

What lurks in the margins: the ill-known short horror video games

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Although the videoludic horror genre has been defined by Triple-A games and that their importance is undeniable, especially with the revival of well-known series such as *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996-) and *Silent Hill* (Konami, 1999-) and the sustained releases of scary video games that make commentators announce “a new golden age of survival horror” (Arroyo, 2022), there exists an ongoing production of indie and homebrew video games in the margins of the dominant industry. And one might argue that it is in these fringes the genre is renewed. As we want to study these works, our talk will describe the bases of a research program on short horror video games that is underway.

The spark of the project comes from the replaying of *P.T.* (Kojima Productions, 2014) and one of the observations found in the deep dive in horror game design by Joshua Bycer (2022). On the one hand, the now famous interactive teaser created by Hideo Kojima for a new *Silent Hills* game that never saw the light of day has indeed “shaped a new age of minimalist psychological horror” (Potter, 2022, 38). While *P.T.* is an experience of about ninety minutes, it remains a very intense one. It has launched a trend of shorter scary games that once more (because it applies to *Alone in the Dark* [1992] *Resident Evil* [1996]) take advantage of a single location or of an old school haunted house; such as *Layers of Fear* (Bloober Team, 2016) and *Evil Inside* (JanduSoft, 2021). On the other hand, looking at what could be the ‘new’ horror, and underlining the success of *P.T.* and of *Five Nights at Freddy’s* (Scott Cawthon, 2014), Brycer introduces the subgenre of “microhorror” based on the concept of “microgame” lasting from a few minutes to around an hour (2022, 88).

Whereas films have always been the reference to describe the survival horror genre, such microexperiences might better be thought in relation to theater and to what the

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playwright André de Lorde called “terror pills” (1909, 25): one time, one place and one action, a condensed play that should leave the viewer staggering. As Lorde’s Grand-Guignol dramas form a motley collection of thrills and chills from the early XXth century, we have already been able to glance at some quite intriguing trends within this strange video game pharmacopeia. For instance, amongst the works we have isolated as being less than two hours made by indie creators, many relied on retro game graphics to create weird imagery (*Paratopic* [Arbitrary Metric, 2018], *Shatter* [Lovely Hellplace, 2020]) and/or displayed a mise en abyme of unhinged games or softwares (*The Enigma Machine* [Enigma Studio, 2018], *Bloodwash* [Black Eyed Priest & Henry Hoare, 2021]). Such features point to a corpus that reinvests videogame culture and history while staging it as an object of anguish. Where current remakes bring up to date the great survival horror of the past, these games draw strange and renewed visions from the very temporal gap that Triple-A productions try to erase.

This type of glimpse encourages us to examine these games. Besides, in the same way that the research on short films is underdeveloped in film studies (feature films remaining the main object of investigation), short video games are also left on the shelf in game studies; this is certainly the case for the horror genre. By focusing on games no longer than two to three hours, and by conducting formal analyses, the project will want to develop a framework of study based on theoretical tools developed in the Historical-Analytical Comparative System (Therrien, 2017) and in Perron’s *The World of Scary Video Games. A Study in Videoludic Horror* (2018). Therefore, it will wish to identify the most salient configurations of these indie and homebrew productions. Do they develop their own parallel subgenres? Do these games apply the same “scare tactics” (Perron, 2018) as the ones found in more conventional survival horror? How can they help us rethink and/or complement the aforementioned theoretical tools used to understand video game horror? These are some of the questions our talk will want to tackle by delving into the margins of mainstream survival horror games.

Keywords

Horror video games, survival horror, microhorror, short games, film, theater

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