Final Essay

Topic:

How do horror games create reactions in players? Why are unusual control schemes and disempowering the player such common genre tropes? Discuss with reference to Tanya Krzywinska's 'Hands-On Horror' and at least two other academic pieces of work.

Essay:

Horror games' unique design traits are commonly associated with unusual control schemes, tense gameplay and a sensation of disempowerment, provoking players' reactions which are not normally associated with a pleasurable, voluntary experience, yet, that's exactly how they are described by its consumers. Such a feat is achieved by horror medium creators not only through specific targeting of teenage audience members – who display a higher chance to be interested – but also by adopting specific techniques, mostly involving Mise-en-Scene, that trick the human mind into believing in the sensation of danger. Understanding why such traits are, counterintuitively commonplace, requires horror enthusiasts to ask themselves a deceivingly complex question; "what is horror?"

Horror is divided into two branches, which ramify into multiple sub-categories, according to Martin (2019). Genuine horror occurs in order to aid humans in survival through dangerous situations – substantiated by Schlozman in his TED (2017) and Parks' (2018) remarks to Freud's Id, appointing uncanniness (misplacement) as the root of horror - or "art horror," present in entertainment media, which exploits humanity's evolutionary traits to provide us with amusement. Manley (2013, p. 1), however, focuses on separating it as a different sensation from terror, "all about psychopathic behaviour", while "horror was all about a mysterious malevolent force in the universe." Other authors (Krzywinska 2002) agree about horror's tendency to allude to mysterious unknown forces, nominating this phenomenon as 'the Occult'. In videogames' horror, such unseen force is presented as the influence of the developers of the videogame itself, in a dilemma between the amount of control the player has over the experience versus how much predetermination is implemented, with the ultimate goal of creating thematically appropriate reactions to horror.

Krzywinska (2002) dissects 'the Occult's' presence through comparison of two popular titles of the horror genre; *"Resident Evil 3: Nemesis"* (Capcom, 1999) and *"Clive Barker's Undying"* (DICE, 2001). Although both are horror, "both use different forms of restriction to create the type of suspense that underpins the genre" (Krzywinska 2002, p.15). The first opts for an experience which assimilates to film, imposing camera restrictions, predetermined cinematographic events and intrusive handlings of users' control, disempowering them, developing the horror atmosphere of gameplay. As summarised in another of her articles (2015, p.296), "games are predicated on giving a player agency within a structured situation, it is equally possible to take that agency away to generate a strong and direct sense of loss and vulnerability." The second title attempts to break from this conventional style, including menacing gothic architecture, increased visual proximity from a first person camera, amounting to an approach which maximises player control over the experience, while not taking away the expected tension from a horror flick (Krzywinska 2015).

The unifying factor between the two is the deliberate discomforting experience caused by playing, yet somehow, such discomfort is enjoyable, not discouragement, as defended by Krzywinska (2015, p.297) "the most effective and affective Horror games […] work against the usual Vitruvian coordinates of games." This concept is not exclusive to horror, as discussed in Jørgensen's (2016) positive discomfort caused by the distressing playthrough of the war themed game *'Spec Ops: The Line' [SO:TL]* (Yager Entertainment, 2012). Players of her study group have "described [the experience] as rewarding and valuable because the sense of discomfort provokes reflection and insight" (Jørgensen 2016, p.5), hence, discomfort is the mean to an end. Players feel rewarded by reflection upon negative experiences. Best described by a playtester, after forcefully witnessing the consequences of his mindless shooting in an aftermath cutscene, proclaimed "I'm a fucking bastard who has killed all these people" (Jørgensen 2016, p.11). Appeal was achieved from becoming aware of his actions' impact, challenging previous desensitisation from other shooting games, where killing's morality is not questioned. Horror approaches dark themes much like SO:TL through shock factor, unsettling imagery and difficult choices, refuting player's detachment from the content presented, forcing self-reflection, perfectly exemplified in Brown's (2016) video on morality in *'Darkest Dungeon'* (Red Hook Studios, 2016). Horror is present in aesthetics and themes, but mainly through difficult moral dilemmas players face, knowing the game's saving system won't allow take backs in decisions made, growing players' awareness of decisions' meaningfulness, especially from witnessing the irreversible consequences through cut-scenes. SO:TL does however differ from horror in a sense, as 'traditional' horror implements disempowering controls to achieve player's reaction of helplessness, while the first, empowers players with an arsenal of firepower. The helplessness comes after fighting, once they forcefully ponder on the morality of what was done.

Pre-fabricated discomfort's success heavily relies on what is described in reversal theory as "parapathic emotions" according to Jørgensen (2016), or "vicarious pleasure" for Krzywinska (2002), further supported by Kerr in her TED talk (2018), enjoyable forms of negative emotions, which "demand a feeling of safety in order to remain enjoyable" (Krzywinska 2015). Especially in horror, this manifests itself psychologically, as "excitement and anxiety are different framings of the same kind of sensory response – arousal" (Krzywinska 2015). When playing a game appealing to both, the line between the two is positively blurred, exciting players through danger, yet awareness of safety, culminating feelings that emerge into meaningful reflection. As described by another playtester, "USA just accidentally bombed a Doctors Without Borders hospital" (Jørgensen, 2016, p.6). Gaming reminded her of real tragedy, although what was witnessed in gameplay was fiction.

'Parapathic emotions' or 'Vicarious pleasure' is one amongst many theories that explain horror's appeal. Zillmann (1986, cited in Martin 2019), however, presents enjoyment from horror as a by-product of resolving tense situations, with the protagonist's success and the villain's failure. This explanation has been pointed out as narrow, because not only various examples of successful horror medium do not abide by this rule, but it also has not been shown meaningful support. As result, further expanding the already developing theory of 'vicarious pleasure' seems more plausible, with supporting scientific grounding, exemplary displayed by Sparks and Spirek (1988, cited in Martin 2019, p.14), "a positive correlation [has been found] between skin conductance (a physiological measure of emotional arousal) and self-reported arousal in people who watched a clip of A Nightmare On Elm Street [1984]".

Statistics further support this, as pointed by Zuckerman (1978, cited in Clasen, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen & Johnson 2018, p.), as the pleasure of seeking thrilling experiences in life, such as financial, social or physical risks assimilates to consuming horror media, evoking similar excitement. He specifically associated such desire to adolescence, peaking at 18-24 years of age – evidenced by Lynch and Martins' (2015, cited in Martin 2019) study group of videogame consuming audience, especially because the most frequently reported game was *'Resident Evil'* (Capcom, 1996), a horror title - slowly stopping overtime, as reported by Edwards (1984, cited in Martin 2019). Non-coincidentally, Clasen, Kjeldgaard-Christiansen & Johnson (2018, p.12) reveal it is to be expected that "the appetite for horror to peak during the teenage years." Hence, a solid connection between thrill seeking and horror medium, especially videogames, matches the collected data.

Lastly, reactions to horror games evoke analysis of what techniques are employed when conveying such emotions, and how those impact gameplay. Parks' (2018) exposes how horror medium producers adopt specific effective techniques which convey such emotions. Although film specific, such techniques translate well into videogames, and the key is Mise-en-scene, the bridging factor of the medium. Soundscape, lighting, acting, setting, and so on, are manipulated by producers in creating uncanniness, unnaturalistic sensations, triggering individuals' danger perception, achieving horror. For example: light creates silhouettes, visible figures that can be seen but not made sense of, triggering humans' evolutionary functions into "fight or flight" as response to fearing the unknown. It can be concluded in that using such techniques boils down to producers playing with evolutionary mechanisms, creating what is perceived as horror. Videogame control schemes reflect this, best achieving it as films do, disempowerment.

Concluding, horror videogames display counterintuitive appeal. The expectation from blatantly distressing experiences would be to cause consumers to be repulsed, yet, it achieves the opposite. One of multiple possible explanations psychology offers is that this phenomenon evokes a complex form of pleasure, consisting of desiring to feel thrilled by danger, while also being aware of one's safety. Horror medium creators are aware of this, and not only target specifically teens, who are scientifically proven to display peak interest, they capitalize on stimulating consumers' senses to fabricate an experience that makes the public want more. In videogames, this feedback loop is achieved through techniques also adopted in cinema, mostly involving mise-en-scene, but different from film, videogames are able to rely on interactivity (or a blatant lack there of) to disempower their player. The complexity of horror videogame entertainment roots back to the manipulation of consumer's expectation of having their sensation of safety being subverted, then finding ways to achieve such goal.

References:

Reference List:

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WoYrpA3v-38 - What horror films teach us about ourselves and being human | Dr. Steven Schlozman | TEDxNashville - 2017

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gL_6bKFlLio - Why do we like to be scared? | Dr. Margee Kerr | TEDxFoggyBottom - 2018

Games/Film List:

Resident Evil 3: Nemesis, Capcom, GameCube, (1999)

Resident Evil, Capcom, Playstation, (1996)

Clive Barker's Undying, Windows PC, (2001)

Spec Ops: The Line, YAGER Studios, Playstation 3, (2012)

A Nightmare on Elm Street, Wes Craven, (1985)