

(Dis)Embodiment: Trans Hauntings in Kitty Horrorshow's Corpus

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Keywords

Trans, haunting, transition, horror, eerie, Kitty Horrorshow

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

“MY REBIRTH HAS MADE ME UNDEFINABLE AND INFINITE/ I SHED THE PRETENSE OF FORM AND BECAME PERFECT/ I AM AT ONCE THE QUEEN AND THE KINGDOM” (*Rain, House, Eternity*, Kitty Horrorshow, 2015)

This extended abstract explores trans embodiment in play, raising the visibility of trans developers in the medium, and reciprocally generating new perspectives on how players interface with games more broadly. It responds to Ruberg’s call for a new wave of disciplinary investment in Trans Game Studies (2022) through a methodology of audio-visual-haptic (Keogh, 2018) and textual (Mäyrä, 2008) analysis of the little-researched corpus of trans horror developer Kitty Horrorshow, combined with autoethnographic reflection. This research haunts, and expands on, recent scholarly attention given to her most famous work *Anatomy* (2016) by Christine Prevas in her exploration of the glitch as a mechanic of trans speculation (2023) and Amy LeBlanc from a Gothic and Disability Studies perspective (2024), to here argue for a more general model of trans (dis)embodiment in games. Through first-person exploration of minimalist 32-bit architecture that exploits the uncanny nature of houses as both homely and unhomely/unheimlich (Vidler, 1992), her players are confronted with themes such as the ineffable, the inhospitable, the trace and the self-negating: low-poly sci-fi ruins haunted both by the present absence of any visible monstrous threat, and the disembodied cursor of the player.

Kitty Horrorshow explores the darker affects of transition through strategies of displacement, where the player’s body is externalised and projected onto a world which they roam as a weightless, invisible and mute avatar. In *Rain, House, Eternity* (2015) and *Anatomy* (2016) we respectively explore a temple that was once a body and a house which becomes a body as an avatar *without* a body, pulled through the space by evocative trans-allegory narratives. At the same time we are also pushed away by forced game reboots, extending even to fictive warnings and deliberately obtuse installation paths in her other works. Unlike tokenistic practices of inclusion which often afford minorities a flat/disembodied presence in games (Russworm, 2018), touristic players a problematic assumption of empathy games’ transparency (Pozo, 2018), or what Andrea Long Chu describes as reductive mainstream progressive narratives of trans affirmation (2019), Horrorshow’s work’s complex (dis)embodiment forces us to reckon with the haunting qualities of transition which resist self-understanding of trans ontology and temporality. While Jones and Zawacki

Proceedings of DiGRA 2025

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demonstrate a growing interest in haunting ludic environments by analysing how NPCs/assets (Jones, 2021) and glitches (Zawacki, 2024) can haunt players, I argue we need to consider how the player also haunts. I analyse Horrorshow's player position as what I term 'diapolar haunting': a condition of both haunting and being haunted that articulates the ambivalent present-absence and absent-presence of the trans player both within and outwith games.

This diapolar model of haunting-and-being-haunted-by games combines Fisher's framing of the Weird 'presence' and Eerie 'absence' bordering horror (2016) with Derrida's hauntology (in opposition to ontology) in which both past and future haunt the present (1993), and builds on Trans Studies explorations of haunting such as Koch-Rein's concept of a 'splitting' of temporalities in trans identities (2014) and Delafosse's autoethnographic discussion of lost loved ones and future precarity by which transphobia haunts us (2024). In terms of the Western socio-cultural structuring of trans existence I see a resonance between all these accounts in the double-binds of haunting, a two-way process where, as Hunt would put it, transness troubles the gender binary at the same time as being plagued by it (2021). Indeed it's hard to escape ghosts in trans discourse. In their analysis of the political weaponisation of transphobia, Butler has recently argued that gender is used by reactionaries as a deliberately paradoxical "phantasm" capable of containing and redirecting the anxieties of neoliberalism by displacement (2024). From my own experience as a trans player, I am both haunted by my pre-transition self and my aspirational future self in ways that disorient being and its relation to time as well as complicating (the often ill-defined and problematically assumed concept of) 'immersion'.

Immersion, critiqued by Salen & Zimmerman (2004) and Soderman (2021) as falsely (and historically contingently) premised and Calleja (2011) and Keogh (2018) as reductive and better described by more nuanced multi-faceted and cyborg models, is rendered weird and eerie by Horrorshow's haunting designs. Resonating with what Lavery describes as the strangeness/weirdness of transition (2022), I argue trans players oscillate between presence and absence in life and in games, and from both the direction of trace pasts and speculative futures as we construct/deconstruct the self through play. While Keogh productively reconfigures the player position as cybernetically both before and behind the screen (2018), this project will investigate the idea that, informed by a trans perspective, players can be in both positions and neither simultaneously.

Horrorshow renders this explicitly by implicating us as ghosts in unwelcoming empty architectures, and in worlds where our character's past self is responsible for an apocalypse we must live in (*Hornets*, 2015), or the game appears broken in its deeply buried executable and acid-coloured assets (*000000FF0000*, 2015), or forcibly reboots (*Anatomy*, 2016). Cumulatively we are made to feel both outsider and insider but also a paradoxical non-person nowhere, treading weird-fiction non-places (Augé, 1992) of generic and repetitive low-poly temples with a minimal mobile player camera, the weird and eerie interplay of outside and inside (Fisher, 2016: 10).

The player here experiences transness as both inaccessible and inescapable, and digital play is exposed as a diapolar haunting that is highly affective but neither an escapist fantasy nor a corporeal involvement so much as a push and pull of presence and absence.

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