AI Nightmares: Videogames and The Uncanny Valley in Images Generated by Artificial Intelligence

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What do machine-generated images want? "Imagined" by databases and fueled by underpaid workers (Beiguelman, 2021), the images produced by Artificial Intelligence display, at least for now, peculiar characteristics arising from their machinic calculations: deconstructed and reassembled faces that appear distorted and blurred, with unnaturally elongated smiles, multiplied arms, and deformed hands, often containing an endless number of fingers on unknown appendages (O'Meara and Murphy, 2023). These features bring AI-generated images closer to what we call "body horror," a long-standing element in horror genre films, video games, illustrations, and photographs, evoking feelings of disgust and strangeness (Santaella and Braga, 2023).

When applied to game design, AI-generated content can amplify these unsettling qualities, resulting in distorted and dehumanized aesthetics that align with themes of body horror, the uncanny valley (Banks, 2020) and body dysmorphia. While such designs may evoke strong reactions, the use of AI raises critical concerns about the ethical and creative implications of delegating artistic processes to algorithms.

What, then, does the "eye of the machine" see? The gaps it reveals highlight the complexity of subjectivity that permeates images and artistic creations—the becomings, the materialities, desires, and autonomy embedded within them (Ascott, 2009) (Alloa, 2015). Despite their rapid and remarkable advancements, AIs still often struggle to replicate the depth of human sensitivity, often resulting in limited representations that lack meaning and nuance. The ongoing pursuit to improve these tools reflects a human restlessness that challenges the boundaries of technology and finitude,

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creating images that gaze back at us, even though they are not yet made in our likeness.

This article argues that the use of AI in game design, analyzed through the lens of Visual Culture and sociological studies, not only perpetuates exploitative labor practices and aesthetic homogenization but also diminishes the creative depth of human-centered design, ultimately reshaping how we perceive and interact with games and beyond.

To deepen the theoretical discussion, the article analyzes three short cases that revolve around AI-generated visualities, employing elements of Visual and Digital Culture as a qualitative methodological approach. The Self-Narratives methodology (Da Silva and Rios, 2018) is integrated into this process to establish unique perspectives on the interplay between the authors' experiences with games, bringing to the written production a richness of detail that can be compared to the experiences of other players gradually immersing themselves in the imaginative universes created by Artificial Intelligence in contemporary audiovisual media.

The cases analyzed include the following electronic games:

(i) Camp Fire Cozy Friends (developed by Campfire, 2024), a classic example of AI-generated hands and the proliferation of imagery as a business model.

(ii) The Purring Test (developed by TED Games and Alex Rosenthal, 2024), a guessing video game where the player is invited to delve into the "mind" of an AI cat.

(iii) Oasis (developed by Decart, 2024), an open-world AI-generated game featuring bizarre artifacts such as misshapen livestock and staircases leading nowhere, with each frame generated based on what the AI model imagines should follow the current frame it perceives.

This work aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between AI-generated images and body horror themes, addressing the aesthetic, social, and ethical implications of their application in digital game design. The critical analysis of these cases seeks to expose how AI can unintentionally amplify feelings of discomfort, alienation, and strangeness when applied to game design and how this can alter the player's perception. Furthermore, the results of this investigation are expected to reveal how the growing reliance on algorithms in creating digital content may negatively impact artistic practices and the creative depth of human-centered design in contemporary game development.

Keywords

Artificial intelligence, Horror, Visualities, Body horror

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