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# **TITANS OF T-POSING**

## So-Bad-It's-Good in Deadly Premonition

# ABSTRACT

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This paper analyses the concept of *So-Bad-It's-Good*, the phenomenon of enjoying works precisely because they do not fit into our normative standards of good art, usually for the purposes of being laughed at. Drawing on work from film studies, we outline a cohesive definition of this phenomenon that can be applied across mediums, as well as categorise the most common ways in which it is communicated throughout the texts, highlighting the relationship between the forms and the cultural horizons of the reader. In particular, this thesis applies this definition to digital games, a medium currently lacking in research on this topic. To do so, we have conducted a close-reading of the game *Deadly Premonition*, a much-noted representative of this concept, attempting to isolate how *So-Bad-It's-Good* is expressed through play, rather than through narrative or visuals, and document how the player responds to the text. In doing this, we discovered insight into the differences between digital games and other mediums: the long run time requiring pacing and varied levels of quality to be pleasurable, and the interactive nature necessitating more focus on this badness being benign. Along with this, the ways in which the forms specific to play can be enjoyed for being bad. *So-Bad-It's-Good* highlights the importance of how the cultural horizons and expectations we have when entering into a work affect our reception of transgressive qualities, and this paper represents the first step towards exploring that through play.

Keywords: So-Bad-It's-Good; Close Reading; Game Studies; Transgressive Games; Camp; Cult Media; Deadly Premonition

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

To Nina, for putting up with me

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

If one were to trawl the recesses of *YouTube* looking for fried rice recipes, they might stumble across an unassuming video from an English housewife, and from the over 800,000 views it has garnered, they might assume some level of culinary competence. An assumption that would quickly dissipate at first sight of the claustrophobic angles which do not allow for easy viewing of the techniques taking place, and the grim colours the food takes on under unnatural lighting. Finally, the immense error of attempting to make fried rice without first boiling the rice would fully cement this as a failure of a cookery video. With this, we have failed to learn how to cook fried rice, but we have succeeded in laughing at the failures presented to us, it is fascinating *because* of its failure to reach its goal (Lee, 2018).

While we can intuitively see that this crunchy fried rice will fit into our category of ‘bad’ cooking, it would be a mistake to assume it cannot also be in the category of ‘good’. Within film, the quintessential example is 2003’s *The Room*, a work renowned for its lack of competence and bizarre violation of cinematic norms, but which has managed to garner screenings long after its initial release, as well as spawning successful books and films about the project itself. Interest in these failures is not without precedent, with art works spanning across different mediums finding cult success in the ‘paradoxical pleasure’ (Hye-Knudsen & Clasen, 2019) that arrives when the audience finds enjoyment because of, not in spite of, the failures on display. This phenomenon, here referred to as *good/bad*, poses some curious questions about our assumptions of reception: how can something deemed bad simultaneously be good? The ‘bad’ here is not simply the absence of good, but the quality of badness takes on its own forms, related to but very much structurally different from the quality of goodness. This phenomenon has been written about extensively within film studies, often with focus on the fan engagement surrounding these works (McCulloch, 2011; Philips, 2013), less so on the overlapping formal features that separates enjoyable badness from bad in the simple form, the *hows* and *whys* of these works finding fans in the first place.

In popular discourse, digital games have been pushed out of the margins of *good/bad*, the active engagement required of the audience making them a difficult fit, the patience one has to personally participate in a ‘bad’ activity being limited (Meslow, 2018). And little research has taken place situating this phenomenon in the context of play or games, despite some interest from popular media (Fox, 2022; Valente, 2017), as well as recent

interest in game studies about the topic of humour (Giappone & Majkowski & Švelch, 2022). One oft-cited example of *good/bad* being applied to digital games comes from *Deadly Premonition*, a 2010 survival horror game infamous for its discordant narrative and equally discordant gameplay, being aptly titled ‘the pinnacle of good bad games,’ (Jurkovich, 2022, n.p.). This raises the questions of: ‘what does it mean for a game to be *good/bad*?’ especially in the context of the limiting agential factor, and: ‘what qualities allow a work to be received as a successful example of *good/bad*?’ i.e., why does *Deadly Premonition* stand out as the pinnacle of the category. It is the ambition of this thesis to use *Deadly Premonition* as a case-study by teasing out the formal elements of the game, and then analysing them through the theoretical lens of *good/bad* we will construct. In this way, we will have a better understanding of *good/bad* as a distinct phenomenon, as well as its relation to digital games. In the hope of drawing light on these areas, these are the research questions we will be focussing on:

1. What are the boundaries of *good/bad*?
2. Do digital games fit within these boundaries?
  - 2.1. What forms exist within *Deadly Premonition* that make it such a heralded example of this phenomenon?

The overall structure of this thesis is to first construct a working definition of what this phenomena of *good/bad* is, built off the background of past research from film studies, as well as construct categories for what formal elements are likely to be found in these works. Then we will be performing a close reading of *Deadly Premonition* using our constructed boundaries as a lens to test them, as well as observe any potential challenges that comes from applying this lens to digital games. This essay will be situated in the area of reception theory, which sees meaning in text as ‘the result of an interaction between text and reader’ (Holub, 2013, pg.83), that the reader will experience meaning through particular cultural horizons they bring to the text, which will be limited by the forms within. In play specifically, the limits of interpretation are defined by the forms of the *gameplay conditions*, the set of conditions available that allow the player to continue to play, i.e., ‘if a player is unable to keep playing because of their interpretation, it is opposed by the game and necessarily wrong’ (Arjoranta, 2022, n.p.). And so our definitions are built on the assumption that the reading of these works as *good/bad* is bound to particular cultural and personal strategies employed at the time of reading, and the eventual response

will be a transaction between the forms of the text and the interpretive lens that the audience brings, which will be evidenced more in the following chapter. It is our contention, built upon background research, that reception as *good/bad* requires an intuitive understanding of current cultural and artistic norms, and so it is impossible to understand how the *good/bad* of *Deadly Premonition* is expressed to the player without first understanding the context it requires for realisation.

The thesis is structured as follows: Chapter two works as a conceptual inquiry into what entails *good/bad*, drawing upon relevant background research primarily from film studies to construct a broad definition of what separates *good/bad* from similar terms, as well as the specific questions of how the audience is encouraged to receive a work as such. We will be outlining three overlapping categories of the formal ways in which *good/bad* is usually presented: *technical failure*, *uncanny failure*, and *idiosyncratic failure*. We will also then be discussing *good/bad* play, the ways in which the medium of digital games separates from film, and addressing the potential pitfalls of applying the concept of *good/bad* to this medium.

Chapter three introduces the methodology we will be using, building from game studies research on close-reading, and discussing the difficulties in textual analysis of digital games, and ways to remedy these issues. This chapter also presents the practical data gathering process as well as the analytical lenses used to focus the pattern finding within that data.

Chapter four serves as a collection of the experiential data, divided into wide overviews of the different overarching gameplay structures, as well as the series of smaller mechanics that make up the real time interaction. This is intended to be broadly descriptive of gameplay and non-linear in nature. Chapter five is where the data is discussed in more detail, primarily from the viewpoint of our previously outlined formal categories. This analysis section shows the ways in which gameplay communicates *good/bad* through these categories, and discusses more broadly some of what *Deadly Premonition* tells us about applying *good/bad* to digital games.

Chapter six concludes the thesis by detailing the main findings and contributions of this work in regards to the benefits of our constructed definition and formal categories, as well as the observations they have allowed through applying them to *Deadly Premonition*.

And then, of course, detailing the limitations we found through our research, and possible topics of further exploration.



## 2 THE CONCEPT OF GOOD = BAD

In the following background section we will be performing a theoretical inquiry into what it is to be *So-Bad-It's-Good*, examining the ways it is socially constructed by the audience, as well as the typical formal features which demarcate the phenomenon. To do so, we will be making reference to classic examples, with special note to the 2003 relationship-drama film *The Room*, 1990's horror *Troll 2*, survival horror game *Deadly Premonition*, as well as others. Using these examples as illustration, we will be outlining the core concept for use as a conceptual lens in later chapters.

### 2.1. What It Is

The concept of *good/bad* has been explored through a number of different film studies papers, covering the topic from a variety of approaches, from criticism of mocking cultural differences to the psychological background required to enter into the works, some of which we will be in dialogue with throughout this background section. In doing so, it is our intention to form a more cohesive understanding of the boundaries that make up the definition of what it means to be *good/bad*, focussing more on the response of the reader than the social practices that have formed around these works. The first question to answer to this end would be: how can something be both good and bad? The terms seem contradictory, especially as what we consider aesthetically valuable is heavily connected to the affective response we have to the work. Effectively, our feelings of pleasure define the aesthetic value: we like it and therefore it is good. But, the way we discuss art in regular discourse is also contradictory in nature. We can find *The Seventh Seal* to be impenetrably boring as an experience while still recognising its aesthetic value, the artistic version of vitamins that need to be swallowed. Similarly, we can have works we find less than stellar which we derive great pleasure from. It is helpful here to think of 'good' and 'bad' as essentially referring to two different things.

One way to reconcile this contradiction is explored by Dyck and Johnson (2017), which will become the structural building blocks of our own definition of this phenomenon. They define *badness* as a failure to achieve artistic intent, what can be described as 'bad' artistically is decided by whether the creator has poorly conceived, by means of incompetent execution, their artistic vision. One wishes to hear a normative rendition of *Moonlight Sonata*, but the pianist is hitting all the wrong notes. We could dismiss this by referencing *The Death of the Author* (Barthes, 1968), that the symbols and form of a text

should be decoded by the reader, that the author's intentions should hold no special meaning. The main issue with this is that it would allow us to view the crunchy-fried-rice dish mentioned in the introduction as a piece of avant-garde cuisine designed to subvert our expectations of normative good taste, but perceiving it as such is antithetical to its reception as a *good/bad* work, our reception would then have to be a kind of ironic-badness as opposed to genuine badness. Intentionality then, the problems of which we will talk about more later, is a necessary component to discerning artistic failure<sup>1</sup>.

The *goodness* then, as defined by Dyck and Johnson, is found in this space between intentions and realisation. Terming this contradictory space as bizarre, they write: 'One is left not just laughing, but rather genuinely curious and bewildered, wondering: *How could someone think this is a good idea?*' (Dyck & Johnson, 2017, pg.5). This bewildering quality of bizarreness is separated from the surreal works of David Lynch or Luis Buñuel, again, by the lack of intentionality, the strangeness on display is exacerbated by a lack of guiding force and reason for its existence. In this way, the *artistic* failure of intentions creates an *aesthetic* appreciation: '[e]ven if the appreciation of an artwork hinges crucially on its artistic value, we as audiences don't solely appreciate art for its artistic virtues' (Dyck & Johnson, 2017, pg.14). Essentially, that the artwork is appreciated in a way that is not artistic.

This quality of bizarreness is useful in drawing a boundary around the elements unique to this phenomenon of *good/bad*. As mentioned by Dyck and Johnson, we can appreciate works for their unintentional success in ways that do not have the same characteristics as this particular category. For example, we can analyse *The Room* as the work of a misogynist, focussing on its creator's solipsistic view of how he was treated in a relationship, but this is not consistent with how works within this category are appreciated by their audience. While not clearly defined, *bizarreness* works as a line of demarcation here, it draws a circle around other kinds of unintended-success, as well as the particular forms which separates *good/bad* from *bad/bad*.

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<sup>1</sup> It is our perception of the intentions of the authors which also separates this from closely related concepts like *transgressive games*, *camp*, or *rage games*. The works of *Suda51* often feature large campy characters, a strange mix of ultraviolence and sexual humour, and a playful twisting of contemporary gameplay norms that could be mistaken for *good/bad*, but these works are most commonly received as a purposeful celebration of the creator's themes rather than failures. Similarly, works like *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* relies on purposefully inducing a sense of distance in the player with unwieldy physics that makes simple actions frustratingly difficult, often to humorous effect. But again, how we perceive the intent alters our reception.

However, there is an aspect of veneration happening when Dyck and Johnson draw the line at *schadenfreude*. Laughing at a work for being a massive failure is not the same, they argue, as appreciating it for its bizarre qualities warrants repeated exposure that simple *schadenfreude* would not. This is certainly true for some of the most significant works in this field, with this idiosyncratic strangeness existing within *The Room*, *Deadly Premonition*, *Troll 2*, and many of the other examples that would fill the top ten lists of any discerning fan. But, this does not account for the possibility of unfulfilling *good/bad* works, as we would have in any other aesthetic category. The structure of unintended failure creating appreciation is there, but not to the extent that we do more than laugh at the result and then move on. Repeated accidental boom-mics may not conjure enough bizarreness to build great appreciation, but it is easy to imagine a group of friends laughing at this incompetence in the same context as these works are usually viewed: ‘*How could someone think this is a good idea?*’ And perhaps for a bully the act of bullying is enough to merit repeated exposure in of itself. While not exactly an act of appreciation, this would still function as the seeking of pleasurable experience through unintentional artistic failure, and cannot so easily be dismissed from the puzzle.

For the purposes of this essay, we will also have to take issue with the terminology, if not the basic structure of the argument. Much of the previous research has delved primarily into the subject of film studies, which is understandable given the great wealth of examples within the medium. But our contention here is that the logic of *good/bad* can be extended to other artistic fields, as well as concepts not traditionally associated with the arts. *Artistic* failure, as defined by Dyck and Johnson, is then not a required prerequisite, but rather that the intended normative standards of an action are not being achieved, and this creates a pleasurable result in the audience. If we take the example from *Deadly Premonition* in figure 1, we can make the assumption here that the intention is to produce language which is normatively structured without artistry being a primary concern, and the failure to do so has resulted in unintentionally pleasurable (at least, on the account of the author) phrases: ‘X RAY ROOM (HELLO KITTY) ... PREMARITAL EXAM’. The bizarre effect is similar, but the artistic intent is not.

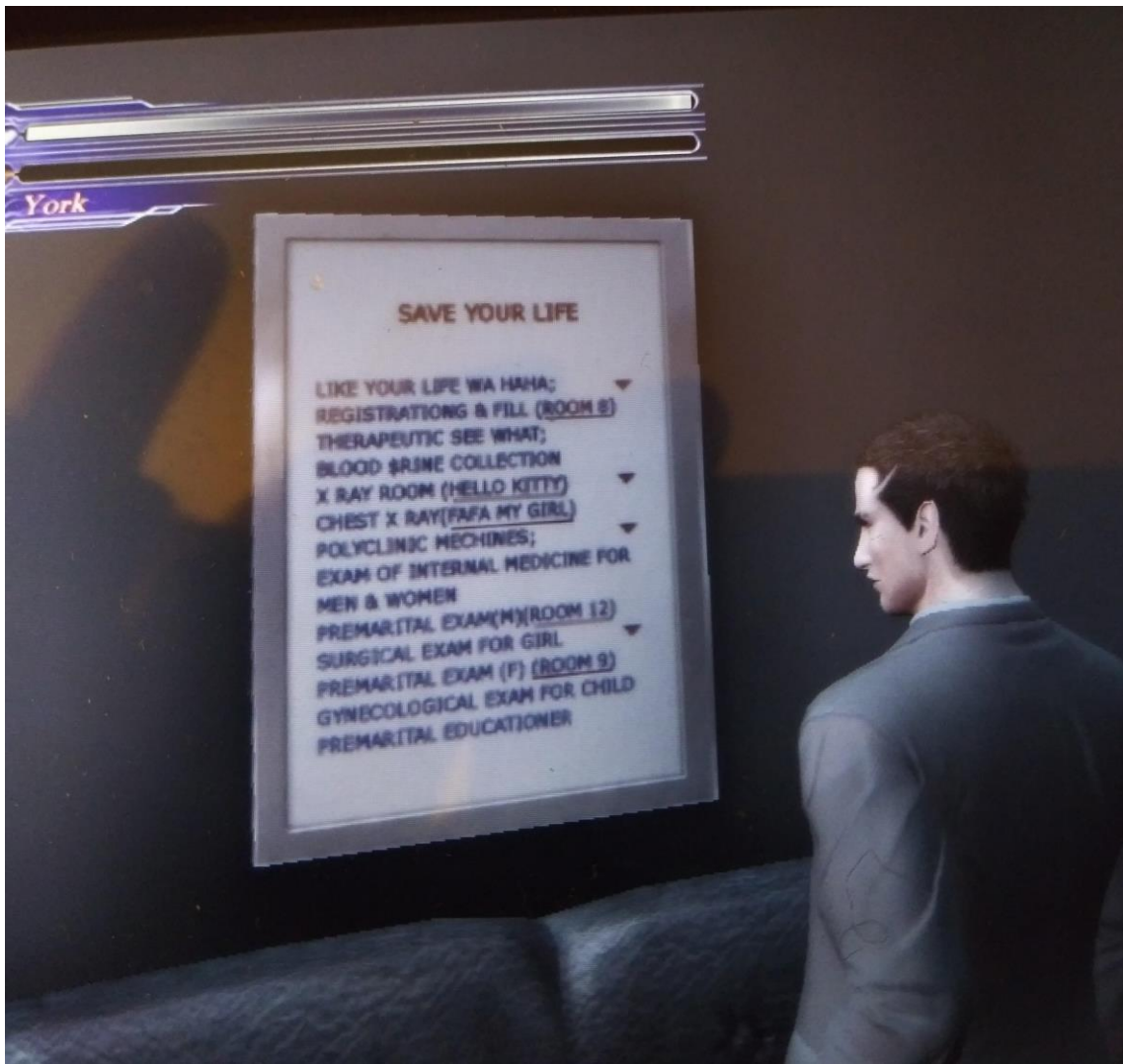


Figure 1. A Background Poster in *Deadly Premonition*. (ladykatytrent, 2021)

Additionally, Tooming (2020) makes the astute criticism that the rigid distinction between the aesthetic and the artistic ‘cuts the merit of [*good/bad* movies] off from their status as artworks in the cinematic medium’ (Tooming, 2020, n.p.). The discerning audience views the failures of film qua film, and our pleasure derived from that failure is also appreciated as part of the category of film – bizarreness in this case is not a distinctly different aesthetic category, but still enmeshed within it. Bizarreness can only be viewed through the lens of the same normative structures which birthed it. If the failures of a film causes one to fart from shock, it would be possible to place the pleasure of this experience in the box of *good/bad* under Dyck and Johnson’s distinction of aesthetic and artistic.

To work around this, we will be using the terminology of *aesthetic value*, which is our stand-in that can account for our socially prescribed knowledge of what an object is meant to be, encompassing the formal structures that go into creating its value properties in the particular category we perceive it to be. Properties such as beauty, excitement, teamwork,

profundity, challenge. Our perception of an intention to reach these goals on behalf of its creator is incongruous with the finished result, and in this space we find our *aesthetic experience* (Gorodeisky, 2019). In this case, the aesthetic experience is largely based in the sensations of humour and bewilderment, but can also be reasoned and intellectualised in the meta-narratives we construct: *'How could someone think this is a good idea?'* Unintended failure of aesthetic value qua X creates pleasurable aesthetic experience qua X, this will be the working definition for this paper.

One large question that sits at the centre of this essay is: what are the formal elements that separate failure of aesthetic value creating pleasure, and from simply creating badness? While each object, whether it be film or cooking, has its own conventions of what is aesthetically valuable, these *good/bad* failures tend to manifest themselves in certain forms. We have conceived here three overlapping categories which elevate a work into this status, creating the bizarreness most commonly associated with this phenomenon. While these are not necessarily essential elements, they are typical features within the permeable boundaries which make up *good/bad*, and will be useful as a point of reference in our formal analysis later on. These are: 1. *Idiosyncratic failure*, which is closely related to our understanding of auteurship, elements that incompetently strive and fail to reach a goal but are wholly unique, recognisable, and consistent stylistically or thematically. 2. *Technical failure*, the most immediately recognisable form of error, usually in the form of incompetence of craft that makes us aware of the artifice of the work, i.e., a glitch in digital games or a continuity error in film. 3. *Uncanny Failure*, the destabilising effect created when an experience is both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time.

With the boundaries drawn, in the next sections we will be extrapolating in more detail on some of the constituent parts which make up this definition. Detailing how audiences are primed to enjoy these works, as well as the distanced viewing space with which the audiences exist and the effect this has on reception. In anticipating objections, we will be confronting the problems which arrive with such heavy reliance on intentionality, as well as where the audience derives their understanding of intention. Outlining in greater detail our formal categories that separate *good/bad* from simple bad. And, as it is one of the central questions of this paper, discussing how the structures of games and play fit into our definition.

## 2.2. Primed for Distaste

Upon initial release in 2010 *Deadly Premonition* was met with more than a few critical side-eyes for its unwieldy design choices, with one reviewer proclaiming: ‘Deadly Premonition is the definition of a system seller. Once you play it, you’ll want to go sell your system,’ (Brudvig, 2010). By 2012, it had been awarded a world record for its polarising response (Guinness World Records, 2012). This is a repeating story within *good/bad* media, with the *The Room*’s original theatrical run prompting ‘NO REFUND!’ signs (Hitt, 2020). Such wide discrepancies in reception asks the question of *why*? What are the factors which cut audiences into such strict opposing feelings of either enjoyment or wanting to leave as soon as possible?

When a work attempts to communicate with us, there are certain social frames we use to answer back, to engage in communication in a language we assume to be correct. When it comes to *good/bad* media, our reception is in part dependant on what frames we are primed to use. As discussed, these works rely heavily on breaking our conventions of aesthetic value, and so it is reasonable to assume that such transgressions can be met with distaste from the audience, rather than pleasure. The audience must attain the correct communicative frame to engage with these works in the right way. The *Benign Violation Theory* of psychology states that, for a violation of norms to be deemed humorous, it must simultaneously be deemed benign. For humour to function in *good/bad*, our shattering of aesthetic norms must be accompanied with a feeling of benevolence (McGraw & Warren, 2010, as cited in Hye-Knudsen & Clasen, 2019). The experience of spending sixty euros on a game that does not live up to your expected aesthetic values is generally an unpleasant one, but if we are primed, either from paratextual information or gathered from common signifiers, to enter into the experience from the frame of *good/bad* then our reception is wholly different.

And then, primed and ready, we can view the work from the proper seat: not immersed within the narrative that is taking place, but from a distance. This effect is most often referred to as *paracinema* in film (Sconce, 1995), latterly co-opted by Jesper Juul as *paragaming* (2009), referring to a ‘viewing stance which involves a form of admiration for the cultural object regardless of its assumed badness,’ (Sarkhosh & Menninghaus, 2016, p.g.3). The discerning viewer of bad adopts an ironic stance where the intention is not to take the work purely at face value, but to sit above it and find pleasure in

deconstructing the unconventional nature of its parts. Amongst the research, a distinction is often made between concepts of ironic engagement that focusses primarily on the sense of superiority above low-status art, and Susan Sontag's 'camp sensibility' wherein the works are held up and admired (McCoy & Scarborough, 2014) (Sontag, 1999, as cited in McCoy & Scarborough, 2014). Within the phenomenon of *good/bad*, the boundaries between the two are blurry, as already discussed. Regardless, it is with this ironic viewing stance that the fan of *good/bad* enters into communication with this work, and through this method of engagement the violation of norms are deemed benign, and thus ripe for pleasure.

Our social frame primes us to communicate in a benevolent way, but how does the work communicate back? We can consider here Bertolt Brecht's concept of *alienation*, a theatrical technique by which the audiences' suspension of disbelief is purposefully laid bare as false, so that they may consider the artifice on display. Here, in the alienated space above the text, we may intellectualise and pick apart the nuts and bolts that would usually be concealed. Originally, this technique was used intentionally to force the viewer to partake of the work more critically, to better understand its relation to the world outside of narrative (Brecht & Bentley, 1961). With *good/bad*, our presumed intentionality is not there, and the effect leads to a very different appraisal from the audience.

It is useful here to reference the work of film researcher Ed Tan: our understanding of normative artistic standards meeting the actualisation of these normative standards in the work creates an illusion of a narrative world for us to immerse in, this being our *narrative absorption*. These *fiction emotions*<sup>2</sup> are in contrast to *artifact emotions*, where in we appreciate the work as an artistic object in of itself (Tan, 1996, as cited in Hye-Knudsen & Clasen, 2019). When our understanding of norms are broken by the forms and mechanics presented, we are distanced from our suspension within the world of the text, our *fiction emotions*, and are then free to view the bizarre structures for what they are, the *artifact emotions* which we can experience as *good/bad*. From the distance of our alienated space, we are free to play with the text and find our value elsewhere.

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<sup>2</sup> Game Studies scholars often refer to the concept of the *magic circle*, a metaphor to describe the psychological and social boundaries that separates the play world, and the playful attitude one takes on, from the world outside of it (Stenros, 2014). This, along with countless similar concepts surrounding the suspension of disbelief when our horizons are met, make useful theoretical stand-ins when discussing play with regards to being immersed in narrative absorption. We do not intend to expound upon exact details here, but only to mention that this is not a novel idea when applied to games.

A common way to find pleasure within this alienated state is to apply meta-narratives. The audience is provoked by the distancing effect to solve our repeating puzzle: ‘*How could someone think this is a good idea?*’ Our understanding of the conventions of form and genre within a medium helps us to make sense of each individual text, and allow us to more easily absorb into the flow state of *fiction emotions*. *Good/bad* works, alternatively, break from conventional rules in often peculiar ways, and force us to try and make sense using their own twisted internal logic, which does not fit into our knowledge of *what should be*. Being distanced, trying to understand the broken forms that make up these strange works, gives us the sense of the inner workings of the creator, where we can discover the *why* of their intentions. With *Two Worlds*, a 2007 RPG, we may attribute the constant technical failures and poor-quality voice acting to its clear low-budget production meant to copy the success of *Elder Scrolls: Oblivion*. With 1985 film *Blood Debts*, we can intellectualise its strangely blunt dialogue and unusual set design by reading the credits and seeing that it is a Filipino film trying to ape the conventions of Hollywood action. The meta-narratives we read into *good/bad* works can be further bolstered by supplementary paratext. Paratextual intervention in the form of interviews, books, and fan theories that give us reading strategies on how to engage with the text. When, in *Troll 2*, we see the sexual tension between two characters be destroyed by a barrage of magically appearing corn, we understand this as misguided satire of vegetarianism, we know from watching interviews outside of the text. While the peculiar logic and abstract symbols may be initially bewildering, the paratext and our own meta-narratives allow us to construct meaning out of incompetence (Middlemost, 2018).

The way in which the audience and the work communicate with each other takes on a fittingly unusual form when it comes to *good/bad*. With these works, we come in most commonly primed to engage with the transgression from a benevolent place, and the peculiar forms of those transgressions distance us from a work and allow us to consider the bizarre artifice on display. *Paragaming/cinema* is the social frame, *alienation* is the action that takes place when confronted with the formal elements – the framing allows us to respond to this alienation in a benign manner. To make sense we apply meta-narratives, which come from a peculiar sense of auteurship or from paratext we foster, which ties back into the bewildering quality. A cycle of bewildering formal elements which create meta-narratives which further reinforce our appreciation for the strangeness on display.



### 2.3. The Problem of Intent

The concept of auteurs has been a running theme throughout this paper so far, with notions of intentionality running throughout the core of this phenomenon and how fans engage with it. So important is it that, in these *good/bad* fandoms, some works are dismissed as outright genuine failures because they are considered to be *trying* to be *good/bad*. On the surface, it is quite intuitively simple, immersed in the greater culture as we are, to guess at what a creator wanted to achieve. For example, when viewing *The Room* the literate audience can see plainly the attempt at Hollywood melodrama, the tropes are all present for us, just ordered wrongly and missing key details. Wiseau writes the character he plays very clearly as a loving and loveable figure that is mistreated by the women in his life, his intentions to present himself in a good light are laid bare. While all this may be true, after the film's release and reception as *good/bad*, Wiseau began describing the film as a 'black comedy' in an attempt to rebrand it as an intentionally humorous product (Harvey, 2014). How then do we continue to appreciate *The Room* as failing to reach its intentions when the creator claims his intentions were achieved successfully? Indeed, how do we determine intention within mediums such as movies and games, where the production staff may number the thousands, some of which may not even be alive to recount their vision?

For the audience itself, these difficult questions are solved intuitively. A common experience for any literate audience is to come away critically assessing a work as 'good, but...' for example, we may say: 'I personally enjoyed it, but I know it was bad' or 'I can see it was good, but I didn't like it.' In this way, each work comes with its own *implied audience* and *perceived intentionality*. Specifically, when we as an audience critically assess a work, often we do so with an implied audience in mind, asking ourselves whether the supposedly average audience, or intended audience, will appreciate it. In this way, the author's actual intentions become superfluous; we create our own sense of intentionality as well as an ideal audience based on context clues such as genre, time period produced, and country of origin. In the critical assessment of *good/bad* media, the audience themselves are creating the intentionality, creating the imagined audience, and then reacting to the bizarreness of the failure produced.

The concept of *perceived intentionality* is similar in function to the *implied author*, a concept developed by literary critic Wayne C. Booth (1961), wherein there is an imagined

creator of the text and its meaning that is sculpted by the reader itself, standing outside what the real author or narrator of the story may actually intend. However, the phrasing of *perceived intentionality* is preferable to Booth's *implied author* as, often within *good/bad* media, our paratextual knowledge of explicit authorial intentions, industry practices, biography and social context, all plays into the reception of *good/bad*. Knowledge of *Deadly Premonition* being threatened with a lawsuit from the creators of *Twin Peaks* plays into the reception of the text itself when we observe the overt influence on display (Philpott, 2015). For Booth, the *implied author* acts as a character distinct from the true author of the work, whereas the intentionality of the artist, as well as the perceived audience we imagine this work is supposed to connect with, and all the aesthetic standards which comes with that, is a necessary component of engaging with *good/bad*, rather than just what exists within the text. Additionally, we can perceive those many intentions without, and sometimes despite, using what the author states their intentions to be as a divining rod. Therefore, while *implied author* is valuable as a metaphor, here *perceived intentionality* better encapsulates the intricacies of how authorship is entwined with the explicit paratextual knowledge that is used to inform a more ecstatic reception. While messy and difficult to prove as a matter of fact outside our personal perception, *perceived intentionality* is an axiom that must be assumed before assessment of *good/badness* can be achieved.

An important question to consider in relation to the *perception* of an author and audience is exactly *how* the audience engages this culturally shared image of intentionality. We can turn here to philosophy researcher C. Thi Nguyen and the concept of *prescriptive ontology*, wherein works of art come with prescribed modes of communication that make them what they are (2019). If a member of the public were to interact with the *Mona Lisa* by blindly attempting to play pin-the-tail on-the-donkey upon the canvas, they have undoubtedly interacted with the painting as object, but it is harder to argue that they have interacted with the *Mona Lisa* as artistic expression, '[t]he prescriptions on encounter reveal what the work is,' (Nguyen, 2019, n.p.). So too, to fully reveal the pleasures of *Deadly Premonition* as work, we must encounter it following the perceived prescriptions the authors have set for us, even if this counter-intuitively leads us down the path of laughing at their incompetence. *Deadly Premonition* is not just an ethereal piece of code on a computer, but it is also an interactive world we are expected to engage with as a work of survival horror, as communicated to us with the cultural trappings of that genre, and in the failure to fully live up to that goal we find the reception of *good/bad*.

And if our sense of *perceived intentionality* is guided by the works *prescriptive ontology*, then how do we derive the correct prescriptions of engagement in the first place? The audience may not come into an experience with the necessary paratextual information to get the full prescription, instead we may perceive it from the works relationship to genre, form, and cultural conventions. Our literacy of the media norms allows us to construct an image of what categorical intentions the work may have. Our understanding of each particular medium, each particular action taken within those mediums, are a set of socially transmitted conventions which are ingrained into subsets of culture over time. If the painting is hanging in an art gallery, we are nominally meant to observe the front of the canvas in hushed tones, so we are taught (Irvin, 2005, as cited in Nguyen, 2019). In this way, the reception of *good/bad* is contingent not only on how the work is designed, but also on the literacy of the audience as well as their place in the wider cultural context. As a literate audience, we may see the off-kilter melodrama of Tommy Wiseau as a wonky attempt to achieve some Brando-like classical Hollywood convention, we may see it as intuitively as we see the frames moving left-to-right in *Lawrence of Arabia* signifying travel. But, if you were to show *The Room* to your six year old daughter, chances are that the effect would be lost. The stimulus we use to decode the *perceived intentionality*, and thus the categorisation of *good/badness*, is contingent on where it is situated.

## 2.4. The Bad and the Bizarre

In the previous section, and throughout, we have made mention of the different formal elements that the literate audience will use their contextual expertise to decode in order to assess a works classification; the features they use to recognise something as *good/bad*. We have identified, across mediums, three overlapping formal categories that feature most commonly within classic examples of this phenomenon. Firstly, it must be said that, for every example that delineates something as *good/bad*, there exists the possibility of a counter example being slung back which does not exhibit such a feature, perhaps none at all. Similarly, when trying to define the exact dimensions of *science-fiction*, one could deflate an attempt at categorisation with an example which does not feature aliens or futuristic technology, or point out that *Star Trek* and *Spaceballs* are now functionally the same. While our starting definition of: ‘Unintended failure of aesthetic value qua X creates pleasurable aesthetic experience qua X,’ is a necessary component of *good/bad*, the following formal components are not. It is not our intention to perfectly sculpt the true and essential nature of *good/bad*, only to identify the most common features that run

throughout much of the well-known and lesser-known examples. These three categories we have observed can be what separates a work from being assessed as simply *bad*, or indeed a preponderance of these factors may allow a *good/bad* work to be received more positively than another work in the category. The delineating elements between good *good/bad* and bad *good/bad*.

#### **2.4.1. Technical Failure**

The broad category of *technical failure* encompasses the most clearly obvious of breakages of normative taste standards, and most likely to achieve an immediate sense of alienation from the text, those where the creator was not competent enough to achieve the baseline of operating the equipment successfully somewhere along the human-machine system: bad in its simple form. We can define this as breaking the pragmatic functions which maintain the *fiction emotions*, allow us to remain immersed within the artifice of narrative, some unintentional slip-up that reveals to us the process of creation. A boom mic is meant to discreetly capture for us clean audio of the dialogue, but when one enters the frame of the film they alienate us from the world of the screen and makes space for the aforementioned distancing effect to take place. While the physicality of boom-mics and glitches make them the easiest examples to point to, they can also be more abstract: our normative sense of storytelling, that events follow cause-and-effect in a logical fashion – these breakages can be as clearly alienating as a t-posing NPC. *Technical failure* then is based on the structural precedent for what a medium needs to be to achieve a basic level of competence.

In reference again to the *Benign Violation Theory*, the shattering of these artistic norms should, in full analysis, not be felt negatively: slipping on a banana peel is not benign if you were to crack your head open. There is a Goldilocks zone of technical failure then, a space where these violations are simultaneously viewed as failures while not producing frustration to the point of simply turning the television off. The occasional glitching animation in a videogame is tolerable, perhaps even amusing, but if the game were to continually crash this would be deemed intolerable despite any other wonderful features on offer. These ‘the porridge is too hot’ examples can still be found pleasurable, but rarely in direct contact, instead, within digital games, from the distance of humour eliciting *YouTube* compilations. The release of *Cyberpunk 2077* caused widespread outrage for its many technical issues (Price, 2020), but these issues have found a successful second life in ‘best of’ compilations (PC Gamer, 2020).

In of themselves, these *technical failures* can rarely achieve the greatest heights of *good/bad*, and we can easily imagine a work produced by a passionate amateur who creates a work that is shoddily unprofessional due to a lack of budget while simultaneously moving us. However, these elements are so ubiquitous as to exist in nearly every example of *good/bad* that we have observed, enough to be immediately recognisable as features of the phenomenon, a preponderance of which let the audience know immediately how they should be communicating with the work. A lack of *technical failure* is rare, though the conspicuous absence can be a good making property alone. *The Room*, uncommon for *good/bad* films, was produced with a relatively large budget (Collis, 2008), and is, at least initially, competently filmed. The sweeping vistas of San Francisco make the incongruity of Wiseau's bizarre performance all the more incongruous. Even if the volume and exact form of these *technical failures* shifts from medium-to-medium, work-to-work, they remain an indispensable element throughout *good/bad*, and are what our other categories use as vessel.

#### **2.4.2. Idiosyncratic Failure**

*Idiosyncratic*, in this case, refers to elements in a work which are recognisably consistent either stylistically or thematically, the *failure* here referring to these elements striving and failing to reach a goal. As example, we can take the work of Neil Breen: across his many films, the concept of a God-like protagonist fixing all problems on Earth, invariably played by the director himself, is a constant theme – while bizarre and arguably narcissistic, these are the distinguishable touches of the creator.

This categorisation finds itself firmly in the realm of *Auteur* theory, the idea that ‘the director is the sole gravitational center in the creation of the cinematographic work... which determine the work's meaning and value,’ (Guter, 2010, p.g.22), which we can also extend to other mediums. Though now viewed as a rather antiquated theory of media analysis, and having limited validity due to the often vast and intricate web of creative decision making that comes from productions with a workforce which potentially number thousands, here we find it relevant due to the construction of meta-narratives at play. Our understanding of, and the pleasure derived from, *good/bad* often comes imbued with the constructed image of the oblivious auteur. With Neil Breen, the repeated instances of ridiculous thematic harmony work together to create for us this figure of the egotistical ‘gravitational center... which determine[s] the work's meaning and value.’ This, in tandem with the paratext we may have (for instance, as simple as knowing that Breen is

working as the director/writer/star), aids in creating the pleasurable aesthetic experience of the work.

When speaking particularly of *The Room*, media scholars James MacDowell and James Zborowski offer us the storied history of research relating the film to auteurism, with many writers making note of the feeling of having unique access to the peculiar vision of Tommy Wiseau (MacDowell & Zborowski, 2013). MacDowell and Zborowski attribute this feeling to the ‘inescapable volume [of failed conventions creating] a strangely consistent narrational inconsistency,’ (MacDowell & Zborowski, 2013, pg.21), that this consistent inconsistency allows us to imagine this as a product not only of the director, but the man himself. Repeated idiosyncratic formal features leave us with only one possibility, that they are the product of an auteur. And this builds in the audience the perception of access to the inner workings of the *good/bad* creator’s mind, and thus to their artistic approach and the meaning they are attempting to display on screen. An access that is in some ways ‘romantic – relying... on an imagined closeness to the mental processes of flesh-and-blood authors,’ (MacDowell & Zborowski, 2013, pg.23), regardless of whether this image of a one-man-creative-process is accurate or not.

These forms of *idiosyncratic failure* are paramount in how we receive and maintain the meta-narratives we use to evaluate the work, though they may not come in the shape of the grand architect of meaning that writings on *The Room* may be preoccupied with. When we view 1979’s *The Amityville Horror*, the direction is stock and without anything that would stir the pleasures of *good/bad*, but the lead performance is bizarrely gruff and wooden, with alien dialogue delivered in a constantly violent cadence – each scene reveals to us unique acting choices which raise the question: ‘How could someone think this is a good idea?’ Conversely to the talk of auteurship, while many of the best known examples of *good/bad* feature creators whose personal thematic obsessions are displayed on screen through the medium of failed artistic goals, Breen’s messiah complex or Wiseau’s need to be seen as a ‘nice guy’, the case may be that a series of *technical failures* could be *idiosyncratic* by themselves. *Resident Evil*, the 1996 horror game, features, without recourse, clipped and unnatural sounding dialogue that makes supposedly tense scenes sound ridiculous – in this case there is no need for a singular auteur or intricate meta-narratives to find pleasure in the consistent series of failures throughout.

### 2.4.3. Uncanny Failure

The *uncanny*, within the realm of fiction, are narratives and images which produce a feeling of strangeness because of how they transform the familiar into the unfamiliar - the classic example would be the waxwork figure, an object that arouses much uneasiness for conjuring the image of humanity while not being quite right, the sinking feeling that it's artificial limbs could reach out unexpectedly. Something that resembles our normative understanding of the world but is simultaneously incongruous with it, the uncertainty of which causes a sense of anxiety (Windsor, 2019). In relation to *good/bad*, that sense of anxiety is replaced with our now ubiquitous bizarreness, something which produces the more immediately pleasurable laughter. To understand the contrast between the uncannys usual home of horror and *good/bads* common reception of laughter, we can look again towards the *Benign Violation Theory*: the audience is primed to view the destabilising violations happening on screen as essentially benign, indeed humourous, and so we are free to enjoy them without anxiety. In the works of David Lynch, the carefree tone and upbeat characters of *Twin Peaks* allows us to view the sometimes dream-like and stilted dialogue with the soap-opera cheeriness intended, whereas that same style of dialogue in *Mulholland Drive* has the opposite effect due to being surrounded with a malevolent mood. In *The Room*, this may appear as the familiar Hollywood melodrama tropes being reproduced in an unnatural way, or it may be as simple as *Blood Debts*' costume decision to have a group of gangsters, without comment, tie their shirts in the middle so their midriffs are visible.

It is important to note that *Blood Debts* was an English language film, nominally set in the US, produced by Filipino film director Teddy Page, and so we can lay the blame of the strange costume decisions partially on cross-cultural miscommunication. Film studies researcher Iain Robert Smith uses the concept of *accented cinema*, referring to American movies produced by non-American creators, and applying it to the large list of *good/bad* works which fit this description. These films are marked not so much by a distance between intention and incompetent delivery, more so by a sense of cultural distance, using the example of *Troll 2*'s Italian director and writer insisting that the actors repeat his broken dialogue without edit. We have noted before the literacy required to engage with these works, and we would be remiss not to mention the sense of superiority that can easily be noted when laughter is derived from the failure of others. While the *uncanny* forms produced in the space between the desire to reproduce western works and a non-

western creator can be funny, we should too note that this is ‘shaped by a tension between celebration and mockery of cultural difference,’ (Smith, 2019, pg.10).

Regardless of potential cultural misgivings, the bizarre quality of these *uncanny failures* feature heavily in much of the popular examples of this phenomenon, and can present themselves in many forms. The distancing effect produced from what *is* and what *should be* layers on the tantalising mystery of the thought process behind the work, the familiarity we have to the aesthetic norms and cultural tropes that are unachieved being far more effective as *good/bad* than any complete rejection of the familiar would be. This quality of uncanny strangeness is closest in spirit to Dyck and Johnson’s concept of the bizarre, and can present itself in many forms: from the not-quite-right replication of Americana or alien sounding dialogue to the unwieldy application of game mechanics which destabilise the player, which we will describe more in the next sections.

## 2.5. Ludic Failure

In observation of modern digital games we may see superficial similarities in how films and games represent narratives, character archetypes, and world building, but the communication between art and audience takes on a very different form: for a game to function requires players to *play* it, rather than simply receive. To attempt to understand the ways in which the player receives *good/bad* through play, we must first delineate what makes these games unique as an art form. Of course, this is not an attempt to relitigate the long-fought discussion over specific definitions of *game*, more so we will be outlining a simplified basement level interpretation so that we know what we need to observe within our close reading of *Deadly Premonition*. Due to the constraints of our methodology, and the general boundaries of how the audience tends to engage with *good/bad*, we will hone in on the forms and reception of overall game artefact as end-product as opposed to the operational logic of code and how it functions.

At the ground level we turn once more to philosophy researcher C Thi Nguyen who argues in his book *Games: Agency as Art* that games, rather than a subset of another artistic field, offer unique value of their own, stating that: ‘[i]n games, we can engineer the world of the game, and the agency we will occupy, to fit us and our desires’ (Nguyen, 2020, pg.4.). Games, and the aesthetic value that arises from them, are the end result of designers of environments, of goals, of motivations, of the ability to meaningfully interact, and ultimately of agency. The player communicates back by fulfilling their own agential role



in this constructed world, guided heavily by the forms of agency the designers wish to engender in them, ‘a game designer can use the medium of agency to get the player to perform a particular activity and attend to it... In short: games are framed agency’ (Nguyen, 2020, pg.131). And in these sets of framed agency, we can find particular aesthetic value: we may find the harmony between a challenge and the acts necessary to solve it, or in the more distanced form of appreciating the elegance of how rules are taught diegetically. This is not to say that there are no other aesthetic functions of games, not to mention the mixed-media products of modern digital games or the different values that arise when considering them as sport, but this is the most practical lens for understanding the pleasures found in *Deadly Premonition* that are unique to this medium. Specifically, *Deadly Premonition*, and other contemporary digital games that come with a preconceived motivation and objective to complete, are what Nguyen terms *aesthetic striving games*, a kind of playing where we temporarily take on the motivation to reach the goal for the purpose of experiencing the struggle. If one plays the popular party game *Cards Against Humanity*, one must take on the goal of beating your opponents by producing the most humorous combination of cards, but the point is not purely to succeed, in fact a player who takes this game too seriously would be seen as spoiling the fun. The real objective then is to enjoy the experience rather than to crush your friends: ‘game play engaged in for the sake of the aesthetic quality of the struggle’ (Nguyen, 2020, pg.12), and this experience would not exist if the players did not take on the role of someone who cares about winning. The aesthetic experience is not just the rules of engagement, but also the agency we take on and the values that come with that, the motivation is to experience the aesthetic. When we speak of *good/bad* play in this essay this is what we refer to, engagement with a constructed agency that the player is engaging with in order to experience the aesthetic struggles. The reasons for this are twofold: firstly, that this appears from the offset to be the primary form of *good/bad* seen throughout the popular examples in digital games, and secondly that our definition of *good/bad* requires an interaction between player and the intentions of the creator, and so earnest engagement with the agential values they are attempting to design is a pre-requisite rather than, for instance, the main motivation being to *speedrun* directly to the end<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> We should also note that it is therefore much easier to apply this concept to *ludus*, games of limitations and chance, than the free-form play of *paidia* (Jensen, 2013), with even the most freedom-focused games still encouraging certain challenges and goals to be accomplished, with heavy limitations on the modes of interaction, the player still motivated to experience the aesthetic striving towards a certain *something*, no matter how enigmatic that *something* might be. We can conceive of finding *good/bad* in observing an unfortunate person’s failed dancing, or flirting, or any number of less *ludus*-like play, but it is difficult to imagine enjoying this in the active agential way as with games, rather than simply watching passively.

For the purposes of *good/bad*, there are two central ways in which the player receives and interprets the meanings of the forms they come into contact with, both of which fall in line with our previous understanding of *fiction* and *artifact* emotions: firstly, we have *real-time hermeneutics*. While interpretation of a literary work certainly requires the horizons of the audience to create meaning, games require a kind of actioned hermeneutic that is judged back-and-forth with the work itself, wherein the work may even punish you for not judging it correctly. We may judge whether a pit of water is traversable or instant death, we may make snap judgements about the inputs required to traverse that water gracefully, and the game replies by either accepting or opposing those judgements (Arjoranta, 2011). The conditions of the gameplay set the limits on what interpretations and choices are possible to the player, as well as setting limits on what the player must do to continue the process of interpreting: i.e., if your judgements result in a cycle of failure, the ability to continue making choices is severely restrained (Leino, 2010, as cited in Arjoranta, 2022). When the horizons of our real-time interpretations are met amicably by the game, we can retain our *fiction emotions*, but when these expectations are not met we open the possibility of *good/bad*.

Secondly, we have the *game hermeneutics*, wherein the player, or even third-party audience, interprets the game as a cultural object as it exists within the personal, the community, or in the broader cultural landscape. How does the game, or particular slices of the game, fit into our overall aesthetic judgements of what is good or bad, what is normative both artistically and culturally (Arjoranta, 2022)? These are the kind of questions we can tackle in the more top-level space of *game hermeneutics* and *artifact emotions*, and in this interpretive stance we can see more clearly the structures and forms that the work is built upon. It is easy to draw lines back to our conception of *good/bad* here, how the player can perceive the broken and bizarre forms of games in a distanced stance, and how this forces us to try and make sense of the games own twisted internal logic. On the surface this may seem too far removed from the process of play to be considered a separate experience from the familiar act of viewing a movie, but this is deeply entwined by the natural act of intellectualising the *whys* of our visceral experiences, just as intellectualising why a character chooses to evade a serial killer by entering a dark basement is not distinctly separate from the act of watching a film. The dual hermeneutic lenses of players both coming against peculiar game conditions that do not fit their expectations, as well as the more traditional manner of reading the text as

contrasting with of our normative standards of what games *should be*, is what allows the player to receive the constructed agencies as *good/bad*.

While this talk of agency and hermeneutics may seem rather grand when speaking on the broader concept of games and play, this essay is more grounded on videogames as ‘consciously part of an entertainment complex’ (Douglas Brown, 2012, pg.25), ones which exist as mixed-media totems with inbuilt prescriptive ontology surrounding genre tropes, current cultural trends, and ultimately how they are meant to be played - and consequently *good/bad* is received through the prism of these conventions. That is to say, much of the analysis of *Deadly Premonition* will be presented through the player’s sense of how these agencies are constructed in contemporary digital games. For example, *Deadly Premonition* superficially fits at a glance into the action-oriented survival horror genre, and our assumptions of this genre communicates back and forth with how we receive the game: the distorted focalisation of player and player-character, the over-the-shoulder camera when shooting, the subject matter and shadow-drenched tone. This extends to every action: when we enter a car in-game, we come with certain expectations of which position the camera will follow us from, which buttons on the controller will accelerate or decelerate, and how much the car will weigh based on our understanding of real-life replication as well as what is normative in games. In games, much more commonly than in other mediums, we also have a set of forms and visual signifiers that are incoherent with the world being designed: think of the floating boxes of ammunition that automatically enter the player’s inventory. These kinds of abstracted incoherencies may be ripe for *good/bad* in film, but in digital games are so common as to be subsumed into the background fabric of the ‘game logic’. The objects, rules, and visual signifiers that relate to us the gameplay conditions are the invisible grammar that the player takes for granted (Salen & Zimmerman, 2005), until that grammar acts unexpectedly. All these forms of genre, methods of interfacing, and others, make up how the frames of agency are constructed, and when these are failed is where we see potential for *good/bad*.

The broadness of our definition of *good/bad* makes it potentially applicable to any form of art, but the interactive elements of agency, as well as the conventional structure of digital games, make it a more difficult fit than the more often touted medium of film. Indeed, the previously noted mixed-media nature makes it difficult to isolate what is specifically *good/bad* play, rather than *good/bad* art, or visual storytelling, that just happens to have play at its core, but the forms of how they intersect can still be particular

to digital games. Contrasting the 2019 game *Shenmue III* with its 1999 predecessor *Shenmue* shows this well: the original *Shenmue* is heavy with poor voice acting, amateurish recording mixed with an unnatural script, which, while common in the early days of acted digital games, is not dependent upon the play, but can exist as *good/bad* abstracted outside of the game. It is *good/bad* voice acting that happens to be in a game. Whereas, in *Shenmue III*, we can see neatly in the opening sections where the two main characters are conversing while walking together how, despite the dependence on *good/bad* voice acting, that this same form interacts with the forms of games. Instead of the more common structure of dialogue playing out in real-time while walking, or the original games manner of fixed cutscenes, *Shenmue III* flits between the two at destabilising regularity, ripping the agency and changing the focalisation point for the player seemingly at random. How the voice acting mixes with how the designers have peculiarly constructed the presentation of dialogue creates *good/bad* voice acting which is dependent on the forms of digital games.

Of similar note, there are forms of digital games which, while only existing in this medium, strip the player of any sense of agency: for example, the ubiquitous ‘game over’ screens, which exist most commonly as static images. This particular element, though, acts as the signifier of death to agency, and so is as intrinsically tied to the forms of games as a curtain call is to the medium of theatre. And even in this, there are normative forms of gameplay that can be broken. 2018’s *The Skeleton*, like *Shenmue III*, features a *good/bad* mix of play and non-play: as example, while being chased by the eponymous skeleton, the player will be attacked with little discernible visible evidence of damage and will then jump cut, without transitional animations or sound clips, to a series of blunt and child-like game over descriptions. The jarring stripping of agency making the writing all the more surprising. So, while it can be difficult to delineate what constitutes *good/bad* play into these multimedia products, this essay will focus on the more clear-cut examples of where they intersect rather than throw them out entirely.

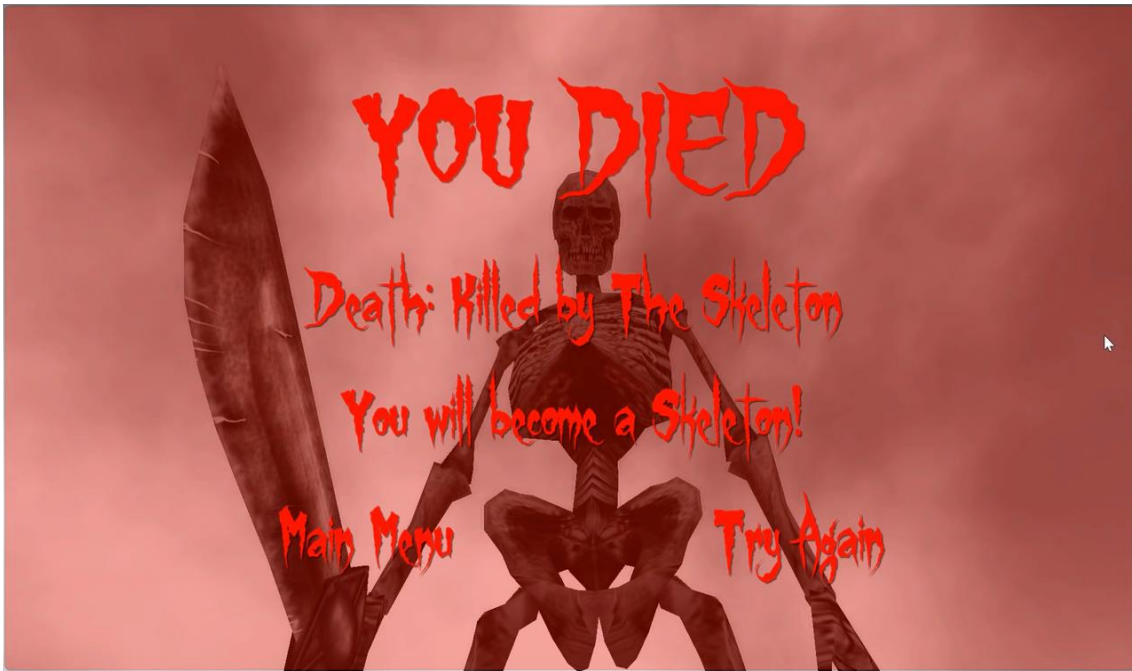


Figure 2. A game over screen from *The Skeleton*. (O'Neill, 2019)

We have previously stated that a game needs a player for it to function as a game, but this presents a problem for *good/bad*: if we are finding pleasure in a failure of the creator's intentions, how can that be possible when a large part of the meaning making in agency comes from the player themselves? There are transgressive players who find unintended meaning using the frame created for them, an example being the otherwise primarily linear shooter *Halo* having hidden pleasures in players creating and filming intricate stunts using explosives found within the environment. We could theorise ways in which this could be performed in a *good/bad* manner, but would this activity be *good/bad Halo* or *good/bad Halo-stuntmen*? The authorial intent necessary has been stripped away. In answer to this, we turn back to C Thi Nguyen's description of *prescriptive ontology*, wherein the player's understanding of how to interact with the work is taught to them socially, and so the intended manner of play is intuited based on cultural knowledge as well as what the forms of the game teach us. We intuitively have been taught that running right is the correct direction in *Super Mario Bros.*, we understand that the floating item is important from the recognisable colour-coding, we learn quickly that jumping into the pit is bad by how it returns us to the start of the level. This is true in linearly guided experiences as well as the freer contemporary open-world games, we have our socially informed prescription of how the creator intends us to interact in their world. In *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* we perceive that the game wishes us to traverse through the game in a normative way despite the complex arrays of interactions available: attacking enemies

and completing quests rather than simply stacking interactable cabbages on top of each other until the console overheats. The prescriptions of how these complex array of interactions are framed guides what we perceive as the *true* way to play. A player's agency is potentially endless when thought of in the abstract, endless to the point of indecision, it is in the limitations as designed in the game that informs how the agency should be directed. And it is in the forms of these authorial restrictions that we can find *good/bad*. Creator intentionality still matters despite the democratic process of meaning making in games, from the construction of agency arise different aesthetic experiences we perceive to be intended, the transgressive player is essentially breaking our perceived intentionality for their own values and experiences, and thus cannot be seen under the same umbrella.

We can see how we receive *good/bad* through interpreting agency and agential prescriptions in digital games, but there still issues that need to be considered. Of particular difficulty is the player-directed action of purposefully seeking *good/bad*. The *Game Boy Advance* version of singing competition simulation *American Idol* features bafflingly hideous low-fidelity renditions of pop songs if the player mistimes some simple button prompts. If the player purposefully fails in order to hear more, what we can presume is supposed to be awful, singing, are they really witnessing *good/bad* in the same form? Glitches may be funny, but if the player has been primed to seek them out, how much of the failure lays at the hands of the creator? For the purposes of this essay, we will only be including what a literate player would naively stumble upon through natural *aesthetic striving play*, the construction of which we will talk more on in the next section. Another difficulty not in the purview of this essay, is how the iterative process of releasing patched and upgraded versions of many digital games changes the nature of how we receive authorial intent - if we have to play an older version of a game to experience the pleasurable *technical failures* does it change the nature of the laughter when the creator has already attempted to remedy the failure? The scope of this project only allows us to get to grips with one instance of *Deadly Premonition*.

An issue that has yet to be addressed, as previously noted from popular media, is whether *good/bad* feels less pleasurable when one has to viscerally play through the failure, and, while we can think of personal counter examples that refute this idea, the extent of this will be analysed in more detail through the close reading itself. A large amount of contemporary digital games require an extensive amount of hours in order to fully

experience the completed work, *Deadly Premonition* being no exception, and so this study will also be attempting to address whether *good/bad* can be sustained over this long running time, and whether this has any effect on overall reception.

### 3 METHODOLOGY

In this section, we will be detailing the proposed method of close-reading for this project. This includes a brief history of textual analysis and close-reading within the medium of digital games, the specific method we will be using, the practicalities of data collection, as well as the lenses by which we will undertake the analysis. In doing so, we wish to provide necessary descriptive details on the *hows* and *whys* of this close-reading of *Deadly Premotion*.

#### 3.1. Close Reading Games

The practice of close reading is mostly closely associated with the *New Critics* movement that found prominence towards the mid-twentieth century. The *New Critics*, a very loose collection of similar minded writers, primarily acted as a revolt against past literary critical traditions who instead chose to focus on the forms of the text, rather than surrounding biography or sociological interpretations (DuBois, 2003). To close-read, as the name would suggest, is to closely read and analyse a given text to elucidate upon the symbols, methods, and meanings within. Originally founded as a practice to study literature, it has since been adapted to many forms of cultural studies, including games.

The history of close reading as a methodology is long and arduous, but as a brief description of what will be performed in this project, it refers to the act of reading a text hermeneutically, to carry out repeated autopsies to identify the codes and patterns throughout. The text is interpreted and reinterpreted to produce a dataset of explorations that are authentic to the spirit of a natural reading, or play in this case, so that the meaning can be teased out - the pragmatic realities of which will be detailed more later. Undertaking a close reading in this manner will allow us to observe and analyse the elements and formal categories of *good/bad* as previously outlined. This is a humanities-based process which finds commonality with many forms of textual analysis across mediums, but close reading will be the preferred terminology due to the rich past we are drawing upon, as well as its usage in articles which will be used here as a structural basis.

Historically, within the practice of *Game Studies*, there existed only smatterings of formalised methodologies focussed on analysing games as text, as noted by computer researcher Espen Aarseth: '[the] cautious search for a methodology, which we should have reason to expect of reflective practitioners in any new field, is suspiciously absent



from most current aesthetic analyses of games,' (Aarseth, 2003, pg.2) which has led to a space lacking in humanistic methodologies to draw upon. While works approaching games through some form of textual analysis have been produced, the exact methodological approach was not written down in any formalised manner beyond noting that the game had been played and then thought about very hard (Consalvo & Dutton, 2006). In the introduction to *Close reading new media: Analyzing electronic literature*, editors Jan Van Looy and Jan Baetens attempt to work against the traditional idea of digital texts an unattractive medium to analyse, that the shifting forms and meanings of emergent text makes analysis unwieldy and inappropriate, that digital texts were a footnote on the far sexier computer-as-technology prospect, noting that their book was 'the first publication to explicitly apply the method of 'close reading' to electronic literature,' (Van Looy & Baetens, 2003, pg.8). However, these early exercises into close reading were still light on ordered methodologies and were primarily focussed on forms of *hypertext* that require a far different approach than the more contemporary game design of *Deadly Premonition*.

In search of a close reading methodologies in digital games, we find games researchers Consalvo and Dutton's (2003) process of 'interaction mapping', which acts as an early form of the method we will be using, essentially a method of 'logging' the events of play with a focus on emergent gameplay and investigating specific questions of analysis. When observing these early stages of development, the lack of formalised methods of textual analysis led to the need to prescribe researchers to actually play the game they are studying: 'many early studies of games were conducted by people that had either not played them, [and/or] had only watched their children play them' (Consalvo & Dutton, 2003, n.p.), which speaks of the novelty of this form of reading. Latterly, media researcher Diane Carr would draw upon literature and film studies to formulate methods of textual analysis that best suit the medium of games. Of particular interest to our own work, Carr details out the need for 'fragmentation' to best facilitate analysis, the practice of unpacking the constituent elements of carefully selected slices of a game experience through playing and replaying, and analysing these fragments through a series of lenses (Carr, 2009). Since then, close reading of games as texts has found a foot-hold through the *Well-Played* book series, and later journals, consisting of detailed close readings from a collection of scholars and industry professionals (Davidson, 2009).

### 3.2. The Method of the Method

Interactive media scholars Jim Bizzocchi and Theresa Tanenbaum have also contributed heavily to this field, publishing close readings of *Elder Scrolls Oblivion*, *Mass Effect 2*, among others (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2009; Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2012). It is from their 2011 proposed close reading methodology that we will draw upon most for our own structure, their construction of a ‘formalized system for reflective practice in games’, (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011, pg. 14). In Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum’s article, they lay out a set of techniques that can be used to apply close readings to digital games, as well as propose solutions to problems that can occur when forcing this square-peg of century-old methodology to the round-hole of interactive media.

In essence, for Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum, a close reading is a detailed reading of a text, turning a critical eye on the work and deconstructing it in order to wring out the meaning. To garner authentic interpretation, Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum recommend approaching the reading through the role of a *naïve player*, rather than the role of academic. Role-playing as someone new to the experience, able to immerse themselves and observe each piece without critical distance. This works as a useful tool to combat the difficulty of engaging the text on its own terms while simultaneously taking on a scholarly-stance, the reader must *oscillate* between two different roles. And then we must ‘make sense of the reading’, (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011, pg. 10), making use of an analytical lens to isolate specific areas of interest. When siphoning down the vast amount of potential data present in digital games, it is necessary to choose an area of focus. In the next paragraphs we will detail how we will adapt these techniques and recommendations to our close reading of *Deadly Premonition*, as well as ways to counteract the issues that can come with them. Concrete information on the exact process of data collection is scant throughout much close-readings and articles about close-readings – indeed, Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum make reference to this method being akin to a ‘magical act of imagination and creation’ (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011, pg. 2), which works perfectly as a metaphor, but less so as a guidebook to follow. As such, we will try to include much of the practical steps of how we take notes, and the frameworks we use to inform us.

### 3.3. Problems and Solutions

In their article, Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum outline a number of difficulties that arise when reading digital texts, as well as some proposed solutions. As previously mentioned, they advise making use of a *constructed phenomenology*, particularly of the *naïve reader*. Reading games inherently comes with the issue of *indeterminacy*, that ‘one cannot guarantee that two readers will encounter the same media assets’ (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011, pg.7), nor that they will engage with the gameplay dynamics in the same way, not to mention exclusive paths they may have to choose between. This can be partially solved by the hermeneutic process, delving back into the text and treading the ground new again, but would be untenable due to the near unending scope of many contemporary games, *Deadly Premonition* included. Better then would be to unshackle ourselves from the unrealistic task of a holistic understanding, but rather we should attempt to produce a reading that is authentic, with the goal of ‘creat[ing] a play experience that is authentic enough to give rise to valuable insight and interpretation’ (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011, pg.9). And so we role-play as a *naïve reader*, one observing the descriptive sequence of the text with fresh eyes, able to passively experience the game as a whole or to hone in on minute details as they take their fancy. The main purpose being to avoid engaging with the text solely as an academic, avoiding the laser-focus on whatever mechanics are viable for one’s particular thesis statement - we want to make our analysis through the frame of how they will be authentically played. As we noted in the previous chapter, the audiences which engage with *good/bad* texts are most often highly literate of the medium, as well as primed for this unorthodox phenomenon, so the player typology will be altered slightly to the *literate naïve player*, one who is encountering the text with fresh eyes but is familiar with the forms of the medium enough to know when they are being broken. While it is far beyond the scope of this essay to tease out the psychological process required to adequately take on the *naïve player* mindset, suffice to say that we will take on this persona during play, performing actions that we feel they would, and then *oscillating*, to use Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum’s term, to the role of observer in retrospect, detailing the mechanics and dynamics that took place throughout the experience.

As we just touched upon, the scope of digital games can make the cycle of reading a difficult prospect. Digital games as a medium are sprawling texts that can require hundreds of hours of play-time in order to explore fully, and the dynamics of how

different mechanics interact can produce potentially endlessly different results, the density of possible interactions being impossible to see within the average play-through. While *Deadly Premonition* is smaller in size, as well as in interactable objects and *NPCs*, than the much more expansive contemporary open-world games like *Grand Theft Auto IV*, the density of reading material requires some specific strategies. Firstly, it will be necessary, after the initial exploratory play-through, to fragment the game into particular slices. *Deadly Premonition* is structured in a loop of exploratory open-world sections where one can engage the townsfolk and partake in small quests in a generally non-hostile context, and linear survival horror sections which are combat heavy, as well as a series of narrative focussed set-pieces, but generally speaking there are many overlapping portions that would be superfluous to analyse repeatedly. Our chosen console version<sup>4</sup> of the game features a robust save-system which thankfully allows us easy access to previous areas of note, so that we may observe and re-observe them in close detail.

Additionally, to answer the question as to whether this concept of *good/bad* can exist purely within gameplay mechanics, rather than traditional forms of narrative or visual storytelling, we will be isolating the gameplay elements from the less gamey cutscenes and dialogue, except where context is deemed relevant. This serves the dual purpose of helping to answer our research question and also making the scope less unwieldy. To touch on the issues inherent in this approach we will turn to film scholar Raymond Bellour, referenced by the aforementioned Carr: this fragmented form of textual analysis necessitates a very un-play-like version of play, that trying to describe the verbs and dynamism requires distance from the academic, a flat image of the game that loses its whole when observed under a microscope, ‘it ends up always occupying a point at which its object is perpetually out of reach’ (Bellour, 1975, as cited in Carr, 2009, pg.6). So while Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum recommend oscillation, code-switching between authentic play and academic-vivisection, we are cautious of being too liberal in pulling apart the text to the point where something of the holistic artifact is lost, both in *what* we choose to read as well as *how*. Indeed, although this essay will selectively omit the overlapping and narrative portions, to ignore the cultural context would lack historical

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<sup>4</sup> As is fitting for a *good/bad* product, choosing between the many different versions of *Deadly Premonition* is an ordeal in of itself, each one being noticeably unique and featuring novel glitches. The PC and *Nintendo Switch* versions are the most easily accessible with modern technology, but the PC copy requires a large amount of modification and tweaking to make it remotely playable for most users. The original *Xbox 360* and later *PlayStation 3* releases are workable but feature different cameras from each other throughout the combat sequences, different *Director's Cut* story content, and different graphical choices. After consideration, the *Nintendo Switch* version was chosen for ease of access, as well as being relatively most similar to the original release, later *Director's Cut* content being deemed ‘non-canon’ in the eventual sequel.

perspective when analysing as *good/bad*. We have to understand *Deadly Premonition* as intention to strive towards something, and this something will exist in a particular time and place. *Deadly Premonition* stands within a particular movement of survival horror, primarily inspired by *Resident Evil 4*, and the literate player would experience it as such, and understand it as a failure to reach these heights. We cannot speak of the formal gameplay structures in a vacuum, they are understood as a striving towards an ideal something, and it will be necessary to analyse them in the correct cultural and temporal context, as readily as it would be a mistake to deride it for not having cutting-edge 2023 graphics. For practical reasons, it is necessary to tear apart the game into unnatural (but easily readable) fragments, but efforts will be made to piece these parts back together in discussion.

### **3.4. Frameworks for Good Reading**

Once the game is played, and all the data is gathered, a means of sorting through the large piles of textual reference that comes in digital games is to focus the target of your analysis. Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum recommend the use of analytical lenses in the close reading process as a way to isolate the many hours of playtime into a specific area, in games this may be the relationship between gameplay and narrative or reward-motivation, just as in film we could focus on shot composition. This, as they mention, is an evolving hermeneutic process wherein what amounts to a desirable lens may only become apparent through previous play experience, preliminary fingerings into the text, or new insights that form through research. When approaching *Deadly Premonition*, we enter with a broad perspective of trying to understand it through the frame of *good/bad*, which does little to focus the reading on a practical level other than an intuitive list of yes/no answers to whether individual moments are, indeed, *good/bad*. As our definition of *good/bad* is heavily centered around aesthetic values, or the lack thereof, we will be using this as a pragmatic starting point for note taking in our readings (the exact details of will be written of shortly). This acts as an anchor throughout the reading process to allow us to take effective logs more specific to the expected normative values, as well as how these values are broken by the game, rather than a loose collection of linear descriptive text. The sifting, flirting with, and pattern finding after the fact will collect this value data into our formal categories of *idiosyncratic*, *technical*, and *uncanny* as tighter and more concise ways to refocus more directly into *good/bad*, rather than more loosely on the concept as a whole.

In terms of verbalising the aesthetic values of digital games, much of the forms will be understood intuitively in play by our literate player archetype, but the practicality of note-taking and observing the processes of play from a birds-eye view will require a framework of how the mechanical elements relate to each other, as well as how we react and communicate with them. The system we will use to guide our close reading is the *AGE model* (actions, gameplay, experience), an attempt at a cohesive formal system for understanding game design methods and how the player consumes them (Dillon, 2012). This follows from the *Mechanics, Dynamics, and Aesthetics Framework* (Hunicke & LeBlanc & Zubek, 2004), in this case *mechanics* meaning the particular pieces of actions and interactive mechanisms available to the player, *dynamics* referring to how these mechanics work together to create an overall experience. The *AGE model* repurposes these two into the closely related concepts of *Actions* and *Gameplay*, respectively. The *Aesthetics* of the *MDA framework* is the broadest of the categories, using a set of eight overarching experiences that are produced by the dynamics, experiences so wide-reaching that they may be applied to a disparate set of examples. The *AGE model* addresses this issue of vagueness by moulding the conception of *experience* around the *6-11 Framework*, an aesthetic taxonomy that revolves around a number of core recurrent emotions and instincts commonly found in psychological analysis (Dillon, 2011). The framework is built on the concept that the gameplay, comprised of the actions the artifact affords, creates particular emotions in the player (such as fear, or excitement), and this arouses instincts (such as curiosity, or greed), which in turn inspires more interaction from the player, creating a complex map of action and experience. Using this as a guideline, we will aim to separate the constituent parts of *Deadly Premonitions* actions, construct how they form together into gameplay, and then find patterns in the particular emotions and instincts they communicate to us. This will be used as a consistent system to observe and understand the underlying building blocks of what makes the game function.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	Section	Description	Action	Gameplay	Value	Intended Value	Notes
16		A loud phone rings which allows us to Save	Save or observe the phone.	Basic saving of the action so far, which gives the player money	narrative oddness of casually "reporting to headquarters" about the zombie infestation. Getting money is not a resource farm, but it is slightly jarring diegetically and with the value of collecting in this survival action segment.	Background saving to allow the player to continue again later	The idiosyncrasies of constant bright collection sounds mixed in with this horror styled tone is presenting itself a lot already.
17		Wooden path section, combat.	Tight pathing, combat, minor door switch puzzle, exploding barrels. Shooting locks off doors.	together to make a tight RE4 like experience, back off zombies which ambush you, slicing open boxes for herbs, backtracking to grab a key to open the door.	there to counteract their power and retain some resource management aspect, but here they are overpowered and drop plentifully, which results in the simple joy of whacking zombies in the skull. Exploding barrels also acts in a	Values of exploration, satisfaction of puzzle solving, fear and immense tension from the zombies hiding round darkened corners.	weapons. My pipe kills an enemy in one hit, but takes down half the durability, the mechanic being immediately offset by the fact that the enemy drops another pipe. Benign violation is noticed here, the easiness of the games makes the horror elements more comfortable to
18		respawning enemy area	combat section with two dark areas of respawning enemies. Pits are run passed to progress	Easy gameplay makes this a simple shooting gallery where you collect resources. I gained a few first aid kits and some money before realising they were respawning	This is an odd idea, the easy enemies, infinite ammo and health items makes this more confusing than anything	Possibly a tense and exciting moment where you, as in RE4, have to think about running around enemies instead of fighting to reserve resources	First real moment where we see the lack of foresight in mechanics makes the intended values morph
19		Raincoat killer QTE	A couple of QTE events which can kill you or not	The player needs to survive through some quick fingered action	Unlike previous QTEs, this works much better, or at least as well as any RE4 or Shenmue QTE, as the context and obvious failstate is immediately apparent.	Tense, exciting, fearful event	INVESTIGATION FAILURE and the death sound effect is rather cute

Figure 3. Experiential data taken throughout a playthrough of *Deadly Premonition*.

Image taken by the author.

In all practical realities, the *AGE model* will not be taken as an ideological necessity that must be followed, understanding *Deadly Premonition* as a cultural artifact requires cross-reference to genre tropes and contemporary digital games that the literate player would be aware of, but the model makes a good anchor to centre the reading process on relevant forms rather than grasping blindly at the endless sheets of data available. As our conception of *good/bad* revolves around the failure of normative aesthetic values, the *experience* then of the *AGE model* will be written of during data collection through the categories of *value* and *intended value*, reflecting our experience as well as what we assume the intended experience to have been. Documentation, then, will generally take the form of short passages analysing the actions, gameplay, and the literate player's expectations that these would bring, both of specific instances as well as more overarching sections, and then reflections upon the aesthetic values and experiences we perceive. These notes will be collected in a *Microsoft Excel* spreadsheet to be added upon in further playthroughs. The patterns we find through repeated close readings will be interpreted through the lens of our three formal categories of *technical*, *idiosyncratic*, and *uncanny* failure to clarify and organise the forms of *good/bad* we observe, as well as to test the extent of their validity.

## 4 CLOSE READING DATA

This close reading will function primarily as descriptive text of how each slice of the gameplay functions in isolation, as well as the general perspective on how our presumed literate gamer role views these elements; a collection of data points from experience. Sections will cover mechanics on a micro-level, including the movement and general controls, as well as the macro-scale of the specific partitioned sections in which these mechanics express themselves. Non-gameplay, such as music or art design, are only mentioned where relevant to the gameplay experience, or to games as unique media artifact, i.e., character animations or paratextual title-screens. As has been mentioned, a more surgical approach to analysis misses something of the holistic product, but this will be viewed more as a whole within the discussion section. While not exhaustive, this close reading will give a break-down of the relevant elements to our analysis of *good/bad*, hopefully being descriptive enough that one may take this data and come to their own conclusions.

### 4.1. Movement

A large portion of the game takes place on foot, the left thumb-stick being used to control the direction of movement while the right thumb-stick controls the camera, which generally follows just behind the character, the speed of movement varying on whether the run-button is held down. These are button layouts which any literate player of the genre should follow intuitively, and they work competently as to essentially become background in the player's mind, with the only variation from contemporary works being the noticeable lack of acceleration between the walk and run animations making things jarring, but this is slight and frequent enough as to become forgettable. A unique quality to *Deadly Premonition* is how the camera positioning will change based on differing sections of gameplay – the camera zooming in to just behind the shoulder, akin to *Resident Evil 4*, during combat sections, and then zooming much further back, as well as centering behind the player, during the stretches of more passivist open exploration.

As with basic movement, the driving mechanics follow contemporary convention as to the button layout, with standard acceleration and braking controls, whilst also following the walk commands of left thumb-stick for directional movement, right thumb-stick for the camera, as well as a button allowing a burst of speed. As a nod to realism, one may also control the windscreen wipers and horn, which holds little gameplay value. The cars



also have a finite amount of health and fuel, which must be replenished. While the controls are mostly perfunctory and intuitive for the literate player, the actual driving physics are not: the cars are floaty and without much friction against the road, and so have a tendency to slide around against the player's wishes. Driving across the map, or participating in timed races, should fuel a sense of exploration or excitement, but this is dashed when the player is accidentally crashing through fences or into innocent civilians. This has immediate tonal consequences when arising during serious relationship building dialogue scenes which take place during driving segments, often resulting in humour.

## 4.2. Combat

The forms of the combat in *Deadly Premonition* signals two conflicting patterns, that of experiencing weakness in the face of overwhelming enemies as well as fast-paced arcade-like destruction of weak hordes. Much like the basic movement, the combat follows the *Resident Evil 4* blueprint: when wanting to enter combat, the player holds the left bumper which produces a laser-pointer like indicator on the screen, the player can then precisely position the indicator on opponents, and then shoot different body parts for different effects. The players can find the standard array of long-distance weapons throughout the game – from basic pistol to high-powered magnum. While in this mode, the player is unable to move their body, and so when to fight and when to move becomes a very deliberate decision when facing an encroaching hoard of enemies. Unlike *Resident Evil 4*, *Deadly Premonition* has an emphasis on melee combat, the arenas littered with shovels and steel pipes to use, and using them is less about precision and more about making sure the enemy is in the area of your swing. Melee is less deliberate and tense, and more so creates a feeling of fun from the blunt-stupidity – disposing of zombies by cartoonishly cracking them with golf clubs, wherein they then dissolve into pools of blood while a bright jingle denotes your success - which is somewhat offset by the weak durability of many of the weapons. *Deadly Premonition* also employs another common mechanic employed by *Resident Evil 4*, the *Quick-Time-Event* (shortened here to *QTE*). *QTEs* are timed button-presses, usually in the form of a large indicator onscreen, linked contextually to some action being performed.

There are essentially three different enemy-types throughout the game. Firstly, a type of meandering zombie which locks in on the player's location and slowly traverses towards them. Once in contact, they will grab hold of the player and start an event where the player

must rapidly circle the thumb-stick to escape and, once released, the player will slowly crawl away with limited control of direction. These enemies act, especially when bashed with high-powered melee weapons, as weak cannon fodder. The next enemy-type are the shotgun-zombies. These police-themed enemies will fire a heavily damaging shotgun blast at the player after a bright visual-cue, which the player can avoid by running from the line of sight. The last type are the much less common wall-crawlers. The player is blocked into a tight corridor where they will be pursued by a swift enemy following them along the walls or ceiling. Contact with them, or their projectile attacks, will cause a large percentage of the player's health. The player can dodge their attacks by following visual-aid for a *QTE* rather than avoiding it spatially, which is immediate and intuitive design for the player to pick up on but also means the player may take or avoid damage regardless of whether the projectile physically touches them or not. These enemies are thick with health points and can also deal destructive damage, and are also very limited in terms of improvisational ways to interact, so these segments act as forced wars of attrition.

Due to the multitude of similarities, the literate player can presume a debt to *Resident Evil 4*'s lauded combat mechanics, and so we can use this as a base of comparison. From the very opening moments of *Resident Evil 4*, we are subject to an encroaching hoard of enemies which can kill the player with ease, and an arsenal of weapons which will either pause the enemy momentarily or, if the player is precise in their aim, cripple their movement. *Resident Evil* values creating fear and tension in the player, fear in being overcome by foes, the suspense of choosing whether to risk standing still to aim that one last headshot, to use your last grenade on the crowd or save it for a more challenging situation. It creates scenarios with a vast array of improvised choices, and rewards player skill and forethought. We assume that *Deadly Premonition* wants to ape the values of *Resident Evil 4*, and yet there is a distinct lack of tension in how the mechanics and enemies interact. The weakness and lack of variation in enemy move-sets often creates a conga line of corpses, which, when considering that they die after one crack from a steel pipe, is more satisfying as an act of blunt and silly violence. This is compounded by an overabundance of resources, which we will talk about later.

### **4.3. Simulation Mechanics**

Throughout every section of *Deadly Premonition*, the player is subject to life simulation mechanics which have knock-on effects on the combat and general exploration. The menu

screen features two slowly depleting bars which indicate hunger and tiredness: depleting your tiredness will cause the player to become hungrier at a quicker rate, and being very hungry will cause the player to lose overall health points. This is counteracted by a large variety of food being available to purchase and store throughout the game world, whether it be within open-world exploration or sections of survival horror. Similarly, the world is littered with beds which allow you to trade the passing of game-time with replenished tiredness. Usually close to these beds, the player is also given the option of dry cleaning the protagonist's suits for a price, as well as mirrors to shave the protagonist's rapidly growing facial hair. Again, both within the open-world and within the horror themed sections. These interact with other structures of the game in unusual ways, which will be detailed fully in the discussion section.

There is a value of simulation and survival that is being attempted in these mechanics, we can presume, a tense nurturing instinct that arises from micromanaging these base statistics to the benefit of progressing the game more smoothly. This simulation value also extends to the driving mechanics, which are dictated by a fuel gauge, as well as a damage bar that decreases when hitting other objects, both of which will force the player to walk when reaching zero. Unlike contemporary open-world games, such as *Grand Theft Auto*, where one can swiftly find a new vehicle if the previous has become incapacitated, *Deadly Premonition* features a singular petrol station where the player can refuel or repair their vehicle. Beyond this, the player can carry a finite number of emergency flares which can be used to have the police send you a new car, or else walk at a much slower pace to your intended destination.

#### **4.4. The Nightmare World**

*Deadly Premonition* is essentially split into two wildly different gameplay loops which are usually partitioned off by some boundary of story progression or progression down the route of a side-story; the *Nightmare World* sections act as linear slices of combat and survival horror. These follow the same basic structure as *Resident Evil 4's* more action-oriented form of survival horror, and the literate player recognises it as such by means of the familiar aesthetic and mechanical choices. In particular, the claustrophobic level design meant to invoke tension and fear, as well as the direct reference of over-the-shoulder gunplay which we have already detailed. Beyond combat, these sections usually repeat a number of other gameplay devices throughout each instance.

The different *Nightmare World* levels feature some form of environmental puzzles which hinder immediate progression. The most common either involves finding a key-like object to place into an object-shaped keyhole, again in the tradition of earlier survival horror games, a staple of the genre. Successful examples of the genre, *Silent Hill* and earlier *Resident Evil* games, find value in satisfactorily gaining mastery of the large environments, exploring the world and remembering by context-clues where the puzzle items should be used. The *Nightmare World* sections are too small and without backtracking and internal map-making to achieve this value. The template of *Resident Evil 4* achieves fear in its puzzles by making them be accomplished in the midst of combat, another tension-making ball that must be juggled while fending off chainsaw wielding attackers. As already noted, however, *Deadly Premonitions* bluntness of design lacks a similar tension, slow-moving enemies and wide corridors make simply walking around the enemies easy and efficient, which in turn makes these puzzles feel perfunctory rather than value-making. On a smaller scale, there are also literal environmental obstacles which block the player's path, in the form of padlocks and fencing which must be broken. The fences and crates littered throughout the levels are seemingly beholden to the same weapon damage-scaling as the enemies, and so the player can choose to crack them apart with a crowbar swiftly or to comically fire a full clip of machine gun rounds into them, at which point they will explode into wooden shards.

Another lifted inspiration from *Resident Evil* comes in the form of safe rooms, small areas which break up the action with respite in the form of saving and/or reallocation of resources. *Resident Evil* and *Deadly Premonition* both allow the saving of progress at the slight cost of resources, by means of typewriters or telephones respectively. Differences arise from the aforementioned survival mechanics: in the *Nightmare World* the player must still consider their hunger and tiredness. And so, the safe rooms come equipped with beds where the player can sleep for as long as necessary. Food, if managed improperly, is a finite resource in *Deadly Premonition*, and so many safe rooms come with a small item, a lollipop as example, that will respawn infinitely, as to make unwinnable scenarios impossible. And so, in-between bouts of zombie killing, the player may choose to sleep, eat infinite lollipops, or shave in the mirror.

The respite of the safe rooms is occasionally broken by another recurring event, in which the player must hide from a stalking killer. The player must seek out a highlighted spot and watch as the antagonist attempts to find them, interspersed with events where they

must hit a brief *QTE*, or else be murdered without recourse. These timed prompts add immediacy to the fear that is intended, but the button required never changes throughout the game, which removes a large portion of the challenge and suspense involved. The prompts bear little relation to what is happening contextually on the screen, as well as happening at set intervals regardless of where the killer is (i.e. the stalker will be searching a locker on the other side of the room, and suddenly the player must hit the cue or face an instant game over), and so the tension of watching them slowly encroach on the player's position is lost.

The same killer will also pursue the player more rapidly in subsequent chase sequences. In these sections, the camera and direction of movement are locked, and the player must constantly hit the left thumb-stick back-and-forth in order to run away. At set points the player will be tasked with pressing certain buttons to step on or off (or, as a holdover of more languid exploration sequences, simply observe) objects, push forward crates, or perform *QTEs* to dodge thrown weapons. At other points, the player will engage in more direct *QTE* sequences which involve completing a series of swift button prompts to avoid the killer's attacks, with an instant game over for any failure. Again, the literate player will recognise these similar scenes play out in *Resident Evil 4*, and the tension and excitement of the immediacy functions similarly. The intended values are marred primarily from incongruous aesthetic elements: as example, despite the need for hurry, the animations for stepping up and down obstacles are comically leisurely, the crates which must be slowly pushed could be easily walked around if the player had control of direction.

*QTEs* are a running theme throughout many elements of the *Nightmare World* sections, and are intuitively used in a manner the literate player would be aware of during action-oriented segments, as an immediate way to create a tense moment of fighting-the-clock. However, they're more unusually deployed when used by the book-ending device of *Profiling*. To progress the *Nightmare Worlds* the player is tasked with finding specific clues which slowly reveal the mystery of the area, which is presented to us in grainy cutscene footage which becomes clearer with each item found. Primarily functioning as a narrative device, these segments are only viewable if the player passes the *QTE* asking them to 'Profile', the fail state being that they miss the cutscene. The context surrounding these actions, when first encountered, jars with the player's expectations for their usual intended value.

## 4.5. Open-World Exploration

Outside of the *Nightmare World*, and other necessary story segments, *Deadly Premonition* is set within a (mostly) non-combative town, which the player can explore freely, with housing, stores, waypoints for the next mission, and a litany of mini-games. The town of *Greenvale* separates itself from contemporary open-worlds, such as *Grand Theft Auto* or *Saints Row*, by focusing on a small cast of characters who follow set paths and routines throughout each day. This focus extends to allowing the player to peek through any window in the game in order watch characters perform tasks, or to simply observe their living quarters. Like its contemporaries, *Deadly Premonition* intends to simulate an urban environment, with long stretches of road and decorative buildings, valuing exploration and a sense of grand scope which necessitates driving to shorten the distance. Unlike its contemporaries, *Greenvale* is mostly empty and built in a way that makes exploration a more difficult process. With the aforementioned slidey driving physics and limited fuel accounted for, the large scope of area the player must traverse has little of the visceral excitement that similarly structured games strive for – there is a lack of any enemy combatants or pedestrians to avoid, no natural steep slopes or jumps to attempt, in fact simply driving too quickly around tight corner might result in your car flipping and causing an instant game over.

Most of the residents of *Greenvale* live in a small strip of two closely-linked groups of buildings, which, while much of it is non-descript decoration, is small enough to mentally map. However, a large amount of the story-progressing waypoints exist far beyond this enclosure, requiring the player to drive long distances across empty landscapes. Navigating these distances is made difficult by a map which only shows a very small portion of the current area, necessitating continuous map-reading to circumvent taking the wrong exits. The literate player expects the excitement which the surface level aesthetics and mechanics would recall, but in play we are left with confusion and tedium as the overarching experiences. Through repetition and creative map-reading, the player may find short cuts that take us off the beaten path, where they can find the blunt pleasure of crashing through exploding fences, but these are useful in few circumstances.



Figure 4. An image of the fully zoomed out map from *Deadly Premonition*. (How Big Is The Map?, 2017)

*Greenvale* includes a small number of stores, bars, restaurants, vending machines, as well as a litter of floating collectibles. The majority of these vendors are used to stock up on items that restore depleting hunger and tiredness, while a couple also focus on purchasing weapons and ammunition. Gaining purchasing power comes through a variety of sources, on top of the player gaining a ‘salary’ through completing *Nightmare World* sections, including from scattered collectibles and performing ordinary tasks. Driving through breakable fencing may award the player enough money for a sandwich, you may stumble across floating medals while in the grocery store which award thirty dollars, spending a few dollars on the payphone will result in a ten-dollar bonus for being a ‘daily reporter’. We assume, as literate players, for the economy of resources and rewards to ramp up as the game progresses, to match with an appropriately ramping challenge. However, the player is very quickly in possession of an overabundance of money, with collectibles providing a constant tick of fresh funds, as well as a lack of need to spend this money. While a can of tuna may cost fifteen dollars from a vending machine, *Greenvale* provides signposted opportunities to eat for free. Drinking a cocktail to restore some of your tiredness will cost thirty dollars, whereas drinking coffee in your starting location is not only free but will actually net you an award.

Many of the most powerful resources, in fact, are locked behind minigames which are accessible from the early sections of the game. Beyond the floating medals, which can be found in great number through regular progression, there exists a number of more challenging collectibles: trading cards, and bones. These items are scattered across the map and, while sometimes being easily stumbled upon, require a concerted effort of exploration from the player: existing down unutilised portions of the map, requiring the completion of other quests, or some manner of environmental puzzle solving such as shooting a bird nest from a tree. Both the trading cards and the bones will net the player with infinitely useable and highly damaging weapons. Similarly, the player can purchase maps to enemy-gauntlet locations and, after beating waves of zombies, is rewarded with more weapons with infinite ammo.

Other tangibly useful items, namely to increase the number of items one can hold, can be obtained from playing darts. Uniquely, *Deadly Premonition* eschews a propriety darts system and instead hands out a darts gun, repurposing the combat system wholesale, so that you aim and shoot at the dartboard as if it were a zombie. Some of the minigames tie back into others, such as the timed races which can be completed around *Greenvale*, that awards the player with more trading cards. Outside of the occasional technical failure or unusual design choice, these minigames are structurally perfunctory and function normatively. There are also a number of smaller character focussed quests; in terms of design, these rarely go beyond conversing at set times of the day, or finding specific items at their request, but find value in communication and building narrative depth, which goes beyond the scope of this essay but this focus on world-building will be important to note for later.

#### **4.6. Story-Progression Sections**

Time within *Greenvale* and the *Nightmare World* make up the majority of *Deadly Premonitions* gameplay content, but there are also many less frequent narrative-bridging sections which, while more rudimentary mechanically, bring their own sense of values. The *Red Forest* sections are a recurring set piece which function to act as tutorial, initially teaching the player basic movement controls through non-diegetic textboxes, and latterly function as narrative dream sequences. Player input within the *Red Forest* is primarily to either walk forward or to observe the surroundings for flavour text. Another slice of interactive narrative comes in the form of deductive sequences at the end of chapters, the



player answering a series of multiple-choice questions about previous events. There are no fail states or rewards from these quizzes, their function comes from reinforcing key points in the plot. In these story-progressing segments, if sometimes simple in their design, the values achieved match up our perceived intentions. These scenes, along with the *Red Forest*, more consistently match the tone of the narrative than the traditional cutscenes: curiosity and mystery is built through movement through the environments, we are made to feel somewhat like a detective – the music is often not even juxtaposed, a recurring feature elsewhere. Idiosyncratic elements of sound design errors and odd visuals run through these sequences, but they otherwise work as intended. Other times, as with the bookending scenes between chapters, the player can choose to watch a cutscene which recaps the narrative with a *QTE* labelled ‘Zach’s View’, the obfuscation of the title being initially confusing and bizarre.

There is a recurring element of interactive cutscenes, once again utilising *QTEs*. During cutscenes the player will occasionally be called to action by a button prompt or a choice of dialogue. While following the same basic structure popularised by *Resident Evil 4*, these *QTEs* are contextually unusual, placed as they are in situations with no stakes or consequences, and at random intervals within otherwise static scenes. As player, we expect *QTEs* to work based on strong and easy to understand rules – we are being chased by a boulder and are tasked with quickly tapping ‘dodge’ to perform the action as described – whereas *Deadly Premonition* lacks this same clarity of participation. As example, the player is tasked to ‘Look with Interest’ at a coffee cup, accompanied by a depleting time bar of around ten seconds – a fast-paced action that comes amidst the lull of a passive dialogue scene, one with unclear motivations and outcomes (why is this important? What would happen if I were too slow?), and one with ultimately no consequences for failure.

#### **4.7. Audio, Visual, and Paratextual Information**

While this close reading intends to isolate features unique to digital games as a medium, *Deadly Premonition* employs sound effects as diegetic and non-diegetic symbols for the player, either to impart functional information or to set emotional tone – a bright click for a newly opened door, or sharp strings for encroaching danger. Background music often works in similar ways, to set or accentuate the intended feeling of the gameplay. ‘Paratextual information’ here means that which exists outside of the game world, but as

we are performing an analysis of game mechanics, we will focus on the game as playable product – so menus and title screens as opposed to author biography. Similarly, on the visual side, direction and shot-composition of cutscenes are ignored in favour of animations and the kind of visual glitches most commonly found in digital games.

A feature of the character animations which becomes quickly clear is that there is a lack of variation to express the exact emotions intended, resulting in scenes which juxtapose against the narrative or value of the gameplay, most often to comical effect. As example, the protagonist expresses surprise at how delicious a sandwich is in one scene by employing an animation indistinguishable from dodging an attack. Two side characters then express their shock by holding rudimentary open-mouthed poses for several seconds without movement. In play, there is sometimes a distinct lack of congruity between the animation employed and the emotional value of the section, such as the previously mentioned way that the protagonist will immediately transition from running away from a murder to daintily stepping up onto a ledge. When opening a door while in the running animation, the protagonist will bash shoulder-first through the door frame, which, while fitting during the *Nightmare World*, becomes more incongruous when deployed in a diner bathroom during the open-world segments. While the narrative and tone sometimes have a purposefully light tone, it is easy to presume a more naturalistic animation style was intended from the serious nature of much of the subject matter and surrounding elements.



Figure 5. Shocked faces after seeing the protagonist eat a sandwich. (Goufunaki, 2010)

The background music of *Deadly Premonition* is varied, as befitting a game which jumps between tones within the gameplay often: light-hearted during passive open-world sections, recalling the jazzy Americana of David Lynch during melodramatic cutscenes, or using droning textures akin to *Silent Hill* during sections of survival horror. At times, this music accentuates the comedy or drama as intended. Occasionally, the music will sharply change in a jarring manner, or is juxtaposed with the action on screen. As example, at one point the player takes the role of the serial killer and must rush through waves of civilians with their axe, all while an emotive version of *Amazing Grace* is sung in the background, which provides a bizarre experience. Much of the soundtrack is original songs which, while sometimes lacking subtlety, create accurate emotional texture and being of high-enough quality to comfortably fit into the background, or even reach the heights of genuine enjoyment. Other tracks have the feeling more so of generic stock music, such as the pop-punk of the driving minigame or looping hard rock found playing darts, which is jarring for how poorly it fits into surrounding soundtrack.

This stock feeling extends to the sound effects, many of them originating seemingly unedited from the *General 6000 Sound Library*, a popular collection of sound effects, some of which will be noticeably familiar for literate players or fans of similar media. Sometimes these feel out-of-place due to anachronism, as with the loud trumpet sting, more suitable for 1940's radio plays, used to indicate surprise. At other times, these sound effects are comically mismatched: most immediately obvious when the sound of hooting monkeys is used over the image of squirrels. Jarring sound mixing is a fixture throughout *Deadly Premonition*, observing or collecting medals or other resources playing a loud and bright jingle that sits high atop the buzz and murmur of the *Nightmare World*, the more pixel-attuned sound effects juxtaposing against the more understated horror soundtrack. Within zombie shoot-outs, the more realistic visceral thuds of bullets-meeting-flesh found in contemporary games is replaced with the non-diegetic happy chirping when achieving headshots, accompanied by the protagonist yelling: 'great shot!' to the player. Again, tonally we are left gasping for air.

When looking at the paratext, the title screen works as a stand-in for how many of the visual and aural elements communicate *good/bad* to the player. An opening screen can be used as a scene-setter, valuable for its ability to set an atmosphere while simultaneously acting as a pragmatic space outside the game-world proper that allows us to finetune options or enter the game at our liking: the value coming from appreciation of the art and

skilful creation of tone, along with clear technical engagement. *Deadly Premonition*, however, opens on an out-of-focus helicopter shot of the town of *Greenvale*, so dark as to barely be visible. Accompanying this poorly conceived image is a set of sound effects that play when choosing the different options, all very loud in the mix, the cancel button being a particularly jarring guitar twang. This jarring sound, a distinct feature throughout the game, distances us from what should mentally be in the background into the foreground. Now we are fully aware of the poor images, made sillier in contrast to the sombre angelic chorus playing over the top. The uncanniness is heightened by the sometimes-incomprehensible options available, the strange ‘cruel production’ button for the level of gore in the game only distantly registers as making-sense contextually. This is the entry-point into the game, and immediately primes them for the *good/bad* experience to come.

## 5 DISCUSSION

Based upon the data of our close reading, this next section will primarily focus on placing the moments of *good/bad* we encountered into our previously outlined categories. Identifying the patterns of *uncanny failure*, *technical failure*, and *idiosyncratic failure* helps us to have more insight into how the phenomenon of *good/bad* is expressed to player, and how the player communicates back. To understand *good/bad* in *Deadly Premonition* in full, and why it became such a popular example, we will also be discussing the surrounding elements which do not fit into our definition of ‘Unintended failure of aesthetic value qua X creates pleasurable aesthetic experience qua X’.

### 5.1. Uncanny Failure

To contextualise the uncanny interplay between how the gameplay *should be* and how it *is* we will look toward Marshall McLuhan’s framework of *Hot and Cold media*, as applied to digital games by researchers Ouellette and Conway. In short, *Hot* game design can be described as having a clarity of participation, strong and easy to understand rules which result in succinct feedback loops. Building challenge often coming from overwhelming the player with enemies, or placing tighter time restrictions (think *Tetris*, with its more and more swiftly falling blocks). A quintessential example of *Hot* design is the much mentioned *QTEs*, the goals and rules immediately obvious in rapid button prompts. *Cold* media, on the other hand, favours more unstructured play. It requires more conceptual participation from the player, as the goals and rules are more hidden, and so our engagement is more strategical or exploratory. The immediacy of *Hot* design is replaced with contemplation, options, things to consider - which raises the levels of participation but potentially less heart-pumping on a visceral level. Conway and Ouellette mention *Deadly Premonition* by name within their article, though with an emphasis on how the player attempts to decipher the scattered and unusual narrative, in turn *heating up* their participation (Conway & Ouellette, 2020). Here we will be looking at how, to the literate player, these *Hot* and *Cold* elements are at odds with their normative standard, and with each other.

*QTEs*, when seen in 1999’s *Shenmue*, take the form of an extended action scene wherein the player must quickly press a button to jump over boxes or avoid a punch, the heat of the *QTE* contextually matching the immediacy of the action on screen. In *Deadly Premonition*, this exact same function is used in a cold environment: having a passive

conversation with a hotel owner, timed dialogue options requiring swift decision making from the player. This is a conversation where you would normatively have time to consider your options, where the rulesets and outcomes on relationships with other characters is often hidden, and your reasons for choosing an option sometimes based on emotional reasons. The tonal coldness clashing with *Hot* interactivity strikes the player off-balance, not only scrambling for the controller due to our false sense of security of cutscene, but also because of the bizarre interplay of gameplay and the context surrounding it. We enter into the cutscene as a moment of respite, passively observing the narrative playout for us, and our expectations when dialogue choices arise are *Cold* and contemplative in nature. And so the unexpected *Hotness* of having to suddenly read, and think, and choose, distances us from the immediacy of our expected horizons and forces us to question these design choices.

This unusual mixture of *Hot* and *Cold* does not lead to an unpleasurable experience, this distancing effect in *Deadly Premonition* is most often comedic. What we perceive as an odd failure of utilising *QTEs* creates a pleasurable aesthetic experience all its own. Being tasked at breakneck speed with the languid challenge to ‘look with interest’ at our coffee cup alienates our suspension of disbelief, and in this state outside the magic circle our reaction is to laugh in bewilderment. This coffee drinking scene has a life outside of the game, with *YouTube* clips of the scene amassing hundreds of thousands of views (pothocket, 2010). We can see similarities to *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare*’s ‘press F to pay respects’ which was widely mocked for the out-of-place interactivity within an otherwise sombre moment (Park, 2021), but *Deadly Premonition* distinguishes itself in two ways: firstly, the decision of timed-responses and pseudo-failure states creates a more instantly jarring experience for the player, creating a more immediate distancing effect through play than through passive consumption. Secondly, the usage of this *Hot* mechanic in unusual situations is an idiosyncratic feature of *Deadly Premonition*, appearing throughout multiple cutscenes and portions of gameplay, consistently creating a distance between player and game, consistently inducing an off-kilter tone.

This extends beyond individual mechanics to the overall building blocks of how we interact with *Deadly Premonition*: the two clashing modes of gameplay illustrates on a macro-level how the mix of *Hot* and *Cold* mechanics leads to a *good/bad* experience, that of the aforementioned *Nightmare World* and the open-world surrounding it. The hybridisation of these two modes results in effects which are uncanny and where the

aesthetic value being striven for is at odds with our experience. Within *Greenvale* as sandbox, the player is ultimately left to their own devices, to drive around, tackle a wide-array of side-quests, chat to the residents, or just simply observe. This is essentially *Cold* design, as the way to proceed is left ambiguous (inviting quest points notwithstanding), improvisation and heating up of gameplay with player-driven goals (such as finding collectibles) being defining markers – the value making properties being a sense of exploration and curiosity toward the game world and narrative within. The world rests on a dynamic day-and-night cycle, with certain quests only being accessible at certain times, though there is not a *Hot*-making time limitation at play, they can simply be tackled the next day. Hunger and tiredness meters require consideration and management. Again, on the surface, *Deadly Premonition* fits into the aims and expectations of this *Cold* genre more than adequately. However, the gameplay of the *Nightmare World* is essentially *Hot*, the gameplay verbiage is clear and immediate, the win and lose conditions are obvious - make it to the end of this linear path without your health bar depleting. The challenge ultimately coming from being overwhelmed by enemies encroaching your position, tasking you with being dexterous enough to aim your gun and get them all while keeping an eye on resources. On the surface, it fits into these aims and expectations more than adequately, but in play the effect is uncanny due to how the forms are entwined.

Two major examples of this conflicting design run throughout the entirety of *Deadly Premonitions* run time. Firstly, is the infinite-pickle-problem, wherein the *Cold* and methodical mechanic of having the control your hunger and tiredness is at odds with the linear structures outside of *Greenvale*. Entering the *Nightmare World*, or more narrative focused set-pieces, cuts the player off from backtracking for resources, which results in the possibility of death from not planning carefully. A successful example of this comes from 2005 survival game *Pathologic*: the player may come to a point in their journey where a lack of careful planning and resource gathering results in an unwinnable situation and the only feasible solution is to simply restart the game from a previous save. A harsh solution, but one which matches the desolate atmosphere of the experience as a whole. *Deadly Premonitions* design decision is to create safe zones where the player may freely stock up on resources at will. And so, if the avatar becomes tired during a serious moment of collecting clues at a murder scene, they may retreat to a wooden shack to nap, or indeed feast on the ever-respawning cans of pickles if they get hungry. This decision permeates the core of the experience, with useable beds and food littering every portion of the map, so the player is never a moment away from putting down their gun to eat lollipops. This

jolts the player out of the horror or pathos into an image altogether sillier due to the constant juxtaposition between tones.

The second major example comes through how the sprawling and side-quest driven open-world effects the tighter, tenser combat segments by inundating the player with tension-breaking resources. Media scholar Julian Novitz, when writing on *Deadly Premonition* notes that: ‘in contrast to typical survival horror design, which is usually defined by the limitations it places on the player and a minimalist aesthetic, *Deadly Premonition* offers expansion and excess,’ which he describes as ‘gamerly uncanny’, the way in which familiar video game actions are rendered strange (Novitz, 2018, pg.10). Due to the hybridised nature of the gameplay, as Novitz points out in their article, you are able to access a large surplus of health items and weapons from the open-world before ever facing a challenging enemy. Our own close reading found similar results, beginning the game with an infinite-ammo pistol, with the open-world segments providing as much time as necessary to gather resources without risk of death, easily becoming an unstoppable force. This renders any possible tension or fear in combat untenable. Novitz compares this to the work of David Lynch, that: ‘the uncanny experience that results from these [gameplay] combinations works to make the viewer/player intimately aware of the constructed nature of the forms of viewing/gameplay that are being referenced and confounds their expectations, complicating or challenging the audience’s immersion’ (Novitz, 2018, pg.7) - the player experiences a distancing effect. We have referred to the ‘blunt stupidity’ of combat throughout our close reading, and this abundance of resources and power forces us to view the game outside of an immersed state, the zombies’ wonky shamle and pained moans fail to induce fear and instead become laughable in the soberness of our distanced state. The spinning money drops to spend back in town drawing further focus on the game as artifice.

This overall clash of gameplay tones brings each section its own particular strangeness, where we can happily club to death the silly hoard of zombies within the dark and ominous scene of a brutal murder, and then be brought into a charming small town where at any moment we can pull out our gun and shoot the whistling residents in the head, the only penalty a whacky sound effect and a pinprick of lost resources. This failed ambition to bring together two disparate modes of gameplay leads to a feeling of something not quite being right in each of them. It makes for a bizarre experience where the functional intended tension-value of the nightmare sections are usurped by the breezy action of



collecting cards and fishing within the open-world sections, it makes for overarching gameplay that appears to be hastily stapled together by departments in no contact with each other and leads the player to question: ‘what were they thinking?’

So we are left again with this vague word *bizarre* in the wake of failure – there is something certainly unusual, but is it *good/bad*? Reviews from time of release present a distinct lack of pleasure, whereas Novitz presents this ‘gamerly uncanny’ tone in a more genuinely favourable impression. Indeed, it is possible to imagine a more technically competent *Deadly Premonition* where the juxtapositions and Lynchian stylings of the narrative and gameplay are taken as intentional and are received as authentically successful, where the uncanniness of gameplay made unfamiliar is perceived as intentional. But for the literate player we presented, one of sufficient background to enter with the *good/bad* mindset, the more common emotional reaction in this sense was to laugh at the strangeness of it all, to be bemused by the failure to evoke terror, to scoff at the audacity to give us a *QTE* for making idle conversation. It stops us from taking for granted the logic of the narrative: instead of the flow of gameplay moving smoothly from beat to beat, we wonder in our distanced state what is happening – why are zombies dropping large floating medals and turkey sandwiches, how does the flow of time work here when I can sleep for twelve hours while my partner waits outside? These kinds of questions, which are usually subsumed by the literate player into the ignorable box of ‘game logic,’ now become salient and silly. It results in an aesthetic experience altogether different from the sum of its failed parts.

## 5.2. Technical Failure

As noted in the previous section, it is possible to perceive *Deadly Premonitions* uncannily playing with gameplay norms as intentional, as at worst a failed attempt at unconventional design. An immediate signal of *good/badness* to the player is the aspect of *technical failure*, some unintentional breakage along the human-machine system that shows us the artificial nature of the world we are inhabiting, the equipment malfunctions known as *glitches*, which *Deadly Premonition* features in a variety of forms. Glitches in digital games are a common enough fixture for environments with so many moving parts, usually as a minor to major inconvenience that run from momentarily breaking immersion to a complete shutdown of the systems involved. Another form of *technical failure* in *Deadly Premonition* which signals *good/bad* is the graphical and aesthetic features which do not

reach contemporary standards, which are the lack of fluidity in animation or fidelity of graphics. These not only inform the literate player of how they should communicate with the game, but the glut of faults in *Deadly Premonition* present themselves in a variety of ways, which we can use to learn more about this category.

Recalling again the *Benign Violation Theory*, these technical issues fall into essentially two different categories. There are those which are benign enough to become *good/bad* violations, those which pierce our normative values in unexpected ways but which are merely aesthetic or unobstructive enough to be benign, and so offer the opportunity to be pleasurable. Then there are those which are not benign, which create frustrating barriers which are unpleasurable in play and not conducive to *good/bad*. Within this, we can see that, while much of these frustrating violations are bad in the simple form while in play, they have the qualities of the bizarre in retrospect or as social experience, as in shared through *YouTube* compilations to be laughed at. We will now discuss examples of these forms as they appear in *Deadly Premonition*.

*Deadly Premonition* is rife with minor glitches or visual errors, enough to be subsumed into the overall presentation of the experience, along with a choppy framerate that is consistent throughout playtime. And again, as with the *uncanny failures*, the *good/badness* comes not solely from the *technical failures* themselves but from how they are juxtaposed to the value trying to be achieved. Brief moments rise to the level of *good/bad*, either being so outlandish as to pierce through the low budget exterior to distance the player, or arriving at inappropriate times to juxtapose with an otherwise serious emotional texture. As example, the NPCs within *Greenvale* have their own set routines throughout the day where they will drive to set locations and perform tasks, and occasionally some error in their sequence will cause them to drive directly through buildings, which as an image is shocking enough to distance the player while benign enough to allow laughter to flourish unimpeded. While it is not much of an observation to state that a budget game does not attain the top-notch graphical quality of the era, contemporary reviews do make note of the of how *Deadly Premonition* looks more akin to a previous generation of hardware (Sterling, 2010). Playing after the timeframe of the original release this has little impact, and the consistent art style allows the unclear textures to be subsumed into background noise. It is how these unclear textures are used which can create moments of *good/bad*. As example, we experience a cutscene of first meeting of the protagonist's love interest. Scored by an angelic chorus, the camera

attempts a sweeping vista of the surrounding area, but we are met with popping-in objects, cut-and-paste textures, and a general scene of low-quality images, which distances us from the intended emotional value. Similarly, at moments the game will focus on particular objects of interest to indicate important plot details or points of level progression, often accompanied by dramatic musical stings. However, the muddy textures can make the point of interest incomprehensible, the special attention paid by the game drawing a large arrow to the low-quality of the graphics.

Outside of simple glitches or graphical errors, there are other moments of gameplay which rise to the realm of *technical failure*, not meeting the base standards of *what should be* as to be perceived an error. As detailed in the close reading, the player has pre-determined scenes where they must swiftly roll the control-sticks to run from a chasing killer. The errors occurring in how the game cuts between running at full speed to cautious stepping-up animations taken wholesale from more passive sections. These sections are also incongruous with the environments designed around them, being that the player will be forced to slow down and push boxes out of the way to keep running forward, all while we can see the easily traversable space directly next to them. Again, this imagery is outlandish and laughable, while also benign enough as to not impede progression. On gameplay of note, much of the driving physics are slippery to the point of being unrecognisable as cars, and causes regular crashes trying to control. This, in isolation, is primarily felt as tedious, or as simply bearable if one plays long enough to become accustomed, but again can produce brief spikes of *good/bad* under the right circumstances. In particular, being able to slide uncontrollably into the fully rigid and stationary horse-models, or accidentally sliding into NPCs while your passengers are seriously discussing the town murder. In these moments we can see the theoretical heights of digital game *good/bad*, the interplay of agency and unintentionally messy mechanics leads to the possibility, given the right circumstances, of endless *good/bad* encounters. But in these we also see the problem of indeterminacy, these unreproducible moments that occurred in abundance through some of our playthroughs and very little in others.

This indeterminacy is a sticking point when it comes to *technical failures* as, while the complexity of the many moving parts of digital landscapes can make for unique moments of genuine surprise and pleasure, the lack of consistency and potential for them to bar progress makes them untenable as a means to warrant repeated exposure. Outside of digital games, media researcher IQ Hunter, when speaking of the *good/bad* work *Jaws*:

*The Revenge*, mentions how the film is funnier when clipped and reported in the form of a stand-up comedy set (Hunter, 2019). And so too for the act of play, *Deadly Premonition* has found fame through the reportage of *YouTube* clips or *Let's Plays* which comment on the game's strangeness (GameGrumps, 2016), the category of 'bad games' itself earning hundreds-of-thousands of views in *YouTube* videos (bibser295, 2022). The irony of *good/bad* play being most effectively consumed through a different medium is worth considering when trying to ascertain the limits of agency.

Expounding upon this issue of indeterminacy, many of the consistent failures would also be better enjoyed more passively. While we are capable of finding moments of *good/bad* in benign technical failures, many of these failures are less than benign and, again, best enjoyed in retrospect or as social experience. As example, there is a mission where the player must tail an NPC without being spotted, driving at a specific distance behind them at all times or being at risk of failure. A common glitch in this mission is that the NPC's car will lose acceleration to the point where they are driving at a snail's pace, wherein the player must inch along behind them. The NPC's set track includes going up a hill, where the lack of acceleration will cause them to stop and then gradually reverse back down, usually past the player's safe zone of distance, causing a failure. This technical error passes the threshold of strangeness to become humorous, and (at least in the version being played) is consistent enough to combat the problem of indeterminacy. However, the punishment for failure, having to restart the entire in-game day and wait for the correct evening hour to retry, is too frustrating to sustain any pleasure, especially if the glitch inevitably repeats on the next go around. Funny in retrospect, but tedious to suffer through. The medium of digital games is unique in this regard, the technical failures of film rarely tasking you with experiencing them on repeat or else simply not being allowed to watch any longer. Again, passive observation through *Let's Plays* extracts the qualities of *good/bad* into a goldilocks-zone of benign violation. It is in these moments where the limitations of a formalist close reading are most clear, where it becomes necessary to view the concept of *good/bad* through the lens of social experience.

### **5.3. Idiosyncratic Failure**

The definition of *idiosyncratic* here refers to failures to reach towards the perceived goals of the creators which are recognisably consistent in theme or form. Inconsistencies within the normative standards of the medium which are consistent in nature. This plays into our

idea of the *auteur*, our manufactured image of access into the mind of the creator through the choices they make with their art, so that we may derive pleasure from the specificity of their bizarre vision. We have previously touched upon examples of this in film: the narrative choice of Neil Breen writing himself as a literal messiah, or Tommy Wiseau's strange use of establishing shots. But in what forms does this establish itself through play? *Deadly Premonition* shows us examples unique to the medium of digital games.

To list the specific examples, we can start with the aforementioned uncanny qualities. With effort to avoid repetition, we can reference again Novitz's analysis of uncanny 'expansion and excess' found in *Deadly Premonition*. Namely how the failed ambition to blend the conventions of survival horror and open-world games leads to our infinite-pickle problem, wherein the player is showered with resources in a genre where judicious management of resources is a key tension-making device. This uncanny mixing, and other mismatched *Hot* and *Cold* gameplay mechanics (i.e. the unconventional of *QTEs*), are consistent enough qualities as to be one of *Deadly Premonitions* defining themes. And with repetition brings greater awareness from the player. Our initial encounter with the respawning can of pickles is silly enough to warrant mentioning, but then we later encounter respawning lollipops, and then another, and then another, all leading to the impression that this is not just a one-off mistake, but the concerted idea and implementation from some creative force.

Another element that was a consistently featured inconsistency within the close reading was *Deadly Premonitions* sound design. The two most numerous *good/bad* elements come in the form of the mixing and juxtaposed sound design, often performing in tandem. One of the first moments of interaction in the game comes from the player choosing to observe a small, comical looking, figurine of another character, which then plays an incongruous trumpet sting more akin to a 1940's detective discovering a body, played at a volume far above any of the surrounding music or dialogue. Sometimes these jolting sound effects appear as *technical failures*, as when the audio of explosions are suddenly muted, but the dramatic stings of surprise or success, or blaring reverse-engine noise and other diegetic audio, is consistent enough that we assume a purposeful decision was made. This mixing oddity extends beyond one-off sound effects: the dialogue in cutscenes is often drowned out by the background music, making some scenes near unintelligible. This, again, can be compounded by the juxtaposition of tones: with dialogue about the gruesome sexual psychology of serial killers being difficult to hear over the whimsical

upbeat whistling of the soundtrack. These consistently baffling technical failings, along with the obvious stock effects that would be noticeable to many literate players, gives the impression of a rushed sound team, making decisions under the pressures of time and budget, leading to humorous end results.

The juxtaposition of tones also runs throughout *Deadly Premonition*, the gameplay of the *Nightmare World* specifically mixes an otherwise serious emotional quality with abstracted *videogamey-ness* that leads to an overall impression of silliness. The tension building act of being overcome by zombies is undercut by the high tones of successful headshots, the money counter constantly rising through hits, as well as the protagonist yelling ‘great!’ at the player – qualities apparent in a more antiquated arcade style shooter rather than the sombre notes that we perceive to be intended. It is these design choices that make us most aware that we are in a game, eschewing a state of *fiction emotions*, ruining the immersion-building tension that would be apparent in the horror aesthetics. The stilted and often silly looking character animations serve a similar function: while the limited animations failing to accurately display the intended emotions can be *good/bad* in of itself, it is in the consistent way they are juxtaposed against the serious subject matter of certain conversations that makes the player question the mindset of the creators – how could they have observed the obvious incongruities and failures on display and continued to make the same decisions again and again?

As may be apparent from these lists of juxtapositions, incongruity itself is a defining idiosyncrasy of *Deadly Premonition*. Failures of sound design, animations, and general aesthetic presentation of the more *videogame-y* qualities clash with the narrative tone being attempted, leading to the perception that they were unable to realise their narrative potential using the tools of digital games as a medium. Recalling Novitz’s article again, he refers to this as a *Lynchian* quality of combining seemingly juxtaposed aspects in a way that destabilises the player (Novitz, 2018, pg.7). This view has merit, especially with how the plot of the game makes use of the player/avatar relationship in unconventional ways. But, viewing this while considering the totality of the literate players understanding of normative game design, as well as their expectations when entering the work, it is difficult to view these peculiar facets as anything other than failure, especially coupled with the litany of *technical failures* already spoken of. At the core of this, the player must intuitively consider the intentions of the creator, and the bizarre idiosyncrasies leave us questioning: *what were they thinking?*

These collections of incongruities of normative standards work in harmony to create an impression of an *auteur*, the gravitational centre of the work that, and noticing the underpinning shoddy structures acts as our *artifact emotions*, our appreciation of the text as a work of art. From this, we feel a closeness with the creators, a feeling of seeing their exact artistic choices and, in the case of *good/bad*, a heightened sense of the bizarre at wondering why exactly they would make a series of choices that seem so completely wrong. There are meta-narratives at play when we attempt to decipher meaning from the many twisted patterns we find in the text. While we will not be including paratextual information in this analysis more specific to formal features, it is certainly fair to assume that our literate player (interested in cult media as they are) would be aware of the surreal television series *Twin Peaks*, and thus also aware of the many allusions to it found in *Deadly Premonition*. The basic premise of the murder of a high school girl showing the cracks in the innocent façade of small town America is shared between both, but also the design and narrative conceit of *Deadly Premonitions Red Forest* sections are similar to the red room of *Twin Peaks*, as well as numerous shared traits between characters in both – these all give more weight to our perceived ambitions towards a *Lynchian* murder mystery, and all of the intrigue and horror which comes with that. This, along with the many consistent features throughout, all mesh to give the impression that *Deadly Premonition* was someone’s vision, was someone’s baby. Which makes the failures and bizarre incompetencies more pronounced in the face of the clear ambitions.

#### **5.4. Failure to Reach Failure**

When performing autopsy on a work, it is possible to create the wrong impression by only magnifying the most relevant portions, portions which may make up only a small part of the holistic experience. While much of the analysis so far has focussed on drawing together the messy experience of *good/bad* into our formal categories, we would be remiss not to mention what may be obvious from the close reading. Much of the experience of *Deadly Premonition* does not fit our starting definition of: ‘unintended failure of aesthetic value qua X creates pleasurable aesthetic experience qua X,’ with special emphasis on the lack of pleasure. While *good/bad* is the key focus of our analysis, understanding how this interacts with moments of genuine *bad*, as well as un-distanced moments of genuine pleasure, gives a clearer understanding of what *Deadly Premonition* communicates to the player, and why it became a popular example of the phenomenon.

Of the limited enemy types within *Deadly Premonition*, roughly ninety-nine percent act as easily dispensable cannon-fodder zombies, with a handful of encounters with wall-crawling monsters - these *wall-crawlers* arrive only in narrow hallways and must be defeated to progress. Simply put: these enemies act as a long slog with little pleasure to be derived, *good/bad* or otherwise. While there is small technical charm in how the *QTE* dodge mechanic invariably forces the protagonist's model to clip through the walls, the variety of options available to player extends to simply shooting when the enemy is running in its one set pattern, and then pressing the *QTE* button when prompted to. The regular enemies also lack any value from challenge for our literate players but, as will become the central conceit of this section, once the joke of the poorly conceived combat wears thin we are still able to proceed without any real sense of risk. We are left with the blunt-instrumentation of swiftly cracking skulls and chugging health packs until the short waves of zombies are over. Lacking in any real violation per se, but without anything to elevate it beyond the functional. The *wall-crawlers*, however, have an uncommonly large health-pool coupled with being able to damage the player heavily with a single hit. Which all leads to a long, monotonous experience with the risk of swiftly dying and having to start all over again. Here the violations are less than benign.

Large swathes of the game expresses itself to the player in similar ways. Under the weight of relatively long length of digital games compared to other *good/bad* media, the pleasurable *technical failure* found in unnatural sliding physics becomes slim, replaced with long empty drives from check point to check point. The idiosyncratic moments of bizarre sound design retain their strange humour but becomes subsumed into background noise over a ten-hour playtime. As the gameplay loop repeats, the player becomes weary at the lack of novel uncanniness appearing. What appears in its place is a functional, if unremarkable, third-person action game where, as noted, even the glitches rarely move beyond being benign into frustrating territory. Rarely moving into genuine *bad/bad*, with peaks of genuine *good*, or at least moments of interesting ideas sadly unrealised. As a holistic package, *Deadly Premonition* exists as a solid framework containing, at least while following the critical path, a mostly well-paced collection of *good/bad* spikes, while also containing few moments of violation which frustrate to the point they cannot simultaneously be deemed benign. Based on this overall structure, there are some possible conclusions we can draw about *Deadly Premonition's* cult success when looking primarily at gameplay in isolation:



First conclusion: *Deadly Premonition* is not a true *good/bad* experience, but rather a cult b-game that is enjoyed genuinely for its idiosyncratic choices and narrative charms, which just so happens to be wrapped in a shell of mostly benign technical issues that the audience tolerates in order to experience the game's pleasures. This is certainly a reasonable opinion to hold, if one were to enter *Deadly Premonition* with different pre-conceptions it is possible to view the bizarre choices as an attempt at avantgarde mixtures of gameplay to create a purposeful sense of the uncanny (how the plot plays with the player/avatar relationship could be seen as evidence of experimenting with conventions). This outlook, however, conflicts with the experience of our close readings, with pleasure spiking at moments of unintentional failure. For the literate player, it is difficult to ignore the many *technical failures* throughout the work which prime the experience with a *good/bad* perspective – any illusion of technical competence would be shattered at the first glimpse of an NPC casually driving through a building. These moments of unexpected bizarre-failure are often the most memorable moments throughout stretches of play which, although could be viewed as interesting experiments, are expressed through monotonous repeated actions. The minutes of empty driving from point-to-point entertains the player less than the poor controls forcing them to slide into a civilian, so it is difficult to assume that *Deadly Premonition* has attracted cult success due to the former. Though the indeterminacy of the gameplay experience may result in a personal experience more akin to this conclusion.

Second conclusion: *Deadly Premonition* is a genuinely bad experience that has found enjoyment because of some brief moments of *good/badness* that can be picked out. Again, a reasonable opinion to hold, critical assessment at release was almost uniformly negative. This would suggest with greater validity that these moments would be best enjoyed in clipped reportage of *YouTube* videos, rather than accessed through hours of interminable drudge. But while the close reading consistently showed sections of play lacking in high-peaks of *good/badness* nor genuine intended values being achieved, the close reading also consistently showed that the gameplay maintained a goldilocks level of competence within the mechanics and the glitches, any violations most often remaining benign. It is rare to find off-putting moments of displeasure, the open-world segments have no consequential failure states, making them a gentle jaunt, and the *Nightmare World* is without challenge, making these segments more akin to short waves of target practice. The gameplay so rarely reaches the point of frustration and is indeed most often simply derivative and without challenge, suggesting a lack of a genuine *bad/bad* experience. Nor

does this perspective explain *Deadly Premonitions* large fanbase or lauded place as the quintessential *good/bad* game.

Third conclusion: our favoured position, that *Deadly Premonition* has found an audience of fanatics because the mostly consistent, but intermittent, moments of *good/bad* are packaged within a shell of baseline gameplay quality: a golden ratio of gameplay competence to *good/badness* that is necessary to maintain a positive aesthetic experience throughout the many hours necessary for completion. Looking at the medium of film, the ability to maintain a consistently high *good/bad* quality even over ninety minutes is a bar held only by the peak examples of the phenomenon, to sustain that over several hours is a near impossible task. Instead, *Deadly Premonition*, at least while pursuing the critical path, primes the player with immediately recognisable forms of *good/bad* and then paces them out throughout in a way that allows them to flourish and remain surprising, while never frustrating or boring the player to the point that overshadows the pursuit of pleasure. Indeed, while we can conceive of a hypothetical *Deadly Premonition* which condenses these instances and impressions within a tighter timeframe, it is possible that without the surrounding negative space that the *good/badness* would become too busy and overwhelming to encounter from a distanced place. Another point to consider: when we look to classic *good/bad* example *The Room*, part of the uncanny quality comes from it appearing, if squinting, like a fully functioning film. The establishing shots are well put together, the cinematography and craft are held to a level of professionalism. If magnified out-of-context, these pieces may seem bland, but within the whole they only amplify how the pieces do not fit together – a distorted simulacrum of what we know to be a dramatic movie. For *Deadly Premonition* to be seen as normatively intended requires the extended length of play common among the genres it echoes, and between moments of *good/bad* we can see how these genres are meant to be expressed, which only elevates our sense that something is going terribly wrong.

While we initially dismissed, in the background section, the idea of *good/badness* being simply a large volume of displeasure, one thing to consider here is how much the proportion of *good* to *bad* to *good/bad* instances within a work dictate the overall reception. The Sammo Hung directed Jackie Chan vehicle *Mr. Nice Guy* bears the hallmarks of *good/bad*: An American movie written and produced by people with a moderate grasp of the English language, resulting in some bizarrely overdubbed dialogue delivered in an inhuman cadence. But the surrounding film, and our expectations of what

a Jackie Chan film should be, brackets the work in a space of genuinely skilled action. So, if *Deadly Premonition* were more technically proficient in its normative moments, would the *good/bad* portions be absorbed into the greater fabric of the game? Would they be appreciated as silly quirks, or even still, be perceived as genuine moments of brilliance and levity? Conversely, if 1998's *Metal Gear Solid*, and subsequent sequels, were less skilfully designed would director Hideo Kojima's idiosyncratic excesses be seen as laughably silly? Our definition of: 'unintended failure of aesthetic value qua X creates pleasurable aesthetic experience qua X' fits well for singular instances of *good/bad*, but for an entire work to be received as such requires much more than that neat description allows.

## 6 CONCLUSION

While the concept of *good/bad* proposes many questions about audience reception and judgements of aesthetic taste, little has been researched about the forms therein which allows the audience to communicate with the works in this specific way. Nor, despite some interest from popular media, has this concept been discussed with regards to play. We entered into this thesis with three major questions we wished to test: namely, what are the boundaries of *good/bad*? We use *Deadly Premonition* as a case study to examine these boundaries, as well as asking the further questions: do digital games fit within these boundaries? And: what forms exist within *Deadly Premonition* that make it such a heralded example of this category? *Deadly Premonition* as example offers insight into the concept of *good/bad*, drawing more clearly some of our assumptions, as well as creating more questions to be answered.

We started by outlining the overarching definition of *good/bad* as: ‘unintended failure of aesthetic value qua X creates pleasurable aesthetic experience qua X’, these pleasurable experiences tending to express themselves through our categories of *technical failure*, *uncanny failure*, and *idiosyncratic failure*. In close reading, we see a consistent pattern of normative values being unintentionally broken, usually expressed through genre conventions that are easily identifiable to our constructed literate player. We see how the ambitions of combining two broadly different gameplay structures leads to unintendedly uncanny outcomes, we see how driving physics not meeting normative standards leads to unexpected interactions, we see how idiosyncratic failures in sound design lead to a consistent impression of the creator’s intentions. Within the formal categories we constructed, we find ample points of example that can be clearly interpreted through these perspectives, as well as fresh insight into the benign violation and pacing of these instances. At this stage, these attempts at definition are too broad to completely avoid blurry boundaries (at what point of consistency can a *technical failure* be classified as *idiosyncratic*?), though seen as a singular exploratory interpretation, we can find value in how meaning is communicated when *Deadly Premonition* is lit in one very specific way, and, at first blush, these definitions connect to a wide range of *good/bad* works.

Viewing the overarching analysis, one weakness of our boundaries is the invocation of ‘pleasure’. We see great emphasis on juxtaposition in the text, deflating the intended tone with a discordant end result being ripe for comedic pleasure. Within *Deadly Premonition*, and many of the classic examples, this juxtaposition arises from a serious-minded

intentionality, grasping and failing for something of the dramatic or exciting in some form, and based on our reading thus far it would seem unlikely then that intentional comedy could be observed as *good/bad*, that a failed joke could be found pleasurable in the same manner. Looking back on our flirting with the text, instances that were not funny were unconsciously discarded from our pattern finding, despite the vague ‘pleasure’ being possible despite any lack of humour. Under different circumstances we could find valuable experience in the discomfort of a joke failing to land, or the purely analytical pursuit of *artifact emotions*, rather than the blunt instrumentation of laughter. But, when considering how these works are conventionally received, *good/bad* is overwhelmingly valued entirely because of the laughter shared, which, unless evidence of contradictory examples arise, would suggest that more precise language than ‘pleasure’ should be chosen to better reflect the necessity of comedy. However, on this end, this is the central issue of trying to understand the structural *hows* and *whys* of *good/bad*: it is very much like the old joke about analysing humour being akin to dissecting frogs, nobody laughs and the frog dies. What we can observe most clearly in our autopsy is that there is indeed some pleasure to be derived, we can see some of the qualities necessary, but there is still something elusive about why the idea of infinite cans of pickles makes us laugh while other failure does not.

A limitation of our chosen methodology is our inability to test these forms with no prior context, our own background knowledge as researcher and the background of our constructed literate player makes it impossible to know the extent to which priming the player effects their reception. Several times we have referred to the possibility of visual indications of a lack of budget and technical failures working as a more textual style of priming the audience for *good/bad*, but again without different methodology this would only be guess work. The constructed background of our literate player archetype, however, had clear impact on how we communicated with the work: in a distanced place looking at the structural building blocks of *Deadly Premonition*, it is difficult to find appreciation in how the norms are being broken without knowledge of genre forms and the contemporary games which are attempted to be imitated, and our close reading made reference to various games and genre conventions to help us understand what is being expressed to us through play. Even on a micro level, an unusually loud noise is not funny simply because it is loud, the surrounding context of design conventions and our intuited meta-narrative of authorial decision is what makes it funny.

Central to the application of meta-narrative is the idea of perceived intent, which has large impact on how we receive and understand *Deadly Premonition*. Throughout our close reading we can see effects of perceiving the forms through the lens of unfulfilled ambition, our understanding, and eventual reception, resting on the assumption that the action sequences are attempting to replicate *Resident Evil 4*, as example. We understand their artistic intentions, and we revel in their lack of success. This quality of intention being a necessary quality is a consistent feature throughout examples of *good/bad*, as well as past research, but we can stress test it by comparing our own reading of *Deadly Premonition* with its sequel. *Deadly Premonition 2: A Blessing in Disguise* shares many similarities with its predecessor, with one key difference being a new sense of self-awareness in its characters and dialogue. Rather than *Deadly Premonitions* strange melding of comedy and sincere melodrama we have a, counter-intuitively, more structurally straightlaced tone of consistent comedy. Gone too is the noted juxtaposition of limited animations that lent the cutscenes a digital-game-centric quality of *good/bad*. This necessity for a lack of self-awareness we found further establishes the Dyck and Johnson writings that we used as base, that there is: '[a] clash between an artwork's intended effect and its actual effect' (Dyck & Johnson, 2017, pg.5).

Along with this issue of intentionality, another key point in our conceptual exploration was McGraw and Warren's *Benign Violation Theory* of psychology, which had far greater influence in our reception than we had initially anticipated. This idea, that a violation of social norms needs to be expressed in a safe context for them to be deemed humorous, has been linked to *good/bad* before, and here we discovered a necessity when trying to understand the ubiquitous glitches that come in digital play. Comparing once more to *Deadly Premonition 2*, the technical failures being much less benign: the framerate of the open-world sections being so consistently bad as to be near nausea inducing, the quests being designed with an unpleasurable lack of conventional design norms. Whereas the original *Deadly Premonition* thrives in this goldilocks zone of technical failures being both distancing and silly while still allowing smooth progression through the game with little setback. The driving mechanics are broken *just so* to allow the player to accidentally slide into an old lady wherein an incongruous sound effect will play, and then the game continues without issue. As we theorised in the background section, the agential nature of play makes the feeling of failure an important factor to overcome in inducing pleasure, technical failure being more visceral when experienced in first-person, as opposed to

passively as with other mediums. And we find truth in how *Deadly Premonition* is successful in maintaining a benign level of agential experience.

Another issue we identified when applying *good/bad* to play was indeterminacy, that the way in which the player engages with the game, and what the game chooses to reveal, is not guaranteed and is difficult to reproduce. What we find from our playthroughs of *Deadly Premonition* is that, while much of the instances of pleasurable *technical failure* come as the result of accidental interactions and so cannot be essentialised, much of what makes the game warrant re-exposure come from these unique moments of the *uncanny* and *idiosyncratic* that permeate the experience throughout. While the wonky procedural landscape is conducive to benign failure, taken in isolation these are experiences common among budget-priced digital games. It is taken in the context of the surrounding package - the strange failures which arise from the uncanny mixture of gameplay modes which we heavily referenced, the interaction of play and the distancing sound design – that encompasses the core of what makes *Deadly Premonition* pleasurable. Indeed, there are many digital games for which indeterminacy is very much the point (any number of roguelike adventures would suffice as example here) but still find replicable aesthetic experience from the facilitation of their core structures. So too does *good/bad* play succeed in *Deadly Premonition* because the core structure of this uncanny mixture of gameplay loops allows it to flourish.

A closely related concept to indeterminacy is pacing. An initial worry we had when applying *good/bad* to play is the relative length of the experience, that the many hours of time spent, along with the agential nature, make finding pleasure in the holistic work untenable. Both indeterminacy and the necessary length of play would suggest a more optimal medium would be to clip the instances of *good/bad* into video compilations, placing the ‘play’ portion of ‘*good/bad* play’ into a vague zone between mediums. What we found in *Deadly Premonition*, however, was an overall importance in how these instances were paced out. A consistent, but intermittent, amount of *good/bad* is sprinkled within a baseline quality of play which, while still not quite conforming to our cultural horizons of genuine *good* per se, is benign enough to warrant continued interaction over the many hours. While more research would have to be done to understand the bounds of whether attaining this golden ratio is intrinsic to a *good/bad* reception, or simply the quality which establishes a work as lauded example of the phenomenon, in *Deadly Premonition* we see it as essential to meriting repeat exposure. Similarly, in *Deadly*

*Premonition*, we hypothesised that part of the value in the bizarre aesthetic experience comes from the uncanny familiarity it shares with more normative examples of the medium. From a distance it seems like a real game, but something just *feels off*. Again, further research would need to be done in comparison with examples where the horizons of our expectations are not just broken, but completely re-written anew.

Taking all of the above into consideration, we can see through *Deadly Premonition* how our overarching definition of *good/bad* works within the context of play: the normative forms of digital games are being subverted in a, presumed, unintentional way, and from this we find pleasure. Again, a broad enough definition as to almost be cheating, but in the margins we have found more illuminating detail: the text is bound to particular cultural reading strategies, and the eventual response will be dictated by the identified forms therein. What has been difficult to ascertain from our close reading is the concept of play in the abstract, much of the relevant data we could tease out of *Deadly Premonition* is inherently tied to other modes of expression. Not just play, but how the audio design of digital games can be *good/bad*. Not just play, but how the visual art is juxtaposed with the emotion of shooting mechanics. Not just play, but how the mechanics have been repurposed into an unusual narrative context. The distancing effect necessary for *good/bad* also blurs the boundaries. We can construct a hypothetical where, in a poorly reconceived game of football, all of the rules have been designed incompetently in such a way where unintentional chaos arises, but we still need to question whether this would truly only be pleasurable from a distance rather than actually within the act, whether the repeated mantra of ‘*How could someone think this is a good idea?*’ intrinsically causes one to step back from *play as play* and can only be appreciated as *play as meta-narrative*. Using *Deadly Premonition* as an example exacerbates some of these issues, particularly that, when approached holistically (and though we tried to isolate this in our analysis), a large part of the play is tied to the context of the b-movie charms of the narrative, which could arguably be considered *good/bad* even without the package surrounding it (or even, as discussed, simply genuinely enjoyable). And so, it is difficult to essentialise our findings to digital games as a whole, as perhaps these could all be a product of *Deadly Premonition* as singular work.

This concept of *good/bad*, reveals much about how we receive and respond to art and our shifting horizons of critical acceptance. As we referenced in the discussion section, it is possible to view *Deadly Premonition*, or other similar texts, through a more celebratory



lens: there is an attempt here at new combinations of gameplay, and there is an element of transgression: it is pleasurable on the account of not doing what art *should* do. But, due to being primed by the creator's lack of capital or education leading to technical errors, or a mocking of cross-cultural miscommunication, or the force of current aesthetic norms inducing a perception of intentionality that has been failed, these works have been gatekept from serious critical reception. We are taught culturally what art we should appreciate seriously, signifiers of what transgressions should be accompanied with beard-scratching and academic regard, and what transgressions should be laughed at as abject failures, despite still giving us pleasure. In discovering the forms of these works, and how the player receives them, we can observe the ways in which our horizons and acceptance of what art is supposed to be can shift and warp through time and literacy, which highlights the importance of further research into this topic.

This is just a preliminary exploration of this phenomenon, and there are still two major questions to be researched in more detail: firstly, when we looked to answer whether *good/bad* could be applied to play we were left with a resounding 'Yes, but...' Despite the agential quality and other potential pitfalls, we experience it as *good/bad*, yes it can be applied easily – But, the mixed-media presentation of digital games is rife with blurred edges where we cannot be sure this is because of the play or another medium entirely. As well as this, we have the more abstract goal of understanding the distance: distance in the Brechtian sense, distance in the sense of appreciating the work for its *artifact emotions* rather than the meaning it is trying to impart, distance in the sense of appreciating it for the meta-narrative of failed creators. So much distance from the play as to wonder whether we are appreciating the play at all. Secondly, while we criticised the vagueness of Dyck and Johnson's use of the *bizarre* as a demarcation line between *good/bad* and simple *bad*, we still have not found a constructive delimiting factor that causes it to be received as pleasurable. Being benign is necessary but not sufficient, being a literate reader is necessary but not sufficient. The exact quality of bizarreness is illusive and is left at 'I'll know it when I see it', which is unsatisfying as a conclusion. We have made here some first steps into examining these questions, the complete answers to which will fully illuminate what it means for bad to be good.

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