

Spatiality, Focalization and Temporality in Horror Games

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Klaudia Jancsovics is a doctoral student at the University of Szeged in the Department of Comparative Literature. Her research belongs to game studies, and she examines digital games with the methods of literary and film studies. She aims to prove that digital games can tell stories in unique, interactive ways while using the techniques of literary writings and movies, whilst they are more than mere storytellers. So far, she has published many studies focusing on different digital games (e.g., in *Replay. The Polish Journal of Game Studies*, she analyzed the artistic value of several digital games). She also explores the different approaches (like the characteristics of detective stories, movie language, or horror stories in digital games). She also held a course at her university where she introduced game studies to the students. It was the first game studies-related class at the University of Szeged. She has also been interested in narratology, game studies, digital humanities, intermediality, and film studies.

ABSTRACT:

The horror genre can be found both in books and movies to shock and scare the audience. In digital games, players have to survive, they try to progress while they have to overcome frightening obstacles, otherwise they cannot be successful. The paper analyses three main topics: spatiality (where closed, open and looping spaces are in the centre), focalization (based on G. Genette's term., We shows how the different angles could contribute to the narrative and what unique methods exist), and temporality (where traumatic experience and looping time is at the focal point, and E. Husserl's protentions and retention terms will be important as well). We also argue that these games are unusual if we take a look at M. Csíkszentmihályi's skills-challenges diagram and see if they fit in the flow zone. The paper aims to extend our understanding of horror games.

KEY WORDS:

flow, focalization, horror, protention, retention, spatiality, temporality.

Introduction

Defining an entire genre – regardless of the medium – can be a challenging task, and the topic attracts the interest of academics from time to time. R. Altman states, “from Aristotle to Todorov and from Horace to Wellek and Warren, the topic of genre has remained one of the staples of theoretical discourse”.¹ It can be “one of staples of theoretical discourse,” because genres are born, transform or even vanish; they are not permanent and stable. Due to their nature, “‘temporary structures’ is also a good definition for – genres: morphological arrangements that *last* in time, but always only for *some* time”.² No medium is an exception.³

But how can we grasp one particular genre, the subject of this paper: *horror*? As D. Mieritz and S. C. Boonen state, “even with common conventions and formulas, horror games can differ widely from each other in terms of gameplay, game-structure, and settings of the game-world”.⁴ According to R. Dansky, horror games are an unusual fit in the gaming industry because most genres are defined by their play styles or content, but horror indicates a unique atmosphere, in other words, the mood of the game.⁵ The author lists a few common elements from this game genre: tight or locked camera, long bits of exposition, and characters wandering off by themselves (which will have consequences). Furthermore, “to supporting gameplay, creating an engaging story, and writing good dialogue, the horror game writer must help create and sustain a feeling of fear”.⁶ Fear is one

1 ALTMAN, R.: *Film/Genres*. London : British Film Institute, 1999, p. 1.

2 MORETTI, F.: *Graphs, Maps, Trees. Abstract Models for a Literary History*. London, New York, NY : Verso, 2005, p. 14.

3 Remark by the author: One example is crime fiction. From the highly intellectual 'armchair' detectives, the trend is shifted toward the tough, streetwise hard-boiled figures both in movies and books.; For more information, see: PORTER, D.: *The Private Eye*. In PRIESTMAN, M. (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*. New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 95-113.

4 MIERITZ, D., BOONEN, S. C.: *Paralysing Fear: Player Agency Parameters in Horror Games*. In JØRGENSEN, K., ŠVELCH, J. (eds.): *DiGRA Nordic '18: Proceedings of 2018 International DiGRA Nordic Conference*. Bergen : DiGRA, 2018, p. 10. [online]. [2022-11-15]. Available at: <http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/DiGRA_Nordic_2018_paper_19.pdf>

5 See: DANSKY, R.: *Writing for Horror Games*. In DESPAIN, W. (ed.): *Writing for Video Game Genres. From FPS to RPG*. Wellesley, MA : A K Peters, Ltd., 2009, p. 113-126.

6 Ibidem, p. 115.

of the key elements of this genre, and this emotion can arise from knowing that something terrifying will happen, but we are not sure what the threat exactly is and when it will reveal itself (it usually slowly comes forward). “Much of the horror of these games is constructed using feelings of tension and terror – the trepidation and anticipation that the player feels as they move through the game. These feelings are created, for example, through the use of music, as other media does to heighten dramatic tension”.⁷ In my opinion, unpredictability, the fact that we have to go through the given route and our responsibility to the character increases the sense of fear.⁸ The sounds and the dark visual effects provide more dimensions to these types of stories and deepen the player’s immersion.⁹

When someone is watching a horror movie or reading it in a book, they want to shiver and experience the threat from a safe distance. Fiction and the different medium’s characteristic are the distance: we can put away the book or pause the movie (or, as we can read in B. Perron’s book, close our eyes).¹⁰ What makes digital games so unique is that the player becomes the protagonist or, as we mentioned, they will be responsible for their fate: if the player fails, the story cannot continue and/or the character will suffer (in many cases, the player will be punished with jumpscare scenes). B. Perron summarizes this issue as follows: “closing one’s eyes in front of a scary scene is actually a way to take flight from the feared object. However, looking away as a monster approaches toward the player-character in a horror game will undoubtedly not allow a gamer to wait out the threat or avoid seeing the character’s demise and just keep going afterwards”.¹¹

Being aware that we cannot defend against the threat with traditional defence mechanisms makes horror games more frightening. We are exposed to the algorithm, and in several cases fighting back is not even an option. As we see it, digital games in the horror genre are the perfect representation of the whole medium’s logic: we are “trapped” between frameworks where we have to cooperate with the algorithm, and although our instinct would dictate otherwise (e.g. we would close our eyes, hide or fight, but the game does not give us the opportunity to do so) we are forced to follow the rules. Of course, the genre is evolving in relation to the market needs, but it is worth looking at horror games in general.

In the following few chapters, we will focus on one particular game – *Love, Sam*¹² – and will mention several others to show how horror games use spatiality, focalization, temporality and audio-visual elements in order to create a frightening atmosphere. One step further, the paper will use E. Husserl’s protentions and retentions terms¹³ in order to shed light on the genre’s attributes. *Love, Sam* was released in 2019, and it grasped my attention with its story and unique solutions. Moreover, the game has an uncommon storytelling method, mainly relying on written information, just like many walking

7 STOBART, D.: *Videogames and Horror. From Amnesia to Zombies, Run!*. Cardiff : University of Wales Press, 2019, p. 28.

8 Remark by the author: It is worth to mention the different terms which connect to the topic. As D. Stobart highlights, terror is an „internal, psychological, feeling that there is something to fear around the next corner, in the darkness, or behind the closed door. Horror, by contrast, is the realization of that fear“.; See also in: STOBART, D.: *Videogames and Horror. From Amnesia to Zombies, Run!*. Cardiff : University of Wales Press, 2019, p. 3.

9 Remark by the author: We follow J. Murray’s term here, which is based on the experience of being submerged in water: “the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus“.; For more information, see: MURRAY, J. H.: *Hamlet on the Holodeck. The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. New York, NY : The Free Press, 2016, p. 99.

10 PERRON, B.: *The World of Scary Video Games. Study in Videoludic Horror*. New York, NY : Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, p. 88-89.

11 Ibidem, p. 89.

12 KOREAN LINGUISTICS LAB: *Love, Sam (PC version)*. [digital game]. Seoul : Korean Linguistics Lab, 2019.

13 For more information, see: HUSSERL, E.: *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*. Bloomington, IN : Indiana University Press, 1973.

simulators do. The paper also focuses on M. Csíkszentmihályi's flow theory. As far as we see, while most games can evoke flow, the horror genre is an exception, or at least, it can fall in another zone in M. Csíkszentmihályi's diagram. An important remark before one reads further: the paper contains major spoilers.

Flow or Anxiety: The Horror Games' Mechanism

Immersion has already been mentioned in the Introduction, and in this chapter, we suggest approaching this question from a different angle. M. Csíkszentmihályi's flow theory resonates with J. Murray's findings: in order to achieve an ideal state of mind, we have to focus on one particular activity. "Attention is the medium that makes information appear in consciousness".¹⁴ A game can immerse its players if it has the ability to 'lock' gamers in the fictional world so they will use their 'physic energy'¹⁵ on the game.

According to M. Csíkszentmihályi, the perfect zone – the flow, when one is streaming with the events – appears when we have to face a highly challenging task but we have the necessary skills to solve it.¹⁶ Horror games do not always let the players use their skills; there are several scenarios where the opportunities are tightly restricted. We would like to argue that these games – as they are more focused on fear – more likely fall in the territory of anxiety or arousal in M. Csíkszentmihályi's diagram.¹⁷ But then, why would anyone play these games?

Players want to experience vulnerability, while the game gives them challenges. As we will see, survival and a happy ending is not always an option. The nature of horror games – its core mechanism – indicates that we will immerse ourselves in a frightening world while we experience dread. I'm not stating that horror games cannot trigger us reaching flow, but if we look at these games' methods, we can find that they are more focused on causing anxiety or at least arousal. Sudden changes – in every aspect of these games – cannot let the player be confident about what will happen next. Unpredictability takes away confidence, and the player cannot stream with the events. Now, let's take a closer look at how horror digital games can strengthen the mentioned mental states.

Spatial Storytelling

Spatiality is one of the most important aspects of a digital game: the sculpted world helps the players to immerse themselves in the fictional space, and even the most minor details can build the whole atmosphere further (sometimes, they function as clues about the fictional world). As H. Jenkins and K. Squire highlight, spatial elements set the terms

14 CSÍKSZENTMIHÁLYI, M.: The Flow Experience and Its Significance for Human Psychology. In CSÍKSZENTMIHÁLYI, M., CSÍKSZENTMIHÁLYI, I. S. (eds.): *Optimal Experience: Psychological Studies of Flow in Consciousness*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 18.

15 Ibidem, p. 20.

16 Ibidem, p. 29.

17 Remark by the author: M. Csíkszentmihályi also presented the challenges/skill ratio diagram at a TED talk.; See: CSÍKSZENTMIHÁLYI, M.: *Flow, the Secret to Happiness*. Released on 11th March 2014. [online]. [2022-07-29]. Available at: <https://www.ted.com/talks/mihaly_csikszentmihalyi_flow_the_secret_to_happiness>.

for the player's experiences, "[i]nformation essential to the story is embedded in objects such as books, carved runes, or weapons. Artifacts, such as jewels, may embody friendship or rivalries or may become magical sources of the player's power. The game space is organized so that paths through the world guide or constrain action, making sure we encounter characters or situations critical to the narrative".¹⁸ Besides the rules, the given space is the other boundary that can help to keep the player on the route. Invisible walls, closed doors, barricaded corridors, and the list continues: they are responsible for marking the path and restricting the character's movement, ensuring that the player encounters every important narrative element.

It is crucial to look at the fictional environment where the gameplay happens. Love, Sam takes place in a small apartment with a bathroom and an open space where a kitchen, a writing desk, a bookshelf and a bed can be found. The whole place gives a claustrophobic feeling; the main character cannot leave the apartment, and the only window is a tiny one (that is positioned up high). The light is poor, it is raining outside, the sky is dark, and only lightning filters in through the small window. The player is mostly 'anchored' to the writing-table, little or no movement is needed to unfold the story and progress in the gameplay.¹⁹ The act of reading – the major activity in the game – is from time to time disturbed by strange events which need to be investigated (the phone starts to ring, the window shuts open, somebody knocking on the door, etc.). The player can look behind them almost anytime while sitting on the chair. This ability evokes the 'behind you' horror cliché when the threat can sneak up behind the protagonist. The fact that the character faces a wall most of the time – due to the writing desk's placement – and an open space behind them arouses vulnerability. At one point in the game, the player learns that a ghost is haunting them, and when the character enters the bathroom, the light will turn off, and there will be no escape for a while. This kind of confinement goes beyond the previously experienced situation, especially when we realize that a furious soul is behind the strange events that happened.

Most frequently, horror games operate with narrow and small rooms, corridors to increase the sense of enclosure, and/or the other common spatial methods are the huge open spaces with several objects, elements where the threat can hide (e.g. trees, abandoned buildings, etc.). For example, *The Quarry*²⁰ or *Resident Evil Village*²¹ enables one to move freely on the given map, but there are restrictions, and inside the buildings, the space is small. The Quarry takes place in a wood that functions as a hunting area (werewolves can move there quickly), whereas inside the accommodations, other threats are waiting for the player. In the case of Resident Evil Village, even though players cannot leave the territory, they have the freedom to explore it according to their will – of course, there are some restrictions, and a few places will be available when the player makes progress in the game. It is not necessary to go into every house or explore all the rooms, but one can find valuable items and clues there. In this case, 'clues' refer to different pieces of information which tell the story of the village and its inhabitants (e.g., players can learn more about the background of the four Lords, who they were before the mutation, etc.).

The same applies to many horror games: the story unfolds while the player explores the space. In other words, the environment helps to tell the narrative. Being chased or getting scared and exploring the environment creates an interesting rhythm in horror games.

18 SQUIRE, K., JENKINS, H.: *The Art of Contested Spaces*. [online]. [2022-10-24]. Available at: <<http://web.mit.edu/~21fms/People/henry3/contestedspaces.html>>.

19 Remark by the author: There are a few puzzle elements in the game. These parts give more dimension to the whole, they build the story further. In addition, the riddles provide the player a frustrating feeling: in some cases, they have to solve them within a short amount of time.

20 SUPERMASSIVE GAMES: *The Quarry*. [digital game]. Novato, CA : 2K Games, 2022.

21 CAPCOM: *Resident Evil Village (PlayStation 4 version)*. [digital game]. Osaka : Capcom, 2021.

They invite the player to learn more and try to understand their fictional world, but at the same time, there is a danger that blocks the players from doing so. It is not uncommon that players are forced to go back to a given space after escaping from a pursuer because they missed a clue. The player's need to investigate everything and their predictability offers many possibilities to the game developers and designers. In some cases, the game 'plays' with the users' attention: in *Resident Evil Village*, the player has to search for a code at a point. It's not a challenging task because the numbers are written in bright colours; however, they are only visible from a window. When the character steps closer, a monster jumps in front of the window. This jumpscare builds on the player's predictability. *Paranormal HK*²² has a similar scene. The player encounters a locked door that has a unique padlock. In order to find out the code, the player has to look through a small keyhole. Even though they put everything in the correct order, the door remains closed. The following attempt to check the code – through the keyhole – will cause a jumpscare: a monster will appear in front of the player. In these cases, the fictional world plays with the gamers' attention.

Another spatial method in horror games – besides open spaces and small interior ones – is the recurring/'looping space', where the character stays in the same environment, but it slightly changes as the game progresses. Horror games that try to explore traumas and mental illnesses use this approach frequently. It is worth mentioning here *Layers of Fear*²³ and *Ouija Rumors*²⁴ as examples. In both cases, the character goes from room to room in the same building, but the space will be more disturbed until it finally turns upside down. As the environment changes, the story unfolds, and the player gets closer to the source of the issue. Sometimes a hidden trauma, some kind of buried atrocity lies in the background or the protagonist does not know their own, twisted past. The character and the player are in the same position with regard to the possession of information. In this case, the same space reveals the truth that changes in relation to the protagonist's mental state. In other words, the player is both closed in a place and someone's mind.

Audio-visual Elements and Focalization

"Please don't look away."
- Love, Sam²⁵

The above-mentioned quote can be found in *Love, Sam*, at one of the most intense and frightening parts. As was already stated, reading is an essential part of this game; the whole story unfolds through diary pages. Some of them are in a diary, while others look like they have been ripped out, they can be found on individual papers (with dates). This will be an important clue as to the identity of the diaries' owners.

As C. Solarski highlights in his book, players can experience a one-sided approach to communication through written materials. According to him, this is usually not a welcomed solution because players want interactivity. He adds that "written narrative information may be a necessity for development budget reasons or a welcome story

22 GHOSTPIE STUDIO: *Paranormal HK*. [digital game]. Hong Kong : Ghostpie Studio, 2020.

23 BLOOBER TEAM: *Layers of Fear*. [digital game]. Austen, TX : Aspyr Media, 2016.

24 LSGAMEDEV: *Ouija Rumors*. [digital game]. Miri : Lsgamedev, 2022.

25 Remark by the author: A quote in one of the diary pages from the game *Love, Sam*; See also: KOREAN LINGUISTICS LAB: *Love, Sam (PC version)*. [digital game]. Seoul : Korean Linguistics Lab, 2019.

layer for players who enjoy delving into every aspect of a plot.”²⁶ Walking simulators usually use written materials in order to unfold the narrative. According to M. Kagen, “in Walking Simulators, the game world and game narrative tend to revolve heavily around death. Often the world is postapocalyptic, haunted, or both. This tension – between an undying PC and a dead, empty world – creates a focus on death by intentional omission.”²⁷ In *Love, Sam*’s case, reading is perfectly tied to the oppressive atmosphere and the dread, while interactivity is not fully suspended. The protagonist can die, but a restart is always an option – in this sense, the protagonist’s actual death only comes when the player does not want to start over –, while the world is haunted and almost empty. The game resonates well with the walking simulators’ methods.

In *Love, Sam*, the player does not even know who they are controlling (it will be revealed in the end), while a high-school drama – about unrequited, obsessive love and cruel classmates – slowly turns into a tragedy. We will learn that a girl, Sam Holt – who just moved to Rosen Peek recently – falls for the popular football star, Brian Colmer. She writes her experiences down in her diary, this is how we learn that she has to deal with Brian’s best friend, Kyle and Kyle’s mean girlfriend, Stacy, who seems to hate her. We can read their story without knowing who ‘we’ are in this drama or if we are even related to anything that happened in Rosen Peek. As the story unfolds, the romantic fairy tale becomes a toxic obsession, somebody is stalking Brian. We can assume that Sam is the one who wrote every diary entry, and she has grown unhealthy feelings towards Brian, but we could not be more wrong. The diary – that is not torn apart – slowly reveals more disturbing drawings and short sentences about someone’s devotion to Brian. In addition, a torn-out newspaper piece will inform us that Sam died at age 17. Stacy and Kyle humiliated her, and according to the news, she had thrown herself off a cliff. Now, the player can assume that the threat in the apartment is none other than Sam.

Audio-visual elements have an essential impact on digital games; they build the whole atmosphere further. “Audio alone can transform the aesthetic experience of gameplay by providing an ambient atmosphere for the player’s actions. Audio is a term that covers two principle categories in the context of games: music and sound effects”.²⁸ Many horror games operate with several sound effects. In *Love, Sam*, a rattling voice returns frequently. This gives a spine-shivering experience, but when Sam’s tragic fate is revealed, it will be much worse. She did not die instantly when she fell: she tried to grasp for air from her broken neck. This fact – which we can learn from the newspaper – explains the strange sound: the rattling voice belongs to Sam’s ghost. At this point, we can see how the narrative elements and the sound effect create a more frightening atmosphere. Furthermore, the player must put the pieces together because we cannot read a full summary of the story at the end.²⁹

“Keeping the tone of the exposition in line with the visuals and the player expectations helps the message get across better”.³⁰ In the sense of visuals, *Love, Sam* – as horror games usually do – has poor lighting, and the lights frequently turn off. In the bathroom scene – where the character is trapped with Sam – the only light source is a camera’s flashes, but we are not the one who controls it. As we have already learnt from the diary, Sam was fond of photography, so we can be sure that Sam is with us. In this scene, the

26 SOLARSKI, C.: *Interactive Stories and Video Game Art. A Storytelling Framework for Game Design*. Boca Raton, FL, London, New York, NY : Taylor & Francis Group, CRC Press, 2017, p. 55.

27 KAGEN, M.: *Wandering Games*. Cambridge, MA, London : MIT Press, 2022, p. 10.

28 SOLARSKI, C.: *Interactive Stories and Video Game Art. A Storytelling Framework for Game Design*. Boca Raton, FL, London, New York, NY : Taylor & Francis Group, CRC Press, 2017, p. 77.

29 Remark by the author: At this point, we would like to mention that the analysis is our interpretation of the game based on the available clues, but others may interpret the pieces differently.

30 DANSKY, R.: Writing for Horror Games. In DESPAIN, W. (ed.): *Writing for Video Game Genres. From FPS to RPG*. Wellesley, MA : A K Peters, Ltd., 2009, p. 121.

game connects a narrative fragment (Sam's hobby: taking photos) and a horror element (only a few light sources are available). In *Ouija Rumors*, the player uses candles to have some light, but at one point, someone always blows off the flame, whereas we should be alone in the room. Playing with light and darkness makes horror games more frightening. The player cannot hide; they have to face these alarming events if they want to go further.

At one point in the game, Sam's ghost leaves a message in the bathroom: "You don't deserve a face" which, on the meta-level, resonates with the nature of *Love, Sam's* first-person view approach. The playable character's whole body remains invisible, we can only see what the protagonist experiences, and this angle strengthens vulnerability. The hidden messages lead to the realization that maybe we are controlling someone who is responsible for the girl's death.

Focalization – G. Genette's term – suggests that there are perspectives through which a narrative is presented.³¹ In the case of digital games, we cannot talk about classical narration, but we can discover its elements. For example, a first-person game (like *Resident Evil Village* or *Love, Sam*) is seen through the protagonist's eyes. According to A. Nae, the first of their kind, "*Condemned: Criminal Origins* attempted to use the formal traits of the first-person shooter in order to provide a survival horror gameplay experience".³² This method – now widely used – mimics the subjective shot from cinema. In contrast, "by taking control over the camera away from the player, classical survival horror games such as *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996) manage to enfeeble the playable character and encumber gameplay. The game designer is to a limited extent similar to a film editor who uses discursive blind space in order to control the amount of ludic and diegetic information that is readily available to the player, script jump scares, and complicate the use of movement controls so that the colonial mastery of space simulated by action games can no longer be achieved, at least not with the same ease".³³ When we are placed behind the protagonist's eyes, we have a given point of view, but the player can decide what they want to see. "In what Genette calls *internal focalization* the narrative is focused *through* the consciousness of a character",³⁴ and we can experience the same method in most horror games as we are restricted to the character's eyes and movements, making the events more frightening.

In *Love, Sam*, we see the events through the nameless character's eyes. When we read in the journal: "Please don't look away" the game sets a new rule, and we are not allowed to look away even though the sound suggests that someone or something is behind us. If we turn back, we have to face the consequences in the form of jumpscare/game over. But if we are staring at the page, a hand will reach out to our face and try to force us to turn back. This forced view resonates with focalization; we experience the events through the playable character. At this point, the game challenges us and tries to 'steal' our control over the focalization. If the player can resist, the story will continue.

Another interesting example is when the player can see Sam and Brian together from the obsessed person's point of view, but their movement is strange and robotic. In my opinion, in addition to the "first person" term, G. Genette's terminology (*internal focalization*) also stands since we are experiencing the story through the playable character's eyes and mental state. The character – who sees these events – has their own interpretation and background that influences how players see the whole. This small detail also confirms that Sam is not the one who is stalking Brian and that there is a third person who made the events twisted.

31 GENETTE, G.: *Narrative Discourse. An Essay in Method*. Ithaca, NY : Cornell University Press, 1980, p. 212.

32 NAE, A.: *Immersion, Narrative and Gender Crisis in Survival Horror Video Games*. London, New York, NY : Routledge, 2022, p. 168.

33 Ibidem.

34 GENETTE, G.: *Narrative Discourse. An Essay in Method*. Ithaca, NY : Cornell University Press, 1980, p. 10.

There is a unique focalization method – that can be found in horror games, too – also worth mentioning: the second-person view. In this case, there is a ‘you’ just like in *Choose Your Own Adventure* books.³⁵ On the meta-level, this method sheds light on the digital game’s logic as it brings into focus that there is an outside observer, the ‘you’, who is in control. The player sees their character through the perspective of another one, which is equivalent to G. Genette’s external focalization, where “the narrative is focused on a character, not through him”.³⁶ *Out of Sight*³⁷ and *Silent Mementos*³⁸ are two outstanding examples of this. In the first one, a kidnapped, blind girl who can only see with the help of her teddy bear tries to escape. Just like watching a movie, the player can see everything from a bigger distance, the fact that both the threat and the controlled character are visible gives a new meaning to fear and anxiety. In *Silent Mementos*, a worried woman tries to find her boyfriend in an abandoned house. We see the events through her eyes, but when we watch film recordings of her missing loved one, we will control him. In these cases, there is something that mediates the events. This method can raise vulnerability: in the case of *Silent Mementos*, while we are controlling the man – as we are ‘watching’ the recordings – the woman stands alone in a dark room (see Picture 1), vulnerable to the algorithm because we cannot control her if something happens.



Picture 1: We are alone in a dark, abandoned house. Our only connection with another human being is experienced through a projector

Source: OLINKALEX: *Silent Mementos*. [digital game]. San Francisco, CA : itch.io, 2021.

35 Remark by the author: This method creates a unique bond between the character and the player.; For more information, see: MANSKY, J.: *The Surprisingly Long History of ‘Choose-Your-Own-Adventure’ Stories*. Released on 4th May 2022. [online]. [2022-11-15]. Available at: <<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/surprisingly-long-history-of-choose-your-own-adventure-stories-180980014/>>.; For more details on role-playing games, see: TRESKA, M. J.: *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games*. Jefferson, NC, London : McFarland & Company, 2011.

36 GENETTE, G.: *Narrative Discourse. An Essay in Method*. Ithaca, NY : Cornell University Press, 1980, p. 11.

37 FG21ST: *Out of Sight*. [digital game]. Stockholm : FG21ST, 2022.

38 OLINKALEX: *Silent Mementos*. [digital game]. San Francisco, CA : itch.io, 2021.

Temporality, Trauma and Madness

“Trauma destroys time.”

- R. D. Stolorow³⁹

In one of Sam's journal entries, players can read about her book report task. The book is the story of a jealous girl who sabotages everyone who tries to get closer to her crush. Sam finds this 'cute', even though she adds that the girl in the book is 'dorky' and 'psycho'. Her comment can give the impression that she was the one who was obsessed with Brian; at this point the game still wants us to believe that Sam was the one who slowly became obsessed.

So who are we in the game? Who is the nameless character that 'don't deserve a face'? As it turns out, the two different journals belong to different persons. Every entry with longer sentences, dates and is placed on single papers is a fragment of Sam's diary, but these are only a few pages. However, the more disturbing diary, which is a whole, operates with shorter sentences and has several drawings, supposedly belonging to Kyle, who had a toxic obsession with Brian. As we learn, he is the one who is responsible for Sam's death because jealousy led him to a horrible decision: he pushed Sam off the cliff (or at least he was the one whose action led her to fall off).

In the game, we learn about the past through journal entries, however, time is uncertain and looks like it is not passing. In some cases, Kyle returns to several significant moments: we can see Sam through his eyes as she is standing near the cliff or the school library, where Kyle eavesdrops on Sam and Brian's friendly conversation. The whole game gives the impression that we are in a timeless prison created by guilt. “Experiences of trauma become freeze-framed into an eternal present in which one remains forever trapped, or to which one is condemned to be perpetually returned through the portkeys supplied by life's slings and arrows”.⁴⁰ We can even find needles in the apartment, which suggests that Kyle has a drug addiction. His mental condition – which is influenced by drugs – and the feeling of guilt, traps him in a time loop, where he has to experience his feelings and repeatedly suffer for his sins. “Everyday, every night, I'm surrounded by whispers. Whispers that lie. Whispers that eat away my brain piece by piece”,⁴¹ states Kyle in his diary, and later, he also adds: “My life is nothing but a repetition of waking up with nothing to live for”.⁴² In the so-called 'time loop' narrative repetition is an essential element. As L. Lahdenperä highlights, time loop belongs to the future narrative (the other type is the forking paths): “A player of a video game, just like a character in a time loop narrative, often replays scenes or levels. If the player's avatar dies, time rewinds back and the avatar respawns; ready to try (and die) again until a goal has been reached. Time loop narratives, then, can be seen to imitate the replay quality of video games”.⁴³

If Kyle dies, he has to start the 'level' again, however, he does not narrate this experience, and only the above-mentioned journal entries show how he sees his repetitive life. It is

39 STOLOROW, R. D.: *Trauma and Human Existence, Autobiographical, Psychoanalytic, and Philosophical Reflections*. New York, NY, London : The Analytic Press, 2007, p. 17.

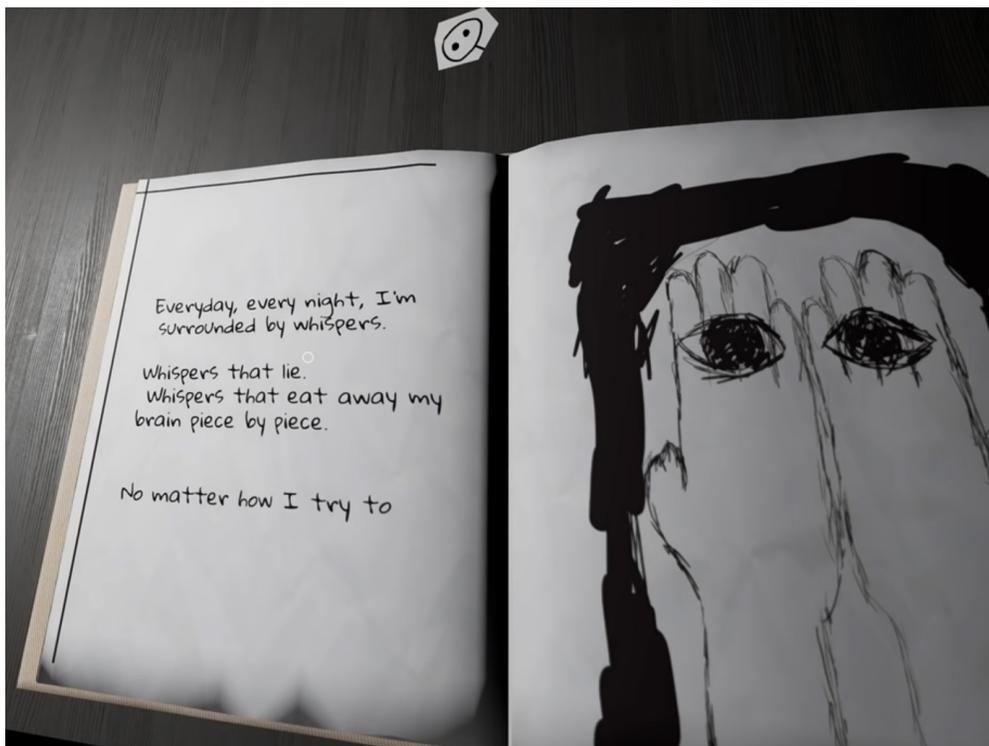
40 Ibidem, p. 20.

41 Remark by the author: A short quote from one of Kyle's journal entry. See: KOREAN LINGUISTICS LAB: *Love, Sam (PC version)*. [digital game]. Seoul : Korean Linguistics Lab, 2019.

42 Ibidem.

43 LAHDENPERÄ, L.: “Live-Die-Repeat”. The Time Loop as a Narrative and a Game Mechanic. In *International Journal of Transmedia Literacy*, 2018, Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 144.

important to add, that Brian and Kyle are no longer friends when the game starts, because as we learn, Stacy told Brian how they tried to frame Sam. After that, Kyle lost all of his connections with Brian. Now players learn that besides guilt, he is left alone. These two strong traumas trap him in this eternal suffering. In the context of the game, Kyle becomes mad: his writing method, journal (see Picture 2), and visions all show his twisted personality.



Picture 2: One of Kyle's journal entries and drawings⁴⁴

Source: author's screenshot; KOREAN LINGUISTICS LAB: *Love, Sam* (PC version). [digital game]. Seoul : Korean Linguistics Lab, 2019.

Our understanding of what madness is – like genres – can change and mean different things as time changes. C. Rodéhn highlights: “A platform game from the 1980s produces a very different kind of madness compared to a massive multiplayer online role playing games produced during the 2020s. This also implies that madness can mean different things in different games and in different game genres. Therefore, madness must be considered a temporary and unstable category that only appears as stable in certain game contexts”.⁴⁵ She adds that “goals, plots, themes, aesthetics, narratives, language, game design, game mechanics, dialogues, and/or sounds can also be representations of madness”.⁴⁶ In the game, every design and narrative element leaks madness. Kyle has several hallucinations, his written tone becomes more and more aggressive, and his drawings are also worrying.

44 Remark by the author: The watching eyes are recurring symbols in the game that suggest how the main character has tried to look away for three years (since Sam died), but he cannot do it anymore. It can also refer to the threat that watches Kyle and can also represent Kyle's stalking nature (he took pictures of Brian secretly, followed him and Sam, etc.).

45 See also: RODÉHN, C.: Introducing Mad Studies and Mad Reading to Game Studies. In *Game Studies*, 2022, Vol. 22, No. 1. [online]. [2022-07-15]. Available at: <<http://gamestudies.org/2201/articles/rodehn>>.

46 Ibidem.

Layers of Fear and Ouija Rumors also tell the story from someone's point of view who committed some kind of sin. That is why they will be trapped in time and space: they experienced a traumatic moment they cannot let go of. In possession of all information (clues) the player can feel that justice has been served, and the antagonists suffer. It is worth highlighting a psychological conflict: players feel responsible for the playable character, and they try to save them, but as they learn their background, they will realize that the threat (e.g. a haunting ghost) is on the right side of the story and our character did something horrible to them. While we usually want to experience justice, we can lose our sympathy toward the playable character as we reach the game's end.

Conclusion

At the end of my paper, we would like to analyse one more aspect of temporality that connects well to the previous chapters. As M. Merleau-Ponty states, "Husserl uses the terms protentions and retentions for the intentionalities which anchor me to an environment. They do not run from a central I, but from my perceptual field itself, so to speak, which draws along in its wake its own horizon of retentions, and bites into the future with its protentions [...] With the arrival of every moment, its predecessor undergoes a change: I still have it in hand and it is still there, but already it is sinking away below the level of presents; in order to retain it, I need to reach through a thin layer of time".⁴⁷ Retention is a presentation of a temporally extended present, and protention implies how we anticipate the next moment. This also ties in with the previous part, where we analysed how horror games build on the player's predictability. We process the given information and have an idea of what comes next, but this genre can turn it upside down.

In Love, Sam, we have the wrong assumption of the stalker's identity because we are reading Sam's journal entries, and it seems evident that every written text belongs to her. At one point in the game, when we read her text, all lights turn off, but only one word remains visible: 'psycho'. This is something that the player does not expect; they are ready to read through one more journal entry as they did before. Horror games can change anytime, making our protention useless. This can cause fear and raise vulnerability, the algorithm decides everything. According to T. Grodal, "as opposed to film, video games simulate emotions in a form that is closer to typical real-life experiences since "emotions are motivators for actions and are labeled according to the player's active coping potentials". It's the perception and appraisal of the threat as well as the ways a gamer can respond that determine the intensity of our gameplay fear".⁴⁸

Horror games are great examples of how a game can build on one's predictability and how they can play with the attention. As we saw, these digital games use several methods – from spatiality to temporality – in order to strengthen the player's fear. Looping time, sudden changes – in the sound or the visual elements –, and unpredictable events offer a high challenge factor, but skills sometimes cannot help to solve the issues. This realization makes me believe that these games evoke anxiety and/or arousal more often than flow, and these attributes make the horror genre so unique. With the perfect combination of dark visual effects, worrying sounds and adequate focalization, they can offer a frightening experience.

47 MERLEAU-PONTY, M.: *Phenomenology of Perception*. London : Routledge, 1981, p. 416.

48 PERRON, B.: *The World of Scary Video Games. Study in Videoludic Horror*. New York, NY : Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, p. 91.; GRODAL, T.: Video Games and the Pleasure of Control. In ZILLMANN, D., VORDERER, P. (eds.): *Media Entertainment: The Psychology of Its Appeal*. Mahwah, NJ : Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000, p. 201.

In the paper *Love, Sam* was my central point for the consideration that the game has outstanding solutions and uses the main horror elements while misleading the player. On the meta-level, the game also reveals its nature. As we can read on one of Sam's diary pages, "My first Rosen Peek weekend! As the name itself gives away, the small town fits perfectly as a setting for a mystery/horror genre." Ironically, the players cannot see Rosen Peak, they will only witness fragments of this town through Kyle's eyes, but they will be a part of a horror story.

In order to give a broader view, we also mentioned several other examples and details. The main sections were: spatiality – where we highlighted three categories (closed, open and looping spaces) – focalization – where based on G. Genette's term, we showed how the different angles could contribute to the narrative –, and temporality – where the traumatic experience and the looping time was at the focal point. Even though horror games are an unusual fit in the gaming industry (according to R. Dansky), as far as we see it, they represent the whole medium's logic: we have to cooperate with the algorithm even though our instinct would dictate other solutions.

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