magic Cycle and procedural rhetoric will be used to facilitate a ‘close-playing’ of *Alien: Isolation*, *The Walking Dead Season 1*, and *Until Dawn*, which will critique the way in which each game positions the player to consider the role of the monster as an antagonistic force and reflect on how ‘real’ the simulation felt, as well as contemplate the origins of such fear.

Outline

This dissertation is structured in such a way as to first examine and then apply these approaches to specific aspects of the chosen games in a ‘close-playing’. The first chapter explores the plot and context underpinning each of the three games studied: *Alien: Isolation*, *Until Dawn*, and *The Walking Dead Season 1*. Due to the complexity and length of each text, plot summaries are limited to the ‘master narrative’, particularly for *Until Dawn* and *The Walking Dead*, as each of these games has a choice-based, branching narrative potentially composed of thousands of combinations of specific narrative outcomes.

The second chapter elaborates on specific aspects of the theory informing the methodologies and interpretation of the chosen video games. This chapter opens with a detailed explanation of both procedural rhetoric and the Magic Cycle, and covers

⁶ Keogh 2018, p.49

⁷ *ibid.* p.48

⁸ *ibid.*

key ideas, concepts, and definitions which are critical to marrying the chosen methodologies to a ‘close-playing’ of each game in line with contemporary research pertaining to video games studies, ideology, and monster studies. Whilst not strictly a literature review, this chapter offers background and scope to the important terminology used in later chapters.

The third chapter focuses exclusively on *Alien: Isolation* and its examination of corporate greed as ideologically repugnant through the manipulation and representation of relatable systems of political and social persuasion to simulate a society in crisis. Furthermore, this chapter positions the reader to consider the catharsis provided by the alien ‘other’ superseding subterfuge, ignoring money and eventually destroying Western capitalist normality. This chapter pays particular attention to how closely the game attempts to simulate reality to best terrify and delight the gamer into accepting its messages.

The fourth chapter continues the discussion of the monstrous ‘other’ as interruptive to long upheld social conventions, specifically inferring that, like all texts involving monsters, the player is overtly being given an opportunity to confront the fear of ideological uncertainty and irrationality. Where this chapter deviates from the first is its discussion of choice-based game mechanics and the potential for increased agency over the narrative outcomes, as well as a more thorough examination of the way in which survival horror video games provide a space in which the video game player is able to confront their relationship with reality and themselves.

The dissertation will conclude by evaluating the way in which previous chapters have addressed the research questions, and will examine the validity of the thesis in relation to specific theory coupled with close-playing of the chosen games. The conclusion will also discuss the implications of the application of theory in relation to possible future research into the implications of survival horror video games as ideologically significant.

Chapter 1

The Games

Although all games selected fall under the survival horror genre of video gaming, the ways they manipulate the conditions of this genre are markedly different. According to Bogost, “Procedural genres emerge from assemblages of procedural forms,”¹ resulting in sub-genres of video games akin to literary, filmic, or artistic genres. The genre of video game will heavily influence the interface and expected gameplay thus significantly shaping the reception of the “procedural tropes” necessary for the “authorship of rules of behaviour.”²

Also appearing in the game descriptions is a section dedicated to the *interface* between the player and the game. According to Janet Murray, participation in an electronic environment must be meaningfully responsive to player input, and must extend beyond the vague notion that simply clicking a mouse, clacking a keyboard, or controlling a console is somehow the interactive element which separates video games from more passive texts such as text or film.³ Murray argues that the “primary representational property of the computer is the codified rendering of responsive behaviours,” and when users state that computers are interactive, they are commenting on a simulated environment “that is both procedural and participatory.”⁴ For interaction to be *sophisticated* means “greater responsiveness, tighter symbolic coupling between user actions and procedural representations.”⁵

Alien: Isolation⁶

Plot Summary

Alien: Isolation is a single-player, first-person shooter experienced from the perspective of Amanda Ripley as she follows a lead on her mother’s disappearance

¹ 2007, p.14

² Bogost 2007, p.29

³ in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 1997

⁴ *ibid.* p.74

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Steam 2014

fifteen years ago. Amanda's mother is Ellen Ripley made famous by the *Alien* film franchise and the events of this game take place directly after *Alien* (1979). Together with the android Christopher Samuels of the Weyland-Yutani Corporation Amanda (Ripley) boards the courier ship *Torrens* heading to the remote space station *Sevastopol* where the flight recorder for the *Nostramo* is being held.

Upon arriving at *Sevastopol* it is clear that something is not right as the populace is in an anarchist fervour, the result of a grown xenomorph (the alien) stalking the station. Ripley along with Samuels and Weyland-Yutani executive Nina Taylor attempt a spacewalk from the *Torrens* to *Sevastopol* but a field of debris severs the line connecting them to the station and the characters are separated.

After exploring the station, Ripley is reunited with Samuels, where she treats a wounded Taylor. There are a number of encounters with NPCs (non-playable character) to progress the plot and effectively give the xenomorph someone to kill, reinforcing its power; however, the true threat of the monster is relatively minor until the player comes across the flight recorder from the *Nostramo*. Once Ripley survives the initial encounter with the xenomorph she wanders the station looking for answers and avoiding violent human factions and the artificial workforce known only as 'Working Joes' who will turn on anyone found in certain zones of the station.

Soon Ripley meets *Sevastopol's* Marshal, Waits, and his deputy, Ricardo who explain that the presence of the xenomorph is the result of Henry Marlow, captain of the *Anesidora*, the ship that found the *Nostramo's* flight recorder. It is also revealed that the *Anesidora* also stumbled across the derelict ship depicted in Ridley Scott's *Alien*. The player learns that Marlow's wife was attacked by a facehugger which resulted in the xenomorph now threatening the station hatching from her chest aboard *Sevastopol* where they had travelled for medical attention.

Waits uses Ripley to lure the xenomorph to a remote zone of the station in order to seal the creature inside. Waits ejects this section of the station into space with Ripley inside. Ripley escapes the creature and spacewalks back to *Sevastopol*. Once back aboard, Ripley discovers that the artificial intelligence controlling the station,

APOLLO, has commanded the Working Joes to slaughter all people remaining on the station in order to safeguard the xenomorph for the Weyland-Yutani Corporation.

Samuels is killed attempting to interface with APOLLO to stop the purging of the remaining humans and Ripley discovers that the station's reactor has been converted into a xenomorph nest. She initiates a reactor purge to destroy the nest only to discover a handful of newly formed xenomorphs escaped. In a last hopeless effort to survive Marlow and Taylor unite to escape on Marlow's ship the *Anesidora*. Ripley takes a shuttle to the ship to find Marlow has taken Taylor hostage and is overloading his ship's reactor to destroy the station and, in turn, all remaining evidence of the monsters.

The overload is successful and Taylor and Marlow are killed in the explosion. Before detonation Ripley took a shuttle back to *Sevastopol* where Ricardo reveals that the destruction of the *Anesidora* rendered the stations orbital stabilisers useless. Ripley and Ricardo contact the *Torrens* for extraction but before escaping a facehugger attaches itself to Ricardo forcing Ripley to leave him.

Once aboard the *Torrens* radio silence foreshadows that a sole surviving xenomorph is aboard the ship. Cornered by the creature, Ripley ejects both the creature and herself into space. The game closes with Ripley floating in space. The final sequence shows a close-up of her helmet as a search light peruses her face.

Interface

The entire game is played from Amanda Ripley's point of view and the player only sees Ripley's face and body during the cut scenes. This first-person point of view strives for authenticity as Ripley's vision is able to be manipulated by the player to focus on particular items or screens, blurring the background. Also, whenever Ripley wears a space helmet the player's view is modified accordingly to account for the visor, as well as the more restricted peripheral vision.

The heads up display or HUD is the only information on the screen and details Ripley's remaining life points as well as informs the player of which weapon is

active and how much ammunition remains. The HUD also shows the player how much battery life is left in their headlamp.

Interaction with the game world relies on collecting an increasingly sophisticated set of tools to hack, maim, program, burn, or penetrate computers and NPCs. Each of these actions requires a different procedure which involves different input from the player via the console controller in an attempt to mimic the diversity of each action as it would happen in the ‘real’ world.

When played with Xbox Kinect active, player sounds and movements are picked up by the Kinect hardware and software and translated into sound and movement in the game world. Such movements and sounds can attract enemies meaning that ‘real’ world actions have game world consequences.

Context and Reception

After a string of failed *Alien* centred video games, *Alien: Isolation* plays to the simplicity and horror which inspired the love/hate relationship viewers shared with the original film franchise. The aesthetic of *Alien: Isolation* is undeniably an homage to Ridley Scott’s original film. Robin Sloan⁷ describes the game being received by the public as “both a work of remediated nostalgia and as a deeply uncanny survival horror.” Sloan goes on to commend how the production design on the game reconciles the “unhomely” (uncanny) with the “homely” (nostalgia) for both original fans of the film franchise, as well as a new generation of video game players.⁸ The feeling uniting these two groups – fear of H.R. Giger’s sublime xenomorph and anxiety surrounding this seemingly undefeatable monster.

The game was initially perceived by players as incredibly difficult and even unfair given the immorality of the xenomorph and its ability to locate the player using a sophisticated interplay of haptics and artificial intelligence which algorithmically “tether” the alien to the player, ensuring that it is present throughout the ship at

⁷ 2016, p.212

⁸ Sloan 2016

regular, unavoidable intervals.⁹ A review by Ludwig Kietzmann¹⁰ goes as far as to describe the game as “...a trauma machine masquerading as a video game...wherein you [the player] seek comfort by deconstructing the alien as a walking cluster of code, an algorithm, to undress the threat”. Whilst this could be considered complimentary given the objectives of developing a survival horror video game, this perceived difficulty rewarded the brave, competent player but ultimately led to the game’s poor performance in the consumer market.

Jaroslav Švelch¹¹ writes comprehensively about the frustration faced by players of *Alien: Isolation* given the opponent being a powerful AI-controlled entity and speculates that its disappointing sales and lack of a sequel corresponds to the lack of a similar mechanic appearing in other video games since. In striving to “provide the experience of “psychopathic serendipity” and sublime monstrosity”, *Alien: Isolation* just proved too hard, both psychologically and mechanically, for the average gamer. The term ‘psychopathic serendipity’ was coined by Andy Bray, *Alien: Isolation*’s director for the artificially intelligent dynamics of the xenomorph. He purposefully mandated that “the creature [be] guided by its own procedural intelligence rather than the canned foreknowledge of the game designer”¹², meaning that the alien will always seem to find itself right where it can cause the most anxiety and any given moment in the game. Resultingly, the alien “feels less like a ludic challenge to learn, overcome and enjoy, and more like an intentional, unpredictable and malicious glitch in the system to be avoided at all cost”.¹³

Until Dawn

Plot Summary

Until Dawn is a single-player, choice-driven narrative, action-adventure. This plot summary is a broad description of the important plot events. The narrative is choice driven meaning that there will be different opportunities available to the player

⁹ Švelch 2020

¹⁰ written for Engadget website 2014

¹¹ 2020

¹² Thompson in Keogh and Jaymenanne 2018, p.10

¹³ *ibid.*

depending on the course of action they take and varied outcomes for game characters depending on these choices. The ending conditions will not be the same each time the game is played and although the game resolves, the player cannot be assured of victory.

The game opens in the past (a flashback in the game plot) showing friends Josh, Beth, Hannah, Sam, Mike, Chris, Ashley, Emily, Matt, and Jessica partying in the Washington Lodge on Blackwood Mountain. The group (minus Josh) plays a prank on Hannah causing her to run off into the wilderness with her sister Beth in pursuit. Whilst in the woods they are hunted by an unknown force and in a moment of panic fall from a cliff and disappear.

One year later Josh, brother to Hannah and Beth, invites the group back to the lodge and this winter getaway in the 'present' becomes the focal point for the remainder of the game. The group is divided as characters pair up to explore different areas of the lodge. There is an encounter with the previously mentioned unknown force as Jessica is dragged into the woods. Mike pursues the entity and Jessica into an abandoned sanatorium which was the site of a cave-in where thirty workers were trapped below ground.

Meanwhile Chris has been abducted and when he awakens he discovers an intricate scenario in which he is forced to make a choice about whether Ashley or Josh will be sawed in half as he watches. Regardless of the choice made by the player Josh is supposedly killed. After learning about Josh's fate, Emily and Matt try to use the cable car to leave the mountain which is locked. They are able to make contact with authorities who tell them to hold out until dawn before help can arrive. The radio tower they used to contact authorities collapses and Emily and Matt are separated.

Back at the lodge Sam is stalked by a new character known only as the Psycho, the person responsible for orchestrating Josh's death, who chases her into an underground workshop. Depending on the choices made by the player, a group of remaining characters meet underground where the masked psycho reveals himself to be Josh who was pranking the group to avenge his sisters' disappearance.

While Josh is the cause of the ‘haunting’ experiences endured at the lodge there remains an unexplainable force prowling the woods, hunting the characters. A stranger appears at the lodge and reveals that the mountain is infested with creatures known as wendigos, which are the cursed bodies of the workers entombed in the caves below the sanatorium.

Mike and Sam (who, along with Jessica, are potentially the only remaining characters) go to find Josh and the cable car key. Josh is discovered hallucinating in the bowels of the caves below the sanatorium where he is left to confront his previously dormant but now unhinged psychopathic personality. The rest of the group are confronted by the wendigos and eventually a gas leak is forced and used to destroy the lodge as well as any remaining wendigos and perhaps any remaining characters. It is possible for all characters to survive or all characters to die depending on the choices made.

Interface

The game is laden with cut-scenes to drive the narrative; however, when the player is controlling a character within the game they do so from a third-person perspective. The camera angles offered to the player are varied and restrictive, often governed by which angle would offer the best jump scare in moments of extreme tension.

Objects of interest with the potential for interactivity will glow to draw the player’s attention and each object reveals more context around the curse placed on the mountain, as well as the relationships between the characters.

Each decision made by the player during the quick-time events and conversations becomes part of the game’s ‘Butterfly Effect’ mechanic which does not dictate whether a decision was ethically or morally right or wrong, it simply releases a stream of white butterflies on screen if the action will contribute to keeping a character alive, and include a flashback or flash forward in black and white when the choice could potentially contribute to a character’s death.

There is no HUD when the player is actively ‘playing’ the game and other than the clues and artefacts uncovered there is no inventory to draw from or weapons to use.

Context and Reception

Until Dawn took four years and development across two generations of consoles (PlayStations 3 and 4) before it was released by Supermassive in 2015 as “a slasher [movie]” that offered a “fresh”¹⁴ take on traditional horror gaming due to the relative passivity of its gameplay mechanics and use of motion capture technology to promote the ‘cutscene’ to be the actual game.

Despite reinvigorating and in some ways, revolutionising the ‘choose your own adventure’ gaming style made popular in the late 80s and early 90s, *Until Dawn* has been critiqued in terms of its representations of race and gender, specifically hegemonic masculinity¹⁵ and the prevalence of the white male saviour. Many of the game’s critics are quick to point out that there is only one male character of colour (Matt, who is African-Canadian), and the female characters, although loosely modelled off their voice actors, are given a “Barbie-type body” and are sexualized.¹⁶ The game has also been both praised and panned on account of its exploration of mental health in relation to loss and again, masculinity.¹⁷

***The Walking Dead Season 1*¹⁸**

Plot Summary

The Walking Dead Season 1 is a single-player, ‘telltale’, action-adventure. As with *Until Dawn* this summary is a broad description of the important plot events as the narrative of this game is choice driven as well. The outcome of the game is a culmination of the player’s decision and multiple endings are possible; however, there remains certain scenarios that will form the backbone of every player’s game.

¹⁴ Schilling 2018

¹⁵ Waldie in Taylor & Voorhees 2018

¹⁶ Galadriel Stinemen, voice actor for Ashley, reflecting on her character design, *ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Steam 2012

Protagonist Lee Everett who is a newly convicted felon is being transported to prison when a zombie apocalypse breaks out. After the patrol car he was being transported in strikes a “walker” and drives off the road into a forest Lee is injured and seeks out help. He stumbles across Clementine who is alone in a neighbourhood infested by the dead. With some help they are able to escape the walkers and meet with other survivors Shawn, Herschel, Katjaa, and Kenny Jr.

After a string of unfortunate events Lee and the band of survivors leave for Macon finding safety in a motel with strong fortifications. After three months holed up Lee and the survivors are struggling to find food. The group is approached by the St. Johns family who own a dairy led by their “mama” Brenda St. John. While the family offers them a safe haven Lee discovers that the St. Johns are engaging in cannibalism, even trading human meat for protection from local bandits. The group escapes in a stolen car leaving the St. John’s farm to be overrun by walkers.

The survivors return to the motel but shortly afterwards it is attacked by bandits and they are forced to flee in an RV. Soon after they find a mysterious homeless man named Chuck who helps them get a train working so that they can follow the tracks to the coast, commandeer a boat and head out onto the ocean. Kenny Jr. is bitten during the trip and his mother Katjaa commits suicide instead of killing him. Lee must shoot Kenny Jr. which puts a strain on the group, particularly Kenny.

As the group nears Savannah Clementine communicates with a stranger on the walkie-talkie she carries on her at all times. The stranger promises her safety once Lee and the group are out of the picture. The group is attacked when church bells ring out and take shelter in a mansion. After surveying the township the group discovers that there are no boats left and the community of Crawford has hoarded all of the supplies. Crawford is an elitist community who do not allow the weak – children, the elderly, the sick, and of course the injured.

The group meet the bell-ringing stranger who warns them about Crawford; however, it turns out that Crawford self-imploded and is now only inhabited by the dead. Walkers attack and scatter the group. Whilst making his way through the sewers

back to the mansion Lee encounters a group of survivors hiding under the hospital morgue led by Vernon. Vernon agrees to help the group only to question Lee's leadership, custody of Clementine and eventually rob the group of supplies and the only boat remaining in the city that they were going to use to escape.

Clementine is abducted and while Lee suspects Vernon, the kidnapper turns out to be the father whose car was stolen by the group earlier in the game to escape the St. John farm. Having his car stolen meant that his wife, son, and daughter eventually died leaving only him and his quest for vengeance.

There is a showdown between the mysterious man and Lee and Clementine rescues Lee by smashing a bottle over the stranger's head. By this stage Lee is ill after amputating his arm post-walker bite. As he and Clementine leave the stranger's house Lee falls unconscious. He wakes up to find out he is close to turning and gives Clementine the choice of either killing him, leaving him to transform, or leaving her to decide for herself based on her experience with his character during the game.

Interface

The game is played from a third-person perspective which restricts the player's movement to a crosshair of potential actions which can be directed around the screen and focused on certain objects which will allow interaction. The player is able to move using the controller at some points in the game and the camera angles offered by the third-person perspective vary from over the shoulder to a bird's-eye view.

Each interaction with NPCs requiring the answer to a question or an opportunity to intervene in group affairs offers four possible answers the player can respond with, one of which is always to say and do nothing. Depending on the answer chosen, NPCs will "notice" what Lee said or did and this will have repercussions in later gameplay, particularly if the player opts to say and do nothing, forcing the NPC to react according to the strength of the pre-established relationship.

The HUD is very basic only presenting the player with small pictures of items which can be used in that scene, and a four arrow crosshair which is watermarked against the scenery allowing easy vision of what is available to interact with.

Depending on the situation the camera will also revert to a first-person perspective in moments requiring intense encounters with walkers and where actions such as shooting a weapon are more high stakes (there is a possibility of hitting an NPC). The screen will also blur if Lee becomes disorientated and will be saturated by a red filter if immediate and potentially lethal danger is threatened. There are times the player needs to respond quickly to what is happening so a deft understanding of how to use the crosshair is the only way to survive these quick-time events.

Context and Reception

As a transmedia franchise, players were already primed to play *The Walking Dead Season 1* upon its release on account of the incredibly popular television show of the same name. Despite the temptation to produce a straight action game, *The Walking Dead* garnered critical praise for making a unique contribution to the franchise by acting as both a prequel to the well-known, ‘Rick Grimes’ central narrative, as well as a “(moral) codex of behaviour”, compelling the player to invest in the *ethos* of the narrative world which is no longer exclusive to television or comic books.¹⁹

Given the sophisticated, choice-based gaming mechanics and popular zombie horror tropes, the game produced an almost cult following due to the difficult ethical quandaries and strong emotions it elicits in players. Toby Smethurst and Stef Craps²⁰ discuss the way in which *The Walking Dead Season 1* offers understanding of the ways that trauma can be represented in video games. Their experiential research into player association with an avatar or agent revealed that *The Walking Dead* resonates with a broad spectrum of the population who are able to instantiate particular associates between the game and facets of their lives in which they face difficult and complex moral and ethical decisions.

¹⁹ Beil and Schmidt 2016

²⁰ 2014

The Walking Dead Season 1 has reportedly been used to teach critical learning in high schools²¹, as well as been the focus for research investigating “adoptive maternity” from the perspective on “non-white characters”.²² Its influence is far reaching and since its release in 2012, there have been seventeen video game titles across multiple platforms which perpetuate the *Walking Dead* narrative and experience.

²¹ Staaby 2015

²² Stang 2019

Chapter 2

The Theory

Procedural Rhetoric

Bogost describes video games as becoming “instrumental tools for institutional goals”¹, acknowledging their potentiality for disrupting and changing fundamental attitudes and beliefs about the world by deploying “abstract representations about the way the world does or should function.”² He offers procedural rhetoric as a “technique for making arguments with computational systems and for unpacking computational arguments others have created.”³ Bogost’s “technique” aligns with the game approach as it considers how the structure of a game employs certain persuasive techniques to offer certain possibilities to be potentially enacted by the player⁴. Procedural rhetoric also complements prior ontological investigations into the relationship between rules, fiction, and the player⁵, but instead of identifying what these relationships involve and how they are formed, procedural rhetoric seeks to analyse how any experiences generated by a computer act persuasively.

Following the classical model, procedural rhetoric entails persuasion – to change opinion or action. Following the contemporary model, procedural rhetoric entails expression – to convey ideas effectively. Procedural rhetoric is a subdomain of procedural authorship; its arguments are made not through the construction of words or images, but through the authorship of rules of behaviour, the construction of dynamic models.⁶

The combination of the game and ontological approaches, specifically Bogost’s *procedural rhetoric* to analyse the role of ideology in the chosen games aligns with

¹ in his work *Persuasive Games: The expressive power of video games*, 2007, p.x

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*, p.3

⁴ Salen & Zimmerman, cited in Egenfeldt-Nielsen, et al., 2016, p.11

⁵ *ibid.*, p.12

⁶ Bogost 2007, p.28

what Espen Aarseth (drawing on the work of ‘ludologists’ Gonzalo Frasca as well as Jesper Juul and Markku Eskelinen) terms “the general position” which is not specifically concerned with games versus stories or narrative theory, but one that questions the hermeneutic link between mimetic and mechanical aspects in gameplay.⁷ It is this grounding in hermeneutics that will permit more purposeful ‘close-playings’ of the chosen games, treating them as though they are imbued with meaning and potential beyond the confines of their coding and its manifestation as sound and images.

While Bogost’s *procedural rhetoric* is a useful method for evaluating the way in which certain games use procedures to create visual enthymemes which enable the player to access prior knowledge of pre-existing procedural systems to “complete the claim” being made about such systems, he admits to ignoring the function of play, as well as the potential of video games as subdomains of play activities, in favour of critiquing video games as if they were literature, art, and film.⁸ This makes *procedural rhetoric* very useful for framing video games within potential hermeneutic circles akin to those in other forms of text and media; however, to completely align with the “general position” and account for the way in which the mechanics of gameplay foster a heuristic environment for players to discover the enthymematic potential of video games, the role of play as the activity guiding players through “abstract representations”⁹ of ‘real’ world activities must be further elaborated upon.

It is critical at this stage to explain the use of inverted commas around the concept of the ‘real’. Treating video games as enthymematic texts is to attribute them power in the ‘symbolic order’¹⁰ of the video gamer. Video games, like any text, adhere to “pre-given structures of social and sexual roles and relations which make up the family and society”¹¹, denying the video gamer any direct access to reality and banishing him or her to strive to fulfil their unmet desires through language, and in

⁷ Aarseth 2014, p. 186

⁸ Bogost 2007, p.45

⁹ *ibid.* p.x

¹⁰ Lacan cited in Eagleton 2008, p.145

¹¹ *ibid.*

the case of video games -code, so that they may create meaning from an 'object' in the same way the create meaning from their lives - by noting the presence of signs to denote real objects and attributing them meaning by virtue of the absence of others and any antagonism stirred in their users.¹² To enter language, then interpreted further in computer code, is to be denied access to the real. The real becomes, "that inaccessible realm which is always beyond the reach of signification, always outside the symbolic order."¹³ Contextualising the use of the term 'real' in this dissertation allows the reader to further appreciated this attempt at recognising the hermeneutic potential of video games as texts grounded in rules and procedures, exactly like language.

The Magic Cycle

In the same way that Bogost privileges the rules and procedures governing gameplay as indicative of a game's hermeneutic potential, Perron and Arsenault have generated a "gameplay-centric" model which removes the onus on the player as the driving force behind "interacting" with a game (a bottom-up approach where individual elements of gameplay are analysed before reacting) and instead favours a "top-down process" where the player must use their expectations, preferences, knowledge, and skills to "react" to the world of the game "with all its varying shades of understanding."¹⁴ This model presents the interplay between hermeneutic and heuristic feedback loops in a diagram which acknowledges that the player's experience with the game starts before gameplay (prior knowledge), whilst also stressing the point that the only way to access any knowledge or experiences a game may offer is to 'play' the game, thus entering into interactive or ergodic relationship made possible by "a continuous loop between the gamer's input and the game's output."¹⁵ This 'Magic Cycle' is an adaptation of Juul's 'Magic Circle' and Perron's 'heuristic circle of gameplay'. The result is a diagram which contextualises the relationship between "Gamer", "Gameplay", "Game", and "Game". This model was favoured over more traditional models of 'playing' such as Johan Huizinga's *Magic*

¹² Žižek 2008

¹³ Eagleton 2008, p.145

¹⁴ Arsenault & Perron 2009, p.126

¹⁵ *ibid.* p.113

*Circle*¹⁶, as well as Juul and Perron's earlier attempts at a two-dimensional circle seeking to categorise those involved in the interpretive process and place value on the skills they may bring, because these outdated models ignore temporal progression – “the evolution of the gamer's relationship with the game”¹⁷ – choosing not to acknowledge the inevitable growth in understanding experienced by the player which is important to the overall interpretation of the game.

The Magic Cycle features three interconnected spirals which the player will have to work through in order to successfully answer gameplay, narrative, and interpretive questions.

The first one, and the largest depicts the actual gameplay – the most important feature of video games. The spiral expands with an ever larger circumference to represent the fact that video games seldom have a unique, fixed, and unchanging gameplay. Usually, new features, power-ups, and situations are introduced progressively to the gamer.¹⁸

Immediately it is clear that this model acknowledges the potential for adapting, improving, and progressing through the challenges within a video game. While it is not the game itself which is expanding (the game's algorithmic rules and procedures are indeed finite and unchanging upon consolidation), it is the possibilities within the game world which expand as the player becomes more familiar with the fiction and technicalities of the gaming system. Such familiarity with the narrative fiction of the game is essential to the second spiral which, “marks the narrative events that unfold through the game [as] most games rely on some kind of narrative, ranging from a basic framing structure...to a rich and complex plot.”¹⁹ The games being critiqued for this thesis spend considerable time and effort establishing and consolidating complex narrative plots in the hope that the player will become emotionally invested. Chris Pruett writes that character and plot design have great influence in horror games. They have an “effect on the way we empathise with the characters, on the

¹⁶ cited in Ensslin 2014, p.23

¹⁷ Arsenault & Perron 2009, p.115

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.* p.116

expression of vulnerability and danger, and on the game mechanics.”²⁰ How unified the first two spirals are will often determine the size and variability of the third spiral – the hermeneutic spiral.

The hermeneutic spiral is at the centre of the Magic Cycle, not because it is the core of the gaming experience, but because it is far from being an obligatory process.²¹ “The spirals’ relationship to each other is one of inclusion: the gameplay leads to the unfolding of the narrative, and together the gameplay and the narrative can make possible some sort of interpretation.”²² It is also important to note that the size of the spirals will depend on the complexity of a game’s design coupled with the willingness of the player to spend time in the game world.

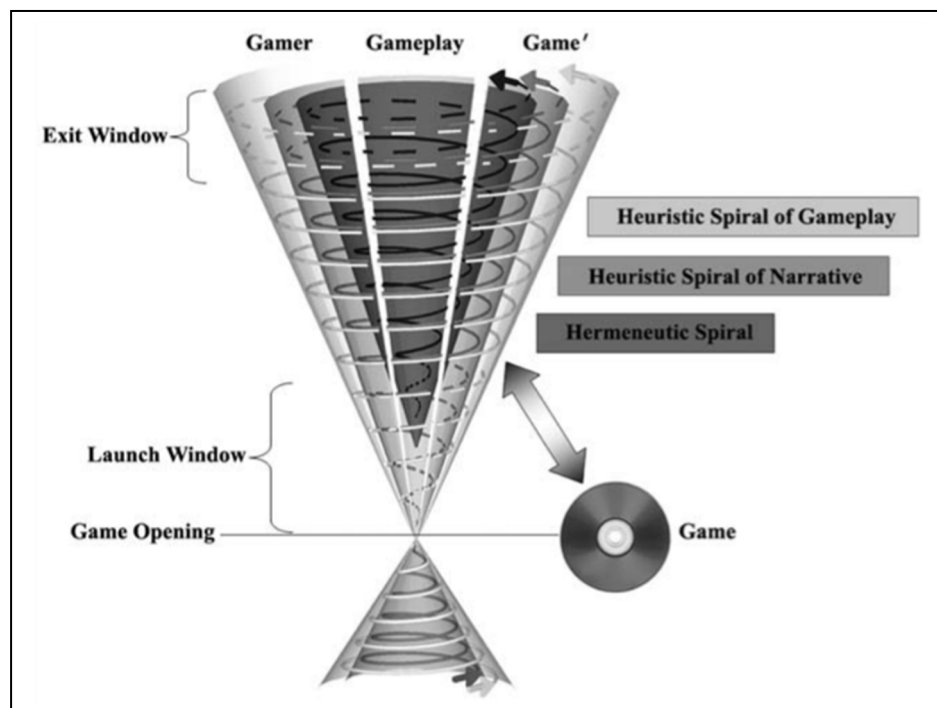


Fig. 1: The Magic Cycle.

²⁰ cited in Perron 2009, pp.133-134

²¹ Arsenault & Perron 2009, p.117

²² *ibid.* pp.117-118

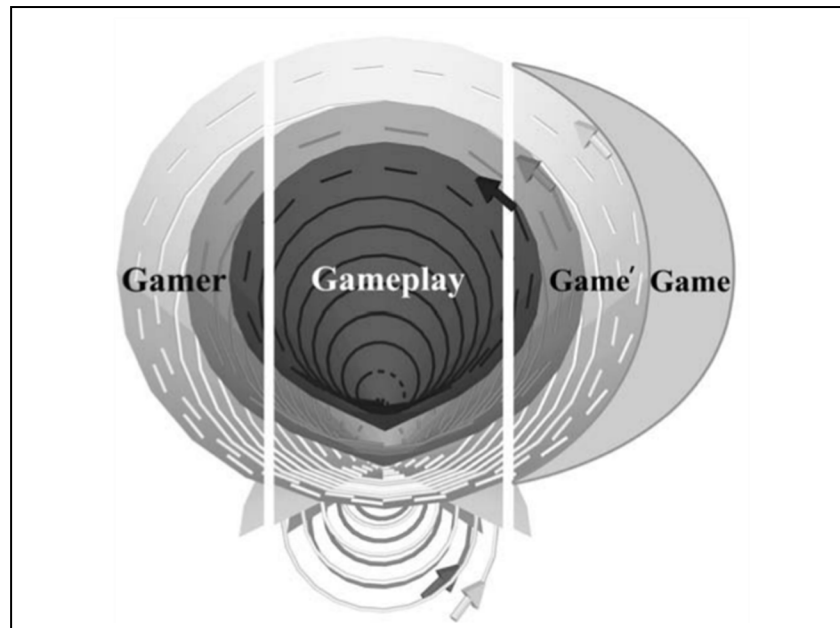


Fig. 2: Top view of the Magic Cycle.

Other key design elements in this model are:

The horizontal line at the game opening: acknowledges that the gamer does not enter the game in complete ignorance of the game’s genre and possibly its basic narrative and gameplay mechanics (based on prior exposure to similar games). Even if the player is completely new to the game the game will offer some sort of *primordial speech*, “this often takes the form of an introductory cut-scene whose main function is to regulate, modulate, take in charge, or shape the gamer’s horizon of expectations.”²³

The dotted lines at the bottom and top of the spiral: suggest that the player can enter the game at any point in the spiral depending on his or her past experiences with the game’s rules, procedures, and narrative. The same dotted lines at the top indicate that not all gamers exit a game “with the same level of understanding (of the gameplay or the narrative), or extensiveness of interpretation.”²⁴

²³ Arsenault & Perron 2009, p.117-118

²⁴ *ibid.* p.127

Game' compared to Game: The distinction between these two terms hinges on the limitations of player perception. Any attempt to “crack” or “decrypt” the game’s code is a fallacy as the player “does not see the game algorithm itself when he [sic] plays, but only a mental image he builds of it while playing.”²⁵ This mental image of the game is note as *Game'* in the model, “following the usual algebraic notation of “image” (prime).”²⁶ While the *Game'* widens as the player progresses through game and accesses more and more of the game space’s possibilities, any confirmation or certainty about the conditions of the ‘real’ game will always remain outside of the player’s interpretive scope.

This model is driven by feedback and the way in which a player must respond to the progressively complex output offered by the game in a *inter(re)reactive*²⁷ manner both in the fictitious game world, as well as the ‘real’ physical world is what makes the experience of video gaming ‘half-real’ as there exists a “duality of the formal and experiential perspectives on fiction in games.”²⁸ The player is cued by their prior experiences of genre, ideology, discourse etc. to consider how best to interact with the fiction of the game world, whilst at the same time being encouraged by the rules embedded in the software of the game to modify their behaviour if they are to complete the game and, in the case of the games studied, survive the monstrous threat seeking to destroy them.

The Player: Who is ‘Playing’ the Video Game?

There are three terms that will categorise the extent to which the ‘real’ world person playing the video game is distanced from the identity of the character they play in the game world: presence, agency, and embodiment.²⁹ Andreas Gregersen and Torben Grodal explore the phenomenon of embodiment in video games stating that, “we are agents that influence the world, and we may also be patients, that is: objects of other agents’ actions or events unfolding around us.”³⁰ They go on to describe this as an

²⁵ *ibid.* p.124

²⁶ *ibid.* p.125

²⁷ *ibid.* p.120

²⁸ *ibid.* p.119

²⁹ Perron 2009; Waggoner 2009

³⁰ 2009, p.65

“interactive feedback loop” whereby the game uses audiovisual and sometimes kinaesthetic data to simulate a time-space – “a simulated world”- seeking to integrate the player into the character they play, as well as the fictional world of the game. If such integration is successful then the body of the gamer is “not only caught up in an involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen...but is also urged to act and feel through its presence, agency and embodiment in the fictional world.”³¹ On account of video games seeking to be representational of reality, the degree to which a player can unproblematically embody a character or ‘presence’ in the fictional world of the game depends on their willingness to submit to the fantasy of the game world which can be meaningful without being faithful simulations of the ‘real’ world.³²

Regardless of the level of realism hoped to be communicated by the game it is the agency afforded to the player’s presence in the game world which will ultimately persuade the player to understand and internalise any artistic, aesthetic, and/or ideological message designed into the game to be ‘played’ out.³³ This ‘agency’ is only possible through the actions of the players ‘agent’ or ‘avatar’. The distinction between the player and their ‘avatar’ or ‘agent’ is best described by Perron when he describes the player as “a head with a body in the gameworld [sic]”.³⁴ Depending on the depth of the player’s interaction with their body in the game world defines whether or not they are acting through an ‘agent’ or an ‘avatar’. Laetitia Wilson best describes the gaming ‘avatar’ when she writes:

[An avatar is] a virtual, surrogate self that acts as a stand in for our real-space selves, that represents the user. The cyberspace avatar functions as a locus that is multifarious and polymorphous, displaced from the facticity of our real-space selves...Avatar spaces indisputably involve choice in the creation of one’s avatar; there is substantial scope in which to exercise choice and create meaning [within the video game].³⁵

³¹ Perron 2009, p.125

³² Engenfeldt-Nielsen, et al. 2016, p.46

³³ Ensslin 2014, p.36

³⁴ 2009, p.131

³⁵ cited in Waggoner 2009, p.9

The very act of being able to create one's representation in a digital space, let alone customise this creation through 'choice' is what separates and 'avatar' from an 'agent'. Agents cannot be altered in any way by the user, merely controlled and never changed in appearance or skill level.³⁶ The games chosen for this thesis all involve the player acting through an agent with a predetermined appearance, personality, and ideological inclinations. Despite this apparent lack of creative freedom over the player agent's physical manifestation and social-political allegiances in the digital world, there is still great scope for players to manipulate the actions of their agent, and in turn be manipulated by the unavoidable collision of the player's identity and the identity of their 'extended body'³⁷ or digital self.

Alexander Galloway prefers to refer to the "player" as the "operator" to "underscore the mechanic, almost industrial, and certainly cybernetic aspect of much of human-computer interaction, of which gaming is a key part."³⁸ Galloway continues, distinguishing between two basic types of action in video games: machine actions and operator actions:

The difference is this: machine actions are acts performed by the software and hardware of the game computer, while operator actions are acts performed by players...the division is completely artificial – both the machine and the operator work together in a cybernetic relationship to effect the various actions of the video game in its entirety.³⁹

Keogh takes Galloway's premise of a "cybernetic relationship" even further, describing the amalgamation of the player and the video game as a "cybernetic assemblage of human body and nonhuman body across actual and virtual worlds."⁴⁰ Such an assemblage is always partial and mediated by the *what* the player must do to play the game, *how* the player must manipulate the plastic in their hands to have their agent or avatar 'perform' his or her will inside the virtual world of the game.

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ a term coined by Perron (2009) that he specifically uses to describe the survival horror genre of video gaming

³⁸ Galloway 2006, p.127

³⁹ *ibid.* p.5

⁴⁰ Keogh 2018, p.22

Keogh's work is predicated on the notion that any video game experience is "a *play of bodies* that flickers between present and absent, corporal and incorporeal, immanent and transcendent, actual and virtual, "me" and "not me."⁴¹

This symbiosis between player and game character, permits what Allucquere Roseanne Stone labels 'the multiplicity of human identity'. She writes: "The identities that emerge from [human-machine] interactions [are] fragmented and complex. I see these identities engaged in a wonderful and awesome struggle, straining to make meaning and sense out of their lives."⁴² Stone recognises the potential for computer technology to increase the acceptance of identity-as-multiple, she acknowledges that computers are a tool to allow for freedom of expression previously unheard of – a medium Lev Manovich described as the first "metamedium"⁴³, able to describe and simulate the details of any other medium and inject the player into worlds that may not even be able to exist outside of the computer realm.

So who is playing? The literature reviewed indicates that whilst the player exists in the 'real' world, it is their presence, or at least the representation of it, in the game world that has agency over the outcome of the game. The real person playing the game is required to physically interact with the game (a phenomenon explored in the next subheading) as part of a feedback loop. In the context of survival horror games, the player will have to critically consider how invested they are in the actions and attitudes of their player character and eventually decide whether or not what they had to do to survive reflects purely on their agent in the game world or, by extension, their own attitudes, values, beliefs, and desires.

Play: How do Players Access the Game World?

In accordance with procedural rhetoric games rely on *procedural representation* which is a form of symbolic expression that uses processes rather than language to

⁴¹ Keogh 2018, p.13

⁴² cited in Waggoner 2009, p.30

⁴³ in *The Language of New Media* 2001, p.370

convey meaning.⁴⁴ Effectively interpreting any meaning offered by a video game requires the practiced enacting of processes, or “play”. Labelling the person who engages with the video game as the “player” automatically favours the verb “play” over the verb “interact”. Manovich writes that the term “interactivity” is “too broad to be truly useful,”⁴⁵ even describing the term interactive as “tautological” as any object presented by a computer automatically becomes interactive, which is a point of view shared by Galloway who references Umberto Eco’s concept of every text being a “lazy machine asking the reader to do some of its work”⁴⁶ a sentiment supported by the heuristic nature of video gaming. Bogost states that, “We encounter the meaning of games by exploring their possibility spaces. And we explore their possibility spaces through play.”⁴⁷ The concept of play, in the context of video games, is paradoxical in the sense that the rules of the game are revealed through playing, rather than more rigid, traditional models of play which relied on pre-established rules defined and agreed upon before play could begin.⁴⁸ In this sense, video games are experimental spaces of play and “every time we face a new game we have to learn to operate it at all levels, including the material one”⁴⁹, rather than rely on predictable, special, “hallowed”⁵⁰ rules and routines native to the ‘ordinary’ world.

Juul proposes that while the game relies strongly on assumptions about the ‘ordinary’ world to exist, the mechanics of gameplay cannot implement a real-world activity, but rather a specific stylised concept of a real-world activity.⁵¹ Aarseth⁵² elaborates on the importance of shifting the focus from outright mimicry of the ‘real’ to accepting gameplay as “representational”. While it must be acknowledged that not all video games seek to mimic the real world, the truth remains that all video games could not exist without ludic mechanics⁵³ as it is the procedural systems of the

⁴⁴ Bogost 2007, p.9

⁴⁵ 2001, p.55

⁴⁶ Eco 1995, p.3 cited in Galloway 2006, p.128

⁴⁷ 2008, p.121

⁴⁸ Zimmerman 2009

⁴⁹ Tosca 2003, p.208

⁵⁰ Johan Huizinga emphasizing the importance attributed to where traditional play takes place - cited in Crawford 2009, p.4

⁵¹ 2011, p.168

⁵² 2014, p.188

⁵³ Ensslin 2014 discussing *ludic mechanics*

computer itself which craft representations of imagined worlds and allow for possibilities within such worlds for the player.⁵⁴ Game worlds and their possibilities “become real through use” in an environment “that is both procedural and participatory.”⁵⁵ The virtual world of the game does not replace reality but augments it, incorporating technologies and audiovisual-haptic feedback that translates the player’s embodied experience into complex assemblages of capacities and processes.⁵⁶

The only way a player can participate in the systematically programmed world of the video game is through the game’s interface. Mark Wolf describes such an interface as being:

...the boundary between the player and the video game itself. The interface is really a junction point between input and output, hardware and software, and the player and the material game itself, and the portal through which player activity occurs.⁵⁷

When a player communicates a decision to the computer system by manipulating the specific input device (keyboard, controller, mouse etc.), the system offers new criteria for any decision players might make within its architecture. This process relies on feedback to the player through direct or implicit instructions, “enabling them to perceive duration and degrees of success.”⁵⁸ Feedback to the player is not exclusive to the game world, input devices can also potentially provide feedback to the player by vibrating, glowing, making sound, and becoming sensitive to the player’s movement and sound. This interaction is called *haptics*⁵⁹ and is present in all of the games being studied, mostly to enhance the tension felt by the player during moments of stealth or when rapid decision making is required, but always to act as a “metaphorical substitution between the player’s real-world activity and the

⁵⁴ Bogost 2008, p.122

⁵⁵ Murray 1997, p.75

⁵⁶ Keogh 2018, p.39

⁵⁷ cited in Waggoner 2009, p.32

⁵⁸ Mauger 2014, p.37

⁵⁹ Juul, 2011, p.135

in-game activity performed.”⁶⁰ Any such interface and its associated mechanics is an attempt to “enter” the game at a “sensory, fictional, or systemic”⁶¹ level to access enough feedback from the game to adopt its rules and follow them to achieve victory.

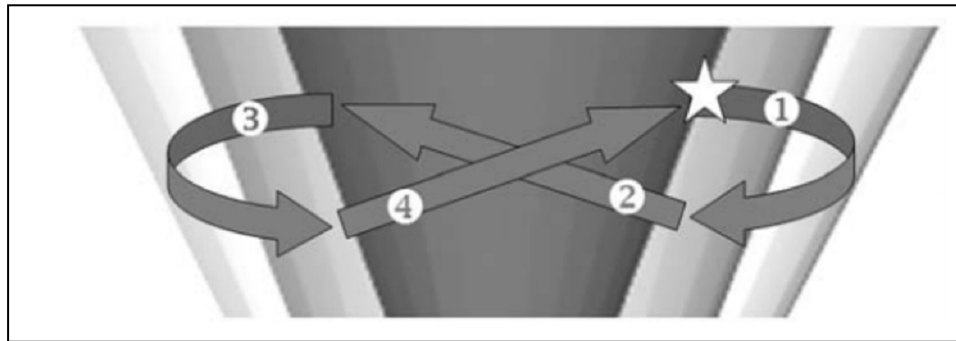


Fig. 3: A single gameplay feedback loop

Arsenault and Perron visualise the gaming feedback loop in their work on the Magic Cycle, one of the chosen methodologies for the way this dissertation will critique the chosen video games. They determine that a single loop of gameplay has four steps⁶²:

1. From the game’s database, the game’s algorithm draws the 3-D object and textures, and plays animations, sound files, and finds everything else that it needs to represent the game state.
2. The game outputs these to the screen, speakers, or other peripherals. The gamer uses his [sic] perceptual skills (bottom-up) to see, hear and/or feel what is happening.
3. The gamer analyses the data at hand through his broader anterior knowledge (in top-down fashion) of narrative conventions, generic competence, gaming repertoire, etc. to make a decision.

⁶⁰ *ibid.* p.173

⁶¹ Mauger 2014, p.37

⁶² Arsenault and Perron 2009, pp.120-121

4. The gamer uses his implementation skills (such as hand-eye coordination) to react to the game event, and the game recognises this input and factors it into the change of the game state.

This looping action is repeated to make up the Magic Cycle and extends upwards and outwards as the player progresses through the game, unlocking more of the game's narrative, as well as becoming aware of more complex ways to input certain actions into the gameplay spiral in the hope of being rewarded with greater heuristic and hermeneutic understanding of the game overall.⁶³

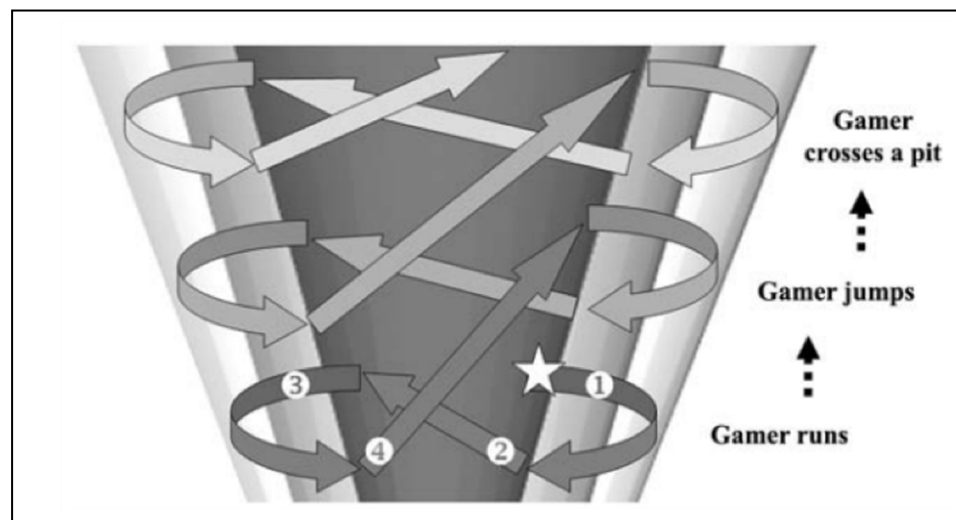


Fig. 4: An example of responding to the game's output to use gameplay to progress up the Cycle towards completing the game.

How well a player can follow the rules of a video game and progress through the gameplay, narrative, and hermeneutic spirals⁶⁴ relies on the player's familiarity with the genre of game, the system it is being played on, and most importantly, the possibilities and limitations inherent in computer software and hardware. Kelsey Cummings⁶⁵ surmises that there is an unspoken agreement between the player and the game producer that the player will be limited by the mechanics of the game, in exchange for the game allowing the player to reach particular goals. This agreement is unspoken in the sense that the computer mediates what is and is not allowed in the

⁶³ Arsenault & Perron 2009, p.121

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ 2015

game space devoid of player or developer mediation once the game is released, both freeing the player from having to remember and enforce the rules⁶⁶ whilst inversely imposing limitations on possibilities to act on any ideological imperatives the player may wish to pursue in the game world outside of the permissible, pre-programmed procedures.⁶⁷ Extensive knowledge of the game's interface, and its similarity to the interface used by other games, grants the player greater predictive powers in regards to the consequences of pressing certain buttons in a certain order.⁶⁸ Michael Liebe⁶⁹ disputes the importance of such prior knowledge when he described video games as positive forms of enablement as ultimately there are no pressures to adhere to any rules as the program code upholds the rules for the player and deviations from the rules simply are not possible as they are not defined in the software program.

Liebe's line of argument follows that traditional play relied on the 'intent' of 'willing' participants to uphold the rules of the game space. The outcome of the game relied directly on the behaviour of the participants (in the context of the 'magic circle') whereas video games are a "unique medium" in the sense that the "rule system does not have to be *magically* upheld by aware players. The rules are upheld by the program code."⁷⁰ What Liebe does not fully acknowledge is the complexity of not merely playing a video game but mastering it by reacting to the supposedly inscribed rules in such a way as to allow for progression and therefore interpretation. Arsenault and Perron's Magic Cycle acknowledges the heuristic nature of the interaction between player and game, but instead of the simple 'trial and error' mentality relying exclusively on finding what is permissible within the confines of the game rules, they describe the interaction between the player and the game as a "conversation" in which the "game always gets the first turn to speak".⁷¹

To just rely on the heuristic accessibility of video games is to ignore their inception as fictional simulations of 'real', formal systems⁷² which are also governed by rules,

⁶⁶ Juul 2011, pp.53-54

⁶⁷ Bogost 2008

⁶⁸ Arsenault & Perron 2009, p.121

⁶⁹ 2008, p.337

⁷⁰ *ibid.* p.334

⁷¹ Arsenault & Perron 2009, p.120

⁷² Juul 2011, p.168

and to risk denying the player understanding of their artistic and aesthetic message.⁷³ Such messages are, as Juul supposes, not sought out as part of a desire to inflict or experience violence and death, but simply another way of acknowledging and coping with their existence.⁷⁴ Although the player may not wish to perform these actions or do not yet know how, to progress in the game they must and the allegorical way in which rules come to represent the consequences of the player's actions are generally based on some sort of existing antagonism in the 'real' world, imbuing the game world with symbolic and metaphorical meaning.⁷⁵

The Game: How do Games Simulate Ideology?

Early video games studies made significant headway into conceptualising the cybernetic nature and mechanical construction of videogames, overshadowing the importance of the signifying potential of these new audiovisual representations. Keogh best summarises this when critiquing the work of Aarseth and Galloway and how focusing "on how the page is turned forgets that the page still has words written on it".⁷⁶ What the videogame has to "say" is explicitly ideological, whether the designer intended this or not.

Andrew Vincent understands contemporary ideology to be bodies of concepts, values, and symbols which seek to conceptualise what is possible or impossible for humans to achieve in their interactions with each other and the Real world according to 'correct' technical arrangements for social, economic, and political life.⁷⁷ Kurt Squire links ideology to video games when he states that, "Games are 'ideological worlds' in that they instantiate ideas through implicit rule sets and systems (rather than by telling stories). The word *ideological* tries to capture that they are built according to theories of how the world operates (implicitly or explicitly)."⁷⁸ Game designers have a unique bias in regards to recreating 'reality' in their respective game worlds due to systematic processes required for the game to even exist. "Every

⁷³ Ensslin 2014, p.36

⁷⁴ 2011, p.193

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, p.15

⁷⁶ Keogh 2018, p.46

⁷⁷ cited in his work *Modern Political Ideologies*, 2010, p.18

⁷⁸ 2011, cited in Cummings 2015, p.6

game has a mathematical substratum, a set of rules that lies under its surface”⁷⁹, and it is these rules that form the very core of the game. Unlike other forms of media where scholars debate the formal core of the medium, it is universally agreed that any video game, “is a kind of miniature artificial system, bounded and defined by the game rules,”⁸⁰ which are responsible for the game’s hermeneutic spiral within the Magic Cycle.⁸¹ These core rules, “reflect the perspectives and convictions of their designers, at once enabling and foreclosing player action and reflection”⁸², in a way that Frasca suggests qualifies the game to function as an ideological model or simulation. When reduced to the algorithmic level, survival horror games rely on the “schematics” for living in the ‘real’ world that ideology proposes, but can only ever do so as a complex imaginary fantasy.

When considering what the “schematics” for living in the ‘real’ world could look like if someone or something tried to simulate it, Eugen Fink suggests that the thing doing the simulating potentially gets closer to Being than any ‘natural’ object or phenomena. Fink claims that ‘irreality’ is more ‘real’ than reality.⁸³ Video games are one such form of ‘irreality’ that rely on *techne* as much as, if not more than, *episteme*, in an attempt to access the Ideal-ego, “the concept the subject has of their phenomenological self in some relation to what they want to believe they are.”⁸⁴ Herein lies the promise of Fink’s statement, as well as its limitation, even danger – the player (through *techne*) can enjoy in and of the symbolic ‘irreality’ so completely that they risk reducing sociality to a circle of enjoyment, and risk “reducing the reality of everyday experience to a series of marks that overwrite the phenomenological/imaginary content of everyday experience, in turn which renders the everyday experience which the subject trusts as indistinct, kitsch, cosmetic, unreal, and so forth...”⁸⁵ The result is the naturalisation of ideology in the ‘real’, “life-world” by concealing traumatic and disruptive forces which would impose themselves on the subject.⁸⁶ Although it could be argued that survival horror games

⁷⁹ Zimmerman 2009, p.26

⁸⁰ *ibid.* p.26

⁸¹ Arsenault & Perron 2009

⁸² Frasca cited in Hayse 2014, p.442

⁸³ cited in Ensslin 2014, p.22

⁸⁴ Žižek cited in Hourigan 2010, p.7

⁸⁵ Freud cited in Hourigan 2010, p.8

⁸⁶ Hourigan 2010, p.21

confront the subject (player) with traumatic and disruptive forces, the mediation of *techne* via the mechanisms and aesthetics of gameplay puts any such unpleasantness at a symbolic distance⁸⁷, reducing cultural complexities to “rigid, reductive, and reified structures.”⁸⁸ Galloway made this statement when justifying his “protocological critique of informatic control” in which he theorises that the digital protocol of video games can undermine ideological meaning within the game world.⁸⁹ The tangible, quantifiable, programmable, predictable nature of video games tempts the player to see them as more reliably ‘real’ than many of the unexplainable phenomena of their “life-world” and thus accept them more readily as socialising forces, especially given the vast improvements in the immersive potential of video games since authors like Galloway and Slavoj Žižek first discussed the limitations of such simulation.

The way in which Žižek writes about ideology as essential to material reality is why his work is favoured when framing video games within the concept of ideology, in particular the way in which he acknowledges that ideology is imbedded in reality, disfiguring it, distorting it, rendering it malignant.⁹⁰ The acceptance of ideology is a symptom of a clash between idealism and ‘reality’ resulting in the need for an illusion, a fetishistic inversion of the truth in which subjects of ideology are able to recognise their subjugation but behave as if they are ignorant, living an *ideological fantasy*⁹¹ easily facilitated by video games as a device to distract from the antagonistic fissure at the centre of all society – ironically, often by simulating it.⁹² In postmodern gaming, the player is content with the workings of the machine to be as concealed as possible in favour of what Žižek labels the ‘transparency’ of contemporary simulation.⁹³ While this ‘transparency’ strengthens the interface between player and video game, it can consequently weaken the player’s inclination to resist subjectivising simulated objects, instead encouraging them to ‘believe’ that what game developers have permitted them to do in the game world is of their own

⁸⁷Hourigan 2010, p.21

⁸⁸ Galloway cited in Hayse 2014, p.444

⁸⁹ Hayse 2014

⁹⁰ Bogost 2007, p.74

⁹¹ Žižek 2008, p.30

⁹² *ibid.* p.142

⁹³ cited in Hourigan 2010, p.4

volition. Galloway is also deeply suspicious of any ideological emancipation video games claim to permit, stating that video games “...solve the problem of political control, not by sublimating it as does the cinema, but by *making it coterminous with the entire game*,”⁹⁴ and in this way video games achieve not only a procedural transparency, but also a political one, luring the player into mistaking their ability to ‘choose’ what happens in the game world with an abstracted ability to do the same in the ‘real’ world.

Norman Fairclough theorises that, “...variable meanings of *ideology* are not just randomly generated, but themselves correspond to different ideological positions, and have been generated in the course of struggle between these positions.”⁹⁵ Bogost supports this, arguing that “no video game is produced in a cultural vacuum. All bear the biases of their creators. Video games can help shed light on these ideological biases.”⁹⁶ Fairclough also emphasises the importance of *meaning systems* when determining the origin and influence of ideology and writes that there are “relevant experts” who are “guarantors” of power as well as any elements of the “codified standard language” which would seek to uphold such power.⁹⁷ Video games are suitable agents to propagate the ideological ‘mystification’⁹⁸ surrounding imaginary resolutions to real contradictions and create procedural models of *meaning systems*, “by imposing sets of rules that create particular possibility spaces...”⁹⁹ which are stringently bound by the procedural capabilities of a computer to replicate “gestures, experiences, and interactions”, resulting in a sort of literal hardwired truth that the game’s rules will allow (and disallow) certain activities that combine to “make up the game’s significance”¹⁰⁰ which realistically is a comment of society being made by the game producer.

⁹⁴ Galloway 2006, p.92

⁹⁵ 2001, p.78

⁹⁶ 2008, p.128

⁹⁷ Fairclough 2001, p.79

⁹⁸ The way in which a dominant power may legitimate itself by *promoting* beliefs and values congenial to it; *naturalizing* and *universalizing* such beliefs so as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable; *denigrating* ideas which might challenge it; *excluding* rival forms of thought; and *obscuring* social reality (Eagleton 1991, p.5)

⁹⁹ Bogost 2008, p.122

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.* p.121

Bogost's procedural rhetoric aligns with the traditional value placed on rhetoric as key to shaping ideology, whilst also accounting for the role of video games as enculturating agents of new media. He stated that procedural rhetoric is:

...a sub-domain of procedural authorship; its arguments are made not through the construction of words or images, but through the authorship of rules of behaviour, the construction of dynamic models. In computation, those rules are authored in code, through the practice of programming...video games can make claims about the world. But when they do so, they do it not with oral speech, nor in writing, nor even with images. Rather, video games make argument with *processes*.¹⁰¹

Employing procedural rhetoric in the study of the chosen games, in response to the research questions outlined above, will permit 'close-playings' of each game to determine how the rules and narrative fiction of the game are symptomatic of 'real' ideological fantasies. Bogost's method, coupled with Žižek's musings on *techné* in the postmodern culture of simulation will help investigate how ludological elements of survival horror video games manipulate players to weigh their symbolic actions against imaginary consequences leaving them to consider how 'real' the actions performed in the game were to them if the virtuality of the situation was accepted as an extension of the ideological conditions of the life-world.

The Monster as 'Other' in the Survival Horror Genre

Perron, when explaining the experiential nature of the video game and the multidimensional concept of presence, evaluated the survival horror gaming experience:

Survival horror worlds are scary and eerie, meaningful and rich sensorial environments capable of focusing the gamer's attention and isolating him

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, p.125

[sic] from other stimuli. They are inhabited by copresent monstrous “others” showing an awareness of the player character.¹⁰²

What makes this statement so effective is its ability to deduce a number of key theoretical ideas (worlds, gamer, habitation, player character) important to *player-response criticism* and introduce the ‘monster/s’ as “copresent”, a term which imbues these “others” with power perhaps equal to that of the player character. Having a powerful antagonist is by no means exclusive to survival horror video games, and all games must contain a challenge suitably difficult to ensure a satisfying win condition¹⁰³; however, true to the subversive nature of the horror genre, survival horror games disrupt ideological systems of power¹⁰⁴ by creating creatures outside of ideological rationality and often beyond the ability of the player to defeat. The monster/s remain interstitial as they transgress rational binary distinctions, “symbolising the negative and destructive elements that the hero must fight to attain his full humanity”.¹⁰⁵ Fighting the monster becomes a confrontation with the self that obliges the player to realise that “it is man that makes the monster”¹⁰⁶ as an embodiment of everything ‘other’ than what the player hopes to represent through their character.

This assertion is supported by Niall Scott when he describes the monster as a powerful expression of the imagination in contention to the rational, a “signifier of what society presents as fundamentally *different* and unlike ‘acceptable’ society...society’s conception of monsters is an inextricable reflection of its fears”.¹⁰⁷ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen furthers this idea of monsters being created by society to signify *différance* when he stated that:

The monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment – of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or

¹⁰² Perron 2009, p.137

¹⁰³ Juul 2011

¹⁰⁴ Taylor 2006

¹⁰⁵ Perron 2009, p.130

¹⁰⁶ Vandevyer 2004 cited in Perron 2009, p.130

¹⁰⁷ cited in Russell 2017, p.1

incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically “that which reveals,” “that which warns,” a glyph that seeks a hierophant.¹⁰⁸

In the same way that the figure of the Jew becomes a “coded message, a cypher, a disfigured representation of social antagonism” in the work of Žižek,¹⁰⁹ the monster in survival horror video games can be interpreted as a projection of society’s internal negativity leading to a “blockage” which prevents society from reaching its full identity as a closed, homogeneous totality.¹¹⁰

Žižek argues that all ‘culture’ is an attempt to cultivate antagonism, “the very antagonism through which man cuts his umbilical cord with nature, with animal homeostasis”¹¹¹ so that humanity may emerge harmonious and ‘new’, without antagonistic tension. Ironically, in a quest to achieve such harmony humanity routinely murders and destroys so that it may be reborn anew.¹¹² The monster acts as the very embodiment of antagonistic tension and emerges from myth, the darkness, the imagination, space itself, to interrupt culture – to reclaim harmony and balance as a force of total destruction that does not discriminate or choose who is to be a part of ‘New Man’¹¹³ but would rather there was ‘no man’. Such an indiscriminate desire for annihilation is never created *ex nihilo* but is the ‘shadow’ of the political-cultural void left in the wake of normality. It is, “difference made flesh, come to dwell among us. In its function as dialectical Other or third term supplement, the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond – of all those loci that are rhetorically placed as distant and distinct but originate Within.”¹¹⁴ The monster is a *projection*¹¹⁵ of *repressed*¹¹⁶ conflicts, forced into the unconsciousness. It is an opportunity to “disown” those negative aspects of the self and, through the power of language (and

¹⁰⁸ Cohen 1996, p.4

¹⁰⁹ Žižek 2008, p.141

¹¹⁰ *ibid.* p.143

¹¹¹ *ibid.* p.xxviii

¹¹² Žižek 2008; Žižek 2010

¹¹³ *ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Cohen 1996, p.7

¹¹⁵ Freud cited in Barry 2009, p.93

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*

in the case of video games - code), metonymically ‘gift’ any unusual desires or neuroses to a third party object.¹¹⁷

Despite inhabiting an ‘alien’ physiology the monster gains its presence in the game by being reflective of the player’s ‘human’ anxieties and acting in opposition to the player’s ‘human’ behaviour¹¹⁸ in a purposeful attempt to become the “hidden face of the hero and its founding virtues”, a true “experience of the self”. To be free of such blatant antagonism “...the player character has no choice but to reply with a similar and animal brutality”¹¹⁹, prompting the player to wonder if the monster truly is ‘other’ or just another extension of the ‘self’. In this way the monster justifiably comes to represent the “inevitable and endless struggle with the realities of ideology”¹²⁰ that Žižek¹²¹ suggests is outside the realm of language and is felt as internal lack and anxiety in the individual.

Projecting unrealised, unacknowledged, or even repressed antagonism onto the Other as written by Žižek originates from the work of Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud, especially their ideas concerning desire and its origins. Linked to the concept of the *unconscious*, repression forces unresolved conflicts, unadmitted desires, or traumatic past events into the unconscious or *id*, where it is dormant until it reenters consciousness or *ego*, in a newly acquired form. Sometimes it is even promoted into “something grander or is disguised as something noble”¹²² depending on the influence of external forces on the subject’s conscience, or *super-ego*. In the case of video games, this ‘rebranding’ of negative traits and desires as the ability to combat ‘other’ forces exhibiting undesirable behaviour is called *sublimation* and channels violent and sexual behaviour into “higher goals”¹²³. Instead of committing violence or obscenity, the subject builds churches and writes poetry. There is a metaphorical substitution codifying antagonism within linguistic mechanisms, making the vanquishing of monsters a worthy “higher goal” for those virtual societies oppressed

¹¹⁷ Eagleton 2008, p.137

¹¹⁸ Taylor 2006

¹¹⁹ Perron 2009, p.130

¹²⁰ Vincent 2010, p.17

¹²¹ 2008

¹²² Barry 2009, p.93

¹²³ Eagleton 2008, p.132

by their scourge.¹²⁴ In video gaming, a “beast” is often a colloquialism for a “highly competent player”, metaphorically likening the player to the very monsters they are combatting. The desire to defeat the monster is *symptomatic* of a player’s need to regulate their own feelings of *jouissance* or absolute excitement and pleasure, by having it symbolised, given form, brought-to-life, so that they can literally destroy a representation of their unbearable suffering. The shape these monsters take is determined by what is permissible in the collective conscience of the super-ego, namely neoliberal contemporary society, and the player is always testing game developers’ interpretations of pleasurable gratification¹²⁵, feeding back how much they are prepared to suffer oppression and even indignity within a virtual world if it means they are able to elucidate their fears and desires.

Whilst key terms from Freudian psychoanalysis were employed in the previous paragraph to categorise the warring forces within the individual as he/she is made a ‘subject’ of society, it is Lacan’s work on signifiers, symbols, and the potential to treat the monsters of survival horror as “assemblages of signifiers clustering round a proper name”¹²⁶, that permit the player to acknowledge each creature as “...merely an empty marker of difference, a sign of what divides us from the imaginary and inserts us into our predestined place within the symbolic order”.¹²⁷ In the act of identifying with these grotesque, animalistic images, the player misperceives and misrecognises themselves in the horror of what they try to understand and identify with, meaning they must restore the symbolic order:

The vividness and concreteness of the image (the animal demon) enables man to establish a relationship with it as a representative of the overwhelming power in himself. He fears it and seeks propitiate it by sacrifice and ritual.¹²⁸

The symbolic order requires patriarchal order and logic¹²⁹ and video games are potentially the contemporary equivalent to a ritualistic appeasing of desires hatched

¹²⁴ Leader & Groves 2010, p.53

¹²⁵ Eagleton 2008, p.167

¹²⁶ Barry 2009, p.108

¹²⁷ Eagleton 2008, p.146

¹²⁸ Jaffe 1968, p.264

¹²⁹ Barry 2009, p.109

from the imaginary - an opportunity to satiate the “animal demon” in each individual. Regardless, the lack felt by the subject, in this case, the video game player, is not able to be satisfied by the ‘object’ of the monster because it is the pursuit of discomfort that drives fantastical illusions¹³⁰, so each object (monster) attained, fought, survived, worshipped, destroyed, fails to satisfy what is a perpetual need for struggle, both individually and collectively, despite the resultant pain and horror.

Far from exclusively revolving around the internal conflict of the individual, fiction involving the monster must also acknowledge a universal, antagonistic struggle which, rather than taking place between particular communities (even though it sometimes does), splits each community from within, so that the “trans-cultural” link between communities is one of a shared struggle.¹³¹ What this means for the player of survival horror games is that while the monster exists to fulfil one of the best established conventions of horror stories -the binary opposition between innocence (that will eventually be destroyed) and unjustified evil¹³² - the player, and by extension their in-game agent, must still contend with a game world populated with challenges and NPCs which exist to either propagate ideology or simply exist as a by-product of the games ideological “cultural inheritance and technological precedent.”¹³³ Such events and characters must exist to foster feelings of a shared struggle against the monster, but also to make it clear to the player that their representation and agency in the game is intended to be ideologically relevant to the game world, thus making the way in which game developers position the monster as ‘other’ appear justifiable in accordance with what the player’s agent would consider monstrous behaviour performed by an abnormal, supernatural, alienesque being.

If ideology represents phantasy then the monster could represent the destruction of such phantasy in the player and in the same way the Real is not knowable, the monster cannot be understood or reasoned with. It will always exist outside of ideology. The monster threatens any notions of long-established political, social, and cultural ideology being essential and through embodying destructive difference,

¹³⁰ Cottrel 2014, p.91

¹³¹ Žižek 2010, p.53

¹³² Tosca 2003

¹³³ Hayse 2014, p.445

reveals such systems to be arbitrary and mutable in the wake of a very real threat. Despite metaphysically embodying a player's terror, the monster ultimately represents everything 'other' than the complex interplay of ideology and rationality invested in the player's fictional representation in the game world. Cohen summarises this phenomenon when he explains that, "the monster is transgressive, too sexual, perversely erotic, a lawbreaker; and so the monster and all that it embodies must be exiled or destroyed."¹³⁴ The act of destroying the monster in the video game empowers the player to 'exorcise' evil from the narrative fiction, as well their life (which has been intertwined with the game), and such victory over the 'other' is potentially cathartic.

¹³⁴ 1996, p.16

Chapter 3

Getting it off [out of] our chest: the alien in Alien: Isolation as a fantasmatic promise of destruction

Alien: Isolation, as a specific example of the survival horror video game genre, extrapolates contemporary fears of death and exploitation to create a simulation of ‘reality’ in which anarchy and corporate greed coalesce in the diegetic space of the ‘game world’¹ to create an experience reliant on ideology, fantasy, and procedurality. This chapter will examine the rules and subsequent mechanics of gameplay within *Alien: Isolation* using Arsenault and Perron’s Magic Cycle as a model for interpretation, in league with Bogost’s procedural rhetoric to discuss the game’s reliance upon ontological rationality to effectively establish antagonism within the narrative of the game, as well as justify the actions permissible to the player as they battle the monster (Ridley Scott’s xenomorph²). This work strengthens the link between ideology as a universally accepted paradigm for placing value on what ‘is’, and video games as phantasmatic simulations of what ‘could be’, furthering the discussion of whether or not there is a difference between these concepts when playing a video game as to ‘be’ in a game world, players must ‘do’, manifesting what ‘is’. If *Alien: Isolation* can be accepted as a simulation which explores a player’s fantasy of confronting and surviving death whilst being suitably grounded in the politics of reality, then battling and surviving this grotesque, monstrous ‘other’ that would destroy them may be cathartic in the sense that it allows them to feel provoked, even antagonised, by violence, gore, death and destruction, in a space seemingly separate from their ‘real’ existence.

The ‘corporation’ and its obsession with the xenomorph acts as a mirror to the player, reflecting back to the individual his/her own desire to control and conquer the monster, despite the game lore exposing the ‘corporation’ as scheming, traitorous,

¹ Wolf 2014, p.125

² *Alien* 1979

violent, and ruthless, and imbuing the playable agent in the game (Amanda Ripley) with a profound resentment for the Weyland-Yutani corporation. By game's end the player is left resenting the human potential for corruption and greed, whilst admiring the monster's liberation from the Symbolic and the Imaginary, envying its potential to live a Real life free from breakable, fallible human 'law', governed only by the unbreakable rules of nature, namely the inevitability of death and destruction.

Whilst *Alien: Isolation* is a complex simulation of a survival horror scenario allowing players to fantasise about what they would do if put in a similar position to Ellen Ripley, hero of Ridley Scott's *Alien*³, it also encourages a cross-examination of corporate greed inciting personal and political turmoil in the wake of an encounter with the 'other'. The player accepts and perhaps even desires the opportunity to simulate moments and feelings from the *Alien* franchise in the "metamedium"⁴ provided by video gaming; however there exists the unique opportunity to present the player with situations and information not previously possible given the limitations of previous mediums.⁵ The persuasive potential of exploiting well established characters and narrative to enculturate players is only as powerful as the game's rules are seamless.

Any video game, "is a kind of miniature artificial system, bounded and defined by the game rules"⁶, rules which "reflect the perspectives and convictions of their designers, at once enabling and foreclosing player action and reflection"⁷, in a way that qualifies the game to function as an ideological model or simulation. Such simulation relies on repetition and mimicry to recreate a certain aesthetic, appeal to symbolic mandates in ethics, and fulfil the need to repeat historical events outside of "the frame of historical necessity."⁸ As *Alien: Isolation* is set in the future and on a space station it does not attempt to directly simulate a pre-existing historical event, but rather draw influence from prior texts, especially the films on which it is based,

³ 1979

⁴ Manovich 2001, p.370

⁵ Bogost 2007, p.9

⁶ Zimmerman 2009, p.26

⁷ Frasca cited in Hayse 2014, p.442

⁸ Hourigan 2010, p.6

to present the gamer with a unique space of possibilities⁹ – an extrapolation of current and prior history to make suggestions about human behaviour into the future.

Interpreting and critiquing any meaning the game may carry requires a fluency in procedurality, the core representational form of computing. Understanding the confines of the game world and its rules enables the player to then recognise how certain actions and ideas permissible to the player or espoused by NPCs are privileged and refined over others and how specific choices made by developers regarding what is possible in the game accept, challenge, or reject ideas and actions encountered in the daily lives of gamers.¹⁰ After all, “video game ideology is a by-product of cultural inheritance and technological precedent”¹¹ and any propositions made within a video game about society and the conditions of living within it, are not abstract but rather technological “schematics” for material reality, reducing human experience to code and then redelivering it as though it were real, becoming a “material practice” for establishing, as well as distorting, ideology.¹²

Both a strength and weakness of this “redelivery” of “material practice” is restriction, “defined by the limitations of technologies, the aims of game designers, and also the ideologies behind these.”¹³ This restriction is a strength as every choice about every aspect of a video game can be traced directly back to a source, a code within the computer chosen to symbolise or represent an aspect of existence – a choice made about what to say. This places pressure on game developers. Randy Pagulayan¹⁴ writes that “The designer has to think about the causes and consequences of the player’s actions...to empathise with the viewer and carefully construct an experience that causes them to think clever thoughts and feel profound emotions.” The limitation of the video game as a restrictive space is the same limitation faced by any system – rules. Video games rely on procedurality to craft

⁹ Bogost 2008

¹⁰ *ibid.* p.137

¹¹ Hayse 2014, p.445

¹² Žižek 2010, p.3

¹³ Crawford 2009, p.8

¹⁴ cited in Tosca 2003, p.214

rules making existence in the game world possible and what these rules allow (and disallow) the player to do make up the game's significance.¹⁵

The extent of any video game's significance to the player's 'reality' is an ongoing contention within video game studies. Aarseth¹⁶, informed by the writings of Hans Georg Gadamer, alleged that the relationship between the player and game is defined by the gameplay and mechanics, "and only intermittently by the player's observations of the mimetic, representational aspects of the game." Juul provides a more nuanced comment on the potential for video games to offer hermeneutic relevance when he wrote, "It would be a misunderstanding to see the game as an expression of the players wanting to perform the in-game actions in reality. Games – like stories – are things we use to relate to death and disaster. Not because we want them to happen, but because we know they exist."¹⁷ Huizinga¹⁸, who wrote extensively on what happens when humans play, suggested that "All [play-grounds] are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart." Although the player may not wish to perform these actions or do not yet know how, to progress in the game they must and the allegorical way in which rules come to represent the consequences of the player's actions are generally based on some sort of existing antagonism in the 'real' world, imbuing the game world with symbolic and metaphorical meaning.¹⁹ Herein lies the potential for video games, specifically survival horror video games, to examine antagonism from not only a ludological point of view, but also an ideological one. Survival horror video games explore ideology by offering a space in which to fantasise about society's fears and desires in which the sum of all fears and object of greatest desire – the monster – is so terrifying as it embodies everything 'other' than acceptable, enculturated social and political behaviour.

Video games are symptomatic of and reliant on political communities and in turn, "...political communities that rely on ideology for social cohesion, and therefore

¹⁵ Bogost 2008, p.121

¹⁶ 2014, p.188

¹⁷ 2011, p.193

¹⁸ cited in Arsenault & Perron 2009, p.113

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p.15

political inclusion depend upon exclusions that are constructed in fantasy and supported by enjoyment...”²⁰ Due to their interactive nature, video games appeal to the subject on the Symbolic/Real level, acting as surpluses of enjoyment which escape pure imagination and symbolisation due to the restrictive proceduralism of the computer imposing unbreakable rules²¹ that determine the Real possibilities available to the gamer as they explore “desire, fantasy, [the signifier of] lack in the Other and drive.”²² Any transgressive violations are permitted in video games as “privatised” forms, many of which facilitate “personal idiosyncrasy deprived of any public, spectacular or ritualistic dimension.”²³ When Juul²⁴ wrote that “even though fiction and rules are formally separable, the player’s experience of the game is shaped by both” he suitably likened video games to a person’s experience of ideology: both grapple with definitive rules of being alongside symbolic, simulated laws of Ideal being; both use politics to shape narratives to be used as a vehicle for meaning; and both permit fantasy as a false choice for how to interact with said narratives, often treating such fantasy as transgressive.

Central to this critique of *Alien: Isolation* as an example of a transgressive, ideological experience are the following tenets:

1. Video games are political
2. Video games are simulation
3. Video games are fantasy
4. Fantasy through simulation is cathartic

Each of these tenets will be considered from the perspective of the theory detailed in the Literature Review of this thesis, in league with a close playing of the game *Alien: Isolation*, in an attempt to validate the potential for survival horror video games to challenge players to interact with the Real²⁵ in a way not previously recognised in ludology.

²⁰ Boucher 2014, p.128

²¹ Bogost 2008

²² Boucher 2014, p.131

²³ Žižek 2010, p.9

²⁴ 2011, p.177

²⁵ Žižek 2006

***Alien: Isolation* is political**

Accepting video games as political relies on treating them as *techne*, a term coined by Martin Heidegger, which identifies the point of ontological disclosure that makes clear the limitations imposed on the subject in the ‘empty space’ of technology.²⁶ Video games are inherently inconsistent due to the limited possibilities within the world of the game resulting from the rules governing game play decided by developers. This dissertation is not concerned with discussing such limitations, but instead subscribes to treating video games as *techne* as they, regardless of what IS NOT allowed, still extend the organic senses of the body, fulfilling urges in the player that their natural bodies alone cannot sense, compensating for the material limitations of the human condition. There is an unspoken agreement between the player and the game developer that they player will be limited by the mechanics of the game, in exchange for the game allowing the player to reach particular goals.²⁷ Such an exchange has ideological implications as the choices made regarding what is represented in video games convey the ideological perspectives of their designers, “at once foreclosing player action and reflection”.²⁸ With this in mind, the player can more critically consider the possible meaning of a video game as every rule, operation, permissible action, and symbol were purposefully chosen to mount a persuasive argument about the world and its order.²⁹ This subheading is not as concerned with the specific functions responsible for the ‘playing’ of *Alien: Isolation*. Rather, the intent behind discussing this particular game as being political will focus on the function of procedural representation for persuasion³⁰, specifically the role that procedural media accessible to the player throughout the game such as video, audio, and written logs have on the game’s narrative which relies on political ideology to affect the attitudes and behaviours of players.

By the time Amanda Ripley (the player’s playable agent) arrives, the space station Sevastopol has been plunged into chaos thanks to the presence of a monstrous alien which has hatched out of a crew member. The station has descended into anarchy, its

²⁶ Hourigan 2010

²⁷ Cummings 2015

²⁸ Hayse 2014, p.442

²⁹ Bogost 2008

³⁰ Bogost 2007

citizens and law enforcement splintering into factions vying for control over resources and devising ways to destroy the alien threat. Although the alien is considered the main antagonist throughout the game, the presence of frightened humans, reprogrammed synthetic beings, and corporate greed comment on “deeper social maladies, many of which fall outside the realm of the machine altogether – even if they are ultimately exacerbated by it.”³¹ The world of *Alien: Isolation* is both familiar in its representation of social antagonism, yet heightened by the presence of the ‘other’ made flesh – an embodiment of evil made famous in film which comes with a reputation that game developers exploited to enhance the terror of playing their game.

Also key to the communication of political ideology is the selective modelling of certain elements of the *Alien* canon important to the credibility and relevance of player actions.³² The aesthetic of the game world is modelled off Ridley Scott’s original film *Alien*³³ through the process of “ludic transmediation”, which is the process of taking a pre-existing literary work and inserting into a game world, or using it as inspiration for a game world.³⁴ While game developers have re-created certain circumstances, settings, and moods indicative of the science fiction horror of the original film, *Alien: Isolation* introduces new and complex social commentary on the introduction of the alien xenomorph into an established capitalist society, creating a new context for any value placed on the creature and human life, invigorating the representational goals of Scott’s film with a more sophisticated system of characters and companies, all existing in the shadow of the lawless monster they fear and desire.

The most immediate example of ideology in *Alien: Isolation* is the presence of the ‘company’. In the opening cut-scene of the game a representative from Weyland-Yutani presents Amanda Ripley with the opportunity to find out what happened to her mother Ellen Ripley. Other than Christopher Samuels and Nina Taylor who accompany Ripley and directly represent the Weyland-Yutani Corporation, the

³¹ Galloway 2006, p.88

³² *ibid.*

³³ 1979

³⁴ Ensslin 2014, p.145

‘company’ exists as an indirect and insidious presence on Sevastopol station and within the rest of the game world. Galloway states that video games “...solve the problem of political control, not by sublimating as does the cinema, but by *making it coterminous with the entire game.*”³⁵ Such is the role of both the Seegson and Weyland-Yutani corporations, they are constant, incontestable, and faceless. Their influence is confined to personal logs, group memos, station propaganda, and audio logs which, together, reveal the underhanded way in which Weyland-Yutani secured Sevastopol station from Seegson once their insider confirmed the existence of the alien specimen. In this way, the corporations ubiquitously and insidiously present themselves to the player as totalitarian forces which have effectively enslaved their employees, both establishing an ideological state for this particular video game, as well as paying homage to the pessimistic attitudes of the *Alien* film franchise towards corporate greed.³⁶

The very first log that Ripley has access to in the game via the *Torrens*’ LM-LINK computer terminal immediately establishes the attitudes of other characters towards the mega corporations within the game narrative:

...I have a friend that’s just lost his ship and he’s looking for work. I can vouch for him, he’s got good papers. Same old story – the megacorps undercut him, picked up all his clients. Contracts are getting harder to come by for the smaller companies...Dropped by the docks and heard you just shipped out. Sevastopol station – what a shithole. Still, I hear Weyland-Yutani pay well...If you can’t beat them, right?³⁷

Alien: Isolation is condemning of corporate greed and ambition, only the video game uses “procedurality to make claims about the cultural, social, [and] material aspects of human experience”³⁸, namely the seemingly insatiable desire for power and conquest encapsulated in the Weyland-Yutani corporation’s relentless pursuit of the ‘perfect’ being, regardless of the human cost. The moment in the game which reveals

³⁵ Galloway 2006, p.92

³⁶ Keogh & Jaymenanne 2018, p.6

³⁷ Blane’s message to Verlaine, captain of the *Torrens*, the ship transporting Ripley to Sevastopol.

Alien: Isolation 2014

³⁸ Bogost 2008, p.123

the extent of the company's willingness to sacrifice the human occupants of the station is when Ripley accesses APOLLO to discover the sale of Sevastopol to Weyland-Yutani upon the discovery of the *Anesidora's* alien cargo. APOLLO is discovered to be following order 939:

Priority one.

Protect specimen.

Maintain station quarantine. Disallow communication.

All other considerations secondary.³⁹

The 900 series of special orders were introduced by Weyland Corp in 2095 in response to the Prometheus expedition when it was realised that the actions of human crew members could potentially deny the company opportunities to acquire alien technologies or biological specimens. The orders are designed so that synthetic crew would prioritise the recovery of alien samples despite crew objection and risk to their lives.⁴⁰ Order 939 disturbingly echoes Special Order 937 discovered by Ellen Ripley in Ridley Scott's film *Alien* (the first of the franchise) when Ripley accesses MOTHER, the *Nostramo's* computer, to discover the following:

Priority one

Insure return of organism
for analysis.

All other considerations secondary.

Crew expendable.⁴¹

Such a strong link to the narrative of the film franchise reveals the transmedial potential for video games as players of *Alien: Isolation* are positioned to feel the same betrayal once felt as passive viewers of film; however, while the experience is still constructed of light and math to feel as though it has heft and volume, there is a new corporeality to knowing that one is expendable, especially given that the player

³⁹ *Alien: Isolation* 2014

⁴⁰ Perry 2015, p.63 Bogost, I 2007, *Persuasive Games: The expressive power of videogames*, The MIT Press, London.

⁴¹ *Alien* 1979

must get themselves out of his situation.⁴² The read out on APOLLO's screen acts as a visual enthymeme⁴³, supplying the premise that Ripley counts as another "consideration" and is therefore less valuable than the survival of the "specimen", in the same way that her mother was "expendable".

Opposing views on the corporate success of Sevastopol station are offered by the a series of logs accessible through the SEVASTOLINK terminals titled "AN OUTPOST OF PROGRESS?" written by journalist Julia Jones who has been living on the station for two months compiling a report for *The Colonial Times*, and "TOMORROW, TOGETHER" authored by the Seegson Corporation as propaganda for station inhabitants. Such logs are fictional immersion mechanisms designed to instill *immediacy*⁴⁴ in the video game with the intention of making the player believe that they are in the presence of these characters (on the same space station) and that there are 'lives' being lived and lost in alternate storylines comprising the lore of the game's "imaginary world."⁴⁵ These often contradictory depictions of life on the frontier of deep space problematize the ethical and moral logistics of being isolated from the earth and any reprieve from the Seegson Corporation which control every aspect of station life. Below is a table of the log entries:

⁴² Goggins 2018

⁴³ Bogost 2007, p.34

⁴⁴ Mauger 2014, p.37

⁴⁵ Wolf 2014, p.131

AN OUTPOST OF PROGRESS?	TOMORROW, TOGETHER
<p>#1: “The space station that nobody needed, run by a company we all forgot. Sevastopol is now a backwater. The population is a tenth of the station’s optimal capacity. Docking bays are empty and shutters are down on local stores and businesses. The orders for Seegson’s cheaply manufactured androids have long since dried up, and the antiquated APOLLO governing AI system frequently</p>	<p>#1: “...Sieg and Son built the components that enabled ships to extend colonial space beyond the Sol system. As history relates, Weyland Corp was reluctant to share its FTL technologies with other corporations. Fortunately, Josiah Sieg was on hand to speculate, innovate and produce. Without Sieg and Son, the skies would have looked very different indeed!”</p>
<p>malfunctions. How did we get here and, more importantly, where have billions of dollars of investment gone? My name is Julia Jones. I have lived on Sevastopol for two months compiling this report for The Colonial Times, discovering the price our second-tier corporations have paid for their over-expansion during the race into the Outer Rim.”</p>	
<p>#2: “Seegson’s Frail Origins. After Weyland Industries led the way in faster than light travel, Seegson found success mass producing the flight components central to the colonial gold rush that followed. Its ensuring overexpansion and reputation for producing “low-cost alternatives” to</p>	<p>#2: “...By 2071, the year the Sieg family sold its shares back into the company, its expansion remained exponential. Single-minded rivals looked on with envy as Sieg and Son became market leaders manufacturing cars, chemicals, educational equipment and building materials.</p>

<p>WY branded goods is a matter of public record.</p> <p>In the modern day Seegson is attempting to change the fortunes of ailing colonial outposts. Stations like Sevastopol receive investment, and Seegson-affiliated companies set up shop. But the economic patterns that once worked within the Sol system have not flourished in deep space.</p> <p>On Sevastopol, mass-produced no frill androids still sit in their boxes. Machines in research facilities are still shrouded in the plastic they were delivered in. Trading docks are used only by the flourishing black market that the station's residents have come to rely on.</p> <p>Sevastopol is a ghost town, and nobody cares.”</p>	<p>Towards the end of the last century, came a move that would forge our shared future. Sieg and Son became Seegson. We took on the name our customers had known us by for decades, and we turned to face tomorrow together, among the stars.”</p>
<p>#3: “For better or worse, the right to bear arms followed us into colonial space. Alone, vulnerable and light years from law enforcement, who could deny our voyagers a way to defend themselves, their ships and their families?</p> <p>...Sevastopol's people feel deceived - tempted here by corporations that refused to recognise the deep space bubble that was about to burst. They are angry, desperate and increasingly</p>	<p>#4: “Our Synthetic Future.</p> <p>With the guidance of key Seegson executive talent, Sevastopol has become an outpost of progress: A trade hub, a vibrant community and the beating heart of the Seegson synthetic solution.</p> <p>Sevastopol is the primary off planet site for the development, sales and maintenance of Seegson androids.</p> <p>From Sevastopol's unique position in the cosmos we can ship our range of</p>

<p>divided. Recent Colonial Marshal clamp-downs on the black market have increased resentment...”</p>	<p>Working Joes wherever they’re needed in colonial space within months, not years.</p> <p>Above and beyond our reliable and cost-efficient synthetic is Sevastopol’s governing AI: Seegson’s award-winning APOLLO system. Through the hard work of our scientists and Seegson’s bold investments, the station is now a showcase for economical and self-governing artificial human operations. Even now our sales executives are overseeing the population of APOLLO mainframes across colonial space!</p> <p>Just as we assured you throughout the journey: We made it to tomorrow, and we did it together.”</p>
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<p>#4: “Seegson has now cut its losses and is set to abandon Sevastopol. This is yet another sign of retrenchment that is rife throughout this sector. Some days it has felt as if corporate pride was the only thing keeping this troubled station in orbit above KG-384. Living in this station today, it’s abundantly clear that Seegson has gambled wildly with both its own investment and that of banking corps such as GeoFund Investor. The ill-judged rush into space colonisation, its hubris and its over-expansion, have cost our second tier corporations dearly. Weyland-Yutani, with its extensive financial and technological firepower, can weather these storms while its lesser rivals fall away. Even the company, however, must hear alarm bells ringing as it looks towards these fading orbital outposts. WY’s ongoing investment in terraforming research technology looks increasingly shrewd, as it watches each of these distant lights blink out...”</p>	<p><u>NOTE: TOMORROW, TOGETHER</u> <u>log #3 was not found in the play through.</u></p>
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The contradictory views expressed in these logs invite the player to ‘read’ out opposing arguments to discern which is more relevant given their own experience within the game world.⁴⁶ Jones positions the player to view Seegson as a sort of leach, piggybacking off the achievements of the Weyland-Yutani corporation, a

⁴⁶ Bogost 2008

sentiment not shared by Seegson propaganda which suggests that while Seegson did not invent faster than light technology, it was on hand to “speculate, innovate, and produce” its own technologies, leading the company to become “market leaders manufacturing cars, chemicals, educational equipment and building materials.” Such rhetoric is dismissed as “hubris” by Jones who labels Seegson as a “lesser rival” to Weyland-Yutani, sealing the fate of this “second-tier” corporation in the mind of gamers as doomed from the start. These logs serve to visualise the logics that make up a worldview, both depicting and enforcing ideological distortion in a political situation.⁴⁷ Reading and considering the ideological phenomena texturing the game world aligns with the contemporary understanding of ideology resulting from adversity.⁴⁸ In *Alien: Isolation* such adversity finds form in the failure of democracy and the hubris of mega-corporations that would seek to constitute society, but instead sacrifice order to the alien xenomorph, which becomes a “threatening figure of absolute Otherness who embodies the phantasmatic danger...[which] might prevent the harmonious fullness of the political community.”⁴⁹ Reading and listening to character logs as well as considering company propaganda allows the player to better consider whether or not the xenomorph is even directly responsible for Sevastopol’s destruction.

It is not only the computer and audio logs dotted around the station which persuade the player to consider the attitudes, values, and beliefs of station inhabitants. Visual rhetoric is at work in *Alien: Isolation* through the design of Sevastopol as a station descended into anarchy, riddled with graffiti offering insight into the political allegiances of the remaining citizens. Bogost writes that “...visual rhetoric is often at work in video games, a medium that deploys both still and moving images.”⁵⁰ The graffiti has been digitally rendered making it both an example of traditional visual rhetoric, but also digital rhetoric, presenting “traditional materials – especially text and images”⁵¹ without drawing attention to the fact that it is happening via a computer or console. However, Bogost is quick to point out the limitations of

⁴⁷ Bogost 2007, p.74-75

⁴⁸ Boucher 2014

⁴⁹ *ibid.* p.133

⁵⁰ Bogost 2008, p.124

⁵¹ Bogost 2007, p.28

regarding visual and digital rhetoric as the sole source of persuasion in a game as it “does not account for procedural representation...Image is subordinate to process.”⁵²



While the computer and audio logs, coupled with the station graffiti act as narrative devices to encourage the player to consider the ideological ramifications of introducing an alien xenomorph into a human society, it is how the player is able to

⁵² Bogost 2008, p.124

actually interact with the station, its inhabitants, and the alien itself that is the most persuasive aspect to the game. The player can play the game with very little exposure to any of the subplot involving the identities and fates of station inhabitants if they simply were not to read the logs made available through the SEVASTOLINK network or the audio logs discoverable under tables, on countertops in unmapped rooms, or in cabinets. Only a skilled player capable of evading the alien threat, Working Joes, and human renegades willing to find all of the logs scattered throughout the station is able to ‘piece together’ the back story to what really happened on Sevastopol pre and post alien threat, especially the corporate subterfuge and betrayal exhibited by the Weyland-Yutani and Seegson Corporations.

The style of gameplay required to better understand the narrative of *Alien: Isolation* favours a “top-down process” where the player must use their expectations, preferences, knowledge, and skills to “react” to the world of the game “with all its varying shades of understanding.”⁵³ The only way to access any prior knowledge of the *Alien* narrative or *Alien: Isolation* gameplay is to enter into an interactive or ergodic relationship made possible by “a continuous loop between the gamer’s input and the game’s output.”⁵⁴ This loop is best discussed in the context of regarding *Alien: Isolation* as a simulation.

***Alien: Isolation* is a simulation**

A more traditional, ludological attitude towards the simulatory nature of video games stresses that while the game relies strongly on assumptions about the ‘ordinary’ world to exist, the mechanics of gameplay cannot implement a real-world activity, but rather a specific stylised concept of a real-world activity.⁵⁵ Žižek postulates that a consequence of “reducing the reality of everyday experiences to a series of marks that overwrite the phenomenological/imaginary content of everyday experience” possibly rendering the experience, “indistinct, kitsch, cosmetic, unreal and so

⁵³ Arsenault & Perron 2009, p.126

⁵⁴ *ibid.* p.113

⁵⁵ Juul 2011, p.168

forth...”⁵⁶ The gamer is reduced to “a head with a body in the gameworld [sic]”⁵⁷ – entering into a feedback loop (Magic Cycle)⁵⁸ requiring them to respond to the game in an *inter(re)reactive*⁵⁹ manner both in the fictitious world, as well as the ‘real’ world, creating a “duality of the formal and experiential perspectives on fiction in games.”⁶⁰ The result is a kinaesthetic form of ‘play’ inciting pleasure in the gamer beyond the visual domain of storytelling. James Newman writes, “In recollection of their play, players talk not of playing or controlling but of “being.””⁶¹ This sense of “being” is not an existential attitude exclusive to the player but an enforced ludic or ludic attitude shaped by the video game’s rules which are both unbreakable and unseeable.⁶²

The rules of any video game are most obvious in the interface between player and game and depending on the game style and genre conventions, as well as cultural frames and cognitive schema⁶³, the player will need to make a conscious effort to interpret the algorithms behind the game systems to ‘win’.⁶⁴ Bogost further examines the need to reach a consensus between rules of the game and the player when he writes that video games, “represent the gap between procedural representations and individual subjectivity. This disparity between the simulation and the player’s understanding of the source system it models creates a crisis in the player.”⁶⁵ Because “the fictional world of a game strongly depends on the real world in order to exist”⁶⁶, players rely on cues within the game to alert them to possible actions and behaviours. In *Alien: Isolation* objects of interest will glow orange if they can be picked up or interacted with, whether it be the player picking up scrap to craft tools and ammunition with, or open a door or vent using Ripley’s hands or tools. Juul acknowledges that the origin of some of a gamer’s anxiety within a simulation stems from the varying degrees of fidelity to what is being simulated and references

⁵⁶ Hourigan 2010, p.8

⁵⁷ Perron 2009, p.131

⁵⁸ Arsenault & Perron 2009

⁵⁹ *ibid.* p.120

⁶⁰ *ibid.* p.119

⁶¹ Perron 2009, p.134

⁶² Arsenault & Perron 2009

⁶³ Mauger 2014, p.36

⁶⁴ Galloway 2006, p.91

⁶⁵ Bogost 2007, p.332

⁶⁶ Juul 2011, p.168

oversimplifications of processes in fighting games such as *Tekken* and early attempts at horror games such as *Resident Evil*.⁶⁷ The developers of *Alien: Isolation* considered the disparity between the action that a certain button or combination of buttons on the console controller or PC would come to represent in the game world and manipulated the “fit between human actions and system responses”⁶⁸ to provoke fear, as well as immersion.

To best discuss examples of the possible actions and interactions within *Alien: Isolation*, Arsenault and Perron’s concept of the Magic Cycle⁶⁹ will act as a methodological framework for linking the computer algorithm responsible for the game’s possible actions, and the player who must react to game events and input a response suitable to progress the game. The Literature Review for this dissertation contains detailed diagrams and further context behind how this model works, whereas this application of the model to certain instances of gameplay in *Alien: Isolation* will be primarily concerned with a single loop of gameplay and how surviving the game entails a progressive subsuming of individual events in a feedback loop between player and game. When the player (as Amanda Ripley) emerges from cryosleep⁷⁰ the game orientates player activity by tutoring them on how to control Ripley as their in-game presence or agent.⁷¹ Ripley’s actions take place in real time – she sits, dresses, types, and interacts with consoles in the time it would take to perform these actions in the ‘real’ world, cueing the gamer to consider this when they will inevitably be trying to perform similar actions under pressure later in the game. It is clear that game developers have used this as a tactic to enhance tension, especially given that the only way to save one’s progress in the game is to activate an emergence intercom system by inserting an identification tag of some kind and wait as the machine registers the i.d., three lights blink as a sort of countdown, and a final chime indicates that the save was successful. The only things that do not happen in real time are the crafting of items and getting in and out of a space suit.

⁶⁷ Juul 2011

⁶⁸ Murray 2012 cited in Mauger 2014, p.34

⁶⁹ outlined in their 2009 article *In the Frame of the Magic Cycle: The Circle(s) of Gameplay*

⁷⁰ a device within the narrative allowing characters to travel great distances in space without aging, *Alien* 1979

⁷¹ Waggoner 2009

Crafting and using items is essential to completing the game and such items require materials which can be collected from the moment Ripley arrives at Sevastopol station. To maintain the sense of immersion, the game does not explicitly tell the player how to use the crafting system, inventory, or even display anything other than Ripley's health bar and the amount left of whatever is equipped. The early stages of the game do not require much interaction with anything other than doors and collecting materials; however, once Ripley begins discovering tools such as the access tuner, headlamp, motion tracker etc., the ways in which the player can interact with the game change significantly. The player can now access previously inaccessible parts of the map, ward off or kill non-playable characters, and better distract or discourage the xenomorph from attacking. It is when using the tools available to Ripley that the player can best acclimatise to the rules governing the activation and use of said devices to both heighten the feeling of realism essential to the tension and fear created by the game, as well as close the gap between the 'real' and the simulation.⁷² A cogent example of simulating an actual task while potentially under threat is using the access tuner. The access tuner finds a door's coded frequency and displays the "callback code" that must be entered for the door to open. When the player rotates the thumb sticks on their controller, Ripley rotates the dial on the side of the access tuner to find the callback code. Once locked onto the frequency, the player must match the symbols comprising the callback code to the available symbols listed below. There is a time limit in which to complete this task and failure to do so disengages the device, meaning that the player must start the process from scratch.

Using the access tuner, along with other simple game mechanics such as repeatedly mashing a certain button to prime a door to be opened, train the player to be able to perform more complex tasks using more complex tools later in the game. *Alien: Isolation* is a game of "emergence" which requires the player to become increasingly competent with the basic mechanics of gameplay before they are able to face more difficult scenarios.⁷³ In the same way that a player could manipulate their own body

⁷² Mauger 2014

⁷³ Arsenault & Perron 2009, p.116

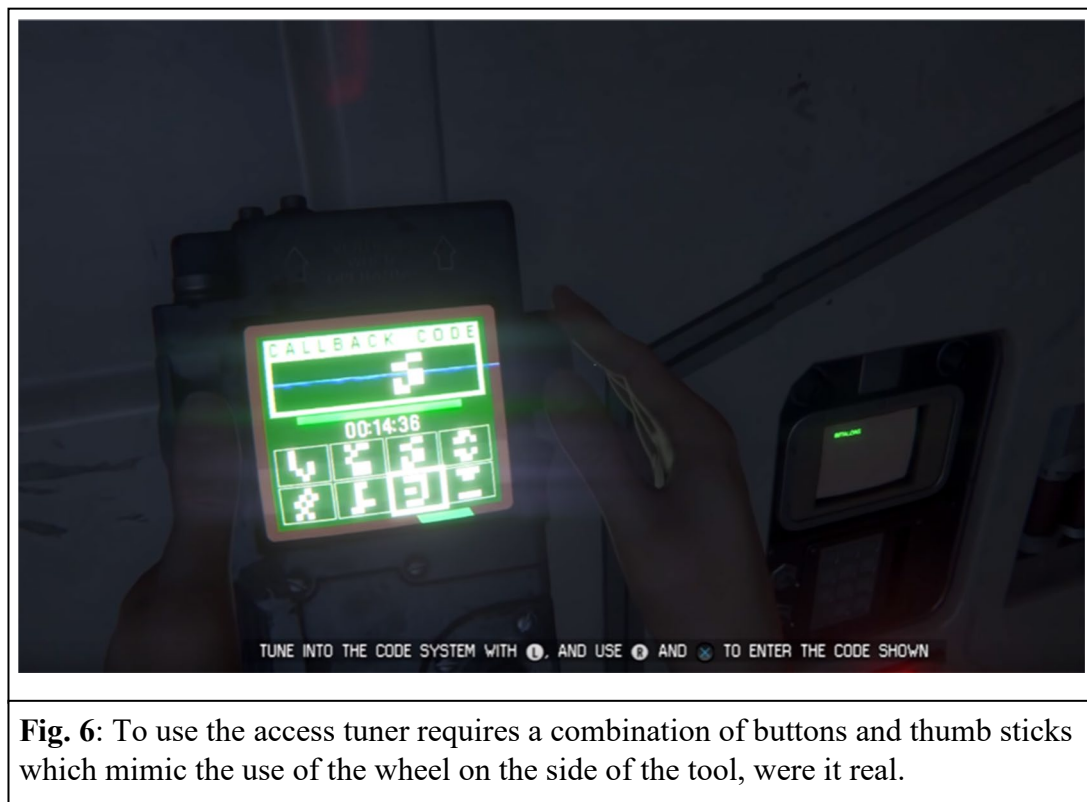


Fig. 6: To use the access tuner requires a combination of buttons and thumb sticks which mimic the use of the wheel on the side of the tool, were it real.

to perform a task, they must be able to manipulate the body of Amanda Ripley. An example of a more complex task is when the player finds the plasma torch, a tool capable of cutting through thin steel, uncovering door handles that could not previously be reached. The tool must be selected; the door approached; the game detects Ripley's proximity to the door and prompts the player to press the cutting command; the player must coordinate the thumb sticks in the same way they had previously to use the access tuner to guide the plasma torch along the dotted line to achieve a successful cut; the player must then prime the door handle by motioning the left thumb stick downward to replicate the downward movement of Ripley's hand. While this process may only take a matter of seconds for an experienced gamer, it is the culmination of a series of skills gained throughout the early stages of the game. Arsenault and Perron use the model of the Magic Cycle to visualise how this action progresses gameplay and enriches the simulatory experience by making the player feel as though they have performed the task.



Fig. 7: Using the plasma torch is a multi-step operation, happening in 'real time' and leaving the player vulnerable to threats.

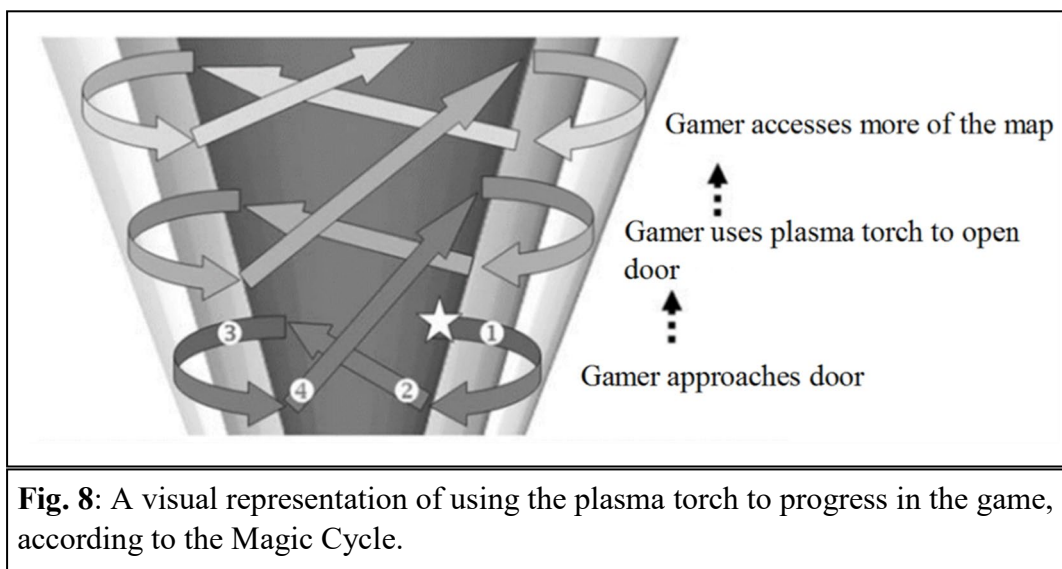


Fig. 8: A visual representation of using the plasma torch to progress in the game, according to the Magic Cycle.

Opening doors may seem trivial and even mediocre in light of the overall objectives of the game; however, fear and anxiety must begin with agency and embodiment - the player must feel ownership over their actions whilst navigating a specular body.⁷⁴ To be afraid of the xenomorph the incommensurability between the conception of the creature as dangerous and the player's subjectivisation of it must be minimalised⁷⁵, which starts with player understanding the limits of the game rules so that they may assess danger and produce a response (input a command) that maximises the probability of surviving the situation. For Joseph LeDoux⁷⁶ such behaviour is evidence of the fear systems in the brain accepting the simulation and reacting to it as though it were a 'real' threat.

Alien: Isolation further manipulates the hardware of the gaming system (a console in the case of this close playing) to promote fear in the player by intensifying the simulation of being on Sevastopol with the xenomorph through interfaces other than the buttons on the controller or keyboard. "The diversity of manual interfaces that provide players control of a game goes far beyond the usual keyboard and mouse duo"⁷⁷, and by extension, goes beyond the controller. Devices such as Xbox Kinect, microphones built into controllers, controller proximity sensors, and player motion sensors all monitor the player and how stimulated they are in response to the game. This tracking can go as far as permitting the actions of the player in the 'real' world to influence the 'game' world outcomes, endangering their avatar or agent and impacting the course of the game narrative, meaning that "...physical space itself is becoming the domain of the digital experience, as a result of new technologies and interactive systems."⁷⁸ With Xbox Kinect activated, every sound the player makes can be 'heard' in the game world by NPCs as well as the xenomorph. Also, the motion of the player's head can be mapped to Ripley's vision, meaning that wherever the player's head is facing, Ripley's will be as well. While this is a useful mechanic for looking around corners and quickly glancing around a room looking for the orange glow emanating from useful materials, it also means that any sudden movements can give away Ripley's position, inviting discovery and probably death.

⁷⁴ Perron 2009, p.139

⁷⁵ Žižek's conditions for simulation in Hourigan 2010, p.4

⁷⁶ cited in Perron 2009, p.140

⁷⁷ Mauger 2014, p.36

⁷⁸ *ibid.* p.39

Although the game makes a concerted effort to marry player action to agent action, the player must still “perform a great deal of mental synthesis, filling the gap between the subjectivity and game process” in a bid to bridge the “simulation gap” between rule-based representation and player subjectivity.⁷⁹ If the player is no longer aware of the game’s rules and is simply enacting processes as if they were the activities they would perform in any aspect of their life then the game is credible and immersive⁸⁰, successfully abstracting⁸¹ the ‘real ’and positioning the player to consider the ontological implications of the gameplay, narrative, and hermeneutics within the Game’.⁸²

***Alien: Isolation* is fantasy**

The degree to which a player can unproblematically embody a character or ‘presence’ in the fictional world of the game depends on their willingness to submit to the fantasy of the game world which can be meaningful without being faithful simulations of the ‘real’ world⁸³, although in the case of *Alien: Isolation*, attempting to simulate ‘real’ actions taking place in a believable political climate is key to the authenticity of its horror. Fantasy, or ‘the fantasmatic’, “is understood as a screen or framing device that domesticates the fundamentally antagonistic and contestable nature of the social order, by offering a coherent narrative of social objectivity.”⁸⁴ *Fantasmatic representations*⁸⁵ such as the xenomorph in *Alien: Isolation*, become a locus of energy for the individual and society to project internal antagonisms resulting from lack onto. The monster becomes a catalyst for the “moral imagination” which allows players to cope imaginatively with any number of bodily and existential threats expounding their rational and irrational fears in a possibility space that does not pose any ‘real’ danger.⁸⁶

⁷⁹ Bogost 2007, p.43

⁸⁰ Murray 1997

⁸¹ *ibid.* p.46

⁸² Arsenault & Perron 2009, p.125

⁸³ Engenfeldt-Nielsen, et al. 2016, p.46

⁸⁴ Salter 2015, p.122

⁸⁵ Phelan 2008 cited in Salter 2015, p.123

⁸⁶ Adkins 2010, p.7

It is through the overt fantastical nature of video games that players are able to coordinate their desires, navigating the ideological gaps inherent in any system, procedurally created or not, in a bid to discern their *objet petit a*⁸⁷ amidst obscene *jouissance*.⁸⁸ The player is presented with an obstacle to ‘fullness’ or ‘completion’ that is disastrous if not overcome. Within survival horror video games this obstacle is the monster which is fulfilling its horrific role as the *Other* responsible for the moral corruption of the ‘game’ world, simultaneously stealing the enjoyment of the player’s in-game agent, whilst inciting enjoyment in the ‘real’ player who adopts video games as *techne*, in a bid to realise and confront unattainable fantasies.⁸⁹ Video games cannot promise the player access to the Ideal-ego but, like most guiding principles of post-modern sociality, are able to reduce behaviours, no matter how grotesque, to a “circle of enjoyment, a tessellation of pleasure.”⁹⁰ The pleasure of surviving mutilation and death in *Alien: Isolation* stems not only from surviving the monster but also surviving amidst heightened social antagonisms such as corporate greed, a failed police state, anarchy, and artificial intelligence that are “condensed”⁹¹ within Sevastopol station. The station is merely a mathematically rendered model which is inescapably reflective of the material world in which the game was produced, as well as the ideological and political contexts of contemporary society which inform the game’s narrative.⁹²

Acknowledging that video games offer *fantasmatic representations* of ‘real’ antagonisms imbues these representations with the same power that any fantasy has over its ‘host’. Thus, giving fantasy a material, visual aesthetic, pre-packaged as it were for the player, becomes a useful political tool for “schematizing” certain ideologies, rendering them “liveable”.⁹³ The xenomorph as the object of desire for mega-corporation Weyland-Yutani, suggests to the player that human lives are less important than the acquisition and weaponisation of the alien *other*:

⁸⁷ object-cause of desire: Cottrel 2014

⁸⁸ pleasure, delight, ecstasy: Cottrel, 2014

⁸⁹ Salter 2015, p.123

⁹⁰ Hourigan 2010, p.8

⁹¹ Žižek 2003 cited in Salter 2015, p.124

⁹² Cummings 2015, p.30

⁹³ Žižek 2010, p.3

Fantasy serves politics precisely in that each political group must recognise its point of view as manifested in the extrapolitical fantasy objects customary within that specific nation, culture or religion. If not, these groups must displace the sitting ideologies' fantasy objects with their own chosen manifestations.⁹⁴

Alien: Isolation as a video game is an 'extrapolitical fantasy object' challenging capitalism in the form of mega-corporations and their desire to apprehend and own any commodity deemed valuable, even at the cost of human life. The fantasy explored in the game is not being victorious over the evil mega-corporation, forcing disbandment and restoring peace and equity. The fantasy is the vicarious thrill of observing the implosion of society at the hands of a force unable to be bought or reasoned with, and the even more thrilling prospect of surviving this threat when mega-corporations like Seegson and Weyland-Yutani, with all of their resources, desire, and cunning, could not.

The xenomorph seems to be nature's response to the pretense propping up human society. It dismisses enjoyment, subverts 'peace', punishes ignorance, emancipates the subject from the falsehood of human 'law' which can be forgotten, and wakes them to Real causality inscribed in nature.⁹⁵ In the same way a stone cannot disobey gravity when falling, the xenomorph cannot disobey its instinctual drive to propagate, kill, eat, and survive. The motivations of the alien 'other' are incompatible for life on Sevastopol, a station governed by law, commerce, culture, and politics. The xenomorph is 'archaic' as it "works outside the symbolic order entirely"⁹⁶ as a pure generative force which is its own point of reference to feelings of 'fullness', emptiness', and desire. It is a Real end to an otherwise 'false consciousness'.⁹⁷

For Lacan the Real is inaccessible and terrifying, veiled in illusions and misperceptions offered up by the Imaginary and the 'wall of language' born from the

⁹⁴ Cottrel, 2014, p.90

⁹⁵ Žižek 2006, p.74

⁹⁶ Keogh & Jaymenanne 2018, p.2

⁹⁷ Žižek 2008

need to relate to reality in a shared, symbolic way. The xenomorph in *Alien: Isolation* is so terrifying because it closes the gap between the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real, becoming *lamella* – “the phantasmatic entity that gives body to what a living being loses when it enters the symbolically regulated regime of sexual difference.”⁹⁸ In his work *Reading Lacan*, Žižek extrapolated upon Lacan’s writing concerning *lamella* in accordance with Ridley Scott’s original film *Alien*. He writes:

The monstrous alien in the film so closely resembles Lacan’s lamella that it is as if Lacan somehow saw the film before it was even made...the monster appears indestructible; if you cut it into pieces, it merely multiplies; it is something extra-flat that all of a sudden flies up and envelops your face; with infinite plasticity, it can morph itself into a multitude of shapes; in it, pure evil animality overlaps with machinic blind insistence. The alien is libido as pure life, indestructible and immortal.⁹⁹

A number of characters in the game express their bewilderment and regret after encountering the xenomorph. “I found something, Anne. I don’t know what it was, but I found it and now it’s killed me. It’s killing everyone. I have to tell someone...There has to be a record.”¹⁰⁰ The xenomorph is unkillable throughout the entire game. Fire will scare it away momentarily but no gun, explosive, or projectile will actually kill the creature. It can appear almost instantly - descending from a vent, erupting from the floor, or “walking down the corridor like it was the most natural thing in the world.”¹⁰¹ The creature inserts itself into the human world, its oozing saliva lining vents and halls as its tail straddles and punctures the helpless bodies of those remaining humans still clinging to a long dead dream, commissioned by a defunct corporation.

Although walking upright and seemingly breathing the same air, the xenomorph remains interstitial as its enormous cranium, elongated limbs, and impenetrable exoskeleton transgress distinctions such as “inside/outside, insect/human, and

⁹⁸ Žižek 2006, p.65

⁹⁹ Žižek 2006, p.63

¹⁰⁰ audio log of Mike Tanaka, Dec 8, 2137 – *Alien: Isolation* 2014

¹⁰¹ audio log of ‘Chief’ Porter, Dec 6, 2137 - *Alien: Isolation* 2014

flesh/machine”.¹⁰² Such a foe can only be faced in the player’s fantasy. The creature can be viewed on film, but never interacted with in the flesh, only in the world of the video game. There it must exist for players to project onto it the enjoyment they lack.



Fig. 9: After first contact with the xenomorph it begins stalking the halls of Sevastopol.

The desire for power and conquest is a universal one and in the same way that Weyland-Yutani misattributes its fantasy of galactic conquest to the xenomorph, the player misattributes their desire to cripple the corporation to the same monster, positioning it as the object of multiple fantasies, all involving destruction.¹⁰³ To be the xenomorph is an impossibility, it is a temporary solution to an enduring problem. In a player looking for ‘something’ to fulfil their lack, Scott’s xenomorph can promise ‘nothing’.

There is catharsis in the destruction promised to the gamer by *Alien: Isolation*

Lacan states that the individual should not ‘give way’ to their desire and attempt to obliterate the distance separating the Real from its symbolisation.¹⁰⁴ Video games are

¹⁰² Perron 2009, p.129

¹⁰³ Cottrel 2014

¹⁰⁴ Žižek 2008, p.xxv

becoming increasingly geared towards closing this distance, permitting players more and more autonomy in how they wish to behave in the game world, as well as more sophisticated ways to interact with the game via improved software and hardware. Despite an evolving knowledge of how to program and manipulate computer code to create video games to achieve realities ever more indiscernible from ‘reality’, the motivation behind doing so remains consistently grounded in exploring the pleasure that can be derived from experimenting with horror and death, trying to come to terms with mortality by imagining how it can be exacted.¹⁰⁵ A video game “inscribes itself on our symbolic universe” and operates as a “crutch against the Real”, virtualising the player’s reality and adding to layers of fantasy and symbolic bliss.¹⁰⁶ They facilitate an imaginary scenario where understanding or even thinking about any form of knowable, objective truth is rendered irrelevant, especially once the player unveils the limits of the conditions of possibility within the game world.

The game is *techne*, a series of algorithms waiting in the void of the computer, waiting to be activated, waiting to be experienced, always grounded in what can be accepted as possible.¹⁰⁷ This game-world becomes a “privatised” form of ‘committing’ transgressive violations, “as a personal idiosyncrasy deprived of any public, spectacular or ritualistic dimension.”¹⁰⁸ For Žižek, the kinds of transgressive violations of acceptable behaviours permissible in video games such as murder, rape, prostitution, enslavement, and violence, are not emancipatory from prevailing binary oppositions and their privilege in everyday experience, but rather, a “prosthesis” or “extension of the human in its technological metamorphoses” capable of reenacting the very same privileged binary oppositions only in a compensatory environment which disguises social separation and encourages the mimicry of “everyday existence”¹⁰⁹. Survival horror video games are scary because they do this so well. The player is scared because “he [sic] is in the moment of agency and ownership of actions, navigating a specular body”¹¹⁰, fusing intention, perception, and action into coping with the grotesque and surviving danger.

¹⁰⁵ Žižek 2008, p.xxvii-xxviii

¹⁰⁶ Žižek 1996, p.290

¹⁰⁷ Hourigan 2010

¹⁰⁸ Žižek 2010, p.9

¹⁰⁹ Hourigan 2010, p.6

¹¹⁰ Perron 2009, p.139

The player treats a video game as *techné* to integrate into and identify with the world of the game in mediation with the ‘real’ world, possibly placing greater value on imaginary possibility than Real/impossible actuality, sometimes resulting in “the anxiety of what one can be” over-determining “what one is”.¹¹¹ Sometimes the only way to separate the player from the projection of their Ideal self is death and destruction, embodied by the monsters in survival horror fiction. If the monster is nature, infallible in the rules governing its existence, the player seeks to cut his/her umbilical cord with it, effectively abolishing such an interruption to culture in a bid to re-establish totalitarian harmony and balance.¹¹² Dealing with the monster is an attempt to obliterate the distance separating the Real from its symbolisation. It is an opportunity for the player to better understand their *objet petit a*¹¹³ when presented with “Nature incarnate or sublimed, a nightmare embodiment of the natural realm understood as utterly subordinate to, utterly exhausted by, the twinned Darwinian drives to survive and reproduce.”¹¹⁴ Cohen¹¹⁵ stipulates that such nightmarish monsters are created by society to signify *différance* to social norms. Their independence is an uncomfortable concept for humans reliant on ideology to give them purpose and often the monster is constructed in response to a cultural phenomenon which must be challenged, projecting fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy around how to deal with the problem.

The monster is “difference made flesh”¹¹⁶, a rhetorical device designed to present antagonisms originating from within the gamer as somehow distant and ‘other’.

Roger Adkins writes:

To put this in Lacanian terms, the monstrous other is a symptom of humanity – that is, the human needs the monstrous to serve as its foil, as the outside of the boundary of the human. Without the multifarious and unstable category of the monstrous, the human would cease to exist as such, since there would no

¹¹¹ Hourigan 2010, p.10

¹¹² Žižek 2008

¹¹³ Cottrel 2014

¹¹⁴ Žižek 2006, p.63

¹¹⁵ 1996, p.4

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*

longer be any threat against which to define the normalising and homogenising category of the ‘human’.¹¹⁷

Adkins expands on this central thesis when he suggests that the monstrous is symptomatic of a closed epistemological relationship in which the Same (the self) requires opposition with its Other. This Other is imbued with every notion that the Same rejects¹¹⁸, it becomes an interrogation of the amorphous nature of evil, a limit placed on the human physically, emotionally, and psychologically.¹¹⁹ The xenomorph in *Alien: Isolation* exists beyond human comprehension, it unravels what is possible or impossible for humans to achieve in their interactions with each other and the Real world according to any ‘correct’ technical arrangements for social, economic, and political life.¹²⁰ It rejects humanity and humanity rejects ‘it’. Characters in the game desire cleansing destruction when faced with the prospect of having to go on living with the creature, “Just send in the Marines to blow this place up. Take these creatures back to hell.”¹²¹ Henry Marlow, the ship’s captain responsible for introducing an infected crew member into Sevastopol hence unleashing the alien threat, shares Sinclair’s desire for annihilation:

You don’t beat this thing, Ripley. You can’t. All you can do is refuse to engage. You’ve got to wipe out every trace. Destroy any clue. Stop its infection from spreading. Make sure there’s no chance of the human race every making contact with it again. Because the moment it makes contact, it’s won.¹²²

The total destruction of Sevastopol and all of its inherent problems is seen by these characters and perhaps the gamer as the opportunity for those surviving humans to emerge harmonious and ‘new’, without the antagonistic tension of an alien threat coupled with a traitorous corporation proving just as lethal to the human population of the station. Such indiscriminate desire for annihilation is never created *ex nihilo*

¹¹⁷ Adkins 2010, p.10

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Wells 2002, cited in Perron 2009, p.126

¹²⁰ Vincent 2010 discussing what it means to exist within ideology.

¹²¹ audio log of Sinclair, Dec 11, 2137 - *Alien: Isolation* 2014

¹²² cut scene in which Marlow is in the process of overloading his ship’s engines in order to destroy the station and creature – *Alien: Isolation* 2014

but is the ‘shadow’ of the political-cultural void left in the wake of normality. It is not possible for the player to destroy the alien as Amanda Ripley without destroying Sevastopol station, killing all remaining survivors so that the monsters are destroyed and kept from the grasp of Weyland-Yutani. It is the only way to finish the game, a purposeful choice made by the games developers encouraged by the game’s narrative and the promise of release from the skulking and hiding required to survive this presence from Outside, Beyond.¹²³

Doing what must be done to finish a survival horror video game such as *Alien: Isolation* will require the player to accept what his or her in-game agent decides is the best course of action. The mediation between the decisions of a player’s agent and the player themselves beckons questioning and considering when settling on what a game may mean. Mark Vorobej¹²⁴ wrote that, “the true object of fascination in horror is ourselves, and the human condition in general. Battling monsters is a highly veiled odyssey of self-exploration.” Such self-reflection is echoed in the work of Jean-Sébastien Chauvin¹²⁵ who suggested that, “Playing a survival horror game remains: an “experience of the self... The solitary experience of the character doubles the player’s one whose body and mind are engaged by the manipulation of the controller, from which come moreover vibrations linked to the context of the game.” Ren Reynolds¹²⁶ takes this further when he challenged the player to “...think about the choices you have to make to win, and consider what they say about you.” Bogost elaborated on Reynolds’ remark:

Yet, simply playing a videogame need not entail the player’s adoption of the represented value system; the player might oppose, question, or otherwise internalise its claims: which processes does it include, and which does it exclude? What rules does the game enforce, and how do those rules correlate, correspond, or conflict with an existing morality outside the game?¹²⁷

¹²³ Cohen 1996, p.7

¹²⁴ cited in Perron 2009, p.130

¹²⁵ *ibid.* p.136

¹²⁶ cited in Bogost 2007, p.284

¹²⁷ *ibid.*

Aarseth¹²⁸ argues that the player is only definable by the role the game affords and is at odds with the idea that games can convey messages and ideologies and simply represent the external world in a mediation between the game's mechanical system and the player. He draws on decades of research attempting to link video games to how they affect behaviour - chiefly the potential for video games to enhance education, or act as harbingers of violence in susceptible minds – to arrive at the conclusion that "...the "ludological" position of autonomy aesthetics, that is, that the hermeneutic decoupling of gameplay from the referential and contextual aspects of the game, is a tenable position."¹²⁹ Whilst this position is reasonable given the quantitative data gathered, it ignores more subtle manifestations of discursive practice within the player.

Astrid Ensslin¹³⁰ supports this when she writes that games as art forms demand "critical, reflexive, and meditative play and seek to persuade the player, through algorithmically grounded interactions, to understand and internalise their artistic and aesthetic message." *Alien: Isolation* employs visual, digital, and procedural rhetoric to persuade the player that the insidious desire of the Weyland-Yutani corporation to contain and weaponise the xenomorph is as condemnable as the actions of the monster itself. The mechanics of the game privilege fear, suspense, tension, and terror as the player must carry out their objectives whilst avoiding a direct confrontation with the xenomorph, whereas the narrative of the game positions the player to resent Seegson and Weyland-Yutani for creating such a horrifying scenario in the first place.

Alien: Isolation as an extension of the survival horror genre of video leave the gamer appreciating the futility of human endeavour when faced with an organism beyond biological comprehension and ideological reasoning. Chelsea Lauren Russell¹³¹ theorised that "...Horror video games pervert the reassuring promise of technological redemption and security and illustrate how monsters are inextricably a part of human consciousness despite the reassurances of technological innovation." No weapon or

¹²⁸ 2014

¹²⁹ Aarseth 2014, p.188

¹³⁰ 2014, p.36

¹³¹ 2017, p.3

idea can combat life and libido. A game's celebration of the end of ideological manipulation via a monstrous 'other' is ultimately a new manipulation, "only this time using wholly different diagrams of command and control".¹³² In spite of the hours spent manipulating controllers, thumb sticks, microphones, motion sensors, and trying to stand still, there is a catharsis in knowing that none of it really meant anything once the computer or console is turned off, except to the person who had to do it.

¹³² Galloway 2006, p.106

Chapter 4

Flesh of my flesh: the creatures in The Walking Dead Season 1 and Until Dawn as em[body]ments of desire

This chapter is skeptical of choice-based narrative survival horror video games and the implications of treating player choice as merely an ‘interactive’ act in a virtual world, somehow free from the responsibility and scrutiny of the ‘real’ world. Keogh speculates that, “...we can no longer take for granted that videogames [sic] have goals, provide challenges, offer choices, or offer pleasures that are solely “interactive” in nature...we must go back to the embodied experience of the videogame and see what is there.”¹ Keogh, like Bogost, sees the video game experience as a play of bodies which adopts a superposition between “present and absent, corporeal and incorporeal, immanent and transcendent, actual and virtual, “me” and “not me.””² The body of the gamer is tangled in an involuntary mimicry of the body on the screen and is manipulated via the mechanics of the game to act and feel through its presence and agency³. When the term ‘embody’ or ‘embodiment’ is utilised in this chapter it is referring to the extent to which the player feels responsible for the outcome of that character’s narrative, having made significant choices and taken significant action to influence that outcome.

The games chosen for this chapter adhere to Bogost’s *procedural rhetoric* in the way they use specific mechanics to model ways of thinking that drive social, political, and cultural behaviour in order to persuade the player to feel that they are free to make choices within the narrative of the game, whilst simultaneously positioning them to realise and accept that there are only so many choices to be made⁴ - each fitting preconceived ideas of ‘what it takes’ to survive. Both games analysed in this chapter, *The Walking Dead Season 1* and *Until Dawn*, incorporate similar mechanics of “temporal progression”⁵, as established by Arsenault and Perron’s *Magic Cycle*, to

¹ 2018, p.6-7

² *ibid.* p.13

³ Bogost 2009, p.125

⁴ Bogost 2008, p.125-126

⁵ Arsenault & Perron 2009, p.115

those of *Alien: Isolation* in that the player becomes increasingly adept at interacting with the rules and controls of the game to participate in the narrative. However, unlike *Alien: Isolation*, both games do not rely so much on the player ‘playing’ out the singular grand narrative, but instead permit multiple narrative outcomes ranging from the tone and attitude of the protagonist’s speech, to deciding which characters (if any) get to live, and who will die. This choice-based mechanic determining the outcome of the narrative is compelling and *The Walking Dead Season 1* and *Until Dawn* defy traditional, linear conflicts in video games in which the player passively participates in the story due to the restriction of possible actions due to the unbreakable rules of the game⁶, in league with the “officially sanctioned and non-optional consequences” signaling to the player what they should feel at the completion of the game’s narrative⁷. The player now has more influence over the transition from what is to what might be than in previous forms of video gaming; however, the choices and their outcomes are certainly not infinite in their variety.

Nick Dyer-Witthford and Greig de Peuter speculated on the scope of choice in video games, warning that whilst “Computers create compelling, dynamic digital depictions of potential universes...many - probably most - digital virtualities amplify and reinforce imperial actualities.”⁸ It becomes increasingly clear to the player that despite the nuances of alternate narrative arcs, there remains an end game manufactured by game developers to conclude the grand narrative. Thus, certain “elements of gameplay can and occasionally do link to radical social potentials”⁹, and despite “the affordances and limitations of rules, challenges, risks, achievement-drivenness, and other ludic structures”¹⁰, create an illusion of choice not unlike the ‘false consciousness’ of ‘real’ world ideology¹¹. As discussed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, the player is cued by their prior experiences of genre, ideology, discourse etc. to firstly recognise the choices presented by game designers as believable, rational (but not always kind) responses to any given scenario, and secondly, to idealise humanity over the ‘other’.

⁶ Liebe 2008, p.329

⁷ Juul 2011, p.41

⁸ cited in Apperley & Jayemane 2012, p.14

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Ensslin 2014, p.11

¹¹ Bogost 2007, p.74

An important tenet to this work is the notion that video games are authentic to the point of being more real than the Real (as coined by Lacan) itself due to their ability to indulge players on the Symbolic level in a clearly defined ‘world’ comprised of unbreakable rules that completely and reliably determine any possibilities¹², unlike the Lacanian Real which defies symbolisation and eludes human perception.¹³ What can be seen in the video game world really is all there is until the player activates the 1s and 0s required to show more. Such an environment obliterates the distance separating the Real from its symbolisation as video games are a surplus of the Real over symbolisation due to the immovable, observable, quantifiable laws governing their existence, despite their inception as tools through which to symbolise ‘reality’.¹⁴ They are an ideal object-cause of desire - fantasy existing to prevent the collapse of the fantasy of ideological control - the double illusion. They are *techne*, reducing cultural complexities to “rigid, reductive, and reified structures”.¹⁵ The choices to be made are listed, the mystery of what will be said and done gone, the point of ontological disclosure is unveiled, revealing the limits of possibility for the subject in the technological space of the video game.¹⁶ Žižek reasons that naturalising the “life-world through its simulation is problematic” and *techne* conceals “the disruptive forces which traumatically impose themselves on the subject”, dislocating the subject from any “historico-genealogical specificity”¹⁷ underpinning the symbolisation of ideological imperatives such as death, sanity, normality, consumption, justice, and healthy relationships. This in turn distances the player of the video game from their ‘ideal’ *objet petit a* (object-cause of desire)¹⁸, casting them in the role of a *deject*, a person straying from normal behaviour, revealing his/her Manichaean ideals which are revealed in the *abject*¹⁹ - the seductive binary opposite to the subject’s once treasured object - the shattering of the mirror reflecting back to the player what is ‘good’ and ‘right’. The image of the player is

¹² Boucher 2014, p.131

¹³ Leader & Groves 2010, p.61

¹⁴ Žižek 2008, p.xxv

¹⁵ Galloway cited in Hayse 2014, p.444

¹⁶ Hourigan 2010, p.5

¹⁷ *ibid.* p.21

¹⁸ Cottrel 2014, p. 89

¹⁹ Kristeva 1982, p.7

replaced by the image of the ‘other’ sent as a “repulsive gift”²⁰ to fascinate and horrify them.

Kristeva’s investigation into the *abject* as an “otherness ceaselessly feeling in a systematic quest of desire” supports reading the monsters in *The Walking Dead Season 1* and *Until Dawn* as “corpses”²¹ encroaching on the human subject, infecting life with death, disrespecting ideological borders, positions, and rules, dissembling normality and replacing it with terror.²² Kristeva’s work is grounded in psychoanalytic terminology, employing terms such as ‘I’, id, ego, and superego (Freud), as well as concepts such as the ‘mirror’ and ‘ideal I’ (Lacan). Others who have written about the monstrous ‘other’ such as Adkins and Cohen also adopt psychoanalysis as the language of choice to discuss the way in which these monsters signify *différance* to social norms²³ whilst at the same time being symptomatic of humanity’s desire to be under threat as a means of contrasting normal and homogenous categories of being ‘human’.²⁴ Kristeva makes specific reference to *jouissance* as the origin of the abject. Whilst not strictly a Lacanian term, the way in which Lacan discusses the *objet petit a* in league with *jouissance* likens the violent and painful joy of *jouissance* to the shattering of the mirror where “the ego gives up its image in order to contemplate itself in the Other”.²⁵ Any “fullness” the signifier (the player of the video game in this instance) saw reflected back them in the mirror of their infancy is plagued by difference, forcing the player, as such ideas did in his/her development, to conceive such difference as ‘symbolic’ of the pre-given structure of social and sexual roles within family and society.²⁶

The player desires the difference they are confronted by. The discussion around desire in this chapter will again be contextualised within Lacanian psychoanalysis. “Desire is fundamentally barred from consciousness” and is distorted once it becomes conscious in a wish.²⁷ Freud determined that when an unconscious idea is

²⁰ *ibid.* p.9

²¹ Kristeva 1982, p.3

²² *ibid.* p.3-4

²³ Cohen 1996, p.4

²⁴ Adkins 2010, p.10

²⁵ Kristeva 1982, p.9

²⁶ Eagleton 2008, p.145

²⁷ Leader & Groves 2010, p.84

repressed it displaces itself onto the minutiae of daily life, never to be fully understood or acknowledged.²⁸ The player ‘wishes’ they were competent enough to survive the video game; they wish they made the right choice when they saved that character; they wish they had more items in their inventory; however, these wishes are alibis for what the player desires. The player desires a confrontation with death. Death is *la condition humaine* - there is no solution, no escape from it; the thing to do is not to overcome, to abolish it, but to come to terms with it, to learn to recognise it in its terrifying dimension and then to try and articulate a *modus vivendi* with it.²⁹ Playing survival horror video games is one such agreement for coexisting with the monstrous Things behind the veil of appearances informing contemporary ideology. The monster is a glimpse into the fissures and tears in the symbolism of language.³⁰ It is the ego listening more to the id than the super-ego, in the way all players of video games were made to abandon long before they picked up a controller.

Central to this critique of *The Walking Dead Season 1* and *Until Dawn* as examples of how survival horror video games are symptomatic of the player’s desire to expatriate their *ego* from the ideology governing their *super-ego* are the following tenets:

1. Survival horror video games are a chance to confront the ‘other’ in an alternate, ‘safe’ reality.
2. How the player confronts the ‘other’ in a virtual reality is indicative of their relationship with the *object* and ideology in their actual reality.
3. The monsters in survival horror video games are metaphors made incarnate, demonstrating the objective frailty of symbolic order.
4. Surviving these monsters can socialise the player, restoring their faith in symbolic order, providing catharsis.

Like Chapter 1, each of these tenets will be considered from the perspective of the theory detailed in the Literature Review informing this dissertation, particularly

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ Žižek 2008, p.xxvii-xxviii

³⁰ Žižek 2006, p.72

Arsenault and Perron's *Magic Cycle* model for interpreting the specific mechanics of gameplay, combined with Bogost's *Procedural Rhetoric* framework for evaluating the significance of gameplay in shaping player perception, particularly in regards to ideology.

Confronting the 'other' in alternate reality: WHAT am I fighting and HOW do I fight it?

Both *The Walking Dead Season 1* and *Until Dawn* are choice-based video games governed by cause and effect mechanics. In *Until Dawn* a plethora of choices and subsequent outcomes is at the forefront of the gaming experience and is labelled the 'Butterfly Effect'. The game reminds that player that, "The smallest decision can dramatically change the future. Your actions will shape how the story unfolds. Your story is one of many possibilities. Choose your actions carefully".³¹ Whilst there is no official name for the similar mechanic employed in *The Walking Dead Season 1*, there is a message before the player begins: "This game series adapts to the choices you make. The story is tailored by how you play."³² Such mechanics are examples of the stability of the video game genre being innovated to exploit ever-growing capacities of the hardware, as well as meet the voracious appetites of players of games to have more claim over the outcome of a game's narrative.³³ The potential to enact alternate versions of the one narrative mean that video games need an adjustment in traditional hermeneutic process:

Different playings of a game, conversely, tend to result in entirely different games, with outcomes as varied as winning or losing, gaining and/or losing lives, credits and other countable units [NPCs], radically different navigation options, and, as a result, a large diversity of experiences of the game world per se.³⁴

³¹ *Until Dawn* 2015

³² *The Walking Dead Season 1* 2012

³³ Apperley 2006, p.9

³⁴ Ensslin 2014, p.28



Fig. 10: A representation of the significant choices and their outcomes for characters involved in *Until Dawn*. Not all choices reach fruition if certain others are made.

The result of providing “different playings of a game” is a “playful and unstable encounter between audience and work”.³⁵ When the various heterogeneous materialities of a video game come together - hardware, virtual bodies and worlds, audiovisuality - the video game text is produced, and through this text, the video game player is embodied.³⁶ The gestures, experiences, interactions, and decisions the game’s rules allow (and disallow) determine the possibility spaces within that game and player relies on *procedurality* to define the outcomes for any player input.³⁷ Any possible outcome for the decisions made in both *The Walking Dead Season 1* and *Until Dawn* reveal a computational “argument” being expressed using rules and code which foster a heuristic environment for players, positioning video games as enthymematic texts - texts which use abstract representations of ‘real’ activities which ultimately reflect pre-given structures of social roles and relations.³⁸ To successfully position the player to recognise the ‘other’ in each of the games played, game designers demonstrate a keen understanding of social antagonism and

³⁵ Keogh 2018, p.47

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ Bogost 2008, p.121-22.

³⁸ Lacan cited in Eagleton 2008, p.145

its persuasiveness. Kristeva claims that the subject (player) endures the grotesque horror of the ‘other’ because he/she imagines that it is the desire of the ‘other’ for him/her to do so. Kristeva’s definition of the ‘other’ will help stabilise this term in the context of this chapter:

[The ‘other is...] A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A “something” that I do not recognise as a thing...On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me.³⁹

By relying on the player being able to recognise the qualities of ‘otherness’ and be antagonistic towards those objects exhibiting them, each game is making a claim about systems, whether they be ideological or computational. Bogost’s *procedural rhetoric* is again useful for evaluating the permitted outcomes of each choice made in *The Walking Dead Season 1* and *Until Dawn*, in order to consider WHAT the game is trying to tell the player about their own perception of morality and ‘otherness’, and provide a heightened awareness of WHY he/she chose to behave a particular way in the game world.⁴⁰ Each game becomes a ‘safe space’ in which to take meaningful action and test the result of decision and choice via a “specular body”.⁴¹ Whether the player is ‘inhabiting’ Lee or Clementine in *The Walking Dead Season 1* or any one of the characters in *Until Dawn* - Ashley, Sam, Mike, Josh, Chris, Emily, Matt, or Jess - decisions must be made, in particular, decisions about how to survive the monstrous ‘other’ in each game. The action that the player is able to take through their in-game agent not only creates the experience of play but also constructs the meaning of the game.⁴²

³⁹ Kristeva 1982, p.2

⁴⁰ Bogost 2007

⁴¹ Perron 2009, p.139

⁴² Bogost 2008, p.121



Fig. 11: The ‘other’ in *Until Dawn* - the Wendigo.



Fig. 12: The ‘other’ in *The Walking Dead Season 1* - the zombie, or “walker”.

Gameplay in both *The Walking Dead Season 1* and *Until Dawn* still relies on the ongoing and ever expanding feedback loop between “Gamer”, “Gameplay”, “Game”, and “Game” as stipulated by the Magic Cycle; however, due to the enormous reliance on storytelling over the player’s skill with the controller, the heuristic spiral of the narrative and governing hermeneutics far exceed the heuristic spiral of gameplay.⁴³ The gameplay is fixed and confined to simple haptic

⁴³ Arsenault & Perron 2009

procedures designed to have the action taken in the game mimic its ‘real’ procedure as closely as possible. Character movement is tightly structured and *hard rails*⁴⁴ exist in the game in the form of walls, fences, hedges, trees, and other obstacles to direct the player along their linear journey through the game world. Interactions with objects and characters are also minimalist. In *The Walking Dead Season 1* the player as Lee can discern what can be interacted with as a white circle appears over the top of the person or object of interest. Once selected, the player chooses between a list of possible actions to take such as “open”, “look at”, “kick”, “examine”, “unlock”, and many more. There is no button assigned to any specific action other than the right joystick enabling the player to move Lee, and later Clementine, around the permissible space. A similar mechanic exists in *Until Dawn* where objects of interest glow white if the character gets close enough to them. Once found, the player simply presses R2 on their controller (game is exclusive to PlayStation) to have the player pick the object up before using the right joystick to rotate the item to see it in its entirety. If the object is a mobile phone or multipage document, the player swipes their finger across the touch pad in the centre of the controller to simulate opening a smart phone or turning a page. Each of these interactions with the controller are designed to be a stylised concept of a real-world activity⁴⁵ and are easily recognisable and replicable actions that metaphorically substitute a ‘real’ world activity with the in-game activity performed.⁴⁶

When the time comes to confront the ‘other’, in the case of *The Walking Dead Season 1*, the “walker”, actions are again limited to the frantic mashing of the A button on an X-Box controller to have Lee fight off the attacking creature, or tapping the right trigger of the controller to have Lee fire a gun or swing any number of sharp and/or heavy objects at this opposing force. Removing the emphasis on being controller savvy directs the player’s attention to the importance of the decision making mechanics in the game. The player uses any one of the four main buttons on the controller (X, B, A, or Y) to choose what to say and how to respond to the situation or conversation within the game narrative. The options vary in tone and personality to enable the player to take some agency over how he/she wants Lee to

⁴⁴ Murray 1997, p.132

⁴⁵ Juul 2011, p.168

⁴⁶ *ibid.* p.173

be perceived in the world of the game. There is a timer for each choice and if it runs out, the game defaults to a standard choice deemed the most neutral. This system of choice procedurally represents morality, offering enormous feedback to the player, later enabling them to perceive the degree of success they had making earlier decisions as the endgame becomes apparent.⁴⁷ The choices regarding the “walkers” are always clear - kill or be killed. It is what these creatures inspire in the remaining human characters who make choices in the game fraught with danger and possibility. Choices such as who to ally with, who to trust, who to save - these are all choices that have the greatest impact on how the narrative is concluded and position the player to consider the actions of the living far more heinous than those of the undead.

The antagonism the player feels towards the “walkers” is a disfigured representation of the social antagonism felt towards the world of the game.⁴⁸ They are a ‘shadow’ of the political-cultural void left in the wake of normality. When confrontation with a “walker” is unavoidable, the white circle cursor used to navigate Lee’s world becomes red and if armed the player is prompted to aim at the creature’s head to effectively stab, shoot, or bludgeon them to ‘death’. There is no option to “feed”, “rescue”, “talk”, “observe”, “talk to”, or any such choices. Conversely, Lee can only inflict violence on a human character in moments of extreme duress, often in a cutscene triggered by a choice in the narrative. Lee reasons with the distinction between the living and the undead when he tells Clementine that, “killing is bad no matter what...I do it [kill walkers] because it’s necessary. And walkers aren’t people.”⁴⁹ Lee is able to “disown” any negative aspects of murder as he has no choice but to “reply with a similar and animal brutality”⁵⁰ to the infliction of the undead on a once ideologically sound reality. Lee, along with other human characters, have found nobility in trying to preserve their ‘humanity’, “rebranding” their acts of extreme violence as some sort of “greater good” or “higher goal”⁵¹ to preserve their perceptions of good and evil as they have always existed.

⁴⁷ Waggoner 2009, p.32

⁴⁸ Žižek 2008, p.141

⁴⁹ *The Walking Dead* 2012

⁵⁰ Perron 2009, p.130

⁵¹ Eagleton 2008, p.132

Whilst Lee, and by extension - the player, is resolute in their dealings with the monstrous “walker”, voids appear in the possibility space of the game when dealing with human NPCs. The significance of being limited to four possible courses of action questions the video game’s grounding in the world. The limits in the rules and therefore, the limits of the conditions of possibility for the subject create an empty space which is what Heidegger termed ‘*techne*’.⁵² Reducing the symbolic ‘irreality’ of the game world to a reliable four choices is necessary for the technical aspect of video game development as there can only be so many outcomes within the code of the game; however, it overwrites the phenomenological/imaginary potential of ‘real’ experience. Due to the choices available aligning with the attitudes, values, and beliefs of the character being played, choices can potentially feel indistinct, kitsch, and simply unreal⁵³ for the player whose choice is mediated via the mechanisms, aesthetics, and narrative of gameplay, namely *techne*, which, when recognised, reduces cultural complexity to “rigid, reductive, and reified structures”.⁵⁴ Whilst this is useful for putting any unpleasantness associated with the zombies in *The Walking Dead Season 1* and their actions at a symbolic distance⁵⁵, it is also very

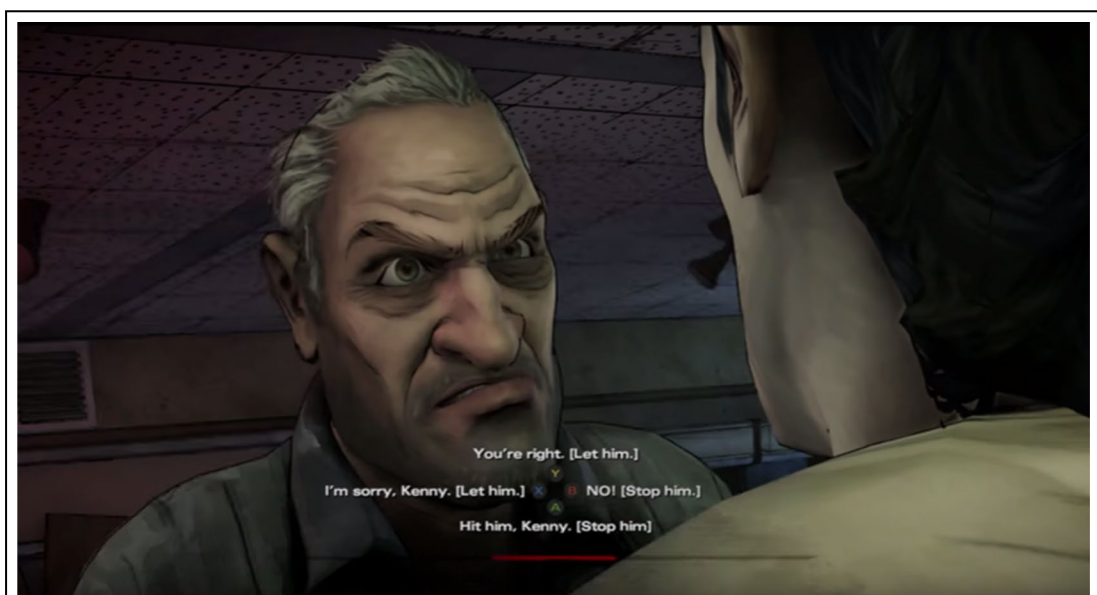


Fig. 13: The player is presented with four possible options. Sometimes there is the option to do nothing. Each choice is timed using a simple diminishing bar below the options.

⁵² Hourigan 2010, p.6

⁵³ Freud cited in Hourigan 2010, p.8

⁵⁴ Galloway cited in Hayse 2014, p.444

⁵⁵ Hourigan 2010, p.21

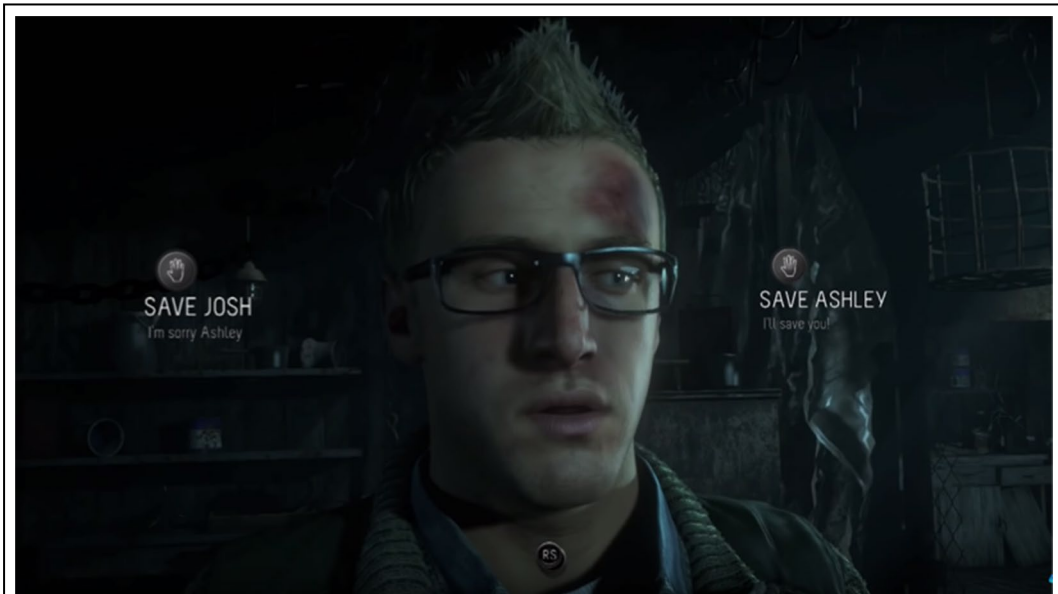


Fig. 14: The player is presented with two possible options. The choice can greatly alter the character’s trajectory in the narrative, both for the character they are made for AND for the character who made them.

persuasive in the sense that the procedures used to interact with this monstrous ‘other’ are so reliably ‘real’ in that they cannot be anything other than their programming, that they are very effective socialising forces in terms of how such a threat could and should be dealt with in ‘reality’.⁵⁶

Player choice is limited further in *Until Dawn* as there is a choice between only two possible outcomes for each ‘junction’ in the game which could change its narrative trajectory. One often directly corresponds to a negative outcome in the overall ‘Butterfly Effect’, whilst the other increases that character’s chances of surviving until dawn. Again, there is a timer in the form of a depleting circular bar which appears around each choice. If the player fails to act, the game decides which way to go or what to say, often (but not always) acting in the interest of the player. The game persuades the player to be forward thinking and bold in their choices, with graffiti at the cable car station early in the game reading: “The past is beyond our control”.⁵⁷ Similarly, part of the in-game tutorial reminds the player that “sometimes

⁵⁶ Bogost 2008; Hayse 2014

⁵⁷ *Until Dawn* 2015

doing nothing is the right thing to do”.⁵⁸ Whilst seemingly sentimental, these phrases signal to the player both the procedural systems of gameplay, as well as making claims about cultural and social aspects of the human experience⁵⁹, namely the history of experience each playable character is bringing to the hours before dawn simulated by the game. This advice is useful in the endgame as the only way for every character to survive is patience when fighting the Wendigos. The temptation is to always be on the move but as the Wendigo’s vision is based on movement there are several moments in the game when the player must be resolutely still to avoid detection and certain death.

Game designers have exploited this characteristic of the Wendigo by incorporating a haptic mechanic whereby, when prompted, the player must hold the controller very still in the same way that the in-game character is needing to be silent and still in that moment to avoid detection. A blue light similar to the one on the front of the PlayStation 4 controller appears in the middle of the screen and the player must ensure that the light does not blur or distort, otherwise his/her player agent in the game will be found and most probably killed. Such a mechanic enhances the tension felt by the player and is an attempt to “enter” the player into the game at a sensory level through feedback beyond the screen telling him/her what to feel.⁶⁰ This example of haptics aligns with Perron’s stipulation that the survival horror video game genre is the “extended body genre” in which the player is “caught up in an involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen [and] is urged to act and feel through its presence, agency and embodiment in the fictional world”.⁶¹ The player can no longer trust the technological interface separating them from the monstrous ‘other’, regardless of how tenuous such a relationship may seem initially, and he/she must accept that the monster holds power over him/her not in spite of the mechanics of the game, but by purposeful extension of them.⁶²

Like the button mashing mechanic in *The Walking Dead Season 1, Until Dawn* contains moments requiring more alertness and dexterity from the player. When

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹ Bogost 2008, p.123

⁶⁰ Mauger 2014, p.37

⁶¹ Perron 2009, p.125

⁶² Russell 2017, p.7

running, climbing, or transitioning between difficult terrain, there are quick-time events wherein a random button on the controller appears with a much faster countdown than regular decisions. To miss the pressing of this button or to miss-press the button could result in the character in the game tripping, falling, stumbling - any number of clumsy actions which could potentially result in being caught by a Wendigo or not saving another character in time.

This is one of the ways that Jess can die in a play through. If the player (as Mike) fails too many quick-time actions and does not reach the mine in time, Jessica's dismembered body is presented to him instead of her alive, unconscious body. If a significant choice has been made, a kaleidoscope of animated butterflies appears in the top left corner of the screen along with a tone. Depending on the colour of the butterflies and the sound the tone, the player immediately knows whether they have made a positive or negative choice. Depending on the choice made and which characters were present to witness said choice, group dynamics can shift and relationships can be strengthened or strained. Depending on the status of any given relationship, certain outcomes become available that might not otherwise be an option had the player treated particular characters a different way. An example of this is when Chris is fleeing a Wendigo and running towards the lodge. If the player had made positive choices towards the character of Ashley up to that point, she would let him in to the lodge; however, if the player (as Chris) chose actions counter to Ashley's values and safety, Ashley instead leaves Chris to have his throat torn out by a Wendigo.

Traditionally, games with an emphasis on narrative rely on one course of action that will ensure victory in every possible game state. This is referred to as a *complete strategy* as it is the only way the game can be completed. *Until Dawn* and *The Walking Dead Season 1* promote *dominant strategy* instead, whereby the player is able to navigate the narrative in a variety of ways, but there is a particular way of playing which best exploits the consequences of the game rules to allow for a more comfortable or 'complete' play through.⁶³ This both defuncts the illusion of endless

⁶³ Juul 2011, p.59



Fig. 15: A representation of the possible outcomes for characters who accompany Lee on the final mission in *The Walking Dead Season 1*. Only 16% of players followed the *dominant strategy*.

choice espoused by the developers of these games and supports Bogost’s decree that “To play the game successfully, the player is forced to acknowledge the campaign’s position on the issues it represents”.⁶⁴ The path to finishing *The Walking Dead Season 1* and *Until Dawn* is not clear cut. There are choices that always ‘feel’ like the safest option and can easily be assumed to be the best way to play; however, safety and rationality are not always rewarded. If a player chooses “safe” over “fast” too often in *Until Dawn* they will not reach a stranded character in time, resulting in that character’s gory death. Similarly, in *The Walking Dead Season 1*, if the player elects for Lee to say nothing too often or chooses to remain neutral in too many group arguments, the character is unable to have a noticeable impact on group dynamics and is consequently unable to effectively form alliances for important missions later in the game.

James Paul Gee⁶⁵ discusses the need for disobedience and insubordination in the context of the video game as integral to succeed at being a character, rather than

⁶⁴ Bogost 2008, p.133

⁶⁵ 2003

simply adhere to the virtues instilled in ‘reality’. Whilst there are many ways to complete the game, the most rewarding is one that empowers players to “[leave] behind his or her own fears and hesitations about authority and the risks of exploration”.⁶⁶ There is no way around it, the player must be prepared to simulate violence, betrayal, anger, apathy, and decide who lives and who dies. The monstrous ‘others’ in each game serve as a motive, an antagonistic force suitably horrific enough to force the player into action. Vorobej⁶⁷ speculates that “Battling [these] monsters is a highly veiled odyssey of self-exploration” which holds true in *The Walking Dead Season 1* and *Until Dawn* as the monsters in each game are perhaps the most predictable element of the game world. It is the choices revolving around the human characteristics of society and morality that are truly being examined. The monsters are positioned outside of the player and his/her playable character. They are that something that “has no satisfactory semantic substitute or refinement”⁶⁸ but instead exist as “an interrogation of the amorphous nature of evil, or an address to the limits of the human condition”.⁶⁹ What each of these survival horror video games permit is the opportunity to interrogate the players relationship with evil through a force beyond ideological rationality, in a virtual space conducive to experimentation with, and exploration of, human behaviours not ‘normally’ considered ‘right’ or ‘just’ but instead necessary to survive an interaction with the ‘other’.

The player’s relationship with the *abject* and ideology in *The Walking Dead* and *Until Dawn*

How a player is willing to perform in the game world to counter the ‘other’ is indicative of his or her enculturation within ideological frameworks, and more interestingly, his or her willingness to manipulate or defy ideological ‘norms’ to complete the game. When writing about video games as “mass culture texts” with the potential to “articulate social conflicts, contemporary fears, and utopian hopes”, as well as driving for, “ideological containment and reassurance”, Douglas Kellner⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Gee 2003, p.121

⁶⁷ cited in Perron 2009, p.130

⁶⁸ Asma cited in Adkins 2010, p.9

⁶⁹ Wells cited in Perron 2009, p.126

⁷⁰ cited in Pérez-Latorre & Oliva 2019, p.782

speculates that there is ideological tension within the both the narrative and game design dimensions of a video game respectively, as well as across both dimensions. Clint Hocking⁷¹ labelled this trans-dimensional tension as “ludonarrative dissonance”, believing there to sometimes be a clash between the ludic and narrative structures of video games. The game mechanics may coerce the player to act in their own self-interest through having their in-game agent hoard ammunition, supplies, kill any opposing forces, liken cruelty to silliness - whilst the narrative of the game shows the same agent’s character being merciful, compassionate, generous, and retaining characteristics favourable in ‘healthy’ human relationships and societies. Whilst initially perceived as a design flaw, ludonarrative dissonance are better understood as a “sociocultural symptom”⁷² of the contradictory nature of human ideology. Whilst the game’s narrative is a more refined delivery of the game designer’s desired ideological and political point of view, the game mechanics permit the player any number of transgressions outside of these ideals. These transgressions are ‘safe’ in that the player is free to violate and explicit rules they would normally be committed to in their ‘real’, ‘actual’ lives and their virtual mechanical actions are best described by Žižek⁷³ as “artificial colouring” in the “grayness of social reality”.

Challenging prescriptive narrative roles as laid out by game developers permits the player of the video game to “experience the self” through carefully designed character tropes which must induce empathy through vulnerability and danger.⁷⁴ Although strictly fantasy, Žižek acknowledges that fantasy fills in ideological gaps as means of manifesting “extrapolitical fantasy” customary within a specific nation, culture or religion.⁷⁵ The work of Daniel Muriel and Garry Crawford contextualise the popularity of video games within discourses of post-industrial, postmodern society in which public regulation of the media was being dismantled. They describe the medium as holding the promise “of new spaces for sociality, virtuality and identity construction while also embodying fears about the increasing levels of violence, individualisation and consumption in society.”⁷⁶ The authors also comment

⁷¹ *ibid.*

⁷² cited in Pérez-Latorre & Oliva 2019, p.783

⁷³ Žižek 2010, p.10

⁷⁴ Chauvin cited in Perron 2009, p.136

⁷⁵ Cottrel 2014, p.90

⁷⁶ Muriel & Crawford 2018, p.3

on the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideology, especially in contemporary video game design. Responsibility is bestowed upon the individual to choose their adventure. The player takes on the central role of the “demiurge of what happens in the act of playing video game, reinforcing this position”⁷⁷. Both *The walking Dead Season 1* and *Until Dawn* position the player to consider violence and consumption in particular through facilitating interactions with the ‘other’ in the form of creatures that flaunt immorality and death as liberation from order.⁷⁸ The zombie or “walker”, as well as the Wendigo are *abject* in the way in which they condemn acceptable standards of ‘living’ and act as the focal point for where meaning collapses.

Confronting the creatures in both games studied is indicative of the player’s quest to metonymically substitute the desire to confront his or her linguistic, sexual, and social inadequacies⁷⁹ with a virtual opportunity to combat an object that directly opposes society’s established conventions around said inadequacies, inadvertently demonstrating those qualities so desired, yet inescapably lacking. The object of this opposition is the abject. Abjection is often associated with uncleanness or lack of health, but is better defined as a disturbance to identity, system, and order. Kristeva argues that:

Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject...He who denies morality is not abject; there can be grandeur in amorality and even in crime that flaunts is disrespect for the law...Abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that dissembles.⁸⁰

Perron concurs, citing the zombie as a prime example of an insidious terror. He states that “the figure of the zombie is abject and reminds the still-living of the inescapable decrepitude of their own material parts, to the point of repulsion.”⁸¹ As an extension of the horror genre, a world ‘run by’ zombies leaves the subject without the

⁷⁷ *ibid.* p.4

⁷⁸ Kristeva 1982, p.4

⁷⁹ Lacan in Eagleton 2008, p.151

⁸⁰ Kristeva 1982, p.4

⁸¹ Perron 2009, p.128

protection of understood systems of behaviour and language. They are torn away from “the intellectual trust that stands behind our actions...exposing our vulnerabilities in relying on the world and on other people”.⁸² They are left with their “material parts” as the only defense against the undead. Stripped of pretense, the player’s agent exists in a world in which there is a consistent ‘natural’ undercurrent of chaos, terror, and death, reinforcing not only horror’s unique juncture between sensation, power, and the body⁸³, but also encouraging the ever introspective question: “what if I actually had to do this to survive?” Noël Carroll suggests that survival horror monsters “remain interstitial as they transgress distinctions such as inside/outside, living/dead, insect/human, flesh/machine and animate/inanimate”.⁸⁴ The Wendigo in *Until Dawn* is a complex hybrid of each of these binaries as each creature was once human, now punished by an ancient curse as a consequence of consuming human flesh. Whilst these monsters retain some of their humanity, for example the Wendigo that was once Hannah does not harm her brother Josh, there remains the primeval, insatiable desire to continue to consume human flesh, much like the “walkers” in *The Walking Dead Season 1*.

Both games consider the dissembling of social conventions and acceptable behaviour allegorically through the literal dissembling of the body via cannibalism.

Cannibalism has long been associated with the exotic, dark regions of the world. Jacques Le Goff⁸⁵ likens the act to other bizarre tastes such as nudism, polygamy, incest, eroticism - actions existing in realms outside of the restrictive morality imposed by Western institutions such as the Church and law. The monster is co-opted into a symbol of these counter-cultural desires, enticing the player from a distance that is simultaneously “exorbitant” and “quite close”.⁸⁶ The act of cannibalism harkens back to an ancient cosmology based on stronger, higher things killing and consuming lower ones in a contract with a supernatural force to preserve some sort of hierarchy categorising all life.⁸⁷ Once committed, the consumption of flesh cannot be undone and is condemned, especially in *Until Dawn*. The stranger on

⁸² Russell 2017, p.15

⁸³ *ibid.* p.41

⁸⁴ Perron 2009, p.129

⁸⁵ in Cohen 1996, p.18

⁸⁶ *ibid.* p.20

⁸⁷ Žižek 2010, p.48

the mountain who presents himself to the group in *Until Dawn* states that Wendigos “surrender human rights the moment they eat one another. There is no cure. There is no redemption.”⁸⁸ The player is positioned to see the act as obscene, grotesque, unforgivable, and by extension, the Wendigo as the perpetrator of such an act must also be all of these things.

Likewise in *The Walking Dead Season 1*, to become a “walker” is to become “satanic” and “[not] Christian”⁸⁹; however, such religious dogma does not stop characters such as the St John family (Brenda and her sons Danny and Andy) cutting off Mark’s limbs and feeding him to the rest of the group in the second episode of the season: *Starved for Help*. The consumption of flesh is foreshadowed throughout the episode with Lee discovering a slaughter room as well as a hidden cell behind a bookshelf where Mark is discovered with his legs freshly amputated. He simply warns, “Do not eat dinner”.⁹⁰ The family justify eating Mark, “He woulda’ died anyway! We gotta think about LIVIN’!”⁹¹ The family sees the needless decay of the human body as “waste”. The irony of their justification is plain when Brenda states that “you got monsters roamin’ around that do nothin’ but eatin’ people. And for what? To continue to rot til’ they eat some more. We think we can put that meat to better use”.⁹² The St John family are a monstrous Thing behind a veil of appearances.⁹³ When Lee and the group first encounter the family, the St Johns appear to be wholesome, family orientated Georgians who are happy to shelter strangers. Once this illusion is shattered, what remains is a group which takes on the role of destroyer, superseding harmony, order, ethics, and morality, forming a fissure in the symbolic network of the player who has mostly been conditioned to fear the undead and must now fear the insidious motives of the living.

⁸⁸ *Until Dawn* 2015

⁸⁹ *The Walking Dead Season 1* 2012

⁹⁰ *ibid.*

⁹¹ *ibid.*

⁹² *ibid.*

⁹³ Žižek 2006, p.72

The creatures in *The Walking Dead Season 1* and *Until Dawn* demonstrate the frailty of the symbolic order

Central to the positioning of the monsters as ‘other’ in both video games is each creature’s role as an interruption to culture. As established by Cohen, these monsters originate from both ‘beyond’ and ‘within’.⁹⁴ Both the Wendigo and the walker originate from a once human subject, now corrupted and deformed, existing to remind the still-living of the “inescapable decrepitude of their own material parts, to the point of repulsion”.⁹⁵ In the Lacanian sense of the ‘other’ embodying the subject’s desire to understand what is always anterior to linguistic, sexual, and social relations⁹⁶, the figure of the monster symbolises the negativity and destruction the hero grapples with once deprived of ideological and symbolic order, but more significantly, questions the boundaries between what is ‘human’ and what is ‘other’.⁹⁷ Each respective monster is a “blockage”, preventing culture as it once was from ever again becoming a closed, homogeneous totality.⁹⁸ A consequence of this blockage is confusion and fear at what cannot longer be understood using language. The monstrous ‘other’ precipitates language - “It is everything that is beyond (re)cognition; it is everything that is unnamable and that threatens to unhinge the possibility of naming itself.”⁹⁹ Whilst the player may be primed to encounter the monster in video games, it is the reaction of the characters within the games themselves which best reflect the role of the monster as a foil to humanity.¹⁰⁰ An inextricable reflection of its fears.

Characters in each game are unable to comprehend what they are facing at first as it defies logical, linguistic convention. Lee exclaims, “What the hell are you?”¹⁰¹ when first encountering the zombified police officer he was talking to only moments prior. He soon learns that speech is one of the easiest ways to distinguish between who is

⁹⁴ Cohen 1996, p.7

⁹⁵ Perron 2009, p.128

⁹⁶ Eagleton 2008, p.151

⁹⁷ Perron 2009, p.130

⁹⁸ Žižek 2008, p.143

⁹⁹ Adkins 2010, p.12

¹⁰⁰ Russell 2017, p.1

¹⁰¹ *The Walking Dead Season 1* 2012

alive and who is “one of THEM”.¹⁰² Likewise, if Emily survives an encounter with the Wendigo in *Until Dawn* she reports to the group that “something’s out there...A monster - It’s a monster! It was after me and it wasn’t human”.¹⁰³ Like the zombie in *The Walking Dead Season 1*, the Wendigo is unable to use language to communicate and is instead heralded by shrieks and snarls. The order of life and language has been ‘injected’ with horror. The player is stripped of his/her “intellectual trust” in symbolic and metaphysical certainties, such as death, and their reliance on the symbolic order is punished¹⁰⁴, as their relationship between the world, sensation, power, networks, and people are tested.

The symbolic order “is both any system of communication (such as language, discourse, a method of monetary exchange, a game, or any system of signs) and the rules governing that system.”¹⁰⁵ Silverman¹⁰⁶ speculates that once the subject has entered the symbolic order of language, he or she has abandoned the “order of the organic”, muting ‘being’ or the ‘real’ in favour of its symbolisation and signification. Adherence to such a system is not natural and its very existence is paradoxical in that the subject only recognises such a system at work using the tools and code given to them by said system. In video games, the recognition of the gap between procedural representations via simulation and the player’s understanding of the system it models creates “crisis simulation fever” in the player. Examining *The Walking Dead Season 1* and *Until Dawn* using Bogost’s procedural rhetoric is one such way of identifying this gap and interrogating the rules that drive both systems.¹⁰⁷ Whilst simulating horrific situations requiring amoral action, these two video games elucidate possibilities for behaviour not ‘natural’ to the player in their ‘real’ world in such a way as to procedurally reduce choice to the movement of a joystick or the push of a button, inadvertently trivialising the action of making a choice for the player, whilst simultaneously heightening his/her awareness of the intricate ideological and psychological factors underpinning every choice. The existence of the symbolic order depends on two elements acting in tandem:

¹⁰² *ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Until Dawn* 2015

¹⁰⁴ Russel 2017, p.15

¹⁰⁵ Kul-Want & Piero 2011, p.58

¹⁰⁶ cited in Olivier 2004, p.4

¹⁰⁷ Bogost 2007, p.332-33

On the one hand, a subject who is formed through participating in the symbolic order and, on the other hand, an imaginary *big other* that perpetually holds out the illusion that the symbolic order is a medium for achieving unitary meaning and reciprocity with other subjects.¹⁰⁸

This ‘big other’ is as fictitious as the symbolic order itself. It is virtual in so far as it only exists as long as the subject believes and acts as though it exists.

Žižek uses the analogy of a game of chess to explain the symbolic order, explaining how each piece of the game adheres to certain rules and the interplay of these rules makes the game work reliably and makes it reproducible.¹⁰⁹ Such an analogy aligns perfectly with acknowledging video games as extensions or models of the symbolic order, ones in which the frailty of such a system is revealed in the way the player interacts with the abject ‘others’ within survival horror video games in particular. The corporeal ‘other’ made flesh as zombie and Wendigo, upsets the one who would confront it. The body of the player character is so obviously fragile and their faith in any system of order fallacious. The ‘other’ “show[s] me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live...the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expels, “I” is expelled”.¹¹⁰ Herein lies the strength, as well as the irony of permitting the player to confront corpse-like personifications of death in the video game world. The video game may feel like a sort of *dream work*¹¹¹ in which the player can freely displace their desire to protect the humanity established for them by their ego and super-ego by destroying any force that would interrupt ‘normality’; however, the video game is just another “symbolic universe” that “propagate[s] a larger hegemony”.¹¹² The video game transcends the unpredictability and unreliability of the ‘real’, presenting itself as “the cure for lack”¹¹³ only to promote the continual and unresolvable pursuit of unnamable desire.

¹⁰⁸ Kul-Want & Piero 2011, p.63

¹⁰⁹ Kul-Want & Piero 2011, p.58

¹¹⁰ Kristeva 1982, pp.3-4

¹¹¹ Freud in Barry 2009, p.95

¹¹² Hayse 2014, p.442

¹¹³ Cottrel 2014, p.91

Positioning video games as a phantasmic text which transcends reality is to acknowledge that the monsters in *The Walking Dead Season 1* and *Until Dawn* become 'transcendental signifiers'. Lacan elaborates on this concept, stating that a transcendental signifier is "not in fact an object or reality...it is merely an empty marker of difference, a sign of what divides us from the imaginary and inserts us into our predestined place within the symbolic order."¹¹⁴ This marker becomes a third party onto which the player can metonymically 'gift' unusual desires or neuroses.

The player is potentially jealous of the freedom granted by being undead, whilst simultaneously contriving reasons not to resort to the same behaviour. The Wendigo and the walkers are free from restraint. They satiate their hunger, act on their violent impulses, do away with speech and communication in favour of pure, animalistic instinct. Both games challenge the player to reflect on the actions they have taken and the decisions made and account for the similarity between his/her 'performance' and the actions of the monsters positioned to be perceived as the enemy. The unnamed antagonist in *The Walking Dead Season 1* states: "You're not men...you're monsters. All men are monsters. Take what they want, then destroy it all. Take a can of beans, take a little girl...it's all the fucking same to you."¹¹⁵ Similarly, in *Until Dawn*, Dr. Hill questions the actions of Josh (whilst the player is playing as Josh): "All the good work we did exploring the source of your fear...and you've just gone and used it for ill. Your overwhelming fear of things that are dead. You have turned it against these people..."¹¹⁶ Josh, through the enacting of his fantasy, has fulfilled his perceived desire, has enacted the revenge he sought for his sisters' deaths. Soon the player realises; however, that the fulfilment of his revenge plan is only a part of Josh's greater desires and whilst it is assumed that his attainment of revenge through pranking the others was the object of his fantasies, it is the Wendigo that is truly the object of his desire. An object he did not know was available to him. The creature is a reunion with his now transformed sister. The monster facilitates a final opportunity to confront what Josh truly 'lacks' - the ability to really affect anything. This lack is intangible, it is a frustration grounded in his very ego and each new object of his

¹¹⁴ Eagleton 2008, p.146

¹¹⁵ *The Walking Dead Season 1* 2012

¹¹⁶ *Until Dawn* 2015

desire fails to satisfy his needs as he lacks nothing ‘real’ and each object can only offer something.¹¹⁷

Dr. Hill in *Until Dawn* is symptomatic of ‘cracks’ appearing in Josh’s perception of reality and his ability to successfully relate to the symbolic order. The character of Dr. Hill appears to the player outside of the main narrative. At first, interactions with this character seem to be done as a flashback for an unknown member of the group of a period he or she (the character wears indistinct clothing and gloves) was receiving therapy from the Doctor. In these sessions the player is controlling the choices made by the unknown character sitting before Dr. Hill and these decisions mostly revolve around responding to questions regarding fear and anxiety:

In our last session we established that you have a fear of things that are dead...or undead. This time we are going to try and understand the root of your anxiety. Now pick up that book, turn the pages. You will see a set of pictures and symbols. I want you to identify which image in each set makes you the most anxious.¹¹⁸

The player then navigates a series of choices regarding what they are afraid of most. Men or women? Planes or crowds? Heights or drowning? Snakes or rats? Guns or knives? Gore or crows? Needles or storms? The way that Dr. Hill addresses the player character changes based on choices made, granting such choices significance beyond merely being an interesting narrative point or mechanic. The images and symbols shown during this therapy session begin to appear throughout the game, prompting the player to consider the closing gap between the symbolism of the choices made in Dr. Hill’s office and the grand narrative now underway.

¹¹⁷ Cottrel 2014, p.92

¹¹⁸ *Until Dawn* 2015



Fig. 16: An example of the choices that can be made from the book of fears prescribed by Dr. Hill. The true implications of these choices are not fully comprehensible without multiple play throughs of *Until Dawn*.

Once the player learns that the character in therapy is Josh, the symbols take on even more significance and there is the realisation that Dr. Hill is Josh's subconscious processing the actions he has taken throughout the game. As Josh's grip on reality loosens, Dr. Hill's office becomes increasingly decrepit and decorated with gore and moments of Josh's attempts to scare the group. Even if the player is able to prevent all of the characters from dying before dawn, Josh inevitably ends up alone in the Wendigo's lair, punished by his deception and dedication to horror. Dr. Hill is the last 'person' Josh speaks to and this therapist reminds Josh (and the player) that "It's time you learned there is more to be afraid of than can be dreamt up by the unhinged imagination of a self-indulgent, spoiled little brat...you're all alone".¹¹⁹

Josh begins to hallucinate the corpses of his dead sister and friend emerging from a wall of flesh and organs. They ask "why didn't you save us Josh?" as they peel their faces from their skulls before a Wendigo's face emerges from the enormous image of a split torso. Josh is left screaming in the dark, devoid of sanity, order, and companionship. Nothing he, and by extension the player, sees can be trusted anymore.

¹¹⁹ *Until Dawn* 2015

Surviving death, as embodied by the creatures in *The Walking Dead Season 1* and *Until Dawn*, is cathartic

The ‘other’ is the monster reflected back to the gamer. In the same way that the game does not exist without the player, the monster does not exist without the player and the plentitude of preconceived notions of the monstrous and grotesque that he/she brings to the narrative. The player has come to the game knowing what it is he/she must face and yet willingly do so in a quest for catharsis. The player willingly becomes the *deject* - one who is willing to perpetrate the abject in the space of the video game, far removed from his or her perception of who he or she is in ‘reality’. Before making the choices presented by *The Walking Dead Season 1* and *Until Dawn*, the player does not critically examine who he or she is, but rather considers where he or she is. The player is removed from their actions through what Juul¹²⁰ has labelled the “half-real” nature of the video game world. Any action actually performed by the player is only a fraction of what such a movement translates to in the game world, highlighting the fact that the world of the game is divisible, foldable, never totalisable, but instead a collection of “pseudo-objects” that can be interacted with devoid of any ‘real’ consequence. These actions do not define the player as they would in the ‘real’ world and instead constantly question the solidity of perception, impelling the player to ‘build’ moments of their design, take risks, invite danger, and stray from conventional morality.¹²¹ The catharsis is not in “being” but in “doing”. Free of ‘real’ consequence, the player is able to behave monstrously in a context which calls for horror. Both games analysed permit a spectrum of behaviour ranging from virtuous through to dissident and downright villainous.

In an act of ludonarrative dissonance, a player can choose to oppose the rules being enforced by the video game and any correlating value systems; however, to do so may mean not being able to finish the game, or at least not being able to finish the game in a desirable way. Surviving death by following the rules can conflict with

¹²⁰ 2011, p.199

¹²¹ Kristeva 1982, p.8

existing morality outside of the game.¹²² Linking the possible affect the player can have on the video game with their goals, desires, feelings, and values forms an appreciative system¹²³ in which the player merges affect and cognition in a bid to evaluate the “significance” and “acceptability” of their respective play through of a game. To exist in any semiotic domain requires the subject to consider what they “like” and what is “good” (or not) in order to determine the extent to which they are willing to participate “inside” any given domain.¹²⁴ To participate in a survival horror video game is to recognise the cultural identities and artefacts central to the genre. In both *The Walking Dead Season 1* and *Until Dawn*, to be classed as “competent” the player must “probe” the options presented by each game to align their own idiosyncratic goals with what the game has pre-determined as the acceptable way to play in order to ‘win’. For many players the real opportunities to reflect upon their own attitudes, values, and beliefs come not from moments in the game that force the player to act violently, such as when a zombie emerges suddenly from a dark corner or a Wendigo slashes wildly through gaps in a wall, but rather when the player is given the choice to act violently.

Like all examples of *jouissance*, video games facilitate the player’s unexamined, unmet desire to explore his or her *alter ego* - those desires felt violently and painfully by the subject without ever having been satisfied. Video games “shatter the mirror” to reveal the ‘other’ reflecting back to the player his or her “sublime alienation”, leaving the subject both fascinated and repulsed, yet willing to endure discomfort and unease for the promise of redemption against this new reflection, this ‘other’, loathsome way of being.¹²⁵ To face the ‘other’ is to kill the ego only to resurrect it, imbuing it with new significance. The post-apocalyptic world of *The Walking Dead Season 1* is a cogent analogy of this process. Each “walker” is a resurrected person now devoid of their ego, now lusting only for death.

The Walking Dead Season 1 like many archetypal zombie text, may be a reminder of the mortality of the body; however, resurrection after death takes on a new

¹²² Bogost 2007, p.284

¹²³ Gee 2003, pp.96-97

¹²⁴ *ibid.* p.97

¹²⁵ Kristeva 1982, p.9

significance when considering what replaces the life lost. The thinking, feeling, reasoning human killed becomes death incarnate - pure id devoid of ego, outside of the super-ego. Such resurrection "...is an alchemy that transforms death drive into a start of life, of a new significance"¹²⁶, free from narcissism and the limits of symbolism. These creatures submit only to hunger and are no longer subjected to the multitude of social determinants the ideological being is bound by.¹²⁷

Lacan, when writing about modernist works, considered the way in which texts enunciate the process of their own production as part of their actual 'content'. Choice based survival horror video games such as *The Walking Dead Season 1* and *Until Dawn* "'lay bare the device' of their own composition"¹²⁸ to both affirm that they are not to be mistaken for absolute truth, whilst allowing the reader "to reflect critically on the partial, particular ways they construct reality, and so to recognise how it might have all happened differently".¹²⁹ Every choice made in the chosen video games has an alternate consequence, a consequence the player can discover simply by replaying the game. Being able to load and redo the narrative, only this time make difference choices, is a mechanic exclusive to video games and a player with even the most limited understanding or experience of this process is conscious of being able to play the game enough times to eventually satisfy both the win condition of the game, as well as his or her ideal play through. Regardless of how many times the player is killed by the monstrous 'other', redemption and possible revenge is only a loading screen away. There is catharsis in knowing that the possibility to replay the game exists. There is further catharsis in being able to face the embodiment of all fear and desire - the monster - by choice and at the distance afforded by the interface between player and game. It is a luxury not afforded in reality, especially considering that the reason for the monsters very existence originates from within the subject. The player simply needs to replace the screen with a mirror and decide which is more terrifying.

¹²⁶ KIRSTEVA 1982, p.15

¹²⁷ EAGLETON 2008, p.150

¹²⁸ EAGLETON 2008, p.148

¹²⁹ *ibid.*

Conclusion

This dissertation critiques the potential for survival horror video games to use computational procedures to perpetuate ideology, particularly ideology as an antagonistic force. Survival horror as a genre seeks to exploit a player's fears of death, particularly experiences of death at the hands of some sort of monstrous 'other', be it an alien creature, tyrannical corporation, or reanimated corpse. Such experiences, albeit generated by a computer, act persuasively. Dynamic computer models make arguments. They 'model' the 'real'. Each model evolves with the inevitable growth in understanding experienced by the player, seemingly unfixed in its potential for boundless possibility, much like the 'reality' of the one playing; however, like the politics of the 'real', video games are self-policing in that any promise of sublime enjoyment is marred by literal and symbolic limitations imposed first by the game creator and, perhaps more significantly, by the player.

Central to a survival horror video game's ability to arouse fear in a player is the agency¹³⁰ offered to them through their playable character. Despite being displaced from the facticity of their 'real' selves, it is this agency that heightens the player's awareness of the actions he/she is performing in the game world.¹³¹ These actions are tempered by the *what* the player must do to not only play but win the game, as well as the extent to which the haptic interface (plastic controller) accurately translates the player's will and movement into their agent's will and movement.¹³² This metaphorical substitution for a player's actions manipulates his/her sensory, fictional, and systemic perceived ideals¹³³, simultaneously appealing to the desire for empowerment, and disempowerment in an environment that rewards not dying and confronting antagonism in a way that his/her Real life may not.

¹³⁰ Ensslin 2014

¹³¹ Wilson cited in Waggoner 2009, p.9

¹³² Keogh 2018

¹³³ Mauger 2014, p.37

As established by procedural rhetoric, a key methodology employed by this thesis, video games use processes rather than language to convey meaning.¹³⁴ These processes dictate the mechanics of gameplay, creating a specific, stylized concept of a ‘real’-world activity.¹³⁵ Whilst it is true that some video games purposefully provide more abstract representations of reality, survival horror video games, particularly the ones studied for this dissertation, tend to mimic reality more closely in a bid to elicit fear in the player. Players enter into a feedback loop when playing video games which is a complex interplay of computer algorithms, haptic inputs (controllers) and outputs (screen, speakers etc.), genre conventions, and of course, physical and mental skill. How well the player can adapt to the various processes and procedures required to proceed through the game relies on prior or acquired knowledge of the game style and mechanics, coupled with the willingness to perform any action mandated to enhance immersion and/or progress the narrative.

In accordance with the methodology of the Magic Cycle, the feedback loop that players enter in to accounts for the game’s hermeneutic and heuristic potential and is in motion before the player even begins gameplay. When explaining this model, Perron and Arsenault acknowledge that a player predicts narrative and gameplay conventions before even participating in the ergodic relationship of cycling between his/her input and the game’s output. The Magic Cycle accounts for this by recognising that the interpretation of a game is an inclusive relationship between the ‘Gamer’, ‘Gameplay’, and the ‘Game’ (the perceivable image of the game made possible by the code) which results in seamless visual enthymemes that procedural rhetoric would suggest imbue video games with the same hermeneutic potential as other forms of media text. The ‘Gamer’ is needed to enact ‘Gameplay’ which unfolds the narrative and mechanics, thus making interpretation possible. Once the ‘Gamer’ can accept the ‘Gameplay’ mechanics as their only way to access the ‘Game’ and become adept at executing actions through the relevant interface, they are able to progress up the spirals beyond simply learning what they CAN do to considering WHY they are doing it. Such a combination of methodologies proved useful to marry gameplay mechanics to their narrative implications, revealing the purposeful choices made by game developers to maximise how much of a player’s fear and distress is

¹³⁴ Bogost 2007

¹³⁵ Juul 2011

directly the result of how capable he/she is to not only predict and adapt to the story being told, but to ‘play’ a part in it.

This experience is *magical* in the sense that all rules and consequences do not have to be *magically* upheld by those playing it, but rather are enforced by unbendable code. In this way, video games challenge traditional discursive formations of power as the rules imbuing a person or group with power do not rely on evolving social or political hegemony, but instead rely on unbreakable, immovable, inflexible bias of the game’s creator. In this way, video games are *techne*, simultaneously concrete whilst remaining variable and context dependent – inert until acted upon.¹³⁶ Any horrifying experience is kept at a symbolic distance which ironically aligns with contemporary ideologs’ attempts to hegemonically naturalise trauma and conflict, weakening the subject’s ability to associate information delivered via a screen with anything other than a kitsch simulation of an otherwise unreal conflict.¹³⁷

Each action the player takes via the interface is an act of ‘doing’ which manifests a state of ‘being’ that is ontologically rational in the game world, whilst also seamlessly impacting upon the player’s state of ‘being’ in the ‘real’ world insofar as prompting fear, disenfranchisement, anxiety, frustration, desire, arousal, insubordination, obedience, regret, fatigue, and any number of psychological and physiological responses. Whilst reacting to a text in this way is by no means a new phenomenon, video games are not rigidly bound by their predetermined existence. Being *techne*, the video game is, to the largest possible extent, completely reliant on the idiosyncratic, technological symbiosis between the specular body of the gamer and the permissible actions of the game world. The worlds of *Alien: Isolation*, *Until Dawn*, and *The Walking Dead* are certainly constrained by the limitations of the haptic interface only permitting certain actions in a feedback loop, however, the order in which these actions take place and the possibility of them even happening at all rely not exclusively on the player’s willingness, but also his/her competency and skill. The player must avoid the xenomorph to live; the player must choose who lives and dies; and the player must do all of this whilst reconciling what is morally desirable, with what is procedurally permissible.

¹³⁶ Hourigan 2010

¹³⁷ Žižek 2008

The monsters used in survival horror video games played, fulfil the role they have always performed in fiction, to facilitate the subject's desire to confront and eradicate his/her own anxieties and fears pertaining to existence. Such existential anxiety stems not from the video game's accuracy in terms of simulating social and political ideology, but the transgressive idea that video games are tools of such ideology. Each of the chosen games is only scary to the degree that the player is willing to uphold and protect preconceived notions of morality in the face of the monstrous Other whose presence serves the two-fold purpose of being directly antagonistic, as well as inspiring and expounding antagonism in those characters and agents who would subscribe to the 'false consciousness' that underpins ideology.¹³⁸ The presence of the xenomorph in *Alien: Isolation* serves to uncover a corporate plot to trade human lives for the chance to trap and weaponise the creature, muddying the player's conception of who or what is more monstrous – the alien organism driven by the same instinct for survival as Amanda Ripley, or the insidious Weyland-Yutani corporation carefully calculating how to make profit from suffering.

Likewise, in *Until Dawn* and *The Walking Dead*, the player is mostly perturbed by what they must decide in relation to the nuanced human interactions central to the "extrapolitical fantasy" underpinning each game's narrative. The player's perception of what is truly disgusting and *abject* begins to shift from cannibalism to treachery, interrupting the once reliable symbolic order and prompting mistrust in the social order. By recognising that he/she is choosing to uphold virtuous moral ideals in an artificial, codified system, the player is subscribing to a paradox wherein they are using the tools and language given to them by the game to enact the tools and language he/she accepts as critical to resolving conflict in the 'real' world. In each game studied the player's agent is doggedly trying to solve the problem of the Other using 'old world' thinking, constantly reminding the other characters in the narrative, and the player, that the threat to be most concerned about is the monster. Whilst the in-game agent may not be able to see it, the player soon realises that the monster morphs from a threat to an excuse, dismantling culture, revealing it to be arbitrary

¹³⁸ Žižek 2008

and mutable, permitting behaviour that would otherwise be considered heinous and unthinkable.

Žižek's¹³⁹ claims that ideology disfigures and distorts reality, rendering it malignant. In the survival horror video game genre the monster becomes the antidote to ideology, a dialectical Other arriving from beyond untrustworthy perception to answer ambiguity with certainty. In each of the games played the player (through their agent) is certain that the monstrous threat will attempt to destroy them, and in turn, must be destroyed. The xenomorph is too perversely erotic; the wendigo is a constant reminder of succumbing to temptation; the zombie, too repulsive in its decay. Victory over each is an opportunity to 'exorcise' such antagonism from the player's own life, making 'reality' a little more palatable. This 'reality' is not reliable or trustworthy, but bearable. Afterall, one can rest easy knowing that any chance of having one's body hijacked or reanimated to be an instrument of insatiable hunger and desire is purely fictional.

¹³⁹ cited in Bogost 2007, p.74

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