Horror Videogames and the Uncanny

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the uncanny dimensions of avatars and gamespaces in survival horror videogames. The avatar's combination of animation and lifelessness personifies Freud's notion of the uncanny. Simultaneously, the cybernetic interaction between player and machine, whereby the digital figure appears to act with autonomy and agency, unsettles the boundaries between dead object and living person. Spaces in survival horror games characterise the uncanny architecture of horror films and literature. Many suggest the unsettling psychological disturbance lurking behind the homely and the familiar. A recurring aspect of survival horror combines the investigation of a protagonist's origins, a return to the family home, and the exploration of gynecological spaces – blood red corridors, womb-like caverns, bloody chambers – reproducing what is for Freud the primal site of the uncanny.

Author Keywords

avatar, cyborg, gamespace, psychoanalysis, survival horror, uncanny

This paper explores uncanny aspects of avatars and spaces in survival horror videogame. As Diane Carr asserts, 'games position and address their players through various perspectives, modes, channels, menus, inputs and outputs,' suggesting 'it would be a mistake to try and impose a single model on to all avatar-player relations' [1]. To avoid such generalisations, this paper is largely focused around avatars in survival horror videogames, a genre described by Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al as a hybrid category where 'the player controls a character who has to get out of some enclosed place solving puzzles and destroying horrific monsters along the way' [4]. Notably, this definition foregrounds feelings of entrapment and enclosure, evoking a sense of being buried alive, an experience which Freud compares to the intrauterine experience [5], and a feature of the survival horror genre which is discussed below.

A history, albeit partial and selective, of the videogame industries might observe the increasing move towards three dimensional photorealistic depiction of the human form in the design of videogame avatars. This is evident in the move from a lifeless bat in Pong, to Pacman, to Mario, to Lara Croft, whose increasingly lifelike design is the focus of much comment within the popular press and online gaming community. Across survival horror can be observed a movement from *Sweet Home* (1989) to *Resident Evil 4* (2004) and *Silent Hill Homecoming* (2009) where playable characters evolve from being represented using a two-dimensional top-down perspectives, to fully three dimensional figures realised with complex texturing and lighting effects. In this respect the avatar has increasingly assumed qualities of the uncanny in its close visual, auditory and perambulatory approximation to the human form – the sense of disquiet which Freud observes is produced when 'an inanimate object becomes too much like an animate one' [5]. At the same time as becoming increasingly lifelike, there remains something unavoidably lifeless about the avatar. There is a robotic repetitive quality to their movements – they are, in many ways, virtual puppets. Avatar animation, like the use of cycles in cartoons 'draws upon a library of short, pre-rendered animated sequences…' which are 'combined and recombined in the real-time of the gameplay' [15]. To cite the short story from which Freud's notion of the uncanny draws inspiration, a female avatar like *Haunting Ground*'s Fiona: '"seems to us... Strangely stiff and soulless. Her figure is symmetrical, so is her face, that's true enough, and if her eyes were not so completely devoid of life... She might be considered beautiful... Her step is peculiarly measured; all of her movements seem to stem from some kind of clockwork... She seems to us to be playing the part of a human being, and it's as if there really were something hidden behind all this."' [7].

The drive towards producing avatars which look like living people within third person game genres is consistent with the figure's function as a surrogate for the player within the virtual world of the videogame. The avatar represents the 'I' on the screen. It constitutes the means by which the gamespace is engaged with, and acts as the focal point for the player's sense of embodiment within the virtual space. Jon Dovey and Helen Kennedy discuss ways in which players are 're-embodied' – given a virtual sense of presence within the gamespace – through the game interface, and the videogame avatar [3]. Simultaneously 'I', 'he/she' and 'it', Bob Rehak applies Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to videogames in his discussion of the 'unstable dialectic' between player and avatar [12], which exists as both self and other. Avatars' combination of

life and lifelessness personifies the uncanny as described in Freud's famous paper. Moreover, the cybernetic interaction between player and machine, whereby the digital figure appears to act as though imbued with life, and the player appears to become more machine-like, unsettles the boundaries between dead object and living person. Donna Haraway in her seminal 'Cyborg Manifesto' describes 'a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction' [6]. The fusion of mind, body and tool which Haraway observes taking place within post-industrial cultures reflects the union of player and avatar's physical movements in videogame play.

While this erosion of binary division is celebrated by Haraway, the sense of immersion, transformation and re-embodiment experienced through videogame play resonates with the unsettling dimensions of Freud's uncanny. This dynamic may explain the ambivalent responses and discourses which videogames evoke. The utopian pleasures of merging with the machine conflict with a sense of erosion of self as players become cyborg-like through engagement with the videogame apparatus. A tirade by Boris Johnson, cited in James Newman's *Playing With Videogames*, vividly expresses this uneasiness as he writes:

> We demand that teachers provide our children with reading skills; we expect the schools to fill them with a love of books; and yet at home we let them slump in front of the consoles. We get on with our hedonistic 21st-century lives while in some other room the nippers are bleeping and zapping in speechless rapture, their passive faces washed in explosions and gore. They sit for so long that their souls seem to have been sucked down the cathode ray tube.
>
> They become like blinking lizards, motionless, absorbed, only the twitching of their hands showing they are still conscious. These machines teach them nothing…
>
> Boris Johnson, 'The writing is on the wall – computer games rot the brain' *Daily Telegraph*, 28/12/2006 – [10]

The avatar is not only uncanny in appearance; it also has an uncanny relationship with the player. This is further reflected in Freud's discussion of the function of the double in the primitive and contemporary imaginations [5], a dimension of videogame play discussed by Carr in relation to *Silent Hill* [1]. The videogame avatar produces a sense of the double as a primitive or surmounted 'preservation against extinction' being endlessly destroyed and resurrected throughout any game session. Simultaneously, the avatar/player relationship reflects the later function of the double in subsequent internal processes, in which the

player represents the self-critical conscious viewing the avatar/ego from a displaced and superior position.

I shall now consider the architectural dimensions of the uncanny in survival horror videogames.

Survival horror games take place across a range of domestic locations common within the horror genre: haunted houses, residential areas, gothic mansions, corresponding to the first definition of *heimlich* as 'belonging to the house' [5]. Many of these spaces personify the 'architectural uncanny' as discussed by Anthony Vidler [14]. Indeed, what might be considered the first survival horror videogame made in 1989 for the Nintendo Entertainment System in which a group of protagonists investigate a haunted mansion, is titled *Sweet Home*; while twenty years later the most recent *Silent Hill* game is *Silent Hill: Homecoming*. Many authors consider the relationship between videogames and architecture. David Marshall [9], for example, writes about the 'interactive architecture' of games. Steven Pool locates videogames in an artistic tradition of 'imaginary architecture', suggesting: 'If architecture is frozen music, then a videogame is liquid architecture' [11]. Henry Jenkins, draws on Pool's perspective when he writes: 'the future art of games may look more like architecture or dance than cinema' [8]. The centrality of architecture in videogames corresponds with a similar prominence in relation to the uncanny, evident in Vidler's emphasis on 'the role of architecture in staging the sensation [of the uncanny] and in acting as an instrument for its narrative and spatial manifestations' [14].

Architecture consequently features highly in the production of survival horror videogames' chilling effect. These are places which confuse and confound: mazes of rooms and corridors filled with traps, dead ends and locked doors which the player must navigate. This characterises Vidler's 'first relationship of the uncanny to the spatial and environmental, that of "orientation" of "knowing one's way about"' [14]. Notably, as players learn their way around these initially-strange environments such spaces lose their uncanny resonance. As Freud himself observes: 'the uncanny would always, as it were, be something one does not know one's way about in. The better orientated in his environment a person is, the less readily will he get the impression of something uncanny in regard to the objects and events in it' [5]. Survival horror videogames also tend to be set in the domestic and the homely. They exist in what Freud called 'the world of common reality' [5]. The castle of *Haunting Ground* is full of winding corridors, bedrooms, bathrooms and domestic details: a nursery full of dolls, a library, a kitchen, a dining room. This is the place which Fiona, the game's playable protagonist, comes to realise is her family home. The Himoru Mansion of *Fatal Frame* is characterised by 'an uncomfortable sense of haunting' [14], as locked doors can only be opened by photographing apparitions which appear elsewhere in the house. The small

town of Silent Hill, a space characterised by *unheimlich* mist or 'hill fog' [5], is both familiar and unfamiliar. It is a place of white picket fenced houses and corner cafes, motels, petrol stations, apartment blocks and parks. There is a Burger Bar, a gift shop, a theatre. A great deal of attention has been paid to make Silent Hill as banally familiar as Bedford Falls, or Twin Peaks, or *Blue Velvet*'s Lumbertown. A key dynamic of *Silent Hill* is the shift from this ordinary space to a dark doppelganger other world where walls become covered in dirt and rust, floors are transformed into rotting scaffolding, corridors are now littered with soiled mattresses and broken wheelchairs. The familiar becomes unfamiliar. Moreover, the eruption of these nightmarish worlds of sickness, childhood memories, and psychological disturbance constitute the 'sense of a once-buried spring bursting forth unexpectedly, of the *unheimlich* compared to a disquieting return' [14], or Freud's notion of 'that which ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light' [5]. Through this mechanic *Silent Hill* suggests the unsettling psychological disturbance lurking behind the homely and familiar.

Carr argues a game like *Tomb Raider*'s 'sterile and profoundly organised' locations [2] cannot sustain the psychoanalytic weight of *Alien*'s gynecological set design. Yet many contemporary survival horror videogames place as much emphasis on the photorealism of their spaces as they do on the photorealism of their avatars. Survival horror games are full of elaborate gothic landscapes, rough-hewn asymmetrical caverns, fleshy corridors dripping with indeterminate fluids. Gillian Skirrow, in a 1986 article 'Hellivision: an analysis of video games' considers the construction of gamespaces and videogame experiences as investigations of the maternal womb. Drawing on the work of Melanie Klein, Skirow argues that for young male players videogame spaces represent the mother's body's interior, both a source of fascination and of fear. Insofar as Klein suggests boys' play displaces anything threatening onto the inside of a woman's body, Skirrow argues videogames appeal to young males resides in the construction of gamespace - be it catacomb, tomb or spaceship – as '"maternal cave"' [13]. Many survival horror games combine narratives where protagonists investigate their family origins with the exploration of gynaecological spaces: blood-red corridors, womb-like caverns, and bloody chambers. The protagonist of *Clock Tower 3* is a young schoolgirl who begins the game by returning to her family home against her mother's wishes. The player must then find a way of guiding the girl to her mother's bedroom, and then opening a secret door by operating a clock puzzle. This allows passage into a red room with a magic circle through which the protagonist can travel back in time. The association between game spaces and the maternal womb is even more pronounced in *Silent Hill 4: The Room*, where the titular apartment is explicitly associated with the antagonist's mother's body. These games, in their emphasis on returning to the family home, in their narrative investigation of the protagonists' origins, in their exploration of spaces approximating the maternal body, reproduce what is for Freud the primal site of the uncanny: 'the former *Heim* [home] of all human beings… the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning' [5]

To conclude, at the risk of pathologising the already-denigrated and infantilised player, videogame processes can be subjected to a range of productive psychoanalytic interpretations. Horror videogames, in particular, have many uncanny resonances which can be used to explore their psychological and emotional impact. Avatars personify the 'intellectual uncertainty whether an object is alive or not, and when an inanimate object becomes too much like an animate one' [5]. Moreover, many horror games, like *Resident Evil*, *Silent Hill* and *Haunting Ground*, self-reflexively comment on the ambivalent nature of avatars and the ambiguous relationship between player and playable character. These games are full of dead objects – zombies, dolls, puppets – which move or display the properties of life. Uneasiness concerning the possibility of life in dead things – the corpse lunging to life, the manikin's sudden animation, the stone statues leaping from their plinth – circulate the player's own avatar, a lifeless 'object' nevertheless given direction, purpose and agency through the player's input. In fact, the zombie may be a metaphor for the process of videogame engagement, representing the avatar without player, the computer-controlled figure, without the human soul to make it truly alive.

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