

Gamification of Gothic

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Gothic themes, characters, stories, and environments can be found across a wide range of videogames, from puzzle games to multiplayer online games, and from shoot 'em ups to strategy games. With so many games drawing on the Gothic, why haven't game scholars been asking why games so frequently call upon it? Is this simply symptomatic of a decline in a humanities' approach to games and culture generally? More wide-ranging and focused work is certainly required as there is a major lack of sustained scholarly engagement with Gothic in videogames.¹ In an effort to begin the task of remedying this, and as part of a more extensive project,² this paper plots some initial coordinates of the domain, locating some of its major features, and provides a framework for evaluating the uses of Gothic in games. My

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

22 underlying agenda here is that a Gothic perspective on games provides a methodology that enables sharper critical insight into the aesthetic and pleasure economies of games. Under the shield of humanities I bring together Game Studies with Gothic Studies, both of which share an attentiveness to the formation and reception of certain types of texts and their “meaning potential”. Game studies and Gothic studies both carry and are constitutive of culture, and are laden with signification and organised around patterns. As Mikko Lehtonen puts it, “texts are not stuck on top of the rest of the world, as messages detachable from it, but participate in a central way in the making of reality as well as forming our image of it” (2000, 11). Gothic Studies evaluates texts, the way they are used and engaged with across a range of media and cultural practices. Game Studies focuses specifically on the formal specificities of games and the way they are played and engaged with. This paper calls on material from both provinces to fulfil its aim of understanding how videogame media shape the constitution of Gothic and my conviction that games have the capacity to add a new dimension to Gothic fiction’s arsenal of affects. This is therefore a paper that pivots on the verb “gamification”, which becomes therefore “remediation”: describing the process of adapting a text, activity, genre, mode or style into game form. While this paper takes the position that Gothic is always rhetorically constituted, it claims there are more coherent claims on the nomenclature of Gothic than others, and that these must be identified if we are to understand in what form Gothic appears (or disappears) in games.

Scholarly work on videogames has grown apace since the first flush of books and articles came out in the early 2000s. Setting out the terms of this new field of academic study meant that much of the foundational work adopted a generalist approach by necessity. Espen Aarseth (2003) and Jesper Juul (2001) for example focused on what was common to all videogames and in so doing privileged computing, rules and game mechanics over the descriptive, adjectival and representational aspects of

games. By contrast Janet Murray (2001, 2003) focused on games as story-based “cyberdramatic experiences”, an approach that helped spark the “narratology/ludology” debate.³ So dominant did this debate become that it obscured or discouraged other approaches to the academic study of games within the arts and humanities. This preoccupation with the (problematic) relationships between game rules and story, mechanics and representation, alongside the aspiration to ascertain the universal principles of videogames, left little scope for the investigation of more niche aspects. The situation was further intensified by the denouncement of work that mapped older methods and concepts, such as those developed within literature or film studies, onto games. Ignoring the value of comparative media analysis, Markku Eskelinen (2001) and Espen Aarseth (2003) pronounced that such endeavour ignored what was radically new and different about the medium of videogames.⁴ This combative milieu, where rhetoric served the creation of opposing poles, was not favourable to the study of something so *apparently* narratological and representational as the presence of Gothic in games, even though aspects of it appeared in a range of well-known commercial games around that time.⁵

More conducive to the study of Gothic in games is a “textual” approach, notably Marie Laure Ryan’s work on immersive,

- 3 Ludologists claimed that game mechanics were what defined games, not story. Now, most game scholars regard stories (where they are present) as important elements of the game-play experience that give meaning to the procedural elements of games. For a useful précis of the narratology/ludology debate and the building blocks of Game Studies see *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance and Game* (Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan 2004).
- 4 An odd stance to take as a comparative approach has proved very useful in efforts to reveal what is new and different, as is evident, for example, in Henry Jenkins’ work on transmediality and media convergence (2006) and that undertaken more generally within the Comparative Media Centre at MIT.
- 5 Examples include *Phantasmagoria* (1995), *Myst* (1993) and *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* (2001).

24 interactive worlds as texts (2001). Craig Lindley (2002) too advocated a more holistic approach to games, seeing story, rules and mechanics as unified whole, an approach echoed in Barry Atkins' *More Than a Game* (2003). Building on their earlier work and applying Roland Barthes' expanded notion of cultural artefacts as text, the introduction to *Videogame, Player, Text* (Atkins and Krzywinska, 2007) argued for the textual analysis of games. They did so not just in terms of story and representational gambits, but claimed code, rules and mechanics as intrinsic to the creation of games as "readable" textual artefacts. I would add that "reading" is often an integral part of playing a game, thereby acting itself as a core game mechanic. Atkins and Krzywinska also noted that games require a player/reader to kick them into action, thereby activating the semiotic, kinetic and affective energies that constitute player experience. Diane Carr extends this text/player synergy by arguing for the importance of taking into account the situated nature of play (2007), an idea developed more sharply in her work on disability and games (2013) which concentrates on the embodied player and the differences in play through the particularity of that embodiment.⁶ Graeme Kirkpatrick argues for a balance between semiosis and experience, suggesting that fixing exclusively on the "meaning" of games elides the fact that our pleasure in playing games, as with playing with a ball, may originate in something more plastic: "Video games do not have to 'mean' anything to be popular and their popularity can be intelligible without reference to interpretation" (2011, 17). The sum of such scholarship provides a more nuanced understanding of the complex relations between videogame, player and text, and it is symptomatic that the analysis in this paper attends to the experiential "doing" element of what it is to play a game in order to make its argument that games have the capacity to bring a

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

new dimension to Gothic - even if that capability is by no means fully realised. A more rounded approach to the study of games is preferred because it takes into account how games are made, how they are played and how they draw on and are constitutive of culture. Most importantly, the textual analysis deployed within this paper allows us to evaluate the types of intertextual patterns and rhythms used to produce and articulate Gothic in games. It further permits evaluation of the impact the characteristic features of digital games (such as interactive, cybernetic, haptic, kinetic and embodied dimensions) have on the way Gothic is actualised ludically. The movement away from an exclusive rules-centric take on ludology (the study of games) towards more diverse approaches has widened the horizon of Game Studies, thereby enabling work that is more focused on individual games and genres, as well as on topics such as gender and philosophy. This extended range provides the scope required for a study of Gothic gamification.

Every game is comprised of systems that define and manage a player's actions. Most videogames possess an interface and are composed of rules, progress arcs, and winning conditions. Each game tailors these elements according to its own design logic which in turn governs the disposition of a game's spatiality and perspective. Therefore, to progress within a game, a player must actively engage with the particular demands set for him or her by the design of a game's mechanics. These mechanics range from the simple to the complex, encompassing what a player has to do in a game as well as the various elements of computing behind delivering the interface controls and the game to the screen. The specific horizon of interactivity, the particular scope of feedback mechanisms, and the precise arrangement of the interface configure around the overarching game concept. In addition to the characteristics of a given gaming platform and the market intended for that game, all these factors play a critical role in the particular way that a game "gamifies" Gothic. It is methodological

- 26 consideration of these elements that provides part of the framework for critical evaluation.

Constructing a systematic theorisation of how the primary elements of a game treat their Gothic subject only proves productive and transcends taxonomy if an *evaluation* of that treatment is framed by a notional and coordinating sense of what is meant by Gothic. I began this work with an intuitive sense that there are vast variations in the effective, and indeed affective, uses of Gothic in games, and as work for this study progressed, that sense has intensified. Definition is therefore no simple task, especially considering that Gothic has spanned such a breadth of mood, time and location. As Fred Botting notes “[t]he diffusion of Gothic forms and figures [...] makes the definition of a homogeneous generic category very difficult” (1996, 14). In his discussion of the uncertainty in scholarly definitions of the Gothic, David Punter writes that there is a “significant resistance to canonization” (2000, ix), suggesting that there is no one text that substantiates Gothic. It is therefore largely agreed within recent scholarship on the topic that Gothic is brimful of vertiginous, acute tangents and perplexing ambiguities. While Platonic ideals are overly confining, it is nonetheless necessary to pin-up some principles if we’re to grasp what Gothic means for games. I do this from a broadly structuralist premise: games have a grammar. Game makers select elements from an established game grammar to construct a specific vocabulary for their game. The same can be said of Gothic. As with games, a set of conventions emerge cumulatively and proliferate from similar texts, sounding the structural beat to which story, style and theme dance. This does not mean an individual convention is stable or foundational however, and we can make useful application here of the structuralist axis of substitution and the plasticity that this affords to any meaning-producing system.⁷ A radical change to the overall

7 Applying with some caveats Saussure's axes of *langue* and *parole* to genre, Rick Altman writes, “language is ... dependent on a different selection of *paroles*” (1999, 174).

pattern leads to hybridity and unfamiliarity (and in some cases creates a change in grammar). Patrick Kennedy (n.d.) provides a historically and visually aware definition of Gothic into which core renderings of otherness and affect are folded: Gothic “employs dark and picturesque scenery, startling melodramatic devices, and an overall atmosphere of exoticism, mystery and dread” (Kennedy n.d.). From here we can ask what the formal properties of games bring.

Gothic’s capacity for constant and definition-bruising reinvention is evident through the ease of its adaptation into game form. Alongside Science Fiction, Gothic vocabulary is very commonly called upon by game developers making digital, blended (part digital) and other types of games (card, board, live-action and table-top games). It is perhaps most fully present in games that seek the status of art and pursue the creation of an experience of the sublime, such as *The Path* (2009) and *Dear Esther* (2012). It is also present in those games that utilise the sensationalist qualities of the supernatural to provoke a brooding sense of dread from a *player*, such as the case with the *Silent Hill* series (1999–present), *Fatal Frame* (2002), and *Dead Space* (2008). Gothic tropes also appear in games that do not seek primarily to discomfort players and which may be best defined as “cute”, as is the case with *A Vampyre Story* (2008) or the *Burtonesque MediEvil* (1988). With these games we have to scrutinise the function of their Gothic elements to evaluate their relationship with Gothic. Gothic is best regarded as central to a games overall concept where Gothic themes and devices are woven into story, game mechanics and representational style. In other games, representation and iconography might draw directly on Gothic but cannot be said to pervasively inform gameplay and/or story. *The Secret of Monkey Island* (1990) for instance makes use of the supernatural and Gothic tropes but any potential for Gothic affect is lost in favour of light-hearted playfulness. Investigating the edges of Gothic, where style might not be underpinned by a more pervasive means of producing the affect of apprehension, shows

- 28 how Gothic can be used to better understand games, as well as the conditions for its remediation in a game context.

Gothic Coordinates

Here I will propose five major coordinating nodes of Gothic in relation to games: character/story patterns; *mise-en-scène* and style; affect; entropy and sublime. Gothic is found in the way that these elements are handled or deployed. We can use these to evaluate the coherence of Gothic conventions (to pun on Sedgwick (1986)), as recipe for construction, or, as a method of critical appraisal.

An obliging place to start is the effect of Gothic on character and story patterns. Manuel Aguirre argues that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) makes use of the structural components of the hero's tale, reconfigured to stage the alternative journey of the "false hero"; "a hero who is not a hero" (2013, 11), the one who fails, who succumbs to entropy, the figure of tragedy.⁸ The presence of this structural pattern and its particular reconfiguration provides our first major coordinate for defining and evaluating Gothic in games.⁹ As Aguirre puts it, "Gothic abides by fairy tale narrative rules; it is only that Gothic individual who crosses over into the Other is no real hero [...] A key to Gothic thus resides in its centering the flawed character as protagonist [while] the standard hero of traditional tales is often demoted to a helpless or passive stance" (2013, 11). This latter point benchmarks a structural patterning that appears in relation to themes and economies of agency in a range of Gothic games and which provides a pivotal node in the process of judging whether the use of the grammar is simply replication or innovation. Examples

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

9 *Warcraft* (1994) and *World of Warcraft* (2004–present) players might recognise Arthas' journey from hero to false hero as one way that this game calls on and makes use of the Gothic.

of games drawing on false hero structures include *American McGee's Alice* (2000), *Planescape Torment* (1999), *Shadow of the Colossus* (2005/2006) and indie platformer *Limbo* (2010) as well as roguelike *The Binding of Isaac* (2011). The “false hero” is therefore emblematic of our first coordinate.

Our second coordinate is a particular use of *mise-en-scène* (and by extension visual style) which can be symptomatic and spatially locative of the journey of the “false hero”. Haunted, disquieted and uncanny spaces abound as “representations of estrangement” made strange not by some property of the space itself but as products of the cultural imagination (Vidler 1992, 12). Numerous games make use of Gothic locations, typically haunted houses, spooky woods, crypts and graveyards, derelict buildings, attics and cellars, without recourse to the “false hero” pattern, begging a question about the strength of a given game text’s claim on Gothic. Here we might include the common use of chiaroscuro, strong-contrast lighting to create visual drama, perhaps emblematic of an occulted moral order, or low-contrast lighting and/or muted colours to create a sense of grim griminess serving often to illustrate ruin or decay. Colour is important in the creation of Gothic atmospheres alongside baroque architectures, labyrinths, ruins and decay, and a strong sense of isolation. In addition, scenery that provides a strong sense of drama through relative scale as provided by the mountains and abysses encountered by the heroine of Radcliffe’s seminal Gothic novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and echoed, for example, in *The Shadow of the Colossus*. This latter feature locks-in perfectly with coordinate five. Many games made using 3D modelling tools create discrete objects for placement within the game field. These objects are therefore very heavily described and in some ways fighting against the ambiguity and spectrality expected of Gothic; particle effects therefore are commonly used in games that call on Gothic to make geometry – and therefore the visual plane – less solid and indeterminate.

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

Out of such configurations emerge different flavours of Gothic that have their own distinctive patterns: fairy tale Gothic, Victorian Gothic, American Gothic or (even) Weird Gothic, for instance. These patterns might be juxtaposed with other generic, affective or stylistic patterns to form hybrids or to create meaning through difference; Martin Wills, for example, argues that “Dickens uses Gothic to isolate certain spaces to mark them off” (2012, 22). In addition to which, there may be a largely uniform Gothic style yet with no use of a Gothic “false hero”, or there may be a Gothic treatment of a genre. There are therefore games that use some aspects of Gothic, demonstrating the value of Wills’ exhortation that, “[i]t is not *where* Gothic might be found that is important by *why* it is found, what it is employed to do” (Wills, 17; emphasis in original). Function therefore provides our fifth coordinate, helping us to evaluate the potential uses of Gothic in games; for example, localised use of Gothic helps reinforce the value of “home” in *Lord of the Rings Online* (2007–present), as it does in Tolkien’s works. Gothic is used in *World of Warcraft*

(2004) through the Undead race to demonstrate moral relativism and, in a different context, provides the means to fuse together an ambiguous mix of power and objectification in *Bayonetta* (2009/2010). Function is then our third coordinate.

Our fourth coordinate is the representation, simulation and/or production of a related group of psychologically affective emotional states: paralysis, claustrophobia, vertigo, alienation, estrangement, dread, discomfort and disorientation. Games often attempt to provoke such feelings for players and these may arise logically in some cases from game mechanics and story type, aligned often to the return-of-the-repressed structure as well as through the particular deployments of elements of *mise-en-scène*. Like adventure, comedy or romance, Gothic fiction carries a certain affective expectation, although many games that make cursory use of Gothic tropes have no intention to create a pervasive Gothic affect. In the context of games, incapacity, dread and claustrophobia (often rendered as a form of live burial) translate into the dimension of performance. In this sense Gothic redacts agency, using it to create sensation. Certainly sound also plays its role in heightening sensation, often helping to intensify panic or confusion. Games such as *Silent Hill* famously use sound to confuse and alienate, working against spatial and harmonious expectation to grate and grind on the player; fog is used to give a very palpable sense of claustrophobia, disabling the player from being prepared for what is coming and redacting the scope of player agency. The “dread” mechanic is also becoming a feature of Gothic-informed games, wherein events paralyse the player-character, as in *Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth* (2006) and *Lord of the Rings Online*. A Gothic game aesthetic is therefore correlated directly and powerfully with players through the (in)ability to perform.

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down –
And hit a World, at every plunge,

Entropy and the sublime is our fifth coordinate. You might already detect a disjunction between Gothic and normative game grammar and we need a detour here to get to this fifth coordinate. Games and puzzles are built on the notion that there is a solution, a winning condition, and many games that we might easily call Gothic, such as the *Midnight Mysteries* (2009–2012) series, are therefore caught up within a polarisation between the normative vocabulary of games, where players are catalysts for redemption, and the intractable sense of loss and entropy that characterises Gothic. There are however different ways that winning can be treated and contextualised while still making use of generic game vocabulary, providing thereby a means to develop a specifically Gothic winning condition that grows out of story and function. Here winning would not be triumphant, but instead melancholy, experienced as a loss of something or someone, as occurs in *Primal* (2003) where Jen fails to save her boyfriend and loses something of the vulnerability that makes her human, allowing her, however, to survive in a metaphysically disturbed and physically hostile world. The total rejection of any winning condition does of course challenge the very definition of a game.

Games do, though, have their own occulted forces: AI and the logic-based machinations of an invisible computational layer, as well as the Skinnerist arrays of feedback from which games are constituted. These can be exploited thematically and textually towards entropic ends when placed in a pervasive Gothic context. This resonant and modally located consequence might also help to explain the popularity of Gothic in games. In a Gothic context, a game’s algorithmic system potentially accrues a mysterious, godlike power that steers choice, behaviour and morality through arrays of determinants, and positive or negative reinforcements. This feature is used thematically and resonantly in *Bioshock* (2007) as well as in distinctly Gothic-Weird context of

The Stanley Parable (2011). The occulted layer that presides with such potency over a player's actions and which determines the extent and appropriateness of those actions provides then a key for unlocking the potential of a special functional bond between videogame form and Gothic, and which gives additional scope for a player to experience, in a ludic sense, the position of the false hero.

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

- 34 Games are repeatedly sold to players as affording agency and skill, where the deft practice of hand-eye coordination and acute timeliness is rewarded with positive feedback; these work in contradistinction to existential dread, claustrophobia, paralysing fear, and an inability to act that are constitutive of Gothic. Within the heroic and Vitruvian structure of many games, Gothic elements are overcome and mastered: the Other is compartmentalised and projected outward, the real of the body and difference subdued, and normative notions of human sovereignty reinforced.

Death in real life is a curtailment of agency (even if the effects of our acts might be felt after our demise). Many games deny the finality of real death, and become simply a prompt for the player to try harder to learn what the game requires for them to progress. Death is functional in games, rather than sublime. It is simply another feedback mechanism.¹⁰ In most games we are shown how we are defined by death: it is not entropic. A player-character “dies” and returns in the most un-Gothic of ways; they do not haunt the screen (although this might be said to be the case in *Dark Souls 2* (2014)).¹¹ In and of itself this return is literally “canny” rather than uncanny – canny in the sense that you get to retry and re-write your game history. In most games, and echoing Freud’s notion of the death drive (2003), a lack of progression is constitutive of how death signifies – and only calls on the Gothic because it redacts agency (*but* only temporarily and often as a stage on the road of progress). As such, in most games, death signifies non-metaphysically through an oscillating movement between action and inaction, and from stasis to progress (Krzywinska 2002). To prevail is to progress effectively, denying the sublime entropy that gives Gothic its fearful symmetry. The way in which death is realised, and how it is tied to a game mechanics, has then an impact on the realisation of Gothic, and

10 Cf. Markus Rautzenberg’s text in this book [editor’s comment].

11 Thanks to Jack Hackett for drawing my attention to *Dark Souls 2*.

a game's claim on the nomenclature. I would offer the following: the more meaning and intensity assigned to death, the more intently are activated our five coordinates and therefore the more intently "Gothic" a game can be deemed to be.

Games often draw on Gothic as a "marketing tool for writers anxious to gain access to popular reading audiences" (Gamer 2000, 29). Such patterns are clearly useful for the game industry which has relied on clear communication with its target market to get a return on their development investment. In game terms the use of ritualised textual patterns also has the function of manifesting the "magic circle", Huizinga's term for the way that we enter a different mindset and social relation when playing a game (1971). In this sense the conflation of "Gothic" and "game" becomes a fast track means of constructing the space of the Other, but this doesn't necessarily imply transgression. The mutability of Gothic may well imply change and movement, but it also makes it a great commercial ally. This is why the treatment of otherness and entropy is so important, if we are to retain Gothic as a critical methodology. Entropy and otherness must therefore be sutured into the fabric of the game through our other four coordinates. *This* Gothic can be mobilised to question reified assumptions and fictions that we use to shore up and solidify our existence and which are supported by the unproblematised agency and Vitruvian coordinates of many games. In some few videogames, with room for more, Gothic becomes a mode through which the very borders and capabilities of this new expressive medium can be explored. With their coded base easily manipulated by the cognoscenti, their branching narratives, and the provision in some cases of tools for adding to their content, games share with Gothic the appeal of collective myth and a type of immersion and participation that disturbs and transforms. Gothic pulls in a different direction from some of the normative features of videogames, particularly the idea that games can be "won" and where death equates to "trying again", yet games are

- 36 nonetheless pregnant with Gothic potential because they are predicated on agency, performance and progress.

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