

Maternal Engulfment in Horror Videogames

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Abstract: This paper uses Freudian psychoanalysis to explore horror videogames. It combines theories of cyberspace, videogames, and psychoanalysis to investigate space, narrative and the avatars in games such as *Clock Tower 3*, *Silent Hill 3*, *The Suffering*, *Haunting Ground* and *Silent Hill*. Discourses of embodiment, immersion and cyborgism describe videogame play as a merging of subject and object, a pleasurable sense of wholeness and union, the erosion of distinctions between self and other, suggesting regression to a pre-Oedipal state of being and consciousness. The horror genre's preoccupation with womb-like spaces and monstrous mother figures corresponds with the visual and symbolic construction of videogame worlds as 'maternal caves'. Vast gothic structures featuring scenes of bloody dismemberment, patrolled by castrating monsters, reinforces this impression; while horror game narratives involving investigation of the playable protagonist's origins similarly suggest an experience of regression and maternal engulfment.

Key Words: horror, maternal womb, Oedipal conflict, *Silent Hill*, psychoanalysis, videogame

In her insightful paper exploring the multiple meanings of videogame heroine Lara Croft, Helen Kennedy quotes a 2001 television documentary as claiming:

Lara's phenomenal success wasn't just about a cracking adventure, other games had that too. Lara had something that hooked the gamers like nothing has before. At the center of Tomb Raider was a fantasy female figure. Each of her provocative curves was as much part of the game as the tombs she raided. She had a secret weapon in the world of gaming, well... actually two of them.¹

This essay explores the psychoanalytic dimensions of that slippage, between the videogame space ('the tombs she raided') which - implicitly heterosexual male - players navigate, and the female body (Croft's 'provocative curves'). The psychoanalytic dimensions of gamespace are examined, specifically

the parallels between the caverns, tunnels and architectural structures which the players navigate, and the female body, primarily the interior of the maternal body. I shall be focussing on horror videogames, a cycle with generic roots in horror film, literature, and gothic fiction, cultural forms which themselves have been subjected to a degree of productive psychoanalytic enquiry. The Oedipal dimensions of discussions of videogame immersion and disembodiment are first explored. A consideration of horror videogame spaces as analogous to the maternal womb then follows. *Clock Tower 3*, *Haunting Ground* and the *Silent Hill* series are then cited as examples of videogame narratives or architectural organisations which enact a return to maternal spaces.

In my work on horror videogames, and the *Silent Hill* series in particular, I have been drawn again and again to psychoanalytic themes: in terms of the narrative and characterisation of the series' central enigma,² the repetitive nature of videogame play,³ or the ways in which videogame components evoke a sense of the uncanny.⁴ As Barbara Creed highlights, psychoanalytic theory both influenced and was influenced by cinema,⁵ and the same may be said of horror videogames. The titular apartment of *Silent Hill 4: The Room* in which the playable protagonist is inexplicably trapped, is explicitly linked to the maternal body of the mother of a serial killer. In a game which references such Oedipal texts as *Rear Window* and *Psycho*, where an umbilical cord constitutes a crucial object to be found and used, in which midway through the game the walls of the room turn blood red and start to bleed, and where the playable protagonist escapes the womb/room through a series of narrow irregular tunnels, identifying psychoanalytic meaning is somewhat like shooting Freudian fish in a barrel. Nevertheless, investigating horror videogames in this manner allows greater insight into their effectiveness as unsettling texts, the ambiguous compulsion/repulsion nature of horror videogame play, and the transformation of generic horror themes within this new medium.

There is something strangely womb-like about many authors' descriptions of the cyberspace experience. Discourses of cybernetic re-embodiment, immersion in virtual spaces, or submission to the rules of alternative digital worlds often describe the blurring of boundaries between the user, the machine, and an enveloping electronic environment. Sherry Turkle writes of "losing oneself" within virtual environments, the "altered state" of videogame play producing a sense of oneness with the medium⁶ comparable to the early oneness between child and mother. "Immersion", as described by Janet Murray using a range of water-like metaphors, resembles a uterine experience,

“the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality... that takes over all our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus”.⁷ Similarly, Martti Lahti describes a technological apparatus which might “spread out of the monitor to encompass the space around the player, wrapping itself around her body.”⁸ Virtual worlds are described as involving a merging of subject and object, a pleasurable sense of wholeness and union, the erosion of boundaries between self and world, considered by Andrew Darley to be a particularly regressive, adolescent or infantile experience.⁹

If the experience of inhabiting virtual spaces appears to evoke a sensation of inhabiting a womb-like space, this is explicitly explored in Gillian Skirrow’s 1986 article “Hellivision: an analysis of video games”. Involving less a speculation on the nature of virtual reality, more a consideration of such technologies’ application in the digital game marketplace, Skirrow’s early analysis of largely text-based adventure games argues: “Videogames... are about mastering a specifically male anxiety in a specifically male way.”¹⁰ Skirrow argues that for young male players videogame spaces represent the mother’s body’s interior, both a source of fascination and of fear. Drawing on Melanie Klein’s suggestion that boys’ play displaces anything threatening onto the inside of a woman’s body, Skirrow argues that the construction of gamespace - be it catacomb, tomb or spaceship - as “maternal cave.” is central to its appeal to male gamers.¹¹ Such elements certainly resonate within the horror genre, where sinister womb like spaces, monstrous mothers and the threat of maternal engulfment are common. An author who has published much on the gynaecological dimensions of horror cinema, Barbara Creed writes: “a reconciliation with the maternal body, the body of our origins, is only possible through an encounter with horror, the abject of our culture.”¹² the *Alien* series representing a graphically realized example of this theme. The alien itself embodies the devouring mother, visually evoking the Freudian vagina dentate, while its lair resembles a monstrous womb, the primal fear-inducing cinematic equivalent of Skirrow’s gynaecological gamespace.

Discussing the productiveness of drawing theoretical similarities between *Tomb Raider* and the *Alien* series, Dianne Carr makes a significant claim about the visual texture of early videogames when she argues that the absence of tactility, depth, ambiguity, implied odour or dampness to the series’ “sterile and profoundly organised” locations¹³, cannot sustain the psychoanalytic interpretations of devouring wombs of *Alien*’s gynaecological set design. While early *Tomb Raider* games informing Carr’s paper present fairly regular rectilinear environments, contemporary horror videogames are characterized by elaborate

gothic landscapes, rough hewn asymmetrical caverns, dilapidated urban environments, or fleshy corridors dripping with indeterminate fluids. Moreover, many horror games combine such imagery with narratives in which playable characters enact a search for or encounter with a maternal figure, a symbolic return to the family home, or a discovery of their origins involving progression through spaces which frequently assume gynaecological dimensions.

The spatial design of contemporary horror videogames corresponds with Skirrow's description of early game texts, being inhospitable places, filled with bloodied corpses and patrolled by vicious monsters threatening castration. The horrific prison of *The Suffering* is strewn with mutilated prison guards, whose disembodied corpses testify to the horrifying events the player arrived too late to witness. *Resident Evil*'s Raccoon City is littered with dead law enforcers and mercenaries whose bodies narrate the failed war against the zombies. Creatures including *The Suffering*'s "Slayers", scuttling monsters with blades where their hands and feet belong, *Clock Tower 3*'s Scissor Twins, and *Silent Hill 2*'s famous Pyramid Head, an avenging father figure who drags a huge knife in his wake, evoke threats of castration against the player's avatar.

Such monstrous designs frequently combine with stories involving investigation of parental origins. The narrative of *Clock Tower 3* opens with the protagonist Alyssa returning to her family home in search of her mother. The game's first level involves players penetrating the home's maternal space, unlocking the mother's bedroom, then the door to a secret red walled-room containing a magic portal allowing a time travelling investigation of the family's past. Architectural echoes of the female body are subtly present in *Haunting Ground*, another game which involves uncovering the heroine's origins. The final act features Fiona crossing an umbilical wooden bridge to the House of Truth, its entrance hall containing two twisting outer staircases leading down into symmetrical chambers, like fallopian tubes into the ovaries. *Silent Hill Origins* has a level set in 'Cedar Grove Sanatorium' in which the protagonist, Travis Grady, must use an object titled the 'Jocasta Artefact' to unlock the Female Seclusion ward where a monstrous version of his own mother resides. This figure must be defeated if the player is to continue.

Discussion of engagement in virtual reality and videogame play often suggest a pleasurable womb-like experience of immersion, union, and symbiosis. In contrast, writing on the horror genre explores the use of gynaecological imagery to evoke fear in film spectators. In horror videogames the two combine, resulting in the virtual construction of dangerous womb-like spaces alongside

narratives where protagonists travel through bloody chambers to discover the secret of their origin. In many games, this is an explicit component of the experience, suggesting that videogame designers are as aware of these issues as are videogame academics.

Notes

¹ H. W. Kennedy, 'Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo? On the Limits of Textual Analysis', *Gamestudies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, vol. 2, issue 2, December 2002, viewed on 31 July 2009, <http://www.gamestudies.org/0202/kennedy/>.

² E. Kirkland, 'Alessa Unbound: The Monstrous Daughter of *Silent Hill*' in Sorcha NiFhlainn (ed) *Dark Reflections, Monstrous Reflections*, 2006, viewed on 31 July 2009, <http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/publishing-files/idp/eBooks/drmr%201.3c.pdf>.

³ E. Kirkland, 'Repetition in Horror Videogames: A Psychoanalytic Perspective', in *Repeat Repeat Conference Proceedings*, viewed on 31 July 2009, <http://www.cpara.co.uk/events/repeatrepeat/technology/kirkland.html>.

⁴ E. Kirkland, 'Horror Videogames and the Uncanny', *Winter Forum on 'The Uncanny'*, Chichester University, 2009.

⁵ B. Creed, 'Film and Psychoanalysis', in J. Hill & P. Church Gibson (eds.), *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998, p.77.

⁶ S. Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*, The MIT Press, London, 2005.

⁷ J. H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, The MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2000, p. 98.

⁸ M. Lahti, 'As We Become Machines: Corporealized Pleasures in Video Games', in M. J. P. Wolf, and B. Perron, (eds.), *The Video Game Theory Reader* (pp. 157-170). Routledge, London, 2003, p. 162.

⁹ A. Darley, *Visual Digital Culture: Surface play and spectacle in new media genres*, Routledge, London, 2000.

¹⁰ G. Skirrow, 'Hellivision: an analysis of video games', in C. MacCabe (ed.), *High theory/Low Culture: Analysing Popular Television and Film*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1986, p. 138.

¹¹ *ibid*, pp. 122-4.

¹² B. Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, feminism, psychoanalysis*, Routledge, London, 1997, p. 41.

¹³ D. Carr, 'Playing with Lara' in G. King and T. Krzywinska (eds.), *ScreenPlay: cinema/videogames/interfaces*, Wallflower, London, 2002, p. 173.

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Ewan Kirkland has published widely on videogames. Specialising in survival horror and the *Silent Hill* series in particular, he has written on game genre, narrative, self-reflexivity, gender representation, remediation, and artistry.