

# Ghastly multiplication: Fatal Frame II and the Videogame Uncanny

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## ABSTRACT

Through a close-play and close reading of the game *Fatal Frame II*, we identify the uniquely game-based aspects of the uncanny in a horror game. Subsequently, we engage in an interpretation of the game which centers on a psychoanalytic model of the avatar and theories of the twin.

## Author Keywords

Horror, uncanny, twins, psychoanalysis

## FATAL FRAME 2: CRIMSON BUTTERFLY

If we can characterize the aesthetics of the uncanny as the familiar-made-unfamiliar, we can identify a *gamerly* uncanny: one activated by its implementation in a software-based virtual environment in a fictive game-world. We have played and studied the game *Fatal Frame II: Crimson Butterfly* [11], both as a unique work in its own right and as exemplary of the production of the uncanny in videogames.

*Fatal Frame II: Crimson Butterfly* (零 : 红蝶, or Rei Zero: Beni Chou in Japanese) was developed in Japan by Tecmo, Ltd., and released for the Sony Playstation 2 in 2003. The game, a sequel to the moderately successful *Fatal Frame*, received critical acclaim and enjoyed commercial success; another sequel was produced, and the game was ported to the Xbox in 2006.

The game's primary avatar (and protagonist) is Mio, a slightly-built young girl often accompanied by her identical twin sister, Mayu. The are walking through a dark forest in the opening sequence of the game, when the twins become trapped in a lost village, which was reported to have disappeared during a ceremony and somehow fallen "out of time." An atmosphere of quiet dread, melancholy and foreboding saturates the game, in which the player attempts to unravel the mysteries of the village's cursed history. The sisters become increasingly implicated in this traumatic history, dominated by a recurrent ritual of sororicide.

The twins use technologies of the uncanny: spirit radios, cryptic film reels, and especially a device called the *Camera Obscura*, which records the images of ghosts and,

in the process of transcribing their image, exorcises them. These are the mechanics of combat in the game: the player must load special spectral film and photograph the spirits that menace her. There are also spirits which pose no threat, but which still must be documented and exorcised to enhance the power of the player and to reveal important clues about the lost village. Mastering the use of this camera and enhancing, using various apparatuses, the power of this spectral photographic technology is central to the successful completion of the game. It is only when looking through the viewfinder of this game-fictional camera that the player has full freedom of motion in the round; it is at this point, too, that the perspective of the player shifts from the 3<sup>rd</sup> person to the 1<sup>st</sup> person view. The player cannot move when in "camera mode."

The reflection in the mirror and the uncanny double are of course integral to our argument relating the player and the characters of the game. However, the mirror as object has connections from Lacanian theory to game play of *Fatal Frame II*. The mirror of Lacan serves as the doorway between the imaginary and reality. In the game, the instrument of the uncanny is instead a camera, endowed with a special lens that can capture and kill spirits.

The fictional space of the lost village is that of a place on the cusp of modernity, temporally displaced during the Meiji era, when the project of the construction of Japan as a modern nation-state in the Western model was under way. The village, called All God's Village, is scheduled to be destroyed another spasm of modernization, the construction of a dam: "all of this will be gone soon," notes one of the sisters.<sup>1</sup> [2]

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<sup>1</sup> Dolar notes the unique characteristics of the uncanny as an aspect of modernity. In the pre-modern, the uncanny could be subsumed in the space of the sacred, the forbidden, what in modernity would be characterized as "supernatural," a space of representation which becomes unavailable in modernity. While this process is associated with the Enlightenment in Europe, in Japan it is accompanied by the encounter with the West: Europe and America, and their episteme, displace spiritual and supernatural beings as the primary objects of encounter. Thus, the uncanny has a valence of

Earlier readings of horror in videogames [5, 8] have cataloged some of the formal cognitive mechanisms behind the experience of suspense and fear in survival horror. Most of these rely on simple representational strategies, or on the use of surprise. However, there is a difference between fear in a broad sense, which may be a component of all videogames in which failure is a possibility—and the experience of the uncanny which informs a game such as *Fatal Frame II*.

Taylor [10] has already discussed sibling relationships with videogames broadly, recognizing the important media-specific (and software-based) aspects of the expression of the tropes of the sibling in these works. We extend such an observation to see the videogame uncanny not simply as a derivative or aspiring version of a filmic or literary one, but as a distinctively designed affective experience in which the textual elements are deeply entwined with the mechanical and spatial aspects.

### **The gamerly uncanny**

The idea of the uncanny in contemporary thought has its origin in a 1906 essay by Ernst Jentsch [4], which is cited and quoted by Freud [3] which he characterizes as that mental state created when one cannot distinguish between the animate and the inanimate, or the living and the dead: the effect is produced markedly by “waxwork figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata.” As a literary strategy, the author of the uncanny work of fiction defers the resolution of the ambiguity. Freud’s theory of the uncanny identifies this familiarity-in-the-strange as evocative of the return of the repressed in a form which challenges or contests the sense of the real.

This idea of wonder, the ‘intellectual uncertainty’ described by Jentsch and used by Freud to build his theory of the uncanny is crucial to the uncanny of the game. In the space of the videogame, the player is left to wonder about the fate of the avatar: her doll-like features, stilted movements and flashbacks of blood-spattered scenes leave one uncertain concerning the goal of the game. Is the goal to save this young girl and her twin, or are they far beyond that point? The gamer seems to be investigating the eventual demise of the avatar and her double.

Similarly, this avatar, Mio, oscillates between recognition and non-recognition of her twin, imagining her touch or presence in empty space. She often refers to an event from the past, trailing off just short of an apology to Mayu, hinting at a past trauma that tried the twin bond. Mayu becomes the uncanny double, an automaton, sensed to be an outsider by her very twin. In the parallel relationships of the game there is no certainty, optimism or trust, merely an instinct to continue.

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national, pre-modern identity and origin: the village that is the space of the uncanny is also atavistic, pre-modern, and reveals the alienation of Japanese national identity. The creation of place is, by necessity, the production of a familiar yet strange past.

Robotics scientist Masahiro Mori drew from this aspect of the uncanny, that which is created by imperfect simulacra of living bodies, as part of a continuum of discomfort called the *uncanny valley*, [7] a kind of repulsion or horror that arises in the interaction with artificial or mechanical faces and forms when a certain threshold of resemblance is crossed. The videogame simulacrum can trigger this anxiety of resemblance not only by visual mimesis, but in producing a repertoire of behaviors—especially responses to player input—that evoke the sense of the presence of another mind, when that simulacrum’s behavior is managed by the CPU of the videogame platform. When the simulacrum is the avatar, the apparent, yet incomplete, contingency of the avatar on the player’s input creates yet another space of the uncanny, evocative of Kleist’s impossible harmony between thought and form in his description of the marionette theater. [12]

What also distinguishes the gamerly uncanny from that of other forms has its basis on what might be called a *gamerly mode of attention*: a mode that is often relentless, from which withdrawal is impossible without inviting failure. [1] The gamer is obligated to actively decode and navigate a genre-constructed space of threats and secrets. This navigation is performed by a surrogate-body in that fictive space: the avatar-character whose activities depend on the player’s activities. The effort to overcome incoherence takes on a specific kind of urgency, one based on a possibility of death. While this tension characterizes many videogames, thematic and mechanical considerations ground this tension in dread, rather than mere excitement, in the horror game. The horror game thematizes and foregrounds the complicated relationship between these virtual bodies and the immersed situation of the player.

The aesthetic and textual aspects of the uncanny are worked out from within the framework of game-based operations. Not only is the affective receptivity of the player distinct from that of the reader or viewer, but the system of representations within the game are configured by the formal demands of videogame construction. Among the tropes of the uncanny is the element of compulsive repetition, the reluctant yet irresistible return to the site of anxiety or traumatic memory. As a player reloads saved games, returns to earlier visited stages in order to recover items, solve puzzles, and find clues, and even replays entire games to produce different endings, the task of compulsive repetition is partially delegated to the player. A dialogic tension exists between the aesthetic experience of the uncanny and the navigational and operational requirements of the videogame, as well.

### **TWINS**

The player experiences this uncanny valley primarily as Mio, and occasionally as Mayu, her identical twin. Mayu, keenly aware of the frightened and unkind spirits that haunt All God’s Village, relies on the protection and close eye of her sister, as she tends to wander off and become trapped

behind locked doors. She often wails to her twin, fearfully begging never to be left behind. As Mio, the stronger, elder twin, the player is thus charged with Mayu's rescue and supervision. Throughout the journey, scraps of literature are collected and slowly unveil the frightening reality that awaits twins in the Kurosawa mansion: in order to save the village from the rumblings of the displeased ghosts and chthonic spirits of the hell mouth<sup>2</sup>, a set of twins must perform the Crimson Sacrifice ritual in which the elder kills the younger by strangulation.

The twins trope is essential to the game narrative; at one instance Mio remarks to the gamer, "everything here seems to come in pairs." Indeed, an atemporal history of twin sacrifice unfolds, abstracting the identity of Mio and Mayu into a sibling paradigm of guilt, abandonment and horror. By including three additional sets of twins into the game narrative, and distinguishing them solely by their degree of success or failure in the Crimson Sacrifice ritual, the game authors activate a psychosocial commentary on twinning. The doubling of the subject viewed in the light of the Freudian uncanny reinforces this commentary: there is a blurring of self and other in the twin sibling situation in which the "you" and "I" is deconstructed incompletely, not entirely into two "I's".<sup>3</sup> The supposed psychic connection that twins share is placed paramount as Mio experiences visions through her sister, as well as the other elder twins previously involved in the ritual. The repetition of the ritual is mirrored in the recurrence of the twin set: there are absolutely no unique qualities required for participation in the Crimson Sacrifice aside from the biological anomaly, the double birth which binds the twins to this fate. This lack of uniqueness connects the four sets of twins throughout the story arc, as they attempt (or had attempted) to rescue themselves and each other from an inevitable demise.

Upon completion of the Crimson Sacrifice, one twin is killed and tossed into the hell mouth while the other lives on as The Remaining. The soul of the murdered twin is believed to become a crimson butterfly and remain within the village to ward off evil spirits. Yet, all in-game references to the ritual claim that *twins* are sacrificed. The legend behind this ritual claims that twins were at one time one being then born into two bodies, and only through soricide (or fratricide, in rare cases) may the two become one again and thus appease the hostile spirits beneath All God's Village. Furthering this special connection assumed to exist among twins, although the elder, stronger twin remains alive, their participation in the death of their sibling

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<sup>2</sup> Referred to in-game as "\*", as the very utterance or written expression of the term the villagers used for this site is believed to have the ability to cause devastation.

<sup>3</sup> Mitchell examines this concept of the two "I's" by exploring the Lacanian mirror phase and the Winnicottian mother mirror, attempting to extrapolate these theories to account for issues of identity in twins. She also notes that this exploration can lead to a problematic classification of one twin or identity as good, the other bad.

is itself a sacrifice, and the term is not restricted to the loss of life.

Grief over loss of a twin as a special psychological phenomenon has been investigated. Issues of survival guilt, as well as being a living reminder/representation of the deceased twin are central to Nancy Segal's study, in which she concludes that twin loss is especially traumatic because it upsets the implication that twins should exit the world in the same way they entered: together. [9] This also relates to the game of our discussion: togetherness of twins, the constant pleading not to be left behind among all sets of twins in the game are motifs that hint at this special grief. Avoiding abandonment and separation becomes the superior goal: taking precedence over the survival of only one twin.

The connection of the avatar to the player will be explored later in this text, yet it is useful to note the concept of sameness and difference with regard to the gaming situation as the player, through Mio, is implored to save the uncanny "I." There is an oscillation between same and other that occurs between twins is mirrored in the player/avatar situation. In the game experience and through the progression of the narrative this bifurcation/unification strangeness is intensified as the player becomes increasingly aware of the differentiation of Mio and Mayu, especially since Mayu's role in the narrative is relatively mysterious. Mio as the avatar is better understood by the player, yet the pull to rescue her double drives game play. According to Juliet Mitchell, "twins also demonstrate the mutability of psychic positions, the play of sameness and difference. From birth, even in an identical 'clone' type twin, there are differences; life experiences will facilitate differentiation. However, pulling in the opposite direction is the tug of identificatory processes - as a twin becomes more different, both also become more alike." [6] The non-unique twin sets, rendered as doll-like in the game animation, allows for the positive transference from the player to the avatar, producing empathy. The promises made between each set of twins to never abandon the other transfers to the player, and the guilt of failure to protect the double enhances the emotional space of the game. The younger, weaker twins are addled with abandonment anxiety, the elders with obligation.

For Lacan as well as Freud, encountering the double seems to reside at the crux of psychoanalytic theories of the uncanny. What Freud called *Unheimlich*, Lacan termed *extimité*, a place where 'the most intimate interiority coincides with the exterior and becomes threatening, provoking horror and anxiety.' [2] This anxiety is linked to death, as the mirror is the identical image, the repetition, which cannot be subjected to pain or death, it exists without a body. Dolar states that the double introduces the death drive, and Freud before him theorized the double-effect of encountering the double. What at first may seem to be an insurance against death in the end becomes the 'uncanny harbinger of death.' [2, 3]

Throughout the game we are introduced to several story arcs that eventually conflate into the meta-theme of twin sacrifice. Akane and Azame Kiryu are the daughters of a gifted dollmaker who carry out the Crimson Sacrifice at a very young age, approximately seven years old. Akane is unable to successfully strangle her sister and a priest is enlisted to assist her. After the ritual is completed, Akane is devastated and withdrawn, unable to cope with the trauma of killing her sister, the loss of her sibling and the resulting guilt. Her only consolation is a lifelike Azame doll created for her by her father, which eventually becomes possessed by the “evil” soul of the dead twin.<sup>4</sup> Azame’s death thus allows for another instance of twinned identity: the Crimson Butterfly she becomes after the ritual can be viewed as the “good” soul, trumped by the “evil” soul which possesses the doll and controls Akane. Azame and Akane are enemies in *Fatal Frame II* and attack Mio, challenging the player to distinguish between the doll twin (who takes no damage) and the spirit twin (who must be beaten to advance in the game.)

Sae and Yae Kurosawa’s situation parallels that of Mio and Mayu. They attempt to escape the ritual, although Sae believes that they should complete it for the good of the village. Yae, the older twin, cannot bear the thought of killing her sister, and continues to run and save herself although Sae has fallen and is eventually recaptured by the villagers. Sae, in the ultimate act of self-sacrifice, hangs herself in attempt to perform the Crimson Sacrifice alone, with catastrophic consequences that leave All God’s Village in the frozen, eerie state of traumatic memory in which it is discovered by Mio and Mayu. It is Sae who returns from the hell mouth to slaughter the inhabitants in an apocalyptic act called “The Repentance”.

The only set of male twins we meet are Mutsuki and Itsuki Tachibana, whose ritual takes place one year before that of Sae and Yae. These Altar Twins<sup>5</sup> fail to successfully complete their ritual, which they carried out in hopes of saving close friends (and female twins) Sae and Yae from the horrific fate. Itsuki, The Remaining, is dedicated to saving Sae and Yae and appears in the story to assist Mio in her rescue of Mayu and their subsequent escape. He refers to Mio and Mayu as Yae and Sae; the differentiation of the

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<sup>4</sup> There is an interesting correlation here with art of the Nigerian Yoruba and the culture’s cult of twins. “one of the best-known art forms of Yoruba art is the small, carved twin figures called ibeji. Twin births are high among Yoruba people, and since infant mortality was high, many of the twins died at birth. Since multiple births are thought to be somewhat animistic, and because twins are thought to have supernatural powers, the death of a twin would require the parents to seek the counsel of a diviner. The diviner might suggest that the parents make special sacrifices to the dead twin(s) and possibly paint certain patters on their local shrine. Or, he might tell them to have an ibeji figure carved to represent the dead child.” George A. Corbin, *Native Arts of North America, Africa and the South Pacific: An Introduction*.

<sup>5</sup> “Altar Twins” is the term used to refer to male twins who carry out the Crimson Sacrifice. Female twins are considered the superior sacrifice and are termed “Twin Shrine Maidens.”

twin pairs is beclouded by this uncorrected mistake and black/white/red flash screenshots of Mayu changing identities with Sae. Even Mio becomes confused by the lack of distinction, and the player is left completely in the dark. The cold reality of the Crimson Sacrifice is replayed: the individual identities of the participants are entirely irrelevant. Mio and Mayu act as agents of redemption in the game, they atone for the failed rituals of their predecessors by completing the ritual entirely by choice, thus calming the hell mouth and simultaneously redeeming Itsuki and Matsuki of their responsibility in Sae’s death.

### AVATAR, DOLL, AUTOMATON

This overwhelming sense of responsibility is projected onto the player through the mechanism of the avatar. When the player controls Mio, her sister usually follows behind her, but at a slightly slower pace: it is revealed that in a childhood accident, Mayu had injured her leg, and walks with a limp. In some sense, Mio can be said to be Mayu’s “player,” as Mayu’s movement is about as contingent on Mio’s, as Mio’s is on the controls of the player. Incomplete control pervades the game: like many horror games, *Fatal Frame II* offers almost no extra-diegetic camera control when navigating the virtual game space. The mapping between player view and avatar spatial deixis is controlled by the game software. The resulting deictic incoherence troubles the player’s identity with the avatar, and foregrounds the player’s inconsistent agency. This restriction of the free agency of the player, thought of as a liability in other genres, is a constitutive feature of horror games such as *Resident Evil*, *Clocktower*, *Siren*, and *Fatal Frame*.

The videogame avatar can be viewed as an adaptation of the doll/sibling connection theorized by Mitchell, wherein “dreams and play have in common the personification of aspects of the self: one plays and dreams others as the self and the self as others; in both cases the personification is both other and self—a doll is one’s baby or one’s little brother or school mate, all of whom will be both who one perceives these real or imagined people to be and the aspects of oneself one has used to understand them, one’s identification with them.” Just as Mio is driven by guilt and responsibility for the destruction of her sister, so the player has been entrusted with the care of the frail avatar.

In his study of the uncanny, Freud connects Jentsch’s theories to infantile psychology and secondary narcissism by stating that children cannot always distinguish between animate and inanimate. Women patients have told Freud that as children they felt with the appropriate stare they could bring their dolls to life. [2]

Freud also links the uncanny effect of the automata to independent activity (his example is a dancing pair of disembodied feet). In *Fatal Frame II*, activity control remains mostly with the player. Yet, during cut scenes or other in-game instances of heightened plot tension in the game (such as when Mayu is taken, disappears or

reappears), this control switches to the computer and the avatar becomes a doll in control of its own movements. This raises the anxiety level of game-play, intensifying stress in the player as the unfolding of the narrative, always uncertain, is now completely in the control of automata. It is “spooky” to accept control of and responsibility for this doll/human, and yet spookier to have that control momentarily taken away then thrust back.

At the same time, the avatar risks activating the sense of the uncanny as its agency remains ambiguous. It can be understood as a prosthetic self in virtual space, exhibiting an uncanny efficacy in the spectral world of the game; it can also be perceived as standing in relationship to the player, pleading, like Mayu, not to be abandoned, demanding union with the player in the gestural language of gameplay.

### CONCLUSIONS

The videogame produces the effect of the uncanny by generating an operational and affective complicity. It is neither sufficient to take the experience of the uncanny in *Fatal Frame II* as a simple transmedia migration from literary or filmic effects, nor do we obtain a rich reading simply by locating it within the logics of the survival horror game genre. Play and reading are intertwined and simultaneous. The player’s own impetus to complete the game becomes the mechanism by which the uncanny is repressed, in the interest of operational success, only to arise anew.

Reflecting on this idea of responsibility and anxiety as consequences of beginning game play, it is also useful to consider the various roles player, avatar and twins take on throughout the story’s progression. Mio, controlled by the player, follows Mayu, who compels the player to continue through investigations and inquiries that elucidate little and bring more horror. Considering the ending of the game in which the awful events of All God’s Village are kept waiting for repetition due to twin sacrifice and murder, we can think of the double as one who “produces two seemingly contradictory effects: [s]he arranges things so that they turn out badly for the subject, [s]he turns up at the most inappropriate moments, [s]he dooms him to

failure...in the end, the relation get so unbearable that the subject, in a final showdown, kills his double, unaware that his only substance and his very being were concentrated in his double[2]. Upon completion of the game, the player is left with no increased understanding or reward; it is unclear whether survival or a “happy ending” was achieved. The avatar could possibly be dead. Instead, finishing the game provides relief from responsibility and escape from its horrors.

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