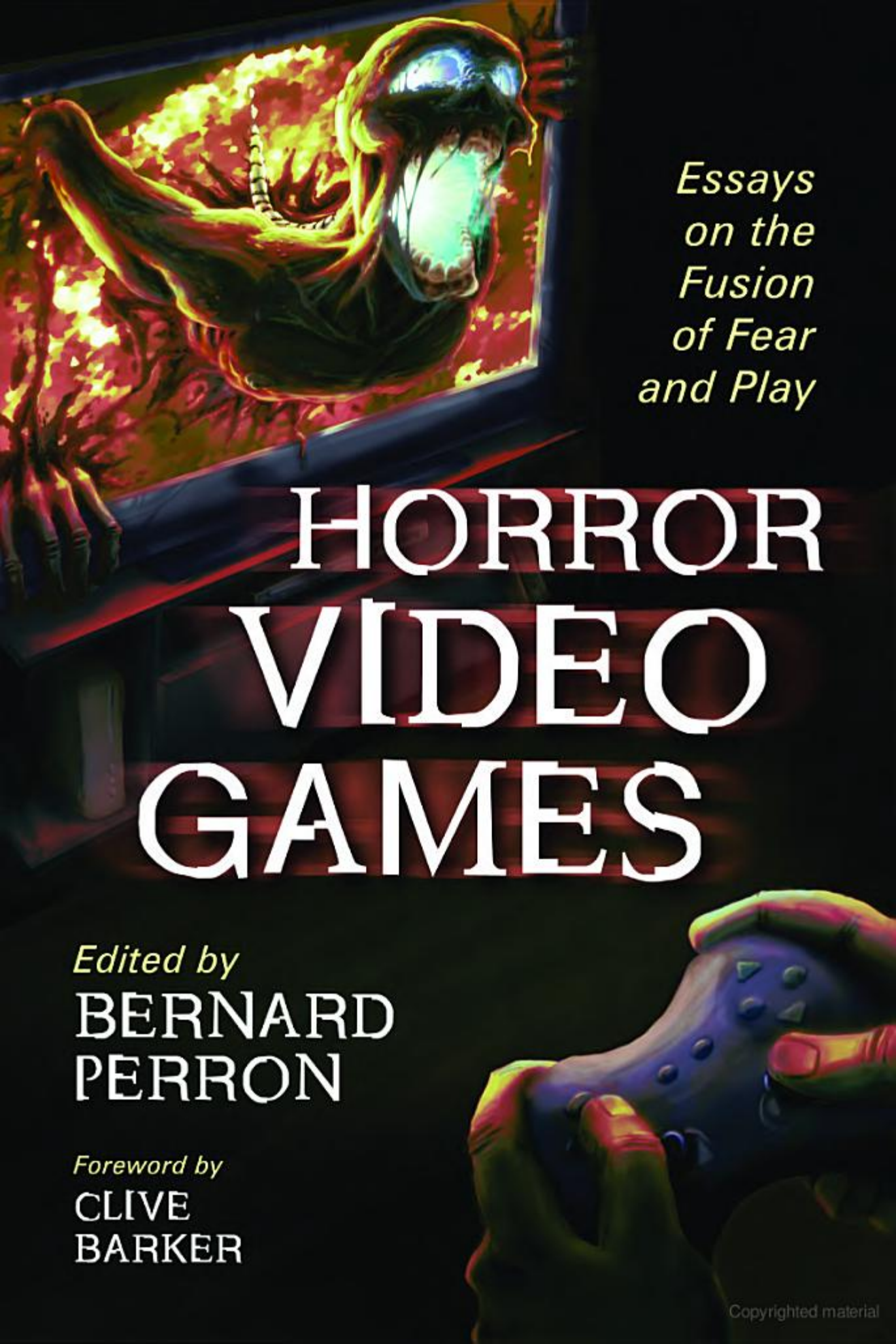




*Essays
on the
Fusion
of Fear
and Play*

HORROR VIDEO GAMES

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APPROACHING THE GENRE

Match Made in Hell: The Inevitable Success of the Horror Genre in Video Games

Richard Rouse III

Games have inhabited the horror genre for almost as long as they've been in existence. Going back to the text-only interactive fiction game *Zork* (Marc Blank and Dave Lebling, 1980) (which, granted, most would call a fantasy game, not a horror game), a significant portion of the game involved players stumbling around in a dark cave system, hideously afraid of being eaten by a Grue, a terrifying situation no player had ever experience before. Indeed, this was a new type of horror, because death would no longer be something happening to someone else, but instead to you, the player. Any chance of redemption and eventual success would involve you facing down death again and again and somehow, finally, emerging victorious.

The horror games kept going from there, from one of the first graphical adventures *Mystery House* (Roberta Williams and Ken Williams, 1980), to the more overt horror of Infocom's *The Lurking Horror* (Dave Lebling, 1987), to the horror parody of *Maniac Mansion* (Ron Gilbert, 1987), to *Alone in the Dark* (Frédéric Raynal, 1992), to *Resident Evil* (Shinji Mikami, 1996), to *Silent Hill* (Keiichiro Toyama, 1999), to *F.E.A.R.: First Encounter Assault Recon* (Craig Hubbard, 2005), to *Dead Space* (Brett Robbins, 2008). It isn't by accident that so many games have found success in the horror setting. The goals of video games and the goals of horror fiction directly overlap, making them ideal bedfellows. Indeed, when I started out designing and writing the action horror game *The Suffering* (2004), I didn't yet realize just how useful the conventions of horror could be to the inherently constrained and un-realistic world of a video game. By the end of development on the first game and through production of the game's sequel, *The Suffering: Ties That Bind* (2005), we pulled out every horror trope we could that also matched our game design goals, while avoiding techniques that were too cinematic or fundamentally non-interactive.

The horror genre embraces disturbing content and twisted subject matter. This material inherently limits the potential audience, as the mass-market gamers who pick up the squeaky-clean space opera of *Halo: Combat Evolved* (Jason Jones, 2001) or the amusing, virtual dollhouse of *The Sims* (Will Wright, 2000) don't want anything to do with warped nightmares or wading through lakes of blood. Yes the marriage of horror and games just seems too perfect for designers to avoid. And still, there's also a lot of room to continue to evolve the horror game, to move it away from just emulating horror in other media, and instead, to employ the genre to explore the dark corners of humanity in ways that no other medium can.

Practical Considerations

Suspense-driven horror films have long focused on life and death struggles against a world gone mad, with protagonists facing powerful adversaries who are purely evil. One need only look at film examples from *Nosferatu* (F.W. Murnau, 1922), *The Thing from Another World* (Christian Nyby and Howard Hawks, 1951), *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968), *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979) and *Ringu* (Hideo Nakata, 1998) to observe this dynamic at work. These are not films where the evil presence is explained extensively, if at all. Through its actions, this antagonistic force shows itself to be so thoroughly inhuman that no audience member would fault the hero for killing the evil as an act of self-defense. This exactly maps to the experience most action-oriented designers want to create, going all the way back to *Space Invaders*; the player is thrown into a dangerous situation with a clear, undeniable "kill to survive" motivation. The evil forces are numerous and all deserve to die. Hence horror games are a natural fit. Indeed, many games that few would describe as "horror" use variations on those same horror tropes to justify the action in their world (among the many examples, see *DOOM* [Sandy Peterson, John Romero and Tom Hall, 1993], *System Shock* [Doug Church, 1994], and *Half-Life* [Gabe Newell et al., 1998]).

Game storytelling works best when the plot is fairly simple. A lot of nuance can be worked into the environment and the characters the player meets, but the plot is something that needs to be immediately understood and which propels the player through the whole game experience, motivating the actions and choices they're making. Since horror works best the less that is explained and the more that is left up to the imagination, it maps well to game storytelling. In *The Suffering*, I wanted to keep the cut-scenes to a minimum to keep the player in the game as much as possible. With a minimum of "forced" storytelling moments, we had to keep our high level plot understandable without much exposition. As a result, we buried a lot of our

back-story in subtle storytelling sections involving dialog played over game-play, graffiti written on walls, very quick semi-animated flashbacks, and cryptic journal entries the player could unlock. This enabled us to keep the story mysterious enough that the player would still be left with numerous unanswered questions. My hope was that the player would fill in the blanks with his own imagination (see Rouse, 2004). One need only look at horror films like *The Birds* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1963), *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980), and *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999) or some of the best horror writing by Lovecraft or Poe to see that the plot of these works is quite simple, the explanation minimal, and what does happen is barely explained, if explained at all. In horror, the way the audience fills in the blanks will be far more disturbing than anything a writer could possibly come up with. Thus, minimalist game storytelling fits perfectly in the horror genre.

Horror is also ideal for games because it presents a familiar world but with enough of a twist to make it seem fantastic and special. Horror stories are typically set in highly recognizable locations that players can identify but which have been invaded by some evil force. This force has often altered the rules of the world in some way. Thus, horror can be used to introduce unique gameplay mechanics based on this altered reality. Military shooters or open world crime games, set in very recognizable spaces, will always feel pretty similar to each other purely on the level of mechanics, due to the realistic enemy combatants and weaponry at the player's disposal. A horror game can introduce a supernatural element which justifies why the player has unique abilities, why he is hearing the thoughts of others, why bizarre enemies can materialize out of nowhere, and so forth. Yet the familiar setting of horror fiction keeps the player grounded. This is in contrast to the fantasy and science fiction settings popular in so many games. These more fantastic settings allow for unique mechanics but only let them exist in worlds which are inherently foreign to players. One game that both succeeded and failed on this front was the horror-influenced *Half-Life*. Set in the recognizable Black Mesa research facility for the majority of the game, the player spends his time fighting bizarre creatures in this familiar space; it's a very tense and fictionally cohesive experience. In the last quarter of the game, the player travels to the home-world of the aliens, a bizarre space unlike anything the player has seen before. It was at this point that most players felt the game went a bit off the rails and lost the delicate balance of the familiar and the alien that had been present in the beginning of the game.

Even the best simulated game never comes close to feeling like the real world. Even *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Leslie Benzies et al., 2008) and *Assassin's Creed* (Patrice Désilets, 2007), which have arguably come the closest to making the player feel like they are in a true "living, breathing" world, fall short

of feeling all that real as soon as one stops to look at them. It's pretty obvious that characters are running on artificial intelligence (AI), no matter how sophisticated. Indeed, the more realistic their behavior and appearance become, the more the perilous "uncanny valley" takes over the experience. This sort of "slightly off" world is ideally suited to the uneasiness of a horror setting. Often people joke that games feel like they're populated by zombies, so why not embrace that? *Dead Rising* (Yoshinori Kawano, 2006) had an excellent simulation of a world filled with zombies, probably indistinguishable from a real shopping mall filled with the undead. The more "human" characters found in *Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth* (Christopher Gray and Simon Woodroffe, 2005) feel zombie-like, but that AI limitation is understandable, given that the town of Innsmouth is supposed to be in the thrall of The Green Sticky Spawn of the Stars. The weird artificiality of game worlds plays directly into the brand of creepiness that the horror genre thrives on.

Finally, it is also convenient that horror tends to draw a younger and more male audience than other fictional settings. Historically, the people who are most interested in the horror setting are also the people who spend a lot of time playing video games. This simple market reality helps keep the horror genre financially viable and subsequent horror games inevitable.

Game Mechanics

A popular game design device is to give players some information about their surroundings, while leaving a lot out. This again is a natural fit for the horror genre. Protagonists in slasher films are never sure where an enemy is or when the next attack is going to come. Being completely blind-sided isn't a lot of fun though, so a number of horror games have used limited information techniques to keep the player apprised that danger is imminent without "giving away" too much. In *Silent Hill 2* (Masashi Tsuboyama, 2001), the player finds a radio which generates static whenever a creature is near. This doesn't tell where exactly it is or what type of enemy it might be, but serves to warn the player and helps build tension in the process. The film *Aliens* (James Cameron, 1986) was famous for its use of the motion detector, which provided a bit more information than the *Silent Hill 2* radio static. This device naturally showed up in the *Aliens vs. Predator* (various) games, and before that in Bungie's first-person shooter *Marathon* (Jason Jones, 1994) (which itself featured a number of levels that felt distinctly horror-inspired). This device only shows enemies that are currently moving, and has the disadvantage of not communicating where they are vertically. With a sufficiently com-

plex “over and under” environment (as was found in *Marathon*) this forces the player to both carefully monitor the detector but also to make choices based on erratic information, creating a much more tense experience in the process.

Much classic horror fiction deals with a fear of the dark. Darkness is great for technologically constrained games, because a lot of darkness means the game doesn’t have to render everything for great distances in all directions. Stephen King’s story *The Mist* (1980) and John Carpenter’s film *The Fog* (1980) are ideal set-ups for a game, particularly when one considers how much cheaper rendering fog is than showing a long, detailed vista. The fog or mist means the player cannot see very far and also allows creatures to get up really close to him before attacking while tidily providing a fictional justification for where they’re coming from. And of course this very device was used in numerous *Silent Hill* games. Interestingly, as game graphics have become higher fidelity, what designers can do with them has become more limited. For instance, look at the original *DOOM* games. The games were capable of rendering large areas filled with many enemies (which were all sprites in a 3D world, hence fairly cheap to put on the screen). For the more modern *DOOM 3* (Tim Willits, 2005), the engine technology had come much farther and was capable of rendering highly detailed characters with complex lighting. The drawback was that it wasn’t capable of showing that many of them and the advanced lighting was expensive enough that it forced more limited play spaces. Hence, the game took a significantly more horror direction, with fewer, tougher enemies leaping out of nearby shadows, instead of the giant battlefields packed with zillions of creatures. The horror theme was a perfect match for these new mechanics and the new technology.

Various horror scenarios are also ideal for limiting where the player can go. When using a real world environment, it’s nice to have a good reason why someone can’t just leave town or run to the police, beyond just saying “you can’t do that.” It can be quite convenient if the player has some sort of psychic disorder that prevents them from leaving. This is easily done in a horror setting, as is the handy thick mist which has descended around the town, filled with tentacled beasts sure to rip a player limb from limb if they enter into this mist. Mysterious “voices” in the player’s head can also provide the player with direction or just deliver back-story in an inexpensive fashion. *Silent Hill 4: The Room* (Suguru Murakoshi, 2004), which contains perhaps the most confining primary space ever seen in a narrative video game, places mysterious chains on the door with only the shadiest of justifications. If the player tries to open one of the windows, it is explained that his nightmares have made him fearful of opening them. The player would never buy this in a military or crime game, but in a horror setting it is immediately accepted.

Emotional Response

Beyond the practical benefits of the horror genre for game designers, the horror genre manipulates certain key emotions, which happen to be the same emotional responses games specialize in. For the February 2001 issue of *SIGGRAPH Computer Graphics* I wrote an essay, titled “Games on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown: Emotional Content in Computer Games,” where I noted that games are good at eliciting certain emotions and less effective at others. I encouraged game designers to exploit this potential as much as possible, instead of trying to mimic other genres and the emotions they do well. As it happens, many of those key “game” emotions are also ones ideally suited to the horror genre.

Two of the most obvious of these emotions, in both games and films, are tension and fear. Games provoke these better than other media because there’s actually something at stake for the player. In any non-interactive media, the audience is seeing unfortunate events or life-threatening occurrences happen for another person, and the audience’s own tension is only possible through empathy with that character’s plight. In an immersive game, the player actually projects himself into the experience. The most extreme example of this is a near-miss projectile in a first-person shooter, which may actually cause someone to shift to one side in their seat while they play. With the player fully immersing himself in the world, fear becomes much more intense. Furthermore, in games one can fail, often through their avatar dying. Death means the player will have to replay a section of the game in order to progress, giving death real stakes, unlike a movie, where the plot will keep going no matter who dies.

Another key emotional response that games are good at evoking is pride. This is an emotion other media can’t really muster at all. Though there’s some bragging rights to be had by saying “I survived a viewing of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*,” few would argue that it’s the same as emerging victorious in a game. In a horror setting, where the player is typically ill equipped and facing nearly-insurmountable and profoundly evil challenges, surviving the situation is all the more meaningful. There’s also something about helping other people in the world that makes it a common theme in horror games. When someone asks you directly for help and you are able to solve their problem while saving them from certain death, a very real sense of accomplishment follows. Certainly, no other media provides that sort of direct satisfaction to the audience.

Games are also great at allowing players to experience taboo subject matter in a safe environment. Audiences go to see thrillers for a reason: their lives typically aren’t that thrilling or perilous, and movies give them a vicarious thrill. The thrill in a game is less vicarious and more direct, though of

course the player is still ultimately safe. The adversaries in a horror game can be dark and twisted, in the best cases evoking real-world horrors that most players would typically not think about, further emphasizing the horror of the experience. For instance, in *The Suffering* games, I deliberately themed all of the enemy creatures after different methods of human execution, because capital punishment is inherently creepy and unsettling, and because most people, even those who are pro death penalty, prefer not to think of the specific realities of execution techniques (figures 1 and 2). Emphasizing this taboo topic forced players to face it, without actually making them attend an execution.

Immersion and Empowerment

One of the biggest advantages games have over other media is how immersive a gaming experience can be. Since players are, to some extent, able to determine the actions of the main character, while playing a game they project themselves into the main character much more than in any other medium. This is especially true in first-person games, where immersion is undeniably one of the primary goals. But even in third-person camera games,

Top, figure 1: In The Suffering (Richard Rouse III, 2004), Torque is fighting some Slayers in the third-person perspective. Bottom, figure 2: An Infernas viewed in the first-person perspective in The Suffering (Richard Rouse III, 2004).

player is forced to watch this bizarre enemy up close for the first time without being able to do anything to stop him. The creature design is brilliant and as a movie scene it's plenty scary, but in the end it's just a cut-scene. As soon as a cut-scene starts, the player's level of engagement in the game drops, and many players will put the controller down entirely, almost completely disengaging from the game.

Similar creature introductions, in a cut-scene free game like *Half-Life*, may place the player in just as little jeopardy (none), but since the player is in control the entire time they can't be sure they're ever completely safe. Without actually killing the player, the game can very effectively present the illusion of true jeopardy. The player has no way of knowing if the hideous creature may finally break through the glass, creating a situation where they'll need to immediately do something to fight back. Games like *Half-Life* and the recent *Left 4 Dead* (Mike Booth, 2008) give players a good number of choices about how they play, yet are still highly scripted experiences that funnel the player through spaces that give the illusion of being open, but which are typically quite linear. AI-driven events are mixed with highly scripted encounters. But with the same amount of linearity and scripting, a game that leaves the player in control of the camera feels more immersive than one where the camera control is constantly taken away. The perfect framing of a shot may be lost, and even with the most meticulous planning, there's always the chance a player may be looking away at the wrong time and miss a critical event. But what's gained in immersion and the feeling of potential threat more than makes up for these shortcomings, transforming what could have been simply a well-implemented cinematic moment into a still-compelling and distinctly interactivity-focused moment.

Despite some exceptions (notably Square Soft games), the trend over the last decade has been to add shorter and more seamless cut-scenes, with some games such as *Half-Life*, *BioShock* (Ken Levine, 2007) and *Dead Space* eschewing them almost entirely. *Resident Evil 4* introduced the notion of keeping the player immersed in the cut-scenes by adding very limited interaction to them. At key moments, players would need to hit a button to make their character swing a knife at just the right instant to stop a potentially fatal attack. Though this minimal interaction kept players on edge, it did nothing to make them feel truly empowered, creating a *Space Ace* (Rick Dyer and Don Bluth, 1994)-esque experience which had the potential to be frustrating in its own right. However, these barely-interactive cut-scenes were very well executed and quite thrilling, thus representing an interesting evolution of the cut-scene.

In *The Suffering*, we had a specific story to convey, but we didn't want storytelling to get in the way of our core game experience with excessive cut-scenes. With immersion as a core design principle, we had a rule of thumb

that cut-scenes were to be used exclusively for short, pivotal story points or for intensely scary scenes. Furthermore, we wanted to keep the player character (Torque)'s actions fairly neutral during these scenes to avoid negating the player's feeling that they were fully in control of Torque at all times. As I mentioned earlier, this meant we kept our plot quite simple, and integrated a lot of our storytelling into the game-world itself.

The Bright Future of the Blackest Night

With all the ways in which games are the ideal medium for the horror genre, it seems we gamers will be playing them for a while to come. But what form will they take in the future? I've never been one to make far reaching predictions, but it seems there is ample room for growth. A lot of the non-game horror examples I've referenced in this essay have been examples from movies, which makes sense since most horror games have taken films as their primary source of inspiration. But as horror games continue to evolve, I suspect they will become more and more distinct from horror films, in the same way horror films have progressed beyond being straight adaptations of horror prose. In my opinion that is a good thing. Consider the interesting case of H.P. Lovecraft adaptations. One might conclude that his work has fared better as games than it ever has on film. This is true for the classic pen and paper game *Call of Cthulhu* (Sandy Peterson, 1981) and the recent *Dark Corners of the Earth* console game, as well as the Cthulhu-inspired *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* (Denis Dyack, 2002). It would seem that Lovecraft's unique brand of unease, insanity, and slow paced terror works better in an interactive space than it ever can as a movie. As the horror game keeps evolving, more such cases will emerge, to the point where games that borrow too much from films will start to look dated. The future for horror games is bright indeed, and the sooner developers embrace what makes them unique, the better.

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