

# **RESEARCH REPORT**

## **The Haunted Mirror: The Disembodied Self in Horror Video Games**



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**The Haunted Mirror:  
Disembodied Self in Horror Video Games**

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## The Haunted Mirror: Disembodied Self in Horror Video Games

### ABSTRACT

Video games are a remediation<sup>1</sup> of films as it is not only a representational extension of a narrative and drama, but also a form of procedural media (Frasca 2003). It is capable of conveying the ideas and feelings of their authors by arguing through procedural representation; where the player learns from processes as his avatar. Thus, video games have become a powerful emerging media, bridging the gap between the virtual and the reality through a space accommodating hyper-reality (Bolter & Grusin 2012). Horror games, similar to horror films, take its players through frightening narratives that engage their attention. However, horror games take it a step further by demanding player's active involvement, forcing their minds into overdrive and triggering their survival instincts.

To understand modern society's fascination with fear and horror, this report aims to explore the temporal and spatial dimensions of *avatarial* subjectivity in Indie horror video games. This paper will examine horror video game as an emerging form of entertainment media, as well as its discursive practices. Studies from the writings of Julia Kristeva, specifically her concept of abjection will serve as a basis to determine the horrors of the video game. Further, the literature review will also consider writings of Ian Bogost, Bob Rehak, N.K. Hayles, Bernard Perron, and of course the seminal writings on ludology by Roger Caillois, and Johann Huizinga. To add to the analysis, this research also follows Judith Butler's writing on precarity as a precondition as how horror is staged. To keep this study comprehensive and easy to understand, the research will analyze three different sub-types of horror games: (a) puzzle-platformer horror, (b) escape-survival horror, and (c) psychological horror.

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<sup>1</sup> Media Theory; adaptations of classic novels into films particularly Jane Austen's in 1990s. The contents are borrowed but does not contain overt reference to avoid disruption of immersion. Largely common in popular culture, as well in characterizing new digital media. (Bolter & Grusin, 2000, pp.44-45).

## CHAPTER I

### RESEARCH BACKGROUND

#### 1. Research Background

##### 1.1. Dreams and Nightmares

It all started with *Spacewar!* (1962), a simulation game created by students in Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) during leisure while developing the first early computers. Created at the height of the ongoing Cold War between the US and USSR—a technological race in Arms and Space exploration—the outer-space theme became the inspiration for this first videogame (Herz 1997). The simulation of two crude spaceship-like avatars shooting at each other was initially designed to stress-test the PDP-1 computer and all its capabilities within a consistent framework; it is also within the intent of the creators to involve spectators in an interactive way (“The Origins of Space War” n.d). Players who participated in the allegorical “space war” were seated, given a joypad and a controller, and were tasked to pilot either the US (Wedge) or the USSR (Needle)<sup>2</sup>, represented by the two avatars. Lost in the tension of simulated war, players are immersed in a player-avatar relationship of the first computer game (Rehak 2003).

Computer programmers and enthusiasts saw potential of this new media, and soon begin to design commercial versions of the video game. *Computer Space* (1971), was the first home console *The Magnavox Odyssey* (1972), and the first hit arcade game *PONG* (1972) (Wolf & Perron, et al). The ascent of the video game industry in popular culture was further propelled by the launch of the arcade machines and home entertainment devices during the 1980s, which include games such as *Pac-man* (1980), *Space Invaders* (1978), *Missile Command* (1980), and *Olympic Decathlon* (1980). The successful and positive revenue from the arcade machines brought computer technologies to new heights for Sega and Atari to launch their first home console in soon after. For example, *PONG* (1972) had a positive retention from the public which sales spurred early game developers to create the home console. PONG became a hit after Atari introduces the Home Pong in 1974 and later, the VCS 2600 in 1978.

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<sup>2</sup> Mantello, P. (2018, December 28). Personal interview.

Out of all the various categories of videogames today, it is the horror game that is considered by many gamers as the genre that provides the most immersive experience. Yet this immersive experience is dominated by fear and fright. From the first *Haunted House* (1972) by Magnavox Odyssey, to *Haunted House* (1981) by Atari, to *Silent Hill* (1999-2014) and *Resident Evil Franchise* (1996-2017), the horror genre only seemed to grow even though it scares its players. As scary as they are, players invest large amounts of time in gameplay. Horror games utilize a role-playing framework that places the *avatar*—the player’s double—in a realistically uncanny environment, immersing players in a sense of adventure and curiosity to explore a third dimensional virtual space (Carroll 1990). At the same time, the environment places the avatar in a world of “precarity” while they have to fight obstacles that comes in the form “abject horror” (Butler 2009 pp. ii; Kristeva 1982 pp. 4). “Abject horror” of these games forces the player/avatar into life-threatening scenarios, solve puzzles to escape, or take questionable decisions for the sake of survival (Carroll et al.). In short, the immersive predicaments the player/avatar experiences in playing horror games can be said to be similar akin to watching a horror film. Charles Derry (2009) writes, “if films are like dreams, then horror films are nightmares. Sometimes dream-like, horror films are able to speak to our subconscious” (pp. 21). In a nightmare, horror could be the representation of repressed desires, painful memories, cosmic wonder, or cultural anxieties (Derry et al.; Carroll 1990) such as *Frankenstein* (1818), The Grand Guignol Theatre, and the horrors of terror as posed by the post-9/11 world. However, these nightmares are presented in a form where spectators can experience within safety of their screen-mediated experience and at their own leisure. Equipped with the knowledge that what is happening is *not* real (Goldstein 1998; Creed 1993) spectators are stunned, completely terrified, and yet wholly entertained.

## 1.2. Are you me? The *Avatar*’s Mirror Stage

The mirror stage is a condition where “I” see “myself” in the mirror. “I” quickly recognizes “me” in series of gestures which “I” play with “myself” who is in the mirror (Rehak 2003). Within the mirror, exist another version of the reflected (Foucault 1984); he is the self’s avatarial agent who can repetitively die and live again. He is and at the same time is not the player, but rather an extension of the player in the game world. Similarly, in a post-human perspective, N.

K. Hayles (1982) suggests that humans, in the contemporary post-human discourse, can exist within the virtual realm. In which one can see themselves inside a screen; the *avatar*.

While this is so, the definition of self-and-Other in cultural studies greatly differs from the self-other nexus in the virtual world of video games. In cultural studies, “other” is often synonymous with a group of people that does not share similarities with the dominant group in terms of similarities in appearance, customs, beliefs, and cultural practices (Hall 1994). Thus, the cultural other works on binary of ‘us’ versus ‘them’, ‘we’ versus ‘they’, and ‘our’ versus ‘their’. In video game studies, the other is traditionally considered as the player’s onscreen avatar: a representation of a ‘disembodied’ self in the game world. The avatar is a representation of our “self” whilst being “other” at the same time (Rehak 2003, pp. 106). It is not the horrifying “Other” of film that tries to harm the protagonist, but rather it is the agent which represents the player. Rehak suggests that video games support the extension of self and represent the player in a structured hyper-realized space. Rehak recognizes that the player is conscious of having a mirror image even when they are immersed in the “game-world” and realize that the avatar -and other playable characters- are both a reflection and a representation of themselves. To avoid any possible confusion, this paper will refer to Rehak’s “other” as *avatar*.

To better understand the *avatar*, this study will draw from writings of Hayles (1982) on post-humanism. She suggests that subjectivity in the virtual realm is slightly different than traditional understandings of the embodied self as posed by Enlightenment philosophers. Unlike Descartes and Kant, Hayles contends that human consciousness in the virtual world is grounded not in a physical form, but instead is a virtual form or data that are able to communicate with one another (pp. xiv). Hayles challenges traditional assumptions of subjectivity by pointing out that the virtual world eliminates the need for identity to be tied to a physical body and suggests that the virtual provides for a new, post-human consciousness. Hayles’ ideas on the emergence of disembodied subjectivity also align with the growing tendency for online users, especially, those belonging to social media circles where their *virtual realm* becomes increasingly significant as the physical counterpart.

### 1.3. Research Objective

The research background draws from the theories from Rehak (2003) and Hayles (1982) which suggest that the video game avatar is an extension of the self. The process is made possible through the engagement of players, in a simulated environment, with their on-screen representation. As such, video games can be construed as interpellative devices that allow for the constructing, orchestrating, and negotiating the notions of self. This interpellative process also exists in horror video games; rather, horror games put emphasis on subjectivity through intense emotions<sup>3</sup>. Thus, this study aims to explore the temporal and spatial dimensions of *avatarial* subjectivity in Indie horror video games. The study draws from the writings of Julia Kristeva, specifically her concept of abjection as it will serve as the framework in which to better define what actually constitutes horror in video games. Further, the literature review will draw from the writings of Ian Bogost, Bob Rehak, Bernard Perron, and of course the seminal writings on ludology by Roger Caillois, and Johann Huizinga. To add to the analysis, this research also follows Judith Butler's writing on precarity as a precondition as how horror is staged (Sical & Delekta 2003). To keep this study comprehensive and easy to understand, the research will analyze three different sub-types of horror games: (a) puzzle-platformer horror, (b) escape-survival horror, and (c) psychological horror. Each of these subtypes are chosen from year 2000-2010 where Indie games gained prominence. From each of these subtypes, *procedural representation*<sup>4</sup> within the games will be analyzed through the narratives, game mechanics/algorithms, player's perspective (first-person or third-person), aesthetics, as well as supplemental materials of the game.

### 1.4. Research Methodology

This paper uses a qualitative research design in order to achieve a more comprehensive study from cultural, sociological, and historical aspects of the subject matter. In laying out the methodology, hopefully readers who would like to perform similar research will be able to undertake similar method. The purpose of showing this methodology is to mitigate inaccuracy, gather personal, first hand insight and to prepare backups in case there are problems that may

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<sup>3</sup> less hegemonic and more subjective, sometimes objective as narrative sequences create tension.

<sup>4</sup> *Procedural Representation* here is a procedure where the avatar (self) learns through processes presented in the game. This would include repetition that results from the avatar's death during the gameplay or other activities the avatar chose to take in the game world.



hinder data collection processes. Here the researcher will describe the ways which errors can be minimized, if not avoided, and if there are errors that should occur, it should have little or no meaningful impact towards the final data of the research. This serves as a fair warning, but it is impossible to look at these games and not consider details that may spoil the narrative. This is because many points that are present in the game narrative are also the point where abject horror occurs.

The study focuses on the player-avatar relationship in the temporal and spatial sense. To do this, the research draw from the theories of Hayles and Rehak, and combine them with horror film theories. Video games are remediation of films (Frasca 2003), therefore it is important to consider some of the key semiotics of film (as they pertain to horror) before analyzing video games. Horror films are designed to create an affect that scares its audiences, to elicit an emotional state in relation to an artistic type of horror (Carroll 1990). However, the interaction in horror films tend to be one way. Horror games do not stop at telling, but they also involve players in a fear-induced experiential route (Perron 2012). To say this, means analyzing the narrative will not be enough as video game is a medium that argues with processes (Galloway 2007) and not storytelling alone. Hayles and Rehak suggests that the avatar is the player's extension inside the video game; although they may be a stand-in, it contains the player's consciousness (in the form of data) that is transferred into the game. Belk (2013<sup>5</sup>) added "if we obtain a feeling of 'being a character', it is most often through embodied empathy with an entity that is partly ourselves, and partly a separate entity that can be identified as a character" (pp. 6), implying that even though the player's body is disembodied within the virtual, the avatar is re-embodies them. In regards to horror games, the creation of certain affect from within the game will be analyzed through its mechanics (game design, player perspective, level design), narrative, and aesthetics and how it can affect the avatar.

In determining what creates fear in a game, the research follows Sical and Delekta's (2003) statement of "Fear, to exist, needs to be staged" (as cited in Perron 2012, his translation, pp. 20) as a starting point. By this Sical & Delekta means that video games will need to have technical

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<sup>5</sup> Belk, Russell W. "Extended Self in a Digital World: Table 1." *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 40, no. 3, Jan. 2013, pp. 477–500., doi:10.1086/671052.

capacities that involve sounds, graphics, and processing speed (which probably meant the computer). To do this, two other theories of fear will be used to triangulate my observations and results. In this regard, the research looks at Judith Butler's (2009) concept of precarity. The idea of precarity dictates that there is some event where a certain population or individual can politically be placed in a precarious position: in some state of danger, or insecurity (para. 3-4). In relation to this, I look at Kristeva's notion of abjection and the notion of violation or transgression which is a prevalent theme in horror videogames. Kristeva's abjection however, comes from various types of revulsion that relates to the ancient religious "abominations". Kristeva extends the notion of abjection to food loathing, premeditated crime, hypocritical murder, sexual immorality and perversion, corporeal alteration, betrayal, death and decay, human sacrifice (or human experiments), the corpse, bodily wastes, and the feminine body (Kristeva 1982; Creed 1993). Importantly, anything that disturbs the player's identity system and order creates horror, and when nothing is familiar, even in memory, or when nothing feels safe, the players are put into a precarious position, affected by abject horror the avatar face.

The data collection for this paper is derived from primary and secondary resources. As game studies is an academic discipline that requires scholars to play games as part of the primary data investigation, the researcher has clocked in over 200 hours of playing various horror video games. Following this, the researcher chose to use participatory qualitative research for two reasons:

- a) Having personal experience with these games can prove to be an asset towards the research; it would contribute in subjective reading of the games. This helps the understanding the subjective response towards interpellation<sup>6</sup> between the player, and the *avatar*. Rehak (2003), echoing Lacan's *Mirror Stage* stated in simpler terms that "video games 'reflect' players back to themselves" (pp. 104). To add, all video game theorists must play the video games that they plan to analyze, otherwise it will hinder their process of acquiring knowledge and experience,

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<sup>6</sup> Ideology: Louis Althusser (1970), the experience of being 'hailed' or drawn; every individual 'assigned' themselves to a role, and feels obliged to respond or not to respond (e.g: being called "hey, you!"). To add, Althusser's points are slightly different and complex than the *mirror stage*, as he believes players are able to recognize and act upon the ideologies presented within the video game.

- b) Sometimes there are objective and subjective knowledge that *must* be experienced in person. Without playing them, the author would not be able to distinguish them and can only guess what is happening, should they resort to watch a youtube gameplay of the corresponding title. By the end of each gameplay, the author should be able to distinguish which part of the games are extensions of: theories of media, theories of games, and theories of film. The experience of playing the games are also not comparable to just watch someone else playing them.

The games that will be looked into specifically are Independent video games; *Indie Games* for short. Indie games, as the name suggests, are developed by an independent team of game developers and they are usually small in number, they are free from the demands of bigger marketing companies (New York Film Academy 2018). The appearance of Indie games is also quite inevitable, as "fans are the most active segment of the media audience, one that refuses to simply accept what they are given, but rather insists on the right to become full participants" (Jenkins 2012, pp. 131), resulting in fans who make their own content and games. The existence of a number of online, digital distribution platforms (Sherr 2017) –namely Steam by Valve— that have emerged along with the advancement of the internet have also enabled many unpublished, or private video game developers. Although this may result in unauthorized or unanticipated media content, consumers who are a part of convergence culture actively search, if not create, contents for the enjoyment of those who share their interests.

Although the analysis for these independent games is quite desolate, a paper by Garda and Grabarczyk (2016) tries to elaborate on the kinds of game developers that could be considered '*Indie*' and delve further to determine the developer's independence. They believe that the presence of an investor is a clear-cut requirement, but does not define Indie developers completely. With these in mind, they came up with three types of independence that could be achieved by Indie game developers:

1. Financial independence (constituted by the developer-investor relation); the presence of an investor may or may not be of help for a small game developer to create their own video game. Although "true independence" is believed to be a game that is self-funded,

the *independence*, in this case, is that of the developer does not belong to a bigger company.

2. Creative independence (constituted by the developer-intended audience relation); a rather divisive type of independence. Creative independence also depends on financial needs. Garda and Grabarczyk implies creating a clone of an existing game is also considered creative independence.
3. Publishing independence (constituted by the developer-publisher relation); usually happens when the publisher is also the developer. The relation is prominent in contemporary society as the method is also supported by digital sharing platforms, namely Valve's Steam.

Secondary data will involve books, articles, and readings regarding horror films, as well as texts and readings related to video games and media. The theories procured from the readings will then be used to understand how horror works. Furthermore, the textual and literary analysis will focus more on the intersubjective relationships between horror, play, and video games. Bolter and Grusin's (2012) theories that focus mostly on the theories of media, remediation, and hypermediacy will then be linked to several other authors who have contributed to contemporary media, beginning from film and literature. Since video games are regarded as the extension of cinema, then the paper will also refer to video game scholars who specializes in film, ludology and concepts of play, as well as the niche horror-genre authors: Johann Huizinga and Ian Bogost with their concept of play, as well as Perron who is a big fan of the *Resident Evil* series and how survival horror became a niche genre amongst enthusiasts. Published interviews from the game developers will also be taken into account as a supplemental data to provide details in regards to the goals of the video game. The research will also refer to various articles published on *gamestudies.org* to enrich the analysis and understanding of the video game discourse.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Video Games in Context

For nearly a decade, the gross profit of the videogame industry has exceeded the combined revenue of both the television and the cinema industry (Nath 2015). Partly due to the shift towards digital software, games now range from Personal Computers to mobile phones and as such, video games can be seen as a leading cultural artifact. This research argues that similar to other forms of media (namely film and literature) video games are capable of producing *meaning* on various levels. More importantly, they also serve as powerful interpellative mechanisms that reinforce but also sometimes challenge prevailing ideologies in contemporary society.

In many ways, video games are the personification of how people can now interact with new technologies as Henry Jenkins's (2009) suggests in his writings on 'participatory culture'. For Jenkins, participatory culture is a culture where there is:

- A relatively low barrier to artistic expression and civic engagement; an ease of access for viewers on any textual or virtual media which allows active interaction or create new content.
- The line between producer and consumer are blurred, and a prosumer – (the combination of both)—is born.
- Strong support for one individual to create and share their creation with another; this creates a sense of community between its members and what used to be an individual experience can now be shared as community involvement,
- A form of informal mentorship between the members and experiences are shared between them; an empowerment towards a community through an informal learning processes.

In contemporary society, Jenkins suggest that the more individuals are exposed toward digital media and have free access to almost any form of social media, the greater their contribution and

free expression can be heard from those who use the same platform. Nevertheless, there are consequences in hindsight: as there are more content that can easily be disseminated, there will also be unfiltered contents (without traditional media gatekeepers) that can be uploaded by users. Communities can turn also turn into ‘echo-chambers’ and users may stay in their comfort zone (filter bubbles), creating a resistance towards other ideologies. It will also mean users can engage in hostile debates –likely concerning the best character in their favorite show—on digital media platforms in a fanatical way.

As a part of the gaming world’s participatory culture, the free distribution of development kits (modification) for gamers spurs them to create their own versions of commercial games. Others with access to cheap and free software can now create games on their own. With the help of *Steam Greenlight* (platform for indie game publishers), more Indie games are accessible on Steam (online distributional platform by Valve); free, or otherwise. Such video games are the product of participatory culture and media convergence –combining new technologies, films and simulations– as well as participants who are active prosumers. Regardless being Indie or not, video games enable ‘agency’ as they channel a player’s actions, by providing them with the ability to control the narrative to some degree (Grodal 2000). Ian Bogost (2016) calls this process *procedural representation*. He contends that when players play a game, they subject themselves to the game similar to how tennis players conduct themselves in the tennis court; players need to be there for a game to be played. In a video game, however, translating the whole human into the game world is impossible. Therefore, players require a stand-in, a symbolic representation created through a process: the avatar. Although, essentially, the avatar is the player’s disembodied self, it re-embodies the player in the virtual game world. Player avatars can sometimes be modified and given names, then players learn to operate it and become comfortable with it. This could be a learning process in the player-avatar relationship. Furthermore, players know that the avatar is partly themselves and partly a separate entity (Rehak 2003; Belk 2013). Knowing this, players also learn to make decisions which affects them in different ways (Bogost 2007). It could be argued that video games are powerful interpellative mechanism that reinforce prevailing or residual ideologies (Galloway 2006).

To understand the processes through which games produce meaning and become a form of experiential middle ground for understanding the world, this study adopts an interdisciplinary approach to map a relatively understudied subgenre of video games. It draws from theoretical writings in game studies, film studies, as well as more all-inclusive discipline known as media studies. The first part of this literature review draws from ludology writings of Caillois and Huizinga. Both of these scholars' contributions to ludology are still considered as the seminal texts which contemporary gamer theorists constantly refer to when studying discursive practices of video games. Both also focuses on the wider inter-subjective relationship between play, games, and society. By reviewing Huizinga's concept of play and Caillois's classification of games, this section intends to trace a socio-historical arc over the ways in which the discursive practices of play have been woven into various aspects of modern society.

In the second part, the concept of horror will be examined through examples of gothic literature such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, as well as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century French Grand Guignol Theatre. This second part intends to provide a better understanding of how meta-narratives of horror have historically played a central role. The third part examines the genre of horror films and how their prevailing narratives mirror hegemonic ideas in liberal society for maintaining moral and social order. This part also elaborates on how horror has evolved and similar concepts can be translated into the video game world. While in the fourth part, will look at how horror video games and the dynamics avatarial subjectivity are used as a way in which the gamer negotiates notions of self; namely, in post 9/11 society's culture of fear. Importantly, the writings of Judith Butler and Julia Kristeva will be explored in this section in relation to horror games.

In the last section, the research elaborates representational and discursive practices of horror video games, as they relate to avatarial subjectivity. This section draws from post humanist writings of N. K. Hayles and relate it in particular with the Independent (Indie) game scene that are made outside the commercial studio system. Although the production value of these games are sometimes hindered by their lack of commercial orientation, these games are regarded by horror game enthusiasts as an elevated form of 'high' horror as they forego commercial success in order to highlight themes that critiques prevailing socio-cultural issues in an honest, perhaps blunt, manner.

## 2.2. Social, Cultural, and Historical Significance of Video Games

### 2.2.1. Play in Culture

Similar to the first reception of horror films, horror video games received massive negative criticism on their debut as a form of new media. In fact, its main struggle was to be accepted as a serious new media primarily because it was mainly perceived as a children's medium; the popular perception being "playing video games" is equal to "idle time spent" and had no credibility. Johann Huizinga, in his book *Homo Ludens* (1944) argues that play is a part of nature and culture. It has a set of unwritten rules and it is something that comes naturally for any living being, as it is not irrational or nonproductive exercise, but rather logical and integral part of how human society functions. Huizinga (1944) contends as follows:

*"PLAY is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, ... We can safely assert, even, that human civilization has added no essential feature to the general idea of play... play is more than a mere physiological phenomenon or a psychological reflex. It goes beyond the confines of purely physical or purely biological activity. It is a significant function-that is to say, there is some sense to it... You can deny seriousness, but not play." (pp. 7-9).*

Huizinga argues that play is central to every part of culture; it is not foolish, nor is it unproductive (pp. 6). It exists in nature and the animal kingdom, in languages such as double speak or innuendos, in civilizing functions, in law, in business, and in politics. There is no profit that can be gained from it, but people play to satisfy their needs; as such, it is formative to the ways in which humans begin to understand themselves and the world around them. In language, Huizinga mentioned that several cultures have invented words that would be able to define play-function, such as the Japanese "遊ぶ(asobu)" or the Greek word "paidia"; both meaning "play the means to function" (pp. 34). His statement further emphasizes the existence of play as a function, rather tries to elaborate how play itself has become a part of a word to define a function.



In the case with laws and politics Huizinga refers to the court where, instead of merely judging the verdict, it is a contest that has play elements to it (pp. 76). A number of factors he considers the courtly war as a form of play are:

- When a court is in session, it is placed on a separate time frame from the daily lives of its audience (pp. 77). Similar with playing a game, it is set within a separate time from the daily responsibilities of the parties involved.
- The judge, donning his wig and robe also allows him to role-play as another being that exercise judgment (pp. 77). Similar to subjectivity in a game, a player can wear an attire to make him or her step into a role; a mimicry, of sorts. In videogames, customizing one's avatar, choosing their facial features, hair color, and clothing is almost as important as playing the game.
- Both parties that intend to prove the verdict right or wrong wants to win (pp.78). Similar to a competition, the battle of wits and verbal performance is at stake in a legal court (Bogost 2016).

All in all, in playing video games, the player separates himself from their daily lives, tinkers with their virtual environment, and wants to win, if not conquer, the game. All these are done in almost similar fashion to the court. This is not to say that the court is completely a form of game, but it certainly reflects an element of play. Each participant in the court are subjected to their role: whether it is the spectators, the verdict or the judge. In a similar way, the avatar, as the player's personal stand-in, subjects the player towards a form of play. It is where the word "play" is often confused with idle time. In fact, the use of this *idle time* is productive – for it allows for creativity and agency and even encourages people to understand their environment by forcing them to interact with it.

To say that competition is an element of play, implies that there is a category of play. Roger Caillois (1961), like Huizinga, suggests play is both a spontaneous and a voluntary activity within given boundaries. At the same time, Caillois extends and nuances Huizinga's initial ideas by coming up with a classification of games. In other words, Caillois orders play into several categories. In his book *Man, Play and Games* (1961), Caillois divided play into four classifications. The first two classifications are *mimicry* (simulation) and *vertigo* (altering

perceptions). These kinds of games are quite popular in pre-capitalist societies, in which mimicry is a type of play that allows someone to mimic others. Popular in spectacles, mimicry incorporates many aspects of play into one. What makes mimicry fun is the illusion of having a mask to hide behind, allowing the actor's true personality to shine. While Illinx or vertigo are types of plays that changes one's perception from extreme types of entertainment to shock themselves for the pleasure of rush of adrenalin. Both can sometimes cause riots during the gameplay and also making it enjoyable towards the player. They can subvert disasters into humorous remarks, and although more chaotic in nature, both imply that one can be immersed when doing something they liked. The following are Caillois's definitions for mimicry and vertigo:

- a) **Mimicry** is an act of impersonation or copying. To put it simply, it happens when one escapes himself and become another. This also accounts when one voluntarily goes into an imaginary universe (or game universe), and become an illusory character as well (the *avatar*) "he forgets, disguises, or temporarily sheds his personality in order to feign another" (pp.19). Mimicry and travesty share a similar quality: the pleasure lies on passing being another person during the play is enacted (immediacy/immersion). In horror video games, players undergo a mimicry through the avatar's agency; a voluntary choice to be an illusory character. For example, one can be Chris Redfield in *Resident Evil* (1996). Although scared, being another person brings an enjoyment to the player since Redfield may correspond to the player's self-identity. When they think they are doing well as Redfield, in relation to how to use his skills, players can feel good about this.
  
- b) **Illinx** or Vertigo are types of plays that can change one's perception through extreme movements. Caillois gives an example of an eerily dangerous Mexican voladores where players climb up a mast, tie a rope on their waist, and make their descent from the sixty to one-hundred meters' tall pole while it is being spun; this kind of play was done as a ceremonial celebration of the setting sun. Needless to say, the practice has been banned by the Mexican government due to its hazardous nature. Some other activities that one does to achieve an altered perception is walking on a tight rope, doing rapid rotations, or speeding and acceleration. Although in real life disorientation needs to be done

purposefully by gyrating rapidly or speeding up, horror games are capable of affecting liminality through constructing suspense. Suspense and tension building in a horror game comes from how the enemy interacts with the player: sometimes they appear from unexpected places, and sometimes there is an indicator such as music or sound effects before they appear. What happens next can potentially disorient the player as enemies may move faster, flank the player, or even achieve aerial advantage. The locomotive shift of the enemy may require players to re-orient themselves before taking a concrete action; which more often than not, fails the first time.

The remaining two classifications are *agon* and *alea* (competitions and chance). The two types are popular in industrial and modern societies due to two things: *Agon* promotes competition, while *Alea* negates work. It is almost an allusion that, in a working society, is either one must work hard to achieve what he wants, or one can just sit back and submit to his destiny and achieve results that comes on its own. The following are Caillois's descriptions on *Agon* and *Alea*:

- c) ***Agon*** is, first and foremost, a competition. The most popular examples are sports, which is a test of speed, endurance, strength, memory, skill, ingenuity, and many more. In today's society, *Agon* is more closely related to chess, duels, tournaments, and to a degree, "courtly war" since it needs a lot of work and skills as a form of play (pp. 132). In relation with horror games, the competition against monstrous beings also incorporate competition against time, test of creativity, fast reactions, and puzzle solving. Although this is not to say that these only exist within horror games, the disorienting effect in horror games gives an urgency towards these tests.
- d) ***Alea*** is the Latin word that means "game of dice" (pp.133). This quite literally means that one must depend on luck or chance to win a game. Players who enjoy these play style mostly compete in slot machines, or games that uses a die to move, or gambling. *Alea* focuses quite a lot on raising and risking the stakes to make it fair for all players involved and also to make it seem more competitive and fun. *Alea* negates work, specialization, skills and everything else since those would not matter in the terms of achieving the favor of lady luck (pp. 134); where the feeling of victory can become addictive towards its players. In horror video games,

however, *Alea* is defined as the risk-taking factor. Usually occurs in action-horror games during zombie horde-escape sequences where one must break through the horde and risking their team inside a vehicle.

Although *alea* is technically the opposite of *agon*, both have similarities in which participants can test things whether they are capable of overcoming challenges through skills, or they can win without trying from a roll of a dice. Taking chances and risks in real life can be simulated in video games through choice options or thinking up strategies to defeat an enemy. Some examples outside of gaming is risk-taking in a stock market where investors must buy and sell while depending on the “favours of fortune” while competing against others. In many ways *Alea* also mirrors the increasing reliance and risks in capitalist societies, not simply the world of finance but also in the post 9/11 world of securitization.

The types of games Caillois introduces are all still present in contemporary societies today. He suggests that pleasure is founded on excitement, illusion, make-believes, gyrating and falling, and harmless collisions; it seemed to imply that one finds recreational values in disorienting experiences (Caillois 1961). In a video game, most, if not all, types can theoretically be present simultaneously: the avatar is a mimicry of the player (mimicry), which changes player’s perception through immersion (illinx); each obstacle they face is a test of skill (agon), and they may get a certain item from a treasure chest (alea). In horror games however, it could work in a slightly different manner. Although the avatar is still the mimicry of the player, more than often the avatar is already a character. Illinx could exist from the disorientation that occurs from facing the enemy, Agon still exist but with a lot more tension, while Alea is rather similar to taking risks to survive in the game.

### **2.2.2. Videogames – Films that we can Play**

As emerging media, video games put forth simulations first, and mediated representations second, making them different from any other forms of new media. Gonzalo Frasca (2003) argues that the video game is an extension of a narrative and drama as it is based on representation, but also places the audience or player in a form of a simulation. Remediation, as a re-representation of one media in another, could simply be a transfer of a work of literature onto

the big screen. Yet what makes video games unique is that it adds an element that previously did not exist in films: the *active* involvement of the audience (Galloway 2006). To understand this, Galloway (et al.) suggests that video games are action-based medium. With this he means that the player is capable of instigating material change—pixels turning on and off, disks spinning up and down, and so forth—through their actions in the game (pp. 4). Player actions are also “textual<sup>7</sup>” decisions, in which they try to understand what is presented, take decisive choice, and experience process to receive results subjective to their interpretation (pp.16). This process, although largely similar, is different from one game to another as each player communicate with the software in different ways (pp. 2). By this, Galloway implies that immersion happens as players learn the game’s codes and algorithms and take actions as the in-game protagonist.

Immersion in video game can also be called *immediacy*. Immediacy is the idea that the medium should vanish and instead place the audience in the virtual experience as realistically as possible (Bolter & Grusin 2000). Immediacy then, is the state at which the audience does not discern the event from its representation. Concurring, Rehak (2003) writes, “Interfaces, then, are ideological. They work to remove themselves from awareness, seeking transparency—or at least unobtrusiveness—as they channel agency into new forms” (pp. 122) suggesting that video games, strive to achieve immediacy while transporting player’s consciousness into the computer. For Rehak video games are interpellative devices capable of shaping a player subjectively (Galloway 2006), while allowing them to obtain individual meaning through game play. In nuancing this line of thinking, Mackenzie Wark (2007) adds that videogames are allegories to reality. They are not real, and yet they still managed to encode real world concepts into theirs (pp. 14). This degree of “realism” amplifies the level of immediacy. The more the player forgets they are actually relating to an allegory of reality the more immersed they become. The more immersed the player feels, the more they experience what Bolter & Grusin (2000) call transparent representation.

To achieve this, video games borrow from other types of older media, especially films, and implement a similar cinematic and narrative element to immerse players within their gameplay. Bogost argues that video games do not simply distract its players with meaningless content. But

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<sup>7</sup> referring to how consumers responds to ideologies presented in old and new media.

rather, video games can make persuasive claims about the world, not with speech, writing, or still images, but instead with processes that comes from avatarial subjectivity (Bogost et al. 2008, pp. 125). They are powerful because they are performative and capable of inciting action from the player (Galloway 2006), and these actions can either gratify or break the player even when they are in control (Grodal 2000, pp. 204). Playing a video game is also similar to play a life-simulation since it follows rules set by, and in, a fictional world. Players learn from the codified rules to learn new skills. These skills are improved through failures, repetition, and success; in some cases, players live, die and live again. This therefore makes playing video games a learning experience (Grodal 2000; Juul 2005; Bogost 2007).

In regards with horror video games, procedural representation also happens in a similar way. Players must interact with the game if they want to achieve immediacy, although in horror games, it happens a little differently. Perron (2012) contends that the goal of horror fiction and horror video games ideally overlap. Taking his points from Rouse (2009), he explains that horror games rely on suspense: killing the evil as an act of self-defense (pp. 2). Moreover, he adds that horror films and games are capable of eliciting one of the strongest human emotions. This process is transferred from transparent representation, mediated by the avatar, and ideally creating a subjective affect in the player. This still does not explain why there are many fans of horror games. In the few following sections, this paper will try and elaborate why there are still fans of horror even though the genre presents a paradox where it should scare players, but instead draw them into the genre even more.

## **2.3. The Artistic kind of Horror**

### **2.3.1. Paradoxes of the Heart: Noel Carroll**

Dixon (2010) in *A History of Horror* paints a general picture of where the horror genre originated. He suggests that the origins of horror can be traced to the narratives found in works of classic literature such as the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh* (Mesopotamia, circa 2000 B.C) and Homer's *Odyssey* (Greece, circa 800 B.C). The two spectacles do not have a degree of horror as it is seen today in contemporary society, but rather spectacles where human heroes

wage wars with fantastic monsters that is the embodiment of cosmic fear<sup>8</sup>. There are many other works that inspire modern horror such as Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1310) that details Dante's versions of hell, purgatory, and paradise; Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus* (1590), along with von Goethe's *Faust* (1808 and 1833) that tells the tale of men who strikes a deal with Satan for wealth and power in exchange for their souls. On the other hand, Polidori's *The Vampyre: A tale* (1819) and Fisher's *Dracula* (1958) both incorporate depictions of Count Dracula which has gone to inspire most of modern representations of the Count. While Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) presents an allegory of the duality of a man, whereby a gentleman scientist is also a primordial rapist murder - both good and evil reside in Jekyll. All of these stories have extended the possibilities of the horror genre by adding not only fantastical monsters, but also monsters that derive from religious symbols, as well as horrors that derive from psychology and personality to the narrative.

However, it is not simply the feeling of fear that has fascinated spectators. Carroll (1990) believes that it is in fact art-horror, a form of artistic horror, that fascinates spectators with the aforementioned horror literatures. For Carroll, *art-horror* should first, provoke an emotional response; Second, it should involve a cognitive evaluation to produce a reaction; Third, the object that arouses horror is scary because it is dangerously threatening and impure (Santili 2007). These forms of art-horror are associated with literature, film, and fine arts that intrigues curiosity, at roughly around the same time Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) was published and persisted until today (Carroll et al. 1990, p.13). Further Carroll elaborates on why horror becomes popular, only to suggest that there is no comprehensive answer as to why the horror genre is quite enjoyable. He did however, contend that for several writers, there are definitions of horror that may define why fans are drawn to the genre.

Carroll describes H.P Lovecraft's horror as largely dependent on cosmic fear; where there is a mixture of terror, curiosity, and awe in the face of a possibly powerful entity that is not human. This sort of fear "emotionally enlivens our sense that there *really* are things in heaven and earth not countenanced by materialistic sophisticates" (pp. 162, emphasis on original). He then

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<sup>8</sup> Cosmic Fear is a rather Lovecraftian way to put this. It's a type of horror that involves the unknown and is a mixture of curiosity, terror and wonder; a supernatural horror that evoke awe from unknown beings.

proceeds onto psychological type of horror, in which he refers to as repressed wishes or desires (pp. 170), suggesting that viewers consequently find pleasure in watching others doing forbidden things. Lastly, he draws on the similarity of tragedy and horror, in which horror is told through a narrative and the narration becomes the “locus of pleasure” (pp. 179) for the audience; to find closure (or disclosure) towards an unfortunate event that befalls an individual. Ideally, Carroll suggests, art-horror should raise an affect from its viewers as the emotional reactions of the characters on screen gives an example of how the audience should react (pp. 14-18).

In relation to video games and to expand on Carroll’s perspective, many of the horror game creators have borrowed existing elements from horror literature. Whether it is the religious symbols, narrative messages, or even an extension of both. Horror video games today also involve the last three reasons why horror becomes a fascinating genre: to experience some sort of cosmic fear, to release repressed wishes or desires, or to follow the narrative to find closure. In the following sections, we will consider a few horror literary works and stage play before relating it back to horror video games.

### **2.3.2. Gothic Literature**

Another example of art horror can be found in the literary subgenre from the 18th Century called The Gothic Literature. The Gothic Literature, defined by Davison (2009) as vulgar due to macabre subject matters, reflecting an enthusiasm towards the morbid, and a guilty pleasure (relative to its time period) for many (pp. 2). Its frequent motifs include monstrosities, parasitism, deformity, and doppelgänger (pp. 6) which brings moral and emotional ambiguity (pp.7) in relation to its readers. Although looked down upon in comparison to other Romantic literature, there are still revivals of the Gothic genre today thanks to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818). Shelley’s work is considered to be one the most influential examples of Gothic Literature, as it makes a statement towards several philosophical questions such as the misuse of science, nature versus nurture, and revenge (Davison et al. pp. 179).

The narrative that Shelley presented helped Gothic Literature to be considered as an artistry. She created the Monster to be an intelligent creature: someone (or something) that is able to think and feel like a human, making the audience emphatic to the monster’s feelings. In the 1818 version,



Shelley wrote how Victor Frankenstein—the protagonist—became obsessed with the natural science and discovers the secret of life. However, during the process, Victor has adapted a weak physique and a recurring illness. Upon seeing his creation, who instead of a beautiful creature as he imagined has become a monster, Victor fled his makeshift laboratory. The Monster's narrative is different from Victor's; he was left alone soon after his creation, not knowing what to do he took off to the woods and learned autonomously about how to communicate, survive, and about his own hideous nature. Both Victor and his Monster later meet again and the Monster begged Victor to create him a mate so he can be happy (and he can leave humans alone since they reject his existence). Things went awry as Victor—instead of finishing reanimating a “mate” for the monster—abandons the project it and the Monster—on the supposedly “wedding day” arranged by Victor—killed Victor's wife. Victor wanted revenge on the monster but passed away first due to his illness first. The Monster found Victor and wept at Victor's death before he left everything behind.

For its time, this odd combination drew its readers in, instead of pushing them away, and became a popular form of entertainment. Even today, a century later, Shelley's work evokes mixed feelings of pity, anxiety and enjoyment from spectators. There have been many versions of *Frankenstein*, ranging from narrative edits (Frankenstein, 1831 version) to contemporary popular culture (the Monster making cameo in cartoons such as Scooby Doo). Davison further argues that Shelley's work is an inspiration for works of Gothic literature to come in ways that they are weird, symbolic dreams (pp. 179). Shelley's work, in many ways, have reanimated the Gothic horror and its tropes are still used today: mad scientist obsessed with his work, blank-slate creations corrupted by the intent of its creator, make-shift laboratories (Tudor 1991), disturbed personalities, and monsters who are actually intelligent and eloquent. The elements of Gothic Literature can be translated to the avatar through the use of tropes as well. For example, in *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (2010), the avatar is hit with amnesia and has to maintain his sanity by solving puzzles in a dark, Victorian setting. If the player's sanity level is low enough, they may see the avatar's hallucinations, hinting at an unstable mental state and insanity.

Another example of the 19<sup>th</sup> century fascination towards the Grotesque are works of David Lynch, an exceptional *avant-garde* Hollywood filmmaker. In many ways, the themes and tropes

of the grotesque are embedded in his very first feature film *Eraserhead* (1977). It features a generous amount of blood, alien-looking child, disfigured human faces (highlighted with great lighting use), supported by cryptic music and atmospheric black and white setting to immerse the audience in the shoes of the main character. What makes *Eraserhead* a particular masterpiece, however, is the fact that it brings forth audience proximity through an “excessiveness of their (the characters) normality” even if the narrative causes confusion (McGowan 2007, pp. 12). Lynch takes one’s normality and pulls it to the logical extreme. For example, the mode of dress Lynch uses was against the trend of “one-button open shirt” that was popularized by John Travolta; Henry wore his shirt buttoned all the way to the top to give an unsettling normalcy (pp. 13). McGowan (2007) argues that the absolute division of “realm of desire and realm of fantasy”, is the definitive normalcy (pp. 15).

Lynch provides another grotesque masterpiece by adopting Dr. Frederick Treves’s book *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences* (1926). Dr. Treves’s book is based on the true story of the life of John Merrick (1862-1890) who has severe physical disfiguration where his head and arms grew into abnormal size. The book does not only serve as a clinical account of Dr. Treves with Merrick, but also a melodramatic narrative of self-introspection on cultural self-other nexus. One part is also psychological gratification of watching Merrick “the Freak” interact with Treves (Holladay & Watt 1989). This incident is detailed by Treves himself through a dream sequence where Treves sees himself in Merrick’s seat. Treves realizes that science is not a separate phenomenon from human society and marked Treves’s maturity as previously he only sees his patients with a gaze that regards them as only broken humans that needs repairs (Holladay & Watt et al., pp. 878-879). Treves’s work was later adapted to film in 1980 by David Lynch, whose fascination with the grotesque Elephant Man started even before he directs a film with the same name, *Elephant Man* (1980). This makes Treves’s writing a natural inspiration for Lynch. Within its context, one answer Lynch’s film was so popular is because it offers the viewing of a freak; a secret and forbidden side from what one could consider normal. Not to mention how Lynch is proficient in highlighting personal issues in his work, viewers could directly relate with Lynch’s *Elephant Man* as he slowly becomes a “normal person” who is capable of intellectual thought (McGowan 2007, pp. 25).

As previously discussed in the section of art-horror, both *The Elephant Man* and *Eraserhead* are able to intrigue a mixture of fear and awe towards its audiences. It is quite visible in *The Elephant Man* where Treves, representing the audience, wrote in account of his fascination; which was also the reason why he befriended Merrick in the first place. Viewers pick up his reactions and this becomes an ideal reaction for the audience to correspond to. While in *Eraserhead*, although most part feels surreal, may sympathize although disgusted upon Henry's actions towards the alien infant. In both of these narratives is the implication of how Treves and Henry gradually coming to terms with what horrors society presents and dealing with them. Similar in *Fran Bow* (2013) where Fran has to deal with a lot of things that does not make sense for her. As Fran, the player does not have a way of knowing if what Fran is seeing is reality, or everything is happening in her mind and still follows through with the game to find closure.

### 2.3.3. The Theatre of Horror, Grand Guignol

Another of the early forms of horror stories is the Grand Guignol theatre in early 19<sup>th</sup> century France. Instead of portraying narratives of good guy vs. bad guy, most of the stage plays takes up Emile Zola's works as an influence (Hand & Wilson 2002). Zola's work, *Therese Raquin*<sup>9</sup> (1857) for example, highlights Therese's haunting regret from killing her husband with her lover and decided to commit suicide to escape the horrors of her decision. Zola's style of naturalism carried on in Grand Guignol where the stories tend to be naturalistic and melodramatic (Hand & Wilson 2002, pp. 34). In the Grand Guignol's *Bluebeard* (circa 1914), the stage play brings enjoyment to its audiences through stylized naturalism that has been expanded from Zola's works: inviting the audience to an "ostensibly the reconstruction of a true-life murder" (pp. 36).

Oscar Metenier was the prominent figure for the Grand Guignol Theatre. As his life was centered around the police as a secretary, he was familiar with the daily lives of the people of his time. He was also invested naturalism, namely in Emile Zola's works. He, along with Andre Antoine, opened the Grand Guignol Theatre in 1897, shortly after their first theatre's bankruptcy in 1893 (Hand & Wilson et al. pp. 3-4). Both he and Antoine presented horrifying stage plays with

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<sup>9</sup> Therese Raquin (1857) a story of a woman named Therese who is unhappily married with her cousin, Camille. She then had an affair with Camille's friend, Laurent, and kills Camille with Laurent in situations where it could look as natural as possible

explicit detail and brutality matching today's contemporary horror. They challenged the ideals of the bourgeois class and represented society that is corrupted by capitalism (pp. 5). However, Metenier's Grand Guignol did not see success until it was handed over to Max Maurey, who made the Grand Guignol truly terrifying in 1914 (Dixon 2010; Hand & Wilson et al.). Maurey uses various special effects to make what was already terrifying even more disturbing, consulting with a psychologist to further his goals to raise "the number of theatregoers who fainted from shock or left in disgust" (Dixon et al. pp. 23).

Some of the gothic literature elements are present in Grand Guignol plays as well. These are some of the notable plays that Dixon (2010) noted:

- The Laboratory of Hallucinations (*Le laboratoire des hallucinations*), where a doctor performs lobotomy to his unfaithful wife's affair partner and instead gets killed by his patient (Dixon 2010). The play seemed like an homage Shelley's Frankenstein by using a mad scientist protagonist with an experiment that goes awry.
- A Crime in a Madhouse (*Un crime dans une maison de fous*) which tells two older women blinding a younger inmate because they are jealous of her beauty. The play highlights torture from focusing on a very human sin and taking it to the extreme.
- Horrible Passion (*L'horrible passion*) a nursemaid who murders the children under her care.

According to Dixon, these characters almost have no motif for the crimes they committed and there are no authoritative forces involved as none of the characters were brought to justice (pp. 23). Even though this theatre was popular, showing up at the end of World War I for some time, it is quickly rendered obsolete by cinema and television (Hand & Wilson et al. pp.25).

Graphic violence and sadism are still visible in today's horror entertainment. Although it may not be as graphic, the Grand Guignol has certainly become somewhat of a benchmark in which horror can evoke emotions from its viewers (Dixon 2010; Carroll 1990). The sadism in contemporary horror does not derive from just films, but also videogames. Much of today's videogames feature surreal violence and destruction of the human body (Goldstein 1998). Some

of the examples, in relation to Grand Guignol, is *Until Dawn* (2015) which is a survival horror game where a group of friends try to escape a serial killer with an unclear motif. The elements of Grand Guignol in the game comes from the colorful death scenes of each characters; mostly involving rolling heads and copious amount of blood.

#### **2.3.4. Playing Horror Video Games**

Watching horror films isn't the same as playing horror video games. In a sense, it is still puzzling why people want to play horror games. Yet Perron (2012) contends that one of the key elements of horror videogames that make them so entertaining is their repetitiveness. He emphasizes that horror games put a novelty to which they can scare their players differently and although this is to be expected, the scare reaffirms fan appreciation towards the genre (pp. 16). To further elaborate, Michael Arnzen (1994) explains that in the same way people enjoy splatter films today, some forms of violence, tension, and horror can be entertaining as it subliminally provides an expectation. He argues: "horror films are essentially conservative in nature: they tend to re-establish the order (social, moral, or otherwise) that they symbolically deconstruct" (pp. 178) as in most conventional western horror films have heroes who overcome the bad. In other words, players of horror games know what they are going into, and they know what to expect of the game. People generally play games because they want to play them, so it is natural that when they go into horror games they want to be scared. The fact that they horror video games are representations makes players feel safe yet to eager to play. The scariness or the terror in horror games does not really exist (Goldstein 1980) but rather it is an artistic experience where they can enjoy themselves (Carroll 1990).

In this way the horror film audience are engaged in simulacra where the audience "play" with the presented text: either they want the protagonist to suffer from horrible things or they want them to survive (Arnzen et al.). In some ways this stability becomes a safe ground where the expected outcome encourages viewers to see or and not see, raising viewers' interactions with the film. The outcome of the film, should viewers decide to watch until the end will tend to unify them and encourage active group experience or self-retrospection (pp. 179-181). On the contrary, on-screen violence is not always attractive. Although it is almost certain that most people enjoy a rather symbolic violence and terror, real violence needs a bit of protective framing to be enjoyed

(Goldstein 1980). In some ways, representational violence and terror in film and video games are within controllable elements, while in the world of terrorism, while the actuality of ISIS beheadings videos may illicit curiosity, they cannot deliver the same enjoyment because they are real. As such there is no possible safe vantage point. The beheadings represent a physical state of fear, rather than a psychological one. Instead of playing with metaphors, horror comes “with an absolute disorder and loss of control” and instills panic, if not paranoia, to spread terrorism (Cavarero 2011). In this way, people prefer looking at violence and gore in the light of *art-horror*, not real-life torture. Perhaps, this is why horror video games are so popular today, because the individual can negotiate with some degree of control the precarity of the post 9/11 world.

## 2.4. Christianity, Precarity and Abjection

### 2.4.1. Christianity and Abjection

Religious depictions of perfection and normality counterpoints 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe’s fascination with the Gothic. For example, the statue of David is considered by art critics as an image of perfection; even considered too perfect to be placed in the Cathedral in 1504 (“Michelangelo’s David” Academia). For many years after its creation, this statue set a form of physical normality. It is the perfection of form that “sees into the future rather than contemplating the past”, and holds the definition of beauty and good morals (“[Michelangelo’s David](#)” 2016). This principle of David’s perfection becomes globally accepted from the spread of Christianity, since the definition of the body comes with the philosophies and arts from 15<sup>th</sup> Century Rome. However, in an excerpt from Tracy’s *Horrors and Horror* (2014), an intriguing point was brought up. Tracy states that if it was not for the sacrifices and violence that existed from within Christianity, it is difficult to recognize the better parts such as redemption. This implies that impurity exist behind purity, further emphasized by Julia Kristeva herself stated:

*“Biblical impurity is thus always already a logicizing of what departs from the symbolic, and for that very reason it prevents it from being actualized as demonic evil. Such a logicizing inscribes the demonic in a more abstract and also more moral register as a potential for guilt and sin. Purity or impurity are thus situated in relation to cult because the latter represents or serves a logic of distribution and behavior” (pp. 91).*

Her statement, especially the last part, suggests that purity and impurity is situated through a cult; a religion or a belief that sets normalcy and morals. Therefore, things that appalled and incite reaction from spectators, particularly relates to sexual immorality or perversion, corporeal alteration, death and decay, human sacrifices, murder, the corpse, bodily wastes, the feminine body, and incest (Creed, as cited in Gelder 2000; Kristeva, 1982, p.1-5) are popular motifs in modern horror texts. Kristeva puts all of the categories into one word: “*Abjection*”, which is best described as where the meaning of self and other is blurred.

To Kristeva, abjection is central to modern horror texts in the construction of monstrous or fantastical beings. Some might say, it is the birth of the uncanny (devils, monsters, criminal thoughts) from what is perceived to be normal (cult, beliefs or religion). Kristeva explains this in relation to the corpse as things that does not respect borders, positions, and rules that are set by religious norms (pp. 4). Kristeva herself made a point “abjection, when is all said and done, is the other facet of religious, moral, and ideological codes on which rest the sleep of individuals and the breathing spells of societies” (pp. 209) making a point that people cannot escape abjection. She further highlights that evil in horror can also derive from an internal motif. Here she continues with “abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady” (pp. 4) where these actions can be committed by humans.

Kristeva suggests that evil is almost always a product of human vice or other failures to a degree. In Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and David Lynch’s *The Elephant Man* and *Eraserhead*, abjection can be seen in many ways. Frankenstein’s Monster lives in a border of the living and un-living; although he feels like a human, his life was created through science and unnatural process of reanimation. *The Elephant Man*, John Merrick, is a freak and is seen as so by society because of his physical disfiguration. While the infant in *Eraserhead* disrupts the border of a normal human infant although equally fragile; some even theorize that this may just be happening inside Henry’s head and the infant is the embodiment of his horrified psyche.

An example of where Kristeva’s theories was used is in Diane Carr’s paper regarding Dead Space in *Gamestudies.org*. In her research, Carr suggests that abjection are human physical

disabilities, in contrast to a perfect player body in *Dead Space*. Kristeva's abjection comes in the presentation of the undead monsters, the exotic nature of the protagonist's deaths and the uncertainty of his existence, as well as the generous amount of disembowelment and blood (Carr 2014). The presentation of disability here refers to the disabled/disfigured monsters that were previously human that resulted from scientific research, called *Necromorphs*. What is more terrifying than the appearance of the Necromorphs, is their attempt to invade the player's body; a psychic intrusion that ignores the borders of life and death. From within the game's environments, the player would have realized that there may not be a safe place for them to hide from danger, and this realization of their precarious situation becomes a horrific experience for the player.

#### **2.4.2. Precarity in Post-9/11**

Precarity, as defined by Judith Butler (2009), comes hand in hand with performativity. Performativity determines the legibility for someone to be considered as a person who can work and survive. Precarity on the other hand highlights the lack of performativity and implies if someone does not strive to live, their survival is not guaranteed. Butler describes it as "anything living can be expunged at will or by accident, and its persistence is in no sense guaranteed... [it] designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence and death" (pp. ii). This concept is further expanded by Guy Standing (2011) who contends that precarity will not go away relative to labor conditions; it is desired by capitalism as means of progression. The ruthless cycle of development in turn causes series of insecurities in communities where people (which he termed "precariats") will not feel secure from instability.

The sense of insecurity encourages the public to behave irrationally and ebbed by the fact that just about anyone can be put into precarious situations. In the post 9/11 society where war on terror has been waged to regain security, Glassner (2000) argues, there is now culture of fear dominating modern day life. What Glassner means by this is not that the world is necessarily more dangerous after 9/11, but rather societies perception of danger has increased. In the culture of fear, Glassner argues that governance is created through mechanisms that make the population aware of their vulnerability. A good example of this, is the color-coded terror alert system that



was introduced after 9/11, which became a temporal reminder of threat. Thus, whether it is survival, psychological, surreal, or gothic horror players can at least have control over their anxiety. Perhaps, this is why horror videogames are so popular today, as they tap into the anxiety and uncertainty of modern society and present offer the player a way in which to control the rhetoric of fear and uncertainty in a coherent stable manner. While the avatar is placed in precarious and life-threatening situations, players know that there is still a chance of victory/survival at the end of the game.

## **2.5. The Disembodied Self: Subjectivity in Game Space**

Hayles (1982) defines the post-human as a “union of the human with the intelligent machine” which she details as the as the transfer of data of consciousness into the computer; a process where human consciousness can exist in a virtual world. In other words, it is a disembodied self; an avatar as a form of post-human (pp. 3). The post-human principle considers the real human body as a vessel that can be manipulated, thus extending or replacing the human body is only a continuation of the original. Most of all, the post-human principle seeks to integrate the human mind seamlessly with machines. The avatar of video games works ideally in regards to the post human discourse: extending the human “body” into the virtual through agency (Rehak 2003). In perspective, Lacan contends that when one sees their reflection in a mirror, they are not scared and instead plays with their image. With the interfaces that are present in reality, players can control their “reflective” avatar (Rehak et al., pp. 107). Foucault’s idea of one’s reflection being in a utopia is reflected as well in Rehak’s writings, implying that through an *objet petit a* (object of unattainable desires) the avatar is the player’s personal virtual stand-in. With this kind of reflection, the avatar –who can live, die, and live again- can help the player learn the codes, the algorithm, and the systems of the game (Rehak et al.; Galloway 2006). With controls on the player’s hand, the behavior of the avatar is tied to the player’s desired movements. The avatar’s progression is also controlled by the player’s motivation to strategize, and perform, which brings satisfaction back to the player (Rehak et al.; Grodal 2000).

Previously, the thought of mind and body have suggested potential post-humanism. These thoughts derive from two philosophers, Kant and Descartes, who suggest that the mind and body can be separated, depending on the spatial and temporal reality. For Descartes, the mind makes

the body (“I think therefore I am”). He contends that the body and the mind are different: the mind thinks while the body does not, which implies that the mind and body could exist without each other. Kant meanwhile argues that one may only have knowledge on the things they can experience on a certain time and place. To illustrate this, there are some examples from Hayles in literary works: in *Blood Music* (1985) by Greg Bear, a man invents a cell to improve someone’s life exponentially. In fear of anyone else finding the experiment, he injects it into his own body. The cells grow in the main character’s body and reconfigure it to make his life better. It is mentioned that the cells also start talking to him, sometimes even sing. Hayles contend that the cells are post-human beings inside of the main character: it does not have to have a human body, but it is enough that they have a “human” mind to communicate to the main character. The second example from *Terminal Games* (1994) by Cole Perriman subverts blood music as the main antagonist absorbs other character’s data from the terminal to enhance himself. To Hayles, this literature implies the basis human man meaning can be destroyed and humans are humans because they live in a finite world, not the virtual.

Post-humanism is the disembodiment of the player and their re-embodiment in the virtual world as an avatar. This does not happen differently in a horror video game, however, it is more often that the avatar has already been assigned for you. Based on Hayles’s examples, the avatar-player is best described as the cells in *Blood Music* (1985) where before the cells do anything, they ask the scientist first before taking a decision. What is demonstrated in *Blood Music* is similar to a consensus between the operator and the avatar (Galloway 2006); except communication between the avatar and the player happens in a transfer of data as the player moves the controller. In regards to horror video games, the transfer of data occurs similarly like in normal video games. What could be regarded as different is how the player receive a certain emotional affect depending on the game sequence. Different from horror films, where players only sit down and indirectly interact with what they see, in horror games players may receive a firsthand experience and will have to move their avatar to run away from the threat. This activity, however, brings back one question: why would we play horror games?

## 2.6. Why do we Play Horror Games?

To come to a definite answer for what makes something horrifying is difficult, as what is horrifying to one person could be different to another. As there are answers, there are also different, sometimes contradictory conclusions as to explain why contemporary society loves horror. Noel Carroll (1990) contends that “to a large extent, the horror story is driven explicitly by curiosity. It engages the audience by being involved in the processes of disclosure, discovery, proof, explanation, hypothesis, and confirmation” (Carroll pp. 182) in his *Philosophy of Horror*. Further he nuances Lovecraft’s (1927) fear of the unknown as a mixture of terror, moral revulsion and awe (pp. 162). Hence creatures or monsters –such as Cthulhu—can have all those qualities. Other times, Carroll suggests that pleasure of playing or watching horror could be the embodiment of repressed desires, where viewers find pleasure in watching others doing forbidden things. Carroll also draws similarity between tragedy and horror, in which both are told in a narrative for viewers to find closure on an unfortunate event that befalls the horror story protagonist. Even so, this statement alone is not enough to explain why people are drawn into horror. For Judith Butler (2009), it’s precarity<sup>10</sup> that comes from performativity. When one does not have good performativity, then they can be exposed to threats of violence, harassments, injury, and death (pp. ii-iv).

In relation to post-9/11 society and the precariat where anyone can be subjected to precarity, she implies that the current contemporary society needs a form of security to behave rationally. Although this may not be achievable in the real world, the world of video games offers a fantasy of a perfect world. Even when the basis of horror games is to entertain players with dread and anxiety, horror games brings dread and anxiety in a simulated and predictable environment where players can control the outcome of their actions (Galloway 2007). For Kristeva (1982), abjection is horror. Moral revulsion and disruption of borders exists in the everyday life of an individual, and it evokes revulsion from the betrayal of these borders. However, she made a point where abjection is another facet of religion which is largely a part of the life of most people. It is a type of fear that results from disgust towards impurity and notions of sin. Even so, viewers do

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<sup>10</sup> “that politically induced condition of maximized vulnerability and exposure for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence and to other forms of aggression that are not enacted by states and against which states do not offer adequate protection.” (Butler, 2009, para. 3)

not enjoy the feeling of total fear resulting from absolute disorder and loss of all control (Cavarero 2011). As much as horror can be repulsive, there are only certain types of horror that people can enjoy.

In horror videogames, the representation of horror is more than just natural, historical, personal or metaphysical (Tracy et al. 2014). Although horror video games take inspiration from older media such as literature and film, experience for each player comes subjectively from being projected into the game. Every avatar faces different horrifying circumstances, resulting in different subjective meanings from each scenario. Whether the player has to take a role to be someone else, solve puzzles, taking a risk to escape a horde of undead, and become disoriented when the enemy assaults them, it is nevertheless, an engaging story of survival.

## CHAPTER III

### CONTENT ANALYSIS: Case Studies

#### 3.1. The Haunted Mirror

Horror videogames place the avatar into precarious, life-threatening situations. In some games, these conditions are reflected through the unfamiliarity of certain spaces such as in *Little Nightmares* (Tarsier Studios, 2017) and *Inside* (Playdead, 2016). Both of these games protagonists, (Six from *Little Nightmares*) and (the Boy from *Inside*) have to traverse unknown and dangerous territories to reach their goal. In other games, the avatar must confront monstrous, fiendish beings that pose a threat to the player's mortality such as *Penumbra: Overture* (Frictional Games 2007). Here the creatures will not hesitate to kill the protagonist, Philip. Other times, they can be the one posing threat to other characters such as in *Lucius* (Shiver Games 2012). Lucius (the main character) is a spawn of Satan, who exacts punishment on the members of the mansion as a payment for a deal made by his grandfather. While in psychological horror games, the avatar must deal with horrors that come from, and threaten, the human psyche. Susan in *The Cat Lady* (Harvester Games 2012) and Fran in *Fran Bow* (2013) must overcome their mental struggles and face horrors from within themselves.

As part of a prerequisite within the horror genre of video games, terror needs to be staged through technical capabilities (Sical & Delekta, as cited in Perron 2012). This would mean that sound and game design needs to be considered first hand to identify the game environment. After these conditions have been identified, the player can understand that the avatar is placed into precarious situations, a derivative of precarity. Precarity, as defined by Judith Butler (2009), is a condition where there is a lack of security, lack of institutional protection, as well as heightened risk towards harassment or violence (Butler et al. 2009). In horror games, precarity may come in various forms including a dismissive authoritative force, lack of warning signs, lack of supportive character, or even lack of protective weapons. All these contribute to the building of the environment the avatar may be thrown into and serves as one aspect towards the gameplay.

The vulnerability of the avatar and his/her exposure towards an abundance of dramatic violence (Goldstein 1998) therefore can create abject horror. Abject horror, according to Kristeva (1982) can come from various aspects that betray the borders between what is considered normal, and what is considered impure or sinful. In horror games, players must face abject manifestations of evil that are embodied in many of the player's adversaries, such as that of sadists, human experiments, pacts with the Devil, or personal guilt. Abjection, with its underlying Christian norms, describes these evils as those that "disturbs identity, system, order... does not respect borders, positions, rules... criminal with a good conscience... a friend who stabs you" and any human crime since it draws attention to the fragility, or lack, of existing law (Kristeva 1982 pp. 4). Even so, abjection can be experienced in various ways relative to moralities and norms (Creed 2000). For example, as most players will regard their avatar as a representation of themselves (Rehak 2003), anything that disturbs, excluded from, or threatens their identity, will be subject for elimination or should be avoided at all cost. For example, in *Penumbra: Overture* Philip has to survive in an abjection-induced caved-in mine. The notes and journals left in the mine seemed to hint that there has not been an attempt of rescue, nor does the writers of each note display shows sanity. While Lucius in *Lucius*, which seemed to have been heavily influenced by Gothic Horror, greatly disturbs the borders of norms and morality by taking the lives of innocents as a sacrifice.

These concepts will be expanded relative to the avatar who is placed within the game mechanics, specifically, in regards to spatial and temporal conditions in the virtual space. As such, this section will analyze the discursive dimensions of avatarial subjectivity as it pertains to three subtypes of the horror genre: Puzzle-Platformer, Survival-Escape, and Psychological Horror.

### **3.2. Classification of Horror Games**

Similar to the purely text-based adventure game *Myst* (1993) that integrated riddle-solving, an absence of instructions, and emphasis on spatial exploration as a way to enhance narrative progression, horror games can contain similar elements (Murray, as cited in Rehak 2003). For Perron (2012), horror is scary adventure games that tell "a story about survival" in a darker, morbid manner. They are different from adventure games, where the avatar can befriend monsters, monsters in horror games are abnormal beings that disturb the natural order (Carroll

year, pp.16) and threaten the avatar. Furthermore, they do not exhibit positive human characteristics, and as such are positioned as "extraordinary characters in our ordinary world" (Carroll et al.). This is evidenced in a scenario from *Resident Evil 7* (2017) where the main character traverses the interiors of a broken down, shadow filled mansion while dealing with its uncanny residents. In order to survive, players must solve clues while being driven by the desire to escape (Perron 2012). All subgenres of horror video games contain narratives involving survival although they can be told in different ways.

This section analyzes six Indie Horror Games: *Penumbra: Overture* (Frictional Games 2007), *The Cat Lady* (Harvester Games 2012), *Lucius* (Shiver Games 2012), *Fran Bow* (Killmonday 2012), *Inside* (Playdead 2016) and *Little Nightmares*<sup>11</sup> (Tarsier Studio 2017). Furthermore, the games are placed into various classifications:

1. *Little Nightmares* and *Inside* are put into the 'Puzzle-Platformer Horror Video Game'. Both games adopt the mechanics of platforming as a means of progression; players climb up, jump, or scale down a suspended platform, accompanied by the puzzle-solving mechanic. There are no known weapons in this game, emphasizing on the elements of stealth, speed, and creativity, all a reflection of ago. In both *Little Nightmares* and *Inside*, players are playing as small children who are placed in an extraordinary location in an unknown time. The fact that they are children (the most vulnerable of human victims), heightening the degree of precarity of the avatar/player. Without a hint of familiarity, the avatar is placed in a situation where they are exposed to danger and can be expunged at any time they are careless (Butler 2009). The goal between each character differs: Six from *Little Nightmares* wants to escape, while the Boy from *Inside* wants to go inside (pun intended) an unknown facility.
2. *Penumbra: Overture* and *Lucius* are categorized as Survival-Escape Horror Video Game. The player's goal is to survive, weapons are provided, and an object is presented to progress throughout the story. There is some degree of competition and risk in both games namely in

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<sup>11</sup> Tarsier Studios received funds from Creative Europe (organizations to provide financial support for creative media) for development, and from Nordic Game Program (organizations for Nordic computer and video games development) for the concept. They are creatively independent.

fighting and outwitting the enemy. Although Philip from *Penumbra* is very different from Lucius, the goal of both games coincide in consideration of stealth. Philip always has the option to quietly traverse the caved-in mine in relative silence. However, this does not mean that he is free from threat: there are little to no warnings from where enemies could come from which meant he is exposed to danger. While Lucius almost always needs to stay hidden to avoid suspicion; as he is an agent of the Devil, there is fear of being discovered. Lucius is almost always under constant surveillance of the members of the manor and one wrong move may prove fatal for Lucius as he can be discovered.

3. *The Cat Lady* and *Fran Bow* are put into the Psychological Horror category. Available dialogue options show each character's internal struggle throughout the narrative; sometimes read with a voice-over, sometimes just a dialogue box. The choices the player makes can also affect the story which put some risks into the choices the player may take. *The Cat Lady's* and *Fran Bow's* story is built around the protagonists Susan and Fran struggles that serve as a terrifying experience of being forced to come to terms with their own sanity. Both of these games highlight a very contemporary issue – namely, suicide and mental illness. The protagonists are never quite sure whether or not the dangers that are presented to them are in fact, actual or just a figment of their mind. Suicide is always a dark option for them in which to resolve this inner psychological conflict. Sometimes similar to the Grand Guignol theatre, *Fran Bow* and *The Cat Lady* does not shy away from showing sadism in the form of mutilation and body sewing, although this time it also accounts drug abuse.

These classifications are not to say that each game specifically belongs to the category, but rather where the game design is more prominent. All these games place the avatar in situations of precarity, namely a setting where there is relatively little semblance towards the ordinary world (Carroll et al.). Even when there is no semblance to reality, the temporal settings of the game are relatively hidden or obscured. Abjection is generated by the increasing obstacles of 'evil' that the players need to face in order to survive. Each manifestation of evil may be construed as an allegory towards human failures and embodies it in the form of monsters that are impure and disturbs normal borders (Kristeva et al.). For example, the monsters in *Little Nightmares* embody what could be considered 'ultra-consumerist' character of modern society. Or as the Steam



website (citation) copywriting says "corrupted souls looking for their next meal" and the failure to negate one's wants. In the end, it is also shown that Six have succumbed to the 'ultra-consumerist' tendency which was her chosen path to escape.

The huddle-creature in *Inside* could be seen as a failure of an apparent human mind-control experiment. As a boy who traverses into the facility, he encounters many mind-control devices that can be used for his aide. Even so, this does not erase that there has certainly been an experiment within the facility. In *Penumbra: Overture*, human failure comes in a form of the failure to heed warnings, putting the main character in dangerous situations. Philip, muddled with emotions and curiosity surrounding his father, disregards his father's last will: to burn the documents he procured. Philip eventually found himself in a dangerous caved-in mine and have to survive and find ways to escape the mine. While in *Lucius*, human failures reflect a sinister desire to cheat through the pact with the Devil. Lastly, *The Cat Lady* and *Fran Bow* highlight the failure of coping with mental illnesses and trauma. However, as the story progresses, it gives only more hopeful thoughts for the player.

### 3.2.1. Puzzle-Platformer Horror

Puzzle-platformer horror weaves the elements of survival slightly differently from survival horror. Intrinsicly, the essence of role-playing and themes of survival are weaved together into a puzzle-solving mechanic. With platforming gameplay similar to *Donkey Kong* (1981) and *Crash Bandicoot 3* (1998), the avatar is required to navigate through suspended platforms to move forward or to evade enemies. Puzzle-platformer horror, as the name implies, puts more emphasis on puzzle-solving rather than platforming (Minkkinen 2016) and combines a set of competitive skill to solve riddles, climb up a platform, and outsmarting the enemy all at the same time making it an engaging type of *agonistic* form of play. To add, the mechanics of puzzle-platformer does not allow the avatar to have weapons, thus raising affect in a horror game as the only choice is to solve puzzles with the intention to escape. Importantly, the horror, puzzle, and platforming mechanic comes together in *Little Nightmares* and *Inside* when the avatar has to defeat each obstacle they face; Six or the Boy must climb platforms to escape the reach of the enemies, jump down and time their movements to escape or to outsmart them.

In both games, the developers focus more on audio-visual storytelling as a strategy to heighten the notion of immediacy for the player and avatar (Perron 2012). There is also no head-updisplay (HUD) which increases immersion since it frames the game as an interactive cinema. The lack of dialogue and background information allows players to have a great degree of subjective interpretation for each game. At the same time, the minimal information given ensures that the player is immersed in a sense of precarity; taking away what they know and putting them in a situation where most things are unknown and therefore lack a sense of protection. The unknown variable such as unavailable warning signs, all of this enhances the vulnerability of the avatar. In doing so, the game design creates tension and fear, giving players only enough information to proceed (Rouse III 2009). Perron further justifies this, stating that horror games aim to constantly put players out of balance while allowing them to react with whatever knowledge they have (Perron et al.).

The automated (non-playable) characters only occasionally emit moans, gasps or shrieks, sometimes they even sing, but they never speak. Nevertheless, they are shown to be aggressive towards Six and the Boy. To illustrate, in *Little Nightmares*, the residents of The Maw will treat Six as though she is a pest. To escape them, she must survive using the platforms to time her escape. Should she fail to reach a platform on time, she risks herself getting eaten, being thrown into the oven, or falling to her death. Most of the residents will grab her in one move, and this will result in a rather colorful nature of her death. Their treatment towards her clearly heightened her risk of accidental death or violence. While in *Inside*, the Boy is constantly threatened by the presence of the authorities; who are supposedly protective forces responsible for the wellbeing of society. Following a similar mechanic to *Little Nightmares*, if the boy is not fast enough to escape the surveillance, he will risk getting killed or abducted by the surveillance team. However, throughout the game there are also children besides the Boy who do not receive similar treatment, implying that there is a political reason behind the treatment. This also reflects Butler's ideas on precarity – specifically, the Boy is exposed to conditions where he is subjected to violence as there is no political protection over him.

In *Little Nightmares*, the tendencies of the residents of The Maw are to consume excessively. This could be seen especially from the Guests who profusely consume not for enjoyment, but

rather for the sake of consumption. Their abnormalities reflect food loathing in the discourse of abjection in which the consumption of food “signifies a border between two distinct entities or territories” (Creed 2000, as cited in Gelder pp. 65). The Guests do not eat in similar behavior with Six, neither do they try to finish what is on their table. When Six walks around them, they also try and grab her and eat her immediately without a second thought. This reflects a breach of norms towards positive human traits (Carroll 1998) as the Guests fail to exhibit control over their appetite. This excessive consumption also reflects a form of food loathing where a reaction could be birthed from just watching someone eat a certain type of food (Halloran 2004; Kristeva 1982). In a normal situation, it may be acceptable for someone to eat a generous amount of food, however in the context of the game the origins of the “meat” is quite unclear.

While in *Inside* the only information from the game is “hunted and alone, a boy/avatar finds himself drawn to the center of a dark project”<sup>12</sup>(steampowered.com). As such, the boy runs from the forest towards a facility. During his journey to the facility, he must hide from the surveillance team in the forest. Should he fail to do this, he will be abducted or killed. This is further amplified as the existence of a surveillance authority inside the facility grows in a number of variations. Inside the facility, the boy/avatar can see humans who do not seem to be moving on their own. Although this does not completely imply human experimentations, the narrative of the game seems to hint that these “non-thinking humans” are a part of a mind control experiment; reflecting a form of unthinking being in abjection (Creed et al, pp 65). This is further emphasized when the boy/avatar can control them using a mind-control device to help him solve puzzles; should the boy/avatar take the device off, the “non-thinking humans” stops moving. The large group of these “non-thinking humans” could also be seen marching into the facility and line up for obedience test.

### **3.2.2. Survival-Escape Horror**

The goal of survival horror is to survive by escaping an area in pursuit of a safer place. As a dark experiential route, sometimes players must eliminate obstacles by killing or escape them (Perron 2012). As an experiential route, sometimes survival horror takes on the first-person perspective to allow a better degree of immersion, or rather “to achieve an intuitive sense of motion and

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<sup>12</sup> Buy INSIDE. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://store.steampowered.com/app/304430/INSIDE/>

action in gameplay” (Galloway 2007, pp. 40). In survival horror, sometimes there are a set of weaponry available and players must use them intelligently; such as scarcity of ammunition in *Silent Hill 2* (2001) and *Metro: Last Light* (2014). These weapons would at least allude to a sense of security in the game. In some sense, a guarantee or reassurance given to the avatar that they can survive another day. However, in some cases, there may not be a set of weapons at all. Such is the case with *Penumbra: Overture* and *Lucius*. The weapons Philip and Lucius received are not guns, but instead, melee ranged weapon and supernatural powers respectively. Although the choice of weapons is not quite promising, the least they can do is protect avatar until a better option arrives. Unlike other types of violent video games such as the First Person Shooter genre a weapon is no guarantee of safety or protection.

In *Penumbra: Overture* (2007), Philip receives a message from his long and deceased father, who wanted him to destroy a set of documents that are held in a bank. Philip, however, decides to disregard this message and instead pursues the contents of the documents, leading him towards Northern Greenland. Upon reaching the place, Philip has to take shelter in a caved in, abandoned mine and absent from any forms of rules or safety. Without warning signs, nor indicators towards danger, this absence of rules reflects the principles of precarity as described by Butler (2009). In various instances, he has to confront creatures that are not normal in comparison to what is normally seen. Although, the creatures are just one part of the mine that is abnormal; there are also a couple of individuals in the mine who elaborated on how they have survived after the mine caved in. Needless to say, the two individuals have been driven insane by confinement. One of them, named Red, directly interacts with Philip using a radio frequency and act as Philip’s guide. Yet because Red is not exactly sane, sometimes he guides Philip into the wrong directions on purpose.

Similar to *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (2010) *Penumbra: Overture* also has physics where players directly control their avatar’s interaction with objects instead of just pressing buttons. The player has to move their mouse a certain direction if they want to move Phillip’s arm. Although the player physics seemed experimental, it provides a sense of liminality that adds to the player’s immersive experience. Stealth mechanics can also contribute to the player’s immersion. For example, in one of the scenes where Philip gets out of one of the rooms in the

mine, a howling that is dog-like could be heard; followed by low growling signifying that the creature is quite irritated. Text on the bottom of the screen appears and reads "... I've never been this scared in my life... I can feel my heart racing. If anything gets within more than a few feet of my hiding spot, I'd better not stare it out. Anything within my field of vision might panic me, and then I'm a goner" (chapter 1 of *Penumbra: Overture*). The dialogue, although only texts, can create certain affect within the player and would have to make sure that Philip stays hidden by crouching. If Philip sees the zombie dog, then he will panic and hyperventilate, as soon as he does the dog will assault –activating a red HUD around the player's screen—and kill him. This may ideally transfer a proper emotional state to the player as Carroll (1990) suggests through procedural representation namely, disorientation.

In contrast, in *Lucius* has a different approach towards survival horror game. *Lucius*'s origin is elaborated by his grandfather, who dealt with the Devil to bring himself wealth and assets, as a grandson who should continue his legacy. His decision backfires as *Lucius* does not only act as an agent of Satan but murders every member in the manor as payment. *Lucius*, seemed to take inspirations from the Faust legend (c. 1480-1540) and combining them with a *Hitman: Codename 47* (2000) mechanic, although with not much action involved. *Lucius* rather puts an emphasis on stealth: *Lucius* needs to avoid being seen or being captured by the police to keep on bringing sacrifices to Satan. In actuality, *Lucius* subverts the notion of a horror game. Instead of confronting the monsters, the avatar is himself - the monster. On a symbolic level the game forces the player to negotiate notions of self by forcing them into an antagonistic relationship of confronting alterity and enmity. Throughout the game, *Lucius* has to outsmart the members of the manor by making them think each death happens by accident. The game puts sequential hints throughout, especially towards *Lucius*'s next sacrificial target. Although in this game *Lucius* technically does not die, he does have some sort of "game over" screen when he is found out by any members of the mansion. The game over screen, however, immediately takes *Lucius* back to the last time the player saved the game.

The procedural representation seems to be translated from the avatar to the player as a repressed desire to commit murder. For *Lucius*, as a stand-in for the player, can create cunning schemes to murder other members of the mansion and make it look like an accident. This, however, puts

Lucius's actions in the discourse of abjection as he is a character who does not respect the borders of humans, and scheme to execute his plans; more so when the investigative force disregard Lucius completely as a suspect. To make it worse (or perhaps better?), for every successful kill, Lucius is rewarded with supernatural powers as proof of his progress. Lucius can also allude to what Derry (2009) calls, 'corruption of innocence'. He is only six years old at the time he commits murder. These actions reflect a film trope that was popular in the 1960s and a part of history where young people were demonstrating against the war (pp. 91). Lucius's "loss of innocence" is further emphasized through planning, targeting, and scheming that reflects "premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge... [which] heightens the fragility [of the law]" in the discourse of abjection while collecting his sacrifice. The story of *Lucius* and *Penumbra: Overture* greatly differs in its narrative. Since *Penumbra: Overture* is just the first part of a trilogy; which include *Penumbra: Black Plague* and its sequel, *Penumbra: Requiem*. The narratives here are divided into three separate parts that make a greater story. The developers also implemented a slightly different game design for *Penumbra: Overture* and its derivatives. *Penumbra: Overture* has more focus on exploration in comparison with the other two. Although it is an experimental horror video game using the player physics mechanic, the elements that stages horror within the game still manages to be able to produce affect. Lucius meanwhile, seemed to play out a lot like B-grade with a clichéd anti-Christ horror film that is notably popular in the late 1960s (Derry 2009). The game is littered with religious and demonic symbols such as Lucius's birthday (June 6, 1966), crosses, prayers and most of all, priests.

### 3.2.3. Psychological Horror

Although Perron mostly writes about survival horror games, the psychological horror subgenre follows a similar approach to present horror; the roleplaying, riddle-solving, and themes of survival still exist within the subgenre. What makes it different is that the elements of horror are based on the fears of the main protagonist, "on his feelings of guilt, on his faith and unstable emotional state of mind" (Prohaszkova 2012). Similar to the naturalist work that inspires the Grand Guignol, *Therese Raquin* (Zola 1867), it highlights the psychological condition of the main characters to build tension towards horror. Zola's literary work implies that not all horrifying things come from external factors, and they can also from the thoughts of the characters. The most compelling aspect of this genre is the display of discomfort caused by the

vulnerability, which is translated through an agency (Rehak 2003; Hayles 1982). To add, existing authoritative figures tends to dismiss the call for help as performativity comes to play, thus hindering the process of protection (Butler 2009).

*The Cat Lady* and *Fran Bow* are both two-dimensional side-scroller psychological horror game. Much like *Catachresis* (2013) and *Limbo* (2010), the mechanics are synonymous with a linear storyline and progressing forward. Though dialogue choices are available to enhance interaction in-game, options players take has risks that could potentially affect the ending. For *The Cat Lady*, dialogue options are accompanied with voice acting to translate affect to the player. In case the dialogue option does not work, the game revisits the previous choice after the current choice is read. In *Fran Bow*, dialogue options are mostly written in texts accompanied by music relevant to the scene. Also as a point-and-click horror adventure, *Fran Bow* allows players to see Fran's thoughts for each object clicked. Slightly different with *The Cat Lady*, Susan has to move towards the object to interact with them. Object interaction pops up a dialogue box that expresses Fran's and Susan's thoughts, as well as hints towards riddles.

*The Cat Lady* is set in a rather modern time and starts out with how the main character, Susan, have committed suicide by drinking sleeping pills. She wakes up into a purgatory-like forest where she was forced to make a precarious pact with the Queen of Maggots; although provided three reluctant options, Susan must accept the offer. The pact obligates Susan to eliminate a number of "Parasites" after she comes back alive. This pact also meant that she has to face death in case the Parasites finds her first, and Susan have no way of knowing them apart from other people. After Susan made the pact, it risks her to constantly be exposed to danger at any given time. At one time she is exposed to verbal sexual harassment, another time she was visited by a murderer, and another she was killed in the hospital where she woke up. The nature of the pact evokes precarity where Susan is placed in a constant state of danger and she has nobody to protect her but herself; even though Susan is granted immortality at a cost of someone else's life to restore her own.

The Parasites are implied as humans with bad intentions, as the creator Rem Michalski mentioned in an interview "it's not the dead but the living we should be afraid of... the dead

can't hurt us. There are no monsters—except us” (“About The Cat Lady” 2013). Much like the Grand Guignol that shows melodramatic violence (Hand & Wilson 2011), the Parasites exhibit sadistic tendencies to kill for pleasure; most of the time they praise and threaten Susan before proceeding to kill her. Their sadistic behaviors, although is artistry, does not respect the norms and some explicitly display abject behaviors. Each abject intent of the Parasites is reflected in their dialogues, for example where the Pest Control Man shamelessly makes sexual innuendos towards Susan or the confrontation with The Eye of Adam who admits that he is a savior by encouraging suicidal individuals to commit suicide.

The notions of precarity are nuanced in *The Cat Lady* as well. Throughout the game, there were at least a couple of instances where Susan tried to report the Parasites to the police, but the authority figure seems dismissive at the moment of emergencies. The actions of authoritative figures further the threat of existence from an unresponsive government. Although perhaps it is only metaphorically implied, *The Cat Lady* gives an allegory towards how mental health and crime are treated in the real world. As precarity and performativity come hand in hand, Butler described it relative to an individual who struggles to live (pp. iv). In relation to someone who is regarded as sick or has a mental illness, Susan is easily dismissed. Similar to gender performativity is still judged, Susan who is known to have mental illness received a rough end.

The character of Dagenhart in *Fran Bow*, is "...a young girl struggling with a mental disorder" (Steam Description), also received similar treatment of dismissal. The story opens with Fran and her parents living a harmonious life until one night Fran's parents were murdered by an unknown assailant. Fran then escapes the house and was taken into an asylum, where the game begins. When she wakes up, she is in Dr. Deern's, her psychiatrist, office during a consultation. Despite all of Fran's complaints and denials that she is sick, Dr. Deern is very dismissive and tells Fran to take her medicines and listen to authorities. The dismissal is very similar to what happened in *The Cat Lady* where Susan, despite contacting securities, is denied due to a part slow process of bureaucracy and part her performativity. Fran is seen to be underage, and the norms of the game world dictate that she should listen to adults; a child with no known education does not have the performativity should listen (Butler 2009; Standing 2017). This is heavily implied from the dialogues that happened with most –if not all—adult figures in the game. She is almost always



forced to listen to existing adult figures although Fran is adamant towards not doing so most of the time. In this authoritarian world, it is the adults know best, and as such for Fran to take medicine which in fact allows her to see another and darker reality.

Yet on a symbolic level the medicine is both the poison (addiction) and cure (tonic). On the one hand it allows her to negotiate hostile environment of the game world. The more Fran accesses the medicine, the more she can 'access' the other reality. As a game mechanic, this allows Fran to solve riddles and puzzles. As a metaphor, it is like a taking Morpheus's "red pill" from the film the Matrix, although this dynamic becomes blurred as Fran becomes increasingly dependent on the medicine. Even more problematically, Fran has to fight Remor, the main antagonist of the game. Remor, is in actually Fran's embodiment of guilt, and acts as the primary source of horror that haunts Fran's mind. Remor is abject as he inflicts pain on others by making them suffer, he also takes on a ghastly and demonic appearance. Remor reflects a "moral register as a potential for guilt and sin" (Kristeva et al., pp. 91) in relation to Fran's mental condition. Fran can also be considered as an unreliable narrator as her world is constantly changing based on what she sees most of the time, heightening the uncertainty of the player/avatar.

According to the game's co-creator Natalia Figueroa, Fran's disturbed mental health is based on her own semi-autobiographical experiences grappling with mental illness. As Figueroa admitted in one interview, she had a traumatic childhood where she witnessed family violence and received unfair personal treatment outside her home ("On Fran Bow" 2013). The interview clarifies some of the game's connections with human experiments, drugs, asylums, and vegetative state as a metaphor for mental health and illness. However, this only shed small light towards what the medicine really does as the game also shifts between reality and un-reality.

## CHAPTER IV

### FURTHER DISCUSSIONS

#### 4.1 Findings

Video games are interpellative devices that allow the player to construct, orchestrate, and negotiate the notions of self. In horror video games there is an emphasis on avatarial subjectivity through affective strategies – namely, the purposeful eliciting of intense emotions. This study, explored the temporal and spatial dimensions of avatarial subjectivity in Indie horror video games.

To summarize my findings, in horror video games, horror is depicted as a variation of evil that is created through the failures of mankind. These representations of evil are applied in horror video games to the aesthetics, narrative and mechanics of game play. Horror video games borrow from the semiotics of Gothic Literature such as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), which depicts Frankenstein’s monster as a product of mad science failure. In the same way, other literary work such as David Lynch’s *The Elephant Man* (1980) depict the superficial tendencies of humans to judge horror along the line of aesthetic considerations. In the same way, Kristeva’s abjection encodes these meanings of failures as “abjection” where the sense of self and other is blurred through various human actions. This include sexual perversion, food loathing, shameless murder and insanity. In the case studies, this research has explored such things in relation to procedural representation:

- a) In *Little Nightmares* and *Inside*, players must use suspended platforms to escape abject threats. Six in *Little Nightmares* must escape The Maw by avoiding the hungry guests who failed to control themselves and succumb to gluttony. While the Boy in *Inside*, becomes a part of a failing mind control experiment and takes over the hive mind-huddle towards a destination that may be a faux freedom. Although fantastical, *Little Nightmares* and *Inside* provides an insight on how players may deal with the fears of their childhood.

- b) In *Penumbra Overture* and *Lucius*, players must traverse their vicinity in stealth or silence in a simulated survival horror. As Philip who is only equipped with a challenging melee weapon have to stay in hiding, while Lucius who is a spawn of Satan have to discreetly exact his deeds. From stealthy executions, players may feel elated or relieved once they have achieved their goal.
- c) In *The Cat Lady* and *Fran Bow*, players must struggle with the main characters, Susan and Fran, in overcoming their fears and coming to terms with their situation. Players may relate directly to each Susan or Fran as they face prevailing contemporary social issues regarding mental health.

In a controllable environment, players through their avatar can achieve their goal and feel momentarily elated. In horror games however, sometimes a part of player's curiosity come into play (Carroll 1990). While the gameplay which invites player's active engagement helps the player be immersed in the games. Although so, as each avatar is the player's subject, it also carries with it a subjective message which players obtain through procedural representation.

#### **4.2 Further Discussions and Limitations**

It is not until the end of the paper that the researcher realized that analyzing video games from the narrative standpoint alone is quite impossible. Although there may certainly be a better method to analyze games just as games, looking at films certainly provide great assistance in understanding how horror games managed to create certain affect. Along the way, looking at horror games is a continuous journey as understanding horror is a paradox. There are so much more horror games that could be explored than the ones the author has picked. However, horror is not only remediated into video games. The recent trend of "Escape Games" or "Escape Rooms" have recently taken horror as a central theme. This too, works differently from video games. As much as it is a simulation, but players experience it physically without mediation. And inside, the room is riddled with puzzles to solve, each complimenting the other to assist the escape of the participants. This notable trend appears to be popular in Southeast Asian countries, and may be growing outside of Southeast Asia as well.

This research also recognizes that there should be better video games to play than what was chosen. However, the life lessons that were taught in the choices are still valuable: *The Cat Lady* especially highlights social issues that were previously untouched in a refreshing (if not depressing) manner. Suicide is a dark subject not many want to tackle and the Indie game scene becomes the perfect outlet for publication. Suicide, in a sense it is a “horror of everyday life”. Not many can talk about, let alone open up to someone, but through *The Cat Lady* people who has suicidal thought might just relate to Susan to a certain degree. Although so, the author is certain that each game, if any of the readers decide to play them, will give them a scare or two.

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