Horror Videogames and the Uncanny

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ABSTRACT
This paper explores the uncanny dimensions of avatars and gamespace in survival horror videogames. The avatar’s combination of animation and lifelessness personifies Freud’s notion of the uncanny. Simultaneously, the cybernetic interaction between player and machine, whereby the digital figure appears to act with autonomy and agency, unsettles the boundaries between dead object and living person. Many horror games self-reflexively comment on this process, being full of dead objects – zombies, dolls, puppets – which move or display properties of life. Spaces in horror games characterize the uncanny architecture of horror films and literature. Many suggest the unsettling psychological disturbance lurking behind the homely and the familiar. A recurring aspect of survival horror combines the investigation of a protagonist’s origins, a return to the family home, and the exploration of gynecological spaces – blood red corridors, womb-like caverns, bloody chambers, reproducing what is for Freud the primal site of the uncanny.

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

This paper explores uncanny aspects of avatars and spaces in survival horror videogame. The videogame avatar is defined by Stephane Natkin as: ‘Game character manipulated by the player, and the player’s representative within the game’ [9]. As Dianne Carr asserts, ‘games position and address their players through various perspectives, modes, channels, menus, inputs and outputs,’ suggesting ‘it would be a mistake to try and impose a single model on to all avatar-player relations’ [1]. To avoid such generalisation, this paper is largely focussed around avatars in survival horror videogames, examples of which include Resident Evil, Silent Hill, Forbidden Siren, Haunting Ground and Rule of Rose. ‘Survival horror’ is described by Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al as a hybrid category where ‘the player controls a character who has to get out of some enclosed place solving puzzles and destroying horrific monsters along the way’ [4]. Notably, this definition foregrounds feelings of entrapment and enclosure, evoking a sense of being buried alive, an experience Freud compares to the intra-uterine experience [5], and a feature of the survival horror genre which is discussed below.

A history, albeit partial and selective, of the videogame industries might observe the increasing move towards 3D photorealistic depiction of the human form in the design of videogame avatars. This is evident in the move from a lifeless bat in Pong, to Pacman, to Mario, to Lara Croft, whose increasingly lifelike design is the focus of much comment within the popular press and online gaming community. Within survival horror can be observed a movement from Sweet Home (1989) and Resident Evil (1996), to Resident Evil 4 (2004), and Silent Hill Homecoming (2009) where playable characters shift from being represented from a two-dimensional top-down perspectives, to fully three dimensional figures realised with complex texturing and lighting effects. In this respect the avatar has increasingly assumes qualities of the uncanny in its close visual, auditory and perambulatory approximation to the human form – the sense of disquiet which Freud observes is produced when ‘an inanimate object becomes too much like an animate one’ [5]. At the same time as becoming increasingly lifelike, there remains something unavoidably lifeless about the avatar. There is a robotic repetitive quality to their movements – they are, in many ways, virtual puppets. Avatar animation, like the use of cycles in cartoons ‘draws upon a library of short, pre-rendered animated sequences… which are ‘combined and recombined in the real-time of the gameplay’ [15]. In other words, in the case of a female avatar like Haunting Ground’s Fiona: “She seems to us... Strangely stiff and soulless. Her figure is symmetrical, so is her face, that’s true enough, and if her eyes were not so completely devoid of life... She might be considered beautiful... Her step is peculiarly measured; all of her movements seem to stem from some kind of clockwork... She seems to us to be playing the part of a human being, and it’s as if there really were something hidden behind all this.” [5].

Nevertheless, the drive towards producing avatars which look like living people within third person game genres is consistent with the figure’s function as a surrogate for the player within the virtual world of the videogame. The avatar has come to represent the ‘I’ on the screen. Players
variously control, protect and manipulate the avatar. It represents the means by which the game space is engaged with, and constitutes the player’s sense of embodiment within the virtual space. Jon Dovey and Helen Kennedy discuss ways in which players are ‘re-embodied’ – given a virtual sense of presence within the gamespace through the game interface, and the videogame avatar [3]. Simultaneously ‘I’, ‘he/she’ and ‘it’, Bob Rehak applies Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to videogames in his discussion of the ‘unstable dialectic’ between player and avatar [12], which is both self and other. Avatars’ combination of life and lifelessness personifies the uncanny as described in Freud’s famous paper. Moreover, the cybernetic interaction between player and machine, whereby the digital figure appears to act as though imbued with life, and the player appears to become more machine-like, unsettles the boundaries between dead object and living person. Donna Haraway in her seminal ‘The Cyborg’s Manifesto’ identifies the cyborg as ‘a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction’ [6]. The fusion of mind, body and tool which Haraway describes taking place within post-industrial cultures accurately reflects the union of the player and avatar’s physical movements in videogame play.

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

We demand that teachers provide our children with reading skills; we expect the schools to fill them with a love of books; and yet at home we let them slump in front of the consoles. We get on with our hedonistic 21st-century lives while in some other room the nippers are bleeping and zapping in speechless rapture, their passive faces washed in explosions and gore. They sit for so long that their souls seem to have been sucked down the cathode ray tube.

They become like blinking lizards, motionless, absorbed, only the twitching of their hands showing they are still conscious. These machines teach them nothing…


The avatar is therefore not only uncanny in appearance; it also has an uncanny relationship with the player. This is further reflected in Freud’s discussion of the function of the double in the primitive and contemporary imaginations [5], as considered by Carr in relation to Silent Hill (2006). The videogame avatar produces a sense of the double as a primitive or surmounted ‘preservation against extinction’ being endlessly destroyed and resurrected throughout any game session. Simultaneously, the avatar/player relationship reflects the later function of the double in subsequent internal processes in which where the player is the self-critical conscious viewing the avatar/ego from a displaced and superior position.

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

Survival horror games take place in a range of locations common within the horror genre: haunted houses, ghost towns, gothic mansions, corresponding to the first definition of heimlich as ‘belonging to the house’ [5]. Many of these spaces personify the architectural uncanny as discussed by Anthony Vidler [14]. Indeed, the first survival horror videogame made in 1989 for the Nintendo Entertainment System in which a group of protagonists investigate a haunted mansion, is titled Sweet Home; while twenty years later the most recent Silent Hill game is Silent Hill: Homecoming (its forerunner being Silent Hill: Origins (2007)). Many authors consider the relationship between videogames and architecture. David Marshall [8], for example, writes about the ‘interactive architecture’ of games. Stephen Pool locates videogames in an artistic tradition of ‘imaginary architecture’, suggesting: ‘If architecture is frozen music, then a videogame is liquid architecture’ [11]. Henry Jenkins, draws on Pool’s perspective when he writes: ‘the future art of games may look more like architecture or dance than cinema’ [7]. The centrality of architecture in videogames corresponds with a similar prominence in relation to the uncanny, evident in Vidler’s emphasis on ‘the role of architecture in staging the sensation [of the uncanny] and in acting as an instrument for its narrative and spatial manifestations’ [14].

Architecture consequently features highly in the production of survival horror videogames’ chilling effect. These are places which confuse and confound: mazes of rooms and corridors filled with traps, dead ends and locked doors which the player must navigate. This characterises Vidler’s ‘first relationship of the uncanny to the spatial and environmental, that of “orientation” of “knowing one’s way about”’ [14]. Notably, as players learn their way around these initially-strange environments such spaces lose their uncanny resonance. As Freud himself observes: ‘the uncanny would always, as it were, be something one does
not know one’s way about in. The better orientated in his
environment a person is, the less readily will he get the
impression of something uncanny in regard to the objects
and events in it’ [5]. Survival horror videogames also tend
to be located in the domestic and the homely. They exist in
what Freud called ‘the world of common reality’ [5]. The
castle of Haunting Ground is full of winding corridors,
bedrooms, bathrooms and domestic details: a nursery full of
dolls, a library, a kitchen, a dining room. This is the place
which Fiona, the game’s playable protagonist, comes to
realise is her family home. The Himoru Mansion of Fatal
Frame is characterised by ‘an uncomfortable sense of
haunting’ [14], as locked doors can only be opened by
photographing apparitions which appear elsewhere in the
house. The small town of Silent Hill, a space characterised
by unheimlich mist or ‘hill fog’ [5], is both familiar and
unfamiliar. It is a place of white picket fence houses and
corner cafes, motels, petrol stations, apartment blocks and
parks. There is a Burger Bar, a gift shop, a theatre. A great
deal of attention has been paid to making Silent Hill as
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Electric Blue 3 cannot sustain the
photorealism of their avatars. Survival horror
games are full of elaborate gothic landscapes, rough hewn
asymmetrical caverns, fleshy corridors dripping with
indeterminate fluids. Gillian Skirrow, in a 1986 article
‘Hellivision: an analysis of video games’ considers the
construction of gamespaces and videogame experiences as
investigations of the maternal womb. Drawing on the work
of Melanie Kline, Skirrow argues that for young male
players videogame spaces represent the mother’s body’s
interior, both a source of fascination and of fear. Insofar as
Klein suggests boys’ play displaces anything threatening
onto the inside of a woman’s body, Skirrow argues
video games appeal to young males resides in the
construction of gamespaces - be it catacomb, tomb or
spaceship – as “maternal cave” [13]. Many survival horror
games combine narratives where female protagonists
investigate their familial origins with the exploration of
psychoanalytic weight of Alien’s gynaecological set design.
Yet many contemporary survival horror videogames place
as much emphasis on the photorealism of their spaces as
they do on the photorealism of their avatars. Survival horror
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games combine narratives where female protagonists
investigate their familial origins with the exploration of
gynaecological spaces: blood-red corridors, womb-like
caverns, and bloody chambers. The protagonist of Clock
Tower 3 is a young schoolgirl who begins the game by
returning to her family home against her mother’s wishes.
The player must then find a way of guiding the girl to her
mother’s bedroom, and then open up a secret door by
operating a clock puzzle. This allows passage into a red
room with a magic circle through which the protagonist can
travel back in time. The association between game spaces
and the maternal womb is even more explicit in Silent Hill
4: The Room, where the titular room is explicitly associated
with the antagonist’s mother’s body. These games, in their
emphasis on returning to the family home, in their narrative
investigation of the protagonists’ origins, in their
investigation of spaces approximating the maternal body,
reproduce what is for Freud the primal site of the uncanny:
‘the former Heim [home] of all human beings… the place
where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the
beginning’ [5]

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

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