Immersion, Narrative, and Gender Crisis in Survival Horror Video Games

This book investigates the narrativity of some of the most popular survival horror video games and the gender politics implicit in their storyworlds. In a thorough analysis of the genre that draws upon detailed comparisons with the mainstream action genre, Andrei Nae places his analysis firmly within a political and social context.

In comparing survival horror games to the dominant game design norms of the action genre, the author differentiates between classical and postclassical survival horror games to show how the former reject the norms of the action genre and deliver a critique of the conservative gender politics of action games, while the latter are more heterogeneous in terms of their game design and, implicitly, gender politics.

This book will appeal not only to scholars working in game studies but also to scholars of horror, gender studies, popular culture, visual arts, genre studies, and narratology.

Dr Andrei Nae is a lecturer at the University of Bucharest, Romania, where he teaches video game cultural studies, narratology applied to video games, and twentieth-century and contemporary English literature. He has been the beneficiary of several scholarships and grants both as a doctoral student and as a postdoctoral researcher and is currently the principal investigator and manager of the research project "Colonial Discourse in Video Games" financed by the Executive Unit for Financing Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation (UEFISCDI).

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To Alexandra

Contents

Preface

The story of this book begins in the summer of 2014 when I first played *Silent Hill 2* on my old PC. The game had been released in 2001 and I had been aware of its existence for many years, but it was only in my early adulthood that I finally had the opportunity to play the game. Growing up in a low-income family in a small town during Romania's transition from communism, like many of my peers, I spent much of my childhood busying myself with third-generation games on clandestine Famicon copies with no access to the fifth-generation games and platforms which were popular at the turn of the millennium. Then, by the time I finally caught up with the most recent gaming platforms, I had started being more interested in literature, which led me to the decision to pursue literary studies at the University of Bucharest. After juggling my two passions, literature and video games, for several years, I eventually became aware that many of the critical concepts I had been using in my literature lectures and seminars were also relevant to understanding video games. Therefore, after graduating from my university's MA in British Cultural Studies, I began playing as many games as possible with a view to formulating a doctoral research proposal in order to start my career as an academic. The time was now ripe to play *Silent Hill 2*.

What struck me about *Silent Hill 2* was that, despite its unconventional controls and mechanics that sometimes made it frustratingly unplayable, I found the gameplay experience highly engaging, which of course begged the question 'why?' My hypothesis at that point was that it was the game's narrative that was so immersive and that, more importantly, compensated for the game's dysfunctional controls and mechanics. My activity as a PhD student did not only confirm my hypothesis, but also made me notice that one might correlate the means by which action games attain immersion with gender representation and simulation. This book is based on a few sections in my dissertation where I discuss the issue of narrative compensation and its relation to gender identity in survival horror video games. Although much has been written on survival horror video games and their impotent protagonists, not enough stress has been laid on how these games relate to the dominant gender constructs. In the context of action games' connivance with hegemony, survival horror games stand out with their propensity for defying norms and issuing a critique that goes beyond the shallow adherence to multiculturalism and diversity adopted by many AAA games and

interrogates the cultural values embedded in games and gaming on a deep level which has less to do with the visual representation and overall narrative, but more to do with the games' procedurality and its diegetic dimension.

Such interrogation is necessary because (action) video games and gaming culture in general continue to be tributary to a culture of rigid normativity for which #Gamergate was merely a token of its manifold manifestations. If, as I argue in Chapter 2, we regard videogames as simulators of cultural identities, then they play a major role in shaping the player's sense of self and community. I am not implying that what we are dealing with is a deterministic relationship, whereby the game automatically triggers the same response for all players, but rather that video games establish a set of norms which may structure the player's cultural horizon in terms of what is normal and abnormal, acceptable and unacceptable. Unfortunately, despite several efforts in the industry and, in recent years, a vehement call from academia, games have continued to foreground a narrow understanding of the category of 'normal,' but a generous and encompassing 'abnormal.'

It is often argued that AAA games have no choice but to engage in this normative rhetoric because of the current demand on the action game market. Yet, survival horror games are a strong counterargument to the developers' market approach that reifies taste and exempts game developers from responsibility. Although it is far-fetched to claim that the survival horror genre in its entirety is fully committed to the ethics of diversity, survival horror games are nonetheless financially successful products which manage to defy and criticize many of the conventional gender roles of action games. Survival horror games prove that it is not mandatory for action games to be sexist, racist, classist, ableist, sanist, or chauvinistic, etc. in order to sell many copies. This book adheres to the call for video games which are truly diverse and which are aware of the history of the multiple forms of subjugation that have often found support in entertainment and art. It is ironic that video games, an outgrowth of the counterculture of the late 1960s, should have been appropriated to such an extent by the hegemony they once contested. Survival horror games can thus be construed as a return to the anti-establishment attitude of games and gaming, and this book provides an in-depth analysis of how some of the most relevant survival horror games contest the dominant culture as far as the gender status quo is concerned.

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Introduction

Survival horror has made a name for itself as a genre with the help of games such as *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996) or *Silent Hill 2* (Konami, 2001), which were very successful not only in terms of sales[1] but also in terms of critical acclaim. Even today, the two occupy very high positions in any "best horror video games list" in popular video game magazines.[2] Despite their success and canonization, they have also come under significant criticism for many aspects of their game design. A quick look at any discussion, blog entry, or set of commentaries on gaming forums will reveal that players are generally dissatisfied with three aspects: the games' combat, movement controls, and camera angles. One YouTube user complains that "[the] controls make the game [*Resident Evil 2*] annoying I'm really trying to give this a chance but it's so bad and annoying,"[3] while another is of the opinion that "tank controls make no sense and are an unintuitive control scheme."[4] Another internet user is intrigued in one post on the GameFAQs forum as to how a game like *Resident Evil* could be so successful despite its movement controls "Oh, man. What the hell? How did this game ever get popular?"[5] In defence of traditional survival horror controls, another user acknowledges the problems encountered while playing *Silent Hill 2* "which frankly controls like salty garbage. Even by *Silent Hill* standards *SH2* was especially clunky—even the original I'd say controls better. Its melee combat was practically broken."[6] As far as the use of fixed camera angles is concerned, in a discussion on GameSpot, two users argue that "the damn things make games nearly unplayable now"[7] and that "a lot of times those fixed camera angles were downright annoying. Shooting at sounds because you can't see around the corner and such. Or needing to run to a better fixed camera angle."[8]

These claims are promptly dismissed by fans who, having a special attachment to the aesthetics of the genre, either find pleasure in the game design choices or are simply not bothered by them. Yet the positions adopted by more mainstream gamers and the later evolution of survival horror suggest that in their early stages survival horror games were at odds with the norms of the mainstream action game industry. While the entire industry struggled to offer gamers more and more seamless gameplay experiences based on functional and easily learnable controls, classical survival horror games provided gamers with the exact opposite.[9] How could we then account for the success of these games? Should it not

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be self-defeating for an action game to have bad combat mechanics and cumbersome movement controls? Survival horror games seem to convince us of the opposite.

Although survival horror games appear to reject the norms of mainstream action games, the type of gameplay they engender legitimizes their place in the action genre. In order to define action in video games, I rely on Bernard Perron, Dominic Arsenault, Martin Picard, and Carl Therrien's classification of games in accordance with their actional modalities. In this view, a game that emphasizes the player's sensorimotor skills and whose actions have short-term consequences in the game world is regarded as an action game.[10] In such games, players have a limited set of actions which they use to eliminate their adversaries. These in-game actions are activated by pressing individual buttons or specific combinations on the controller. Many of the Atari games such as the canonical *Space Invaders* (Taito 1978), the 2D side-scrolling games of the Nintendo Entertainment System such as the beat 'em game *Double Dragon* (Technōs Japan, 1987), and even some of the games of the subsequent decades such as the first-person shooter *Doom* (id Software, 1993) are prototypical examples of action games,[11] yet survival horror games, too, match up to this description. Despite featuring clunky controls and inefficient core mechanics, they require good hand-eye coordination and quick reactions in fighting or avoiding the playable character's foes.

More recently, however, action games have hybridized into the now very popular action-adventure genre.[12] Besides the requirement of sensorimotor skills, these games rely on cognitive skills and feature a more heterogeneous set of actions that can be enacted by performing a standardized sequence of controls.[13] In adventure games, players must explore game space, find a variety of items which they can use to unlock sealed doors, and find clues that help them solve riddles, as well as other such activities that are different from the fast-paced rhythm of conventional action games. The addition of adventure elements to action games is not new and can be traced back to early games such as *Adventure* (Atari, Inc., 1979), *Vampire Killer* (Konami, 1986), the second instalment in the *Castlevania* series, or *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo, 1986). However, it is in the last 20 years that action-adventure games have become a hallmark genre of the video game industry with franchises such as *Devil May Cry* (Capcom, 2001–2020), *Price of Persia* (Ubisoft 2003–2005), *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft, 2007–2020), or *God of War* (SIE Santo Monica Studio, 2005–2018) developing into successful transmedia storyworlds. Due to their emphasis on exploration and puzzle-solving, survival horror games fit very well into the action-adventure category. Especially in their early years, survival horror games featured maze-like levels which the player had to explore thoroughly in order to find a wide range of items which would enable her to proceed to the next location.

Action and action-adventure are two neighbouring genres that often conflate. The games released in the past 20 years tend to implement both action and adventure elements, but differ in terms of how the two set of elements are balanced. While some games foreground action, others lay more stress of exploration. In this book, I discuss survival horror games whose gameplay has an

important focus on action and compare them to other action-adventure games that share the same focus. This comparison is informed by the historical links between modern action-adventure games and the early, more prototypical action games, which is why from this point onward I will be using the term action to refer both to more prototypical action games and to action-adventure games that emphasize combat.

Since their emergence, action games have thrived on their capacity to immerse the player into the world of the video game. They have done so by providing the player with continuous and realistic audio-visual representations of the game world, by lending her control over a playable entity in the game, and, especially after the mid-1990s, by creating storyworlds with high degrees of narrativity. While the goal of any conventional action game is to maximize these means of achieving immersion, survival video games take on a different avenue. The formula patented by *Alone in the Dark* (Infogrames, 1992) and *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996) offers players an overtly hypermedial and discontinuous perspective on the game world and features a set of core mechanics and controls that make it difficult for the player to play the game. Since this would lead to a low level of immersion, survival horror games compensate for their hypermedial perspective on the game world and cumbersome interactivity by means of a high degree of narrativity. In this book, one of my main goals is to analyze some of the most representative survival horror games and inspect the consequences that narrative compensation has for immersion.

The alternative means used to immerse the player is not without political implications. Action games typically function as simulators of white heterosexual masculinity[14] which, through immersion, naturalize the hyperpotency manifested by the male playable characters in the game worlds they inhabit.[15] By rendering the playable character impotent in the game world, survival horror video games challenge the conservative gender politics of the action genre and raise awareness with respect to its artificiality. Therefore, the second aim of this book is to analyze the political implications of the game design of survival horror games and reveal the particular way in which these games question patriarchy.

Although in the genre's early years survival horror games were very homogeneous as far as their game design and approach to gender were concerned, the genre's later evolution evinces a relativization of its initial formula. In order to distinguish the early games from the later ones, in this book, I operate with the following historical categories: I will be using the term classical survival horror to refer to the games released between 1992 and 2004 that emulate and elaborate on the game design of *Alone in the Dark* and *Resident Evil* and the term postclassical survival horror to refer to the games released after 2004 which stray from the original formula and adopt the game design of *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom, 2005)[16] or other action subgenres such as the first-person shooter. My contention is that postclassical survival horror games move closer to the norms of the action genre by opting for a more gamer-friendly game design. As a result, not only do these games feature more functional controls, more seamless aural and visual representations, and more reliable core mechanics, but the postclassical

survival horror is also more heterogeneous in terms of gender politics. While some games maintain the political attitudes of the classical games, many postclassical games adopt the conservative gender politics of the action genre.

My book follows up on one section of Bernard Perron's latest monograph, *The World of Scary Video Games,* entitled "Figures under Threat," where the author discusses the gender politics of horror games. However, instead of a brief overview of the representation of gender in various games, my book provides in-depth analyses of eight survival horror video games: *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996), *Silent Hill 2* (Team Silent, 2001), *Fatal Frame* (Tecmo, 2001), *Forbidden Siren* (Project Siren, 2003), *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom, 2005), *Condemned. Criminal Origins* (Monolith Productions, 2005), *Alien: Isolation* (Creative Assembly, 2014), and *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory, 2017). Moreover, my analysis is conducted along the lines of the above-mentioned historical and aesthetic categories (classical vs postclassical survival horror) and links the gender politics of the games to their respective means of immersing the player. Although Perron makes similar historical distinctions in his sixth chapter, his approach to the issue of gender does not take into consideration the difference between the games released in intervals between 1992–2004 and 2005–2017, respectively.[17] Finally, besides length and historical input, my book also differs in terms of methodology. My approach is strongly indebted to cognitive narrative theory and, therefore, my analysis of the games also focuses on the verisimilitude of the storyworld and the consequences that this verisimilitude has for the representation and simulation of gender. As a result, this book is addressed not only to scholars working in the fields of game studies and gender studies but also to those interested in narrative theory. Additionally, this book may be of interest to game designers who want to step out of the often reactionary gender norms of the action genre and create video games that are more open to diversity.

Finally, I would like to point out that in this book I use two pronouns to refer to the player. In the first part where I provide a more general discussion of immersion and gender in video games, I use the feminine pronoun "she" in keeping with video game cultural studies' attempt to decentre the masculinist assumptions concerning gameplay as an activity. In sections two and three, however, where I examine the video games listed above, I switch to the masculine pronoun "he" in order to highlight that action games are usually designed with an implied male player in mind.[18]

Notes

1 By 18 October 2017, Capcom had sold 5.08 million units of the first instalment of *Resident Evil,* including here the two director's cut versions. See Stephany Nunneley, "Resident Evil 7 Has Reached Capcom's Target of 4 Million Units Shipped," *VG24/7*, October 18, 2017, https://www.vg247.com/2017/10/18/resident-evil-7-has-reached-capcoms-target-of-4-million-units-shipped/.

2 See Adam Smith, "The 25 Best Horror Games on PC," *Rock Paper Shotgun*, October 31, 2017, https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2017/10/31/best-horror-games/1/; Chloi Rad, "Top 10 Scariest Video Games," *IGN*, July 29, 2016, https://

www.ign.com/articles/2016/07/29/top-10-scariest-games; GamesRadar Staff and Leon Hurly, "The 20 Best Horror Games of All Time," *Gamesrader*, October 31, 2019, https://www.gamesradar.com/best-horror-games/; Rhys Pugatschew, "50 Scariest Horror Games of All Time," *NerdMuch?*, January 3, 2020, https://www.nerdmuch.com/scariest-horror-games/; Samuel Roberts, Richard Cobbett, Phil Savage, Fraser Brown and Tom Sykes, "The Best Horror Games," https://www.pcgamer.com/the-best-horror-games/, *PC Gamer*, February 24, 2020, https://www.pcgamer.com/the-best-horror-games/; Tom Hoggins Olivia White, "The Best Horror Video Games," *The Telegraph*, November 16, 2017.

3 Nathan Richards. Comment on Elite Khajiit, "Why Resident Evil Games Had 'Tank Controls'," YouTube, 2019, November 18, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ClSWqHI8PyQ.

4 FinalSHowdown. Comment on Elite Khajiit, "Why Resident Evil Games Had 'Tank Controls'," YouTube, 2019, November 18, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ClSWqHI8PyQ.

5 Dawn_Wanderer, post on forum topic "Movement Controls: Resident Evil: Director's Cut," GameFAQs, 2014, https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/boards/198462-resident-evil-directors-cut/68780869.

6 Yummylee, "A Defence of Resident Evil Survival Horror Controls," *Giantbomb*, 2015, https://www.giantbomb.com/resident-evil/3025-397/forums/a-defence-of-resident-evil-survival-horror-control-1485587/.

7 Darklink, post on forum topic "Call Me Old-fashioned, But I Miss Survival Horror Games with Fixed Camera Angles," 2011, https://www.gamespot.com/forums/system-wars-314159282/call-me-oldfashioned-but-i-miss-survival-horror-ga-27437932/.

8 Markinthedark, post on forum topic "Call Me Old-fashioned, But I Miss Survival Horror Games with Fixed Camera Angles," 2011, https://www.gamespot.com/forums/system-wars-314159282/call-me-oldfashioned-but-i-miss-survival-horror-ga-27437932/.

9 For a brief overview of the metaculture surrounding survival horror video games see Broc Holmquest, "Survival Horror, Metaculture and the Fluidity of Video Game Genres," in *Unraveling Resident Evil. Essays on the Complex Universe of the Games and Films*, ed. Nadine Farghaly (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2014), 82–103.

10 Dominic Arsenault, "Action," in *The Routledge Companion to Video* Games, eds. by Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 228; Bernard Perron et al., "Methodological Questions in 'Interactive Film Studies'," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 6, no. 3 (2008): 248, doi: 10.1080/17400300802418552.

11 In some of these games one can already identify some traits of adventure, thus anticipating the now popular action-adventure genre.

12 Arsenault, "Action," 229.

13 Perron et al., "Methodological Questions in 'Interactive Film Studies'," 248.

14 See Derek A. Burrill, *Die Tryin': Videogames, Masculinity, Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008); Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter, *Digital Play. Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 194–195.

15 Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007), 112–113; Burrill, *Die Tryin*', 79.

16 Ewan Kirkland, "Survival Horrality: Analysis of a Videogame Genre," *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* 10 (October 2011): 23.

17 Here I use the periods mentioned by Bernard Perron in order to distinguish the two historical stages of the "videoludic horror," a genre which includes, but is not

restricted to, survival horror. See Bernard Perron, *The World of Scary Video Games* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 175.

18 See Alison Harvey, *Gender, Age, and Digital Games in the Domestic Context* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 11; Michael Z. Newman and John Vanderhoef, "Masculinity," in *The Routledge Companion to Video* Games, eds. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 380–387.

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Part I

Immersion and gender in action games

1 Immersion in mainstream action games

Video games are the peak of our modern need for realistic or illusionistic[1] experiences of fictional worlds. Like no other medium before, video games' technology has soared from the low-resolution 2D images of the 1980s, to the jittery 3D polygons of the 1990s, to the complex shader effects of the 2000s, and finally to today's virtual reality gear. The galloping speed at which video games enhanced their representational capabilities was only matched by the medium's drive to cannibalize other media used for ludic and narrative purposes. Literature, comics, the internet, virtual reality, film, TV series, board games, even older gaming technologies can be found in contemporary video games. Playing a video game today requires a complex set of skills and the mastery of a wide range of literacies that go beyond the mere desire to deliberately adhere to a set of rules, to enter what Huizinga calls a "magic circle."[2]

This long technological genealogy has turned video games into a standard for the absorption and engagement of the consumer in modern entertainment. Developers, reviewers, and gamers praise video games for their ability to involve the player in mind engrossing challenges and convincing fictional worlds to the point that, throughout gameplay at least, the player is allegedly less aware of, or no longer cares about the real world. Popular discourse calls video games' ability to absorb the player and continually keep her under its grasp immersion. Despite the popularity enjoyed by the term, scholars and game designers often find fault with the broadness of the term as it is used in popular discourse and, instead, provide a set of conceptual models aimed at clearly defining what immersion is. However, as with each new emerging field of study, consensus with respect to the definition of immersion is yet to be reached.

Immersion at the intersection of immediacy, interactivity, and narrativity

Understandings of immersion oscillate, on the one hand, between the technological and the psychological and, on the other hand, between the medium free and medium specific.[3] In other words, there are scholars and game designers who use the term immersion to designate the technological affordance of the medium that allows players to control entities in other worlds from a distance,

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while other scholars equate immersion with the psychological impression of being absorbed into a different world. Moreover, members of academia and practitioners argue with respect to the scope of the concept. Should a conceptual model of immersion explain the dominant tendency of all representational media to erase their mediation and immerse the consumer in the represented world, or should we employ different concepts for the particular means in which different media engross the receiver?[4]

Despite the many contending models of immersion, these theories seem to share a common ground that associates immersion in video games with three components: immediacy, interactivity, and narrativity.[5] Immediacy refers to the medium's capacity to erase itself and create the illusion of a direct, transparent, and non-mediated experience of the object of representation.[6] In our case, this means that a video game is expected to use its aural, visual, and kinaesthetic signs to create a representation of the game world that seems so realistic that the player should ideally not be able to tell the difference between the game world and reality. If the game is not set in the real world, then the player must be convinced of the reality/realism of the game's fictional space.[7] In addition to this, the video game should isolate the player from external stimuli and integrate her "in a 360° space of illusion, or immersion, with unity of time and place."[8]

Intimately tied to immediacy in video games is interactivity which designates the need for video games to offer the player the possibility to complexly and meaningfully interact with the game world. When playing, gamers draw on their experience as conscious embodied beings and infer a series of actions that are prompted by the represented game world.[9] The idea in the gaming industry today is that the task of an immersive video game is to grant the player the capacity to perform many of the inferred actions. For instance, if a playable character is in a city, he or she should be able to take the bus, steal a car, eat at a fast-food restaurant, or interact with people on the street. In other words, the video game should have a rule for each of these actions.[10] The more the actions are supported by the game mechanics, the more immersive the game becomes. The ability of video games to confirm the expectations concerning player agency cued by (mainly) visual representation produces what Hawreliak calls modal consonance, understood as the felicitous situation when two or more modes complete one another and yield a unitary meaning.[11] Consequently, if a video games' aural, visual, and kinaesthetic signs, on the one hand, and the system of rules that govern the player's agency on the other hand (referred to as the procedural mode by Hawreliak)[12] are coherent and consistent with one another, then this leads to a higher degree of player immersion.[13]

However, simply interacting with the game world cannot maintain a high degree of player immersion for long. The game must constantly prompt the player with new challenges that demand the use of the said game mechanics and, consequently, give ludic relevance to actions the player has at her disposal.[14] These challenges succeed one another quickly so that the player's attention is fully grasped and she has no time to think about anything else.[15] Ideally, they should

be neither too difficult, nor too easy and should require the use of as many of the available in-game actions as possible.[16] This ensures that the player psychologically experiences gameplay as flow, understood as a "pleasurable, optimal performance state."[17] Moreover, it should be easy for players to learn the controls,[18] the player's P-actions[19] should feel natural[20] and, if possible, resemble the in-game actions of the playable character.[21] According to the immersion ideal, this should eventually lead to a fusion of the player's and the playable character's intentions, perceptions, and actions, a fusion that gives the player "a sense of extended embodiment"[22] and erases awareness of the presence of the controller in the player's hands.[23]

At the same time, there is a limit to the number of actions/possibilities afforded by the game beyond which the game becomes formless[24] and less immersive. Video games seem to be characterized by a tension between the push for more immediacy, which demands that games be as life-like as possible, and the push towards more interactivity, which calls for a limiting of possible player actions so that the game may remain ludically engaging throughout.[25] A successful game, according to the dominant aesthetics of the industry, is one that manages to offer the player the right number of actions so that it manages to maintain the illusion of reality, but also upholds a stable game design which ensures that core mechanics are ludically relevant.[26]

Lastly, narrativity refers to the ability of video games to lend themselves to narrative purposes. In order to motivate the player to take on the challenges, they should be embedded in a narrative which is partially represented, and partially simulated by the video game.[27] Unlike traditional media, video games do not only 'tell' stories, but they also generate them as you play. While some parts of the game's narrative are linear and not subject to interactivity (cutscenes, documents, and other remediations of non-interactive media), action video games also lend the player narrative agency, allowing the player to enact the narrative within the confines established by the game designer.[28] Consequently, the player's actions are not only ludic but also narrative, which means that they push the story forward. Typically, video games begin with a cutscene that functions as a narrative frame for upcoming events. The task of the player is to follow the instructions offered by the game in order to reach a ludic goal often dressed as a narrative goal. The reaching of the first goal is usually marked by the end of the level and prompts a new cutscene which pushes the story even further and posits new ludic and narrative goals for the player.

In order to account for the tension between linearity and non-linearity, Marie-Laure Ryan proposes that we should distinguish the scripted from the emergent narrative. For Ryan, a scripted narrative is one whose material signs are inscribed in the game's multimodal text, while an emergent narrative is a type of narrative whose signs are subject to improvisation.[29] By way of consequence, those parts of the video game that are present on each run of the programme and are outside the scope of the player's interactivity are to be regarded as the scripted narrative or representation, while the interactive parts of the game form the emergent narrative, or the simulation.[30]

A more elaborate approach to the narrative affordances of video games is provided by Henry Jenkins who inspects the tension between representation and simulation along the lines of temporality and spatiality. He claims that traditional media are primarily characterized by a rigid chronology of events which allows them to stress their causal relationship. On the other hand, non-linear media, such as video games, lack the immovable temporal sequentiality and causality of events, and, instead, offer a space of potential narratives.[31] By exploring the world of the game, the player can engage with a series of narratives in any order she sees fit. Depending on the level of freedom the player enjoys in choosing what story to play, how to play it, and on the relationship entertained by the game with other narratives across other media, Jenkins distinguishes four types of "immersive narrative experiences"[32] which, of course, are not mutually exclusive. The four types proposed by Jenkins are evocative spaces, enacting stories, embedded narratives, and emergent narratives.

Evocative spaces are those spaces that are part of a transmedia storyworld. They either adapt the narrative content of a different medium or offer a new narrative within an already existing storyworld.[33] Enacted stories refer to those games where the player's progress is to a great extent determined by the game designer in the sense that the player must reach a series of predetermined checkpoints. Her freedom is confined to the way she uses the means at her disposal to reach those checkpoints.[34] The third category, embedded narratives, represents those narratives whose content is scattered around the video game's storyworld in the form of usually linear analogue media. The player has the option to collect them in whatever order she can and they typically function as the backstory of the enacted story which is being played.[35] Lastly, emergent narratives unfold not according to a pre-designed narrative plot, but they are merely the result of the player's interaction with the game world, i.e. gameplay.[36] While the first three types of narratives lend more narrative agency to the game designer, emergent narratives privilege the player who now has more authorial responsibility for the unfolding of the events than the game designer.

Throughout this book, I will be using concepts from both Ryan and Jenkins to refer to various aspects of the games' narrative design. When discussing the game's plot bottlenecks[37] and scripted order of events I will be using Ryan's concept of scripted narrative while emergent narrative, a concept shared by both scholars, will be used to designate the diegetic meaning engendered through gameplay. Finally, I will employ Jenkins' concept of embedded narrative to refer to the diegetic backdrop of the events represented in scripted narrative and simulated in the emergent narrative.

Finally, in postulating immersion as a gradient resultant of immediacy, interactivity, and narrativity, I would like to point out that the total immersion craved by the gaming industry is never achieved and that, depending on the level of immersion, players are always aware to a greater or lesser extent that they are in fact playing a video game.[38] It could not be otherwise given games' specific hypermediacy generated by the haphazard experience of playing. Therefore, to be immersed in a game means finding oneself somewhere on a continuum between

total self-referentiality and total immersion. The next section discusses these two extremes of the gaming experience with reference to the third component of immersion, namely that of narrativity.

Degrees of narrativity, degrees of identification, and degrees of immersion

Although contemporary game design manuals, theoretical books on video games, as well as the panels of narratology conferences now give due attention to video games as narrative products, this has not always been the case. Traditionally, narrative theory has shown considerable reluctance to include non-linear cultural products into its scope.[39] While novels and films were the cultural favourites of narratology, video games were at odds with traditional narrative theory. The incompatibility of the two was advocated not only by narratologists from the fields of literary and film studies but also by ludologists who saw the non-linearity of video games and the linearity of narratives as irreconcilable.[40] This barrier between video games and narrative theory would soon change with the emergence of postclassical narrative theory (cognitive narrative theory, in particular), on the one hand, and the growing importance of transmedia storyworlds that are the norm in mainstream narrative entertainment today, on the other.[41]

Since its beginnings in the mid-1990s, cognitive narrative theory has been concerned with narrative as it is conceived of and used by everyday users, in other words, with narrative as a natural category.[42] Natural categories are not rigid sets comprised of members of equal status. When placing external objects into categories, people are likely to view some members as being more indicative of a category than other members. Prototype theory proposes that categories be defined either by prototypical objects or traits that would eventually lead to an assessment of an object's degree of membership to a category, rather than its absolute membership.[43] In keeping with prototype theory, cognitive narrative theory has come up with several definitions of narrative that are not aimed at creating a rigid set of traits that universally distinguish narratives from non-narratives. Quite on the contrary, cognitive narrative theory tries to identify prototypical traits of the category of narrative, traits which can be present to a greater or lesser extent in various instances of narrative. This way, rather the clearly setting apart narratives from non-narratives, this theory places narratives on a continuum from more central ones, i.e. cultural products that evince all the prototypical traits, to more marginal ones, i.e. cultural products that feature few of the prototypical traits. Consequently, instead of speaking of narratives per se, cognitive narrative theory prefers the concept of degrees of narrativity.[44]

In this book, I rely on David Herman's definition of narrative which proposes four prototypical features, or, as he calls them, basic elements.[45] According to Herman, narrativity resides in situatedness, sequentiality, worldmaking/world disrupting, and experientiality.[46] Stories are delivered and received in contexts deemed appropriate for storytelling. These contexts have a bearing not only on how narratives are delivered but also on their content and structure.[47] Narratives

usually represent a sequence of events that need not be recounted in the order in which they happened.[48] The relation between the order of occurrence and the order in which the events are represented yields various types of suspense. Interpreters invest interest in the possible outcomes of the narrative "what suspense", the events that led to a particular state of affairs in the storyworld "how/who suspense", or in the artificial means which the narrative will use to reach a predictable result "metasuspense".[49]

In order to infer the events, interpreters use the material signs delivered by the medium to mentally create a storyworld.[50] According to Jan Van Looy, in assigning meaning to the material signs, players engage in a process of virtual recentering. This means that, in order to comprehend a game's storyworld, players put themselves in the shoes of the playable character in order to infer how the virtual storyworld is like,[51] but without losing knowledge of the separation between the self and the virtual projection of the self in the form of the playable character.[52] These inferences are buttressed by what Marie-Laure Ryan calls the principle of minimal departure.[53] Players start from an assumption that there is logical compatibility between the possible world simulated by the video game and the actual world they live in. What this entails is that, except when explicitly prompted otherwise, the laws, be they physical, social, or of another nature, that govern the actual world apply to the virtual one, as well.[54] (See, for instance, the discussion on interactivity as far as the inferred possibilities of action are concerned in the previous section). Therefore, the more a game's storyworld meets the logical compatibility criterion, the more possible, i.e. plausible, the virtual world seems and the stronger immersion becomes.

In order to further facilitate the mental construction of the storyworld and, consequently facilitate immersion, action games usually (re)present the events in chronological order and make the causal link between them explicit. Typically, one of the events represented will distort the equilibrium of the storyworld and will motivate the characters to act in order to bring the storyworld back to a state of balance. The characters involved in reinstating the initial balance are conscious human or human-like entities that reflect upon the events of the storyworld. Interpreters have either direct or indirect access to the minds of the characters and make sense of their thoughts, feelings, and reasons for acting by relying on their own experiential background.[55]

As I show in greater length in the following chapters, action video games feature a high degree of narrativity judging by Herman's prototypical definition. Action games typically commence by presenting a game world in a state of balance which is brutally disrupted by a traumatic event. This triggers a series of other events that usually lead to the triumph of the main protagonist. The player is motivated to play because she is mainly interested in what will happen to the main protagonist and how the initial balance will be regained, hence 'what' suspense. Moreover, as the player progresses, she often comes across a series of remediated media (many of which are analogue: audio logs, photographs, VHS cassettes, letters, and so on) that provide information with respect to how the game world had attained the state of balance which is broken at the game's inception. With

each newly found document, the player also invests interest in the narrative's past ('how/who' suspense) and wants to progress in order to complete her understanding of the current state of the game world. Like in all narratives, the events of the game world are filtered through the consciousness of the characters that populate it. Video games represent the experience of being in the game world by granting us direct or indirect access to the minds of the characters. Action video games are, as such, likely to feature sequentiality, world disruption, and experientiality.

The level of experientiality featured in video games has a strong bearing on the extent to which the player identifies with the playable character. The issue of identification has been widely discussed in Adrienne Shaw's *Gaming at the Edge, Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*. In her book, Shaw draws a distinction between game designs that foster identification as and those that foster identification with. The former refers to those video games whose design starts from the assumption that players will automatically identify with the playable character if the two share one or more identifiers, i.e. same gender,[56] race, class, sexual orientation, etc.[57] The latter represents the alternative game design philosophy which starts from the assumption that there is no immediate union between the player and playable character and that the former is always aware of her distinction from the playable character. According to this view, the player will identify with the playable characters on the condition that the playable character is psychologically complex, historically rich, and narratively well-wrought.[58] Such characters are consciously involved in the world of the game and filter their experience through their consciousness, thus providing the video game with a high degree of experientiality and, consequently, narrativity.

By means of an ethnographic approach, Shaw has proven that players are more likely to identify with playable characters who are psychologically complex, rather than with flat characters with whom they nevertheless share at least one identifier. In this latter case, the player's attitude is likely to remain a self-referential one, i.e. the player is not absorbed, immersed in the game world, although the realism of the aural and visual representation may be high and the control symbiotic.[59] This contradicts the expectation that unnamed silent protagonists such as 'the doom guy', with no history and identity, can function as an empty shell for the player to psychologically fill, thus enabling a more complete immersion. Furthermore, as Shaw has revealed, avatars created by the player lead to a similar low level of identification with, hence immersion.[60] On the contrary, for identification to work, there has to be a distance between the player and the playable character since, as psychoanalysis has repeatedly pointed out, disidentification is constitutive of identification.[61]

Coupling Adrienne Shaw's claim with the model of immersion exposed in the previous section, it would seem that in order for the playable character and player to connect, and, consequently, for the game to be more immersive, the former has to be a diegetically complex one. Therefore, a high level of narrativity and, inherently, experientiality seem to be an essential condition for identification with the playable character and for immersion in the game world.

Having looked into sequentiality, world-making/world-disrupting, and experientiality, it is time to address the issue of whether playing video games can be considered a socially accepted storytelling occasion. Reviewers, players, scholars, and game designers evince an understanding of playing as a narrative occasion and are often very keen on praising video games for the quality of their stories. For example, game studies scholar Souvik Mukherjee insists that, when discussing games, one should privilege neither the ludic, nor the diegetic, nor the technological side, and claims that they find themselves in a non-hierarchical relation of supplementarity.[62] Video game journalism also regards the narratives of video games not as ornamental elements aimed at adding shimmer to the "real" game underneath, but rather as an element intrinsic to gameplay which is defining for the player's experience. Players and reviewers criticize those games whose stories (they claim) are redundant and whose characters are bland and difficult to empathize with while praising those video games whose stories they find engrossing and filled with characters they can relate to. The assumption behind such positive or negative appraisals is that, for gamers and reviewers today, video games are an occasion for experiencing narratives. Producers and game designers, too, adhere to the idea of gameplay as an occasion for interactively telling stories if we take into account the recent increase in the number of adaptations and appropriations of canonical narratives into AAA video games. To name but a few, *Spec Ops—The Line* (Yager Development, 2012) is an appropriation[63] of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and the film *Apocalypse: Now*,[64] *Alien: Isolation* (Creative Assembly, 2014) is to a large extent a procedural adaptation of Ridley Scott's 1979 *Alien* (as Chapter 9 discusses at length), while its embedded narrative appropriates the conflicting views on colonialism expressed by the two narrators of *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad,[65] *BioShock* (2K Boston, 2007) adapts and at the same time criticizes the works of Ayn Rand, and *Manhunt 2* (Rockstar, 2008) is a critical adaptation[66] of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.[67]

Technologies of representation, nevertheless, are not narrative by birth, they are assigned narrative roles. Consequently, using media for entertainment purposes may be regarded as an occasion for storytelling inasmuch as there is a dominant discourse that vouchsafes the narrativity of that particular medium. Action video games are an illustrative case of how the narrative uses of media fluctuate and are culturally constructed. Initially, gameplay was a merely ludic occasion which elicited ludic pleasures. The player faced a set of challenges and, depending on her performance, she was rewarded with a high score. With time, action games have started to pay more attention to their narrativity to the point that today action-adventure mainstream games are just as interested in offering narrative pleasures as they are interested in offering ludic ones.[68] Narrativity now plays a key role in the immersion of the player and has become a crucial element of any game design. As a result, although playing video games is yet to become a prototypical narrative occasion, it has, nevertheless, started to be regarded as an occasion for storytelling on top of playing.

Immersion via maximization

A glance at action video games today reveals an immersion race in which each new game tries to beat the other by attaining new heights of immediacy, interactivity, and narrativity. But, despite its recent acknowledgement in the industry and academia, narrativity has not always been the concern of game developers. Due mainly to technological constraints, but also to the cultural conception of action video games as a 'low' form of (only) ludic entertainment,[69] video games have not always attained high degrees of narrativity. Early arcade games were in a constant process of developing their hardware, mechanics, and interface[70] in order to determine potential players to insert the coin, while action video games developed for consoles and the PC up until the mid-1990s featured very few or no cutscenes at all, so they had to rely on extraludic elements such as packaging, or the game manual, in order to evoke the world of the video game or a sometimes already existing storyworld.[71] The backstory that would frame the events of the game was usually provided on a single page of the game manual, while the video game proper would be solely dedicated to the player's attempt to successfully defeat a never-ending number of adversaries. It seems that the action games of the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s evinced a low degree of narrativity, but lay significant stress on immediacy and interactivity.[72]

One example indicative of the importance of these last two aesthetic values is one of the advertisements for Midway's *Mortal Kombat* released for arcades in 1992 and for home consoles a year later. The advertisement warns players that the game is "so real, it hurts" and shows two boys in front of an arcade being pulled towards the screen by Kano and Raiden (two of the game's playable characters) who seem to be coming out of the machine. What can be deduced from this advertisement is that immersion is only a matter of immediacy ("so real") and interactivity ("it hurts"), while for the game's narrative potential there is little regard.[73] The discrepancy between the rapid progress of action games' immediacy and interactivity, on the one hand, and the slow advancement of their narrativity, on the other, can also be observed if we take into consideration the evolution of shooting games from the 2D Nintendo Entertainment System games to the 3D shooting games designed for the personal computer. In a video game such as Konami's highly popular side-scrolling 1988 *Super Contra,* the playable character can move and jump in only two directions (left and right), cannot retrace his steps to a previous off-screen position, and can only shoot in four directions: straight, diagonally, upwards, and downwards. The formal limitations of such shooting games would be overcome in 1992 with the release of id software's *Wolfenstein 3D.* In an attempt to remediate virtual reality, *Wolfenstein 3D* offers the player a first-person view (the player sees the world through the eyes of the playable character) and allows the players to freely move the visual perspective on the x-axis. Players are now visually immersed in a 3D game world, even though the models are not yet 3D proper.[74]

Despite the fact that *Wolfenstein 3D* has better graphics and a higher degree of interactivity than *Super Contra,* id software's 1992 first-person shooter does

not evince a higher degree of narrativity than Konami's 1988 2D shooter. Both games feature no cutscenes, no in-game text documents, or any other significant narrative interruptions, while the narrative frame of the events is rendered in one page of the game manual. In their brief narrative introductions, both game manuals shortly introduce the game world and represent a world-disrupting event that pushes the player to act. In the case of *Super Contra,* the two main characters are relaxing on a beach when the aliens that were defeated in the previous instalment decide to strike again. The task of the player is to control one of the protagonists and repel the alien invaders anew. In *Wolfenstein 3D,* William Blazkowicz is an Allies spy in the Second World War sent out to investigate Nazi research at Castle Hollehammer. During his mission, he is captured and interrogated through torture. The narrative introduction ends with Blazkowicz's escape from his cell, leaving his escape from the castle up to the player.

The tendencies observed in the two action games can be found in numerous others up until the mid-1990s. Games such as *Doom* (id software, 1993), *Quake* (id software, 1996), or other early instalments of the *Contra* franchise (Konami, 1987) evince the same small regard for narrativity, while each takes its own steps in order to enhance the realism of its graphics and the mechanics that govern the player's interaction with the game world. The evolution of video games in the 1980s and early and mid-1990s is indicative of a game design philosophy that regards immersion as the result of only immediacy and interactivity, where more immersion means the maximization of these two components.

After the mid-1990s, this dominant view on immersion would undergo an important change. The advancement witnessed by the technology of gaming platforms enabled action video games to better the realism of their representations and their game mechanics. If a first-person shooter such as *Wolfenstein 3D* used sprites instead of real 3D models and did not have a mechanic for looking up and down or jumping, in later first-person shooters such as *Quake* (id Sotfware, 1996), *Half-Life* (Valve, 1998), and many others, the use of 3D polygons and total freedom of movement (jumping, crouching, and looking across the x and y axes) became the norm.[75] Additionally, the fact that the player could use the movement of the mouse to control the movement of the player's sight in the game world was an important step towards symbiotic control. The semblance of the player's movement in the real world[76] and that of the playable character in the game world was a significant step forward in video games' attempt to achieve an ever greater immersion of the player because it now paved the way for a type of immersion that was not only visual and ludic but also more kinaesthetic. Yet, besides the predictable importance that the industry ascribed to immediacy and interactivity, game designers also started laying considerable emphasis on the narrativity of their action games in an attempt to increase the immersion of the player.

The new developments in video game graphics, storage, and processing capabilities enabled action video games to also create more realistic representations of the game world and, consequently, allowed them to pursue more narrative goals. With the popularization of the CD-ROM and the PlayStation, game developers

started having enough storage capacity at their disposal to include longer, more complex cutscenes.[77] These cutscenes used cinematic means to add narrativity to the gaming experience by creating more complex characters, dialogues, and game worlds, turning video games from a ludic into a ludo-narrative medium.[78] If up until the mid-1990s action games had very few and very brief cutscenes (the norm being the use of text and image to offer a diegetic background for the gameplay), by the end of the decade the number and length of the cutscenes of an average action video game witnessed an important increase with games such as *Metal Gear Solid* (Konami, 1998) reaching an amount of 4 hours of non-interactive cutscenes (out of 12 hours of game time).[79] By using conventional montage techniques and by exploring the aural capacities of video games through voice acting and soundtrack, video games created more complex characters (instead of the no-name speechless protagonists) and storyworlds, achieved narrative effects such as foreshadowing and flashbacks, and overall increased the narrative relevance of in-game actions which hitherto had had merely ludic relevance.

However, cinema was not the only medium which video games were very keen on imitating. Other media such as the diary, the email, letters, audio logs, VHS cassettes, and television were also often remediated, thus forming a network of remediations whose aim was to represent complex narratives similar to the ones represented by traditional analogue media. Games such as *Hitman: Codename 47* (IO Interactive, 2000) and *Max Payne* (Remedy Entertainment, 2001) are illustrative cases of how other media are incorporated by video games in order to achieve a high degree of narrativity and, as Bolter and Grusin argue, to borrow the cultural prestige of those media which are older.[80] In *Hitman: Codename 47,* the mission objectives are presented via email and are framed as part of a wide narrative arc which becomes clearer and clearer with each new file, letter, or diary entry that the playable character encounters throughout the missions. Without ignoring cutscenes altogether, *Max Payne* relies mostly on the remediation of comic strips coupled with a narratorial voiceover when representing the game's scripted narrative, all wrapped up in neo-noir aesthetics borrowed from cinema.

The freedom of movement now afforded by action video games meant that the player could also have a more active role in discovering the storyworld of the game. While some action games make use of linear non-interactive media to convey important diegetic information about the storyworld, games such as *Half-Life* do not always cancel the player's interactivity during the scripted narrative's bottlenecks. Unlike most action games that usually begin with a cutscene that functions as the story's exposition, *Half-Life* opts for an alternative way to introduce the storyworld to the player. In the first five minutes of the game, the playable character is on a train taking him to the centre of the Black Messa facility. The train ride is designed as a tour where a recorded voice on the speakers recounts the history of the facility, thus fulfilling the narrative function of setting the action. In the game, the player is allowed to move around the train in first-person view and be actively engaged in visually exploring the Black Messa Research Facility. Here, interactivity does not serve a ludic goal, but rather the

narrative goal of introducing the player to the storyworld of the video game. By looking out the window, the playable character does not receive any health points, bonuses, weapons, nor does he complete any challenge. The player's only reward is knowledge about the storyworld of the game.

Another example of how interactivity is used only for narrative purposes is id Software's *Doom 3* (2003). The player's first two objectives, to reach the sergeant's office and then to find a missing scientist in Delta Labs, are set before the gate of Hell is opened and the Mars station is overrun by demons. Before reaching the sergeant and the scientist, the player can freely interact with the characters he encounters on the station and obtain relevant diegetic information about the storyworld. After the world disrupting event (the unleashing of Hell), the playable character can also collect audio logs, and emails scattered around the station in order to further deepen her knowledge of the storyworld. The interaction with other characters and the retrieval of audio logs and emails rarely offers any relevant ludic information (although sometimes they have key codes to safes containing armour and ammunition). Their function is a narrative one, which indicates the growing importance that narrativity was already enjoying in action video games.

A more radical approach to the idea of using interactivity for narrative purposes can be found in Hideo Kojima's *Metal Gear Solid* (1998). Typically, the manipulation of the controller and the console of the PlayStation does not play a role in the player's interaction with the game world. Besides pressing the buttons, the PlayStation does not require that the player maintain the controller in a particular position, nor that it be connected to a particular socket. Unlike more recent platforms such as the Nintendo Switch, or the PlayStation VR, the physicality of the consoles is the limit of the interactivity afforded by the PlayStation, a limit which, as already explained, video games usually try to conceal. *Metal Gear Solid* challenges this technological limit and, when fighting Psycho Mantis, the player is required to unplug the controller and connect it to the other socket. In this case, the scope of the game's interactivity encompasses the physicality of the console, thus pushing the boundaries of the gaming platform's interactivity even further.[81] What is more, the rule which governs this radical kinaesthetic interaction is also narratively embedded. The game explains through the voice of Colonel Campbell that Psycho Mantis can read the player's mind, which is why he is able to avoid any attack coming from Solid Snake. After a few minutes of struggle, Campbell tells the player to connect her controller to another socket in order to evade Psycho Mantis' mind reading. In keeping with postmodern aesthetics,[82] during the fight against Psycho Mantis, *Metal Gear Solid* self-consciously includes the materiality of the medium into the narrative and implicitly reveals the hypermediacy of the game's interactive storyworld. In this game, interactivity exceeds its narrative goal and ends up serving a metanarrative one.

The gaming industry has made significant progress in augmenting the level of immersion afforded by video games by maximizing their levels of immediacy, interactivity, and narrativity. However, this progress has not been accompanied by a similar level of awareness with respect to the ideological implications of the

games' ludic and narrative content. Despite some notable exceptions such as *BioShock*,[83] *Spec Ops—The Line*,[84] and others, the industry has put relatively little effort into the interrogation of the cultural values that are reflected and enforced by AAA action games. In the next chapter, I focus on the political implications of the design of action games and show that immersion achieved through the maximization of immediacy, interactivity, and narrativity leads to a naturalization of dominant normative gender constructs.

Notes

1 The distinction is made in Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith and Susana Pajares Tosca, *Understanding Video Games. The Essential Introduction* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), 122–123 where the authors use realism to designate games' attempt to provide mimetic representations of a verisimilar, referential world and illusionism for the application of the aesthetic principles of photorealism to the representation of non-referential worlds and entities such as aliens or monsters.

2 Johan H. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens—A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London, Boston, MA and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949), 10.

3 For a more detailed explanation of the two concepts, see Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon, Introduction to *Storyworlds across Media*, eds. Marie Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 4.

4 For a discussion of the multiple theories of immersion in relation to the four coordinates (technological vs. psychological, and medium-free vs. medium-specific) see Gordon Calleja, "Immersion," in *In-Game. From Immersion to Incorporation* (London and Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), 18–30. See also Mark Grimshaw et al., "First-Person Shooters: Immersion and Attention," *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture* 5, no. 1 (2011): 29–44 for an overview of several immersion theories relevant for the action genre, in particular first-person shooters. Finally, see Salen and Zimmerman's rebuttal of the immersive ideal in Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play—Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 450–451.

5 The theoretical model of immersion proposed here is structured on the one put forth by Lara Ermi and Frans Mäyrä which identify three types of immersion: sensory, challenge-based, and imaginative immersion. Although these categories are similar to immediacy, interactivity, and narrativity, my account vastly elaborates on the components and is also informed by other works that focus on the individual components. Furthermore, while Ermi and Mäyrä suggest that there is more than one type of immersion, my suggestion is that we should regard immersion as the resultant of the three components. Rather than being three types of immersion, immediacy, interactivity, and narrativity complete and complement one another to form an ensemble that immerses the player. See Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyrä, "Fundamental Components of the Gameplay Experience: Analysing Immersion," in *Proceedings of DiGRA 2005 Conference: Changing Views—Worlds in Play*. http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/06276.41516.pdf; Jason Hawreliak, *Multimodal Semiotics and Rhetoric in Videogames* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 14.

6 David J. Bolter and Richard A. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 71.

7 Ernest Adams, *Fundamentals of Game Design*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, CA: New Riders, 2010), 25. Keith Burgen, *Clockwork Game Design* (New York and London: Focal Press, 2015), 99; Ermi et al., "Fundamental Components of the Gameplay Experience," 7; Casper Harteveld, *Triadic Game Design* (London: Springer, 2011), 208; Celia Hodent, *The Gamer's Brain: How Neuroscience and UX Can Impact Video Game*

Design (New York and London: CRC Press, 2018), 110; Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 99.

8 Oliver Grau, *Visual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, trans. Gloria Custance (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), 13.

9 Marco Caracciolo, "Those Insane Dream Sequences: Experientiality and Distorted Experience in Literature and Video Games," in *Storyworlds across Media*, eds. Marie Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 233–234; Mark J. P. Wolf, "Abstraction in the Video Game," in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, eds. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 52.

10 According to Daniel Black, interactivity plays a more important role than the verisimilitude of the visual representation. If it were not so, first-person shooters, which mimic natural eyesight, would be more immersive than third-person shooters, which is not the case, claims the author. See Daniel Black, "Why Can I See My Avatar? Embodied Visual Engagement in Third-Person Video Game," *Games and Culture* 12, no. 2 (2015): 196, doi: 10.1177/1555412015589175.

11 Hawreliak, *Multimodal Semiotics*, 88.

12 Ibid.

13 Weimin Toh, *A Multimodal Approach to Video Games and the Player Experience* (New York and London: Routledge, 2019), 80.

14 Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 126.

15 Adams, *Fundamentals of Game Design*, 26. On the relation between immersion and attention, see also Grimshaw et al., "First-Person Shooters," 34–36.

16 Ermi et al., "Fundamental Components of the Gameplay Experience," 7.

17 Katherine Isbister, *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016), 4.

18 Chris Solarski, *Interactive Stories and Video Game Art: A Storytelling Framework for Game Design* (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2017), 181. See also the comments made by Brown and Cairns regarding the manner in which controls difficult to learn prevent immersion in Emily Brown et al., "A Grounded Investigation of Immersion in Games," paper presented at *Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, Vienna, 2004, 2.

19 P-actions, or primitive actions, refer to the actual bodily movements of the player when manipulating the controller. In return, these p-actions trigger a particular response from the playable character. See Andreas Gregersen and Torben Grodal, "Embodiment and Interface," in *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*, eds. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), 70.

20 Hodent, *The Gamer's Brain*, 20.

21 Calleja, *From Immersion to Incorporation*, 63–65.

22 Gregersen et al., "Embodiment and Interface," 67.

23 Graeme Kirkpatrick, "Controller Hand, Screen: Aesthetic Form in the Computer Game," *Games and Culture* 4, no. 2 (2009): 130–131, doi: 10.1177/1555412008325484.

24 See Bogost's comment on the need for video games and procedural media in general to limit the number of afforded interactions, lest the process should become less persuasive. Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 43–44.

25 Andrei Nae, *Horror Video Games as Procedural Narratives: Extreme Colonial Encounters in the Digital Heart of Darkness* (Bucharest: Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti, 2019), 124. See also Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

26 For Eric Jenkins, the limits imposed by the game mechanics on what the player can do in the game world via the playable character/avatar are an element of hypermediacy.

"Virtual space allows games to [generate] a visible environment over which the player has some control, creating space that can feel real without being too real, that can be interacted without risking oneself, that can foster a pleasurable sense of agency within simulated conditions, in short, that can extend the self while still remaining other. Various games modulate this economy in differing ways, along a continuum between the completely hyperreal and the completely real. Indeed, each game modulates this economy in unique ways in an attempt to produce a pleasurable experience. Any experience that goes to one extreme or the other would cease being a game, either becoming an inaccessible spectacle only for passive consumption (pure hypermediacy) or becoming a slice of everyday, physical reality (pure immediacy). Successful games balance this economy in ways that articulate to both the pleasures of immediacy and hypermediacy, of control and conditions, and of intimacy and distance." Eric S. Jenkins, "Updating Narcissus, the Ur-myth of Media, for Digital Gaming," *Games and Culture* 11, no. 7–8 (2016): 660, doi: 10.1177/1555412015577734.

27 Adams, *Fundamentals of Game Design*, 26. Hodent, *The Gamer's Brain*, 157.
28 Jeremy Gibson, *Introduction to Game Design, Prototyping, and Development* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Addison Wesley, 2015), 53–55.
29 Marie-Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 14.
30 Ryan, *Avatars*, 13.
31 Henry Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, eds. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 121.
32 Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," 123.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 124.
35 Ibid., 126.
36 Ibid., 128.
37 Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith, Susana Pajares Tosca, *Understanding Video Games. The Essential Introduction* (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), 181.
38 See the concept of immersive fallacy proposed in Katie Salen et al., *Rules of Play*, 453.
39 The contention with video games' non-linearity taken up by traditional narratology is to some extent similar to the debate surrounding the question whether drama is narrative. For an account of the diegetic character of drama, see Patrick Colm Hogan, "Emplotting a Storyworld in Drama. Selection, Time, and Construal in the Discourse of *Hamlet*," in *Storyworlds across Media*, eds. Marie Laure Ryan and Jan-Noel Thon (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 50–66.
40 Markku Eskelinen, "The Gaming Situation," *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001), http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen; Jesper Juul "Games Telling Stories?" *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2001), http://gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts/. For an overview of the ludology-narratology debate, see Souvik Mukherjee, *Video Games and Storytelling: Reading Games and Playing Books* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan: 2015), 5–7.
41 An example of how the events represented and simulated by video games can be part of a wider transmedia storyworld is provided by Henry Jenkins in his analysis of the *Matrix* storyworld. See Henry Jenkins, "Searching for the Origami Unicorn: The Matrix and Transmedia Storytelling," in *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006), 93–130.
42 David Herman, *Basic Elements of Narrative* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 3.
43 Daniela Sorea, *Language and Social Schemata: Gender Representations in British Magazines* (Bucharest: Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti, 2006), 40–41.
44 Herman, *Basic Elements*, 15.
45 Since its emergence in the 1990s, the second wave of cognitive narrative theory has proposed multiple prototypical definitions of narrative. For a comparison with other

such definitions and an application of Herman's model to a linear narrative medium such as the cinema, see the chapter "From Narrative to Narrativity" in Nae, *Horror Video Games as Procedural Narratives*.

46 Herman, *Basic Elements*, 9.
47 Ryan, *Avatars*, 37.
48 Ibid., 75.
49 Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 143–145.
50 Herman, *Basic Elements*, 105; Ryan, *Avatars*, 7.
51 Jan Van Looy, "Virtual Recentering: Computer Games and Possible Worlds Theory," *Image and Narrative* 12, ed. Gray Kochhar-Lindgren (2005).
52 Van Looy claims the exact opposite, namely that successful recentering in video games leads to a coalescence of the player and playable character. This is allegedly different from recentering in linear fiction like the novel where there is a referential break between the narratee and the actual reader. As already explained, such a conception oversimplifies the complex player-playable character relation and can be construed as what Salen and Zimmerman refer to as the immersive fallacy. See Van Looy, "Virtual Recentering;" Salen et al., *Rules of Play*, 450–451.
53 See Marie-Laure Ryan, *Possible Worlds, Artificial, Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991).
54 Van Looy, "Virtual Recentering."
55 Herman, *Basic Elements*, 137; Marco Caracciolo, *The Experientiality of Narrative* (Berlin and Boston, MA: Walter de Gruyter, 2014), 232.
56 In an earlier work discussing gender identification, Esther MacCallum-Stewart argued that playing as female characters does not imply a process of identification. In fighting games, male players would often choose female characters for tactical advantage, thus precluding any transgendering of identity. By the time action-adventure games featuring female protagonists such as *Tomb Raider* (Core Design, 1996) started to appear, male players had already become accustomed to playing as female characters without experiencing a contestation of the positive masculine gender construct. Moreover, such games also made sure to code the actions of the playable character masculine, thus maintaining heroic agency exclusively within the ambit of patriarchy. See Esther MacCallum-Stewart, "Real Boys Carry Girly Epics: Normalising Gender Bending in Online Games," *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture* 2, no. 1 (2008): 27–40, https://www.eludamos.org/index.php/eludamos/article/view/vol2no1-5/51; Jeffrey A. Brown, *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 111.
57 Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 26.
58 Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, 74, 80, 96, 106, 114–115, 131, 157–161, 172–173. The discussion of identification occurs in the context of the book's more general goal of critiquing the manner in which the gaming industry addresses the problem of diversity in video games.
59 Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, 123.
60 Shaw does concede that players tend to be more attached to the avatars they create, but this is different from the type of identification that in this book is regarded as immersive. Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, 165.
61 Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, 123. It should also be noted that, according to Eric Jenkins, there is no uniform level of self-referentiality/identification throughout the entire unfolding of a game since games play with the boundary between self and other. Shaw herself has revealed that more diegetically relevant moments (which, it must be stressed, need not be non-interactive) tend to prompt a higher level of identification than the more diegetically thin parts of gameplay. See Eric S. Jenkins, "Updating Narcissus," 660. Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, 158–159.
62 Mukherjee, *Video Games and Storytelling*, 13.

63 According to Julie Sanders, an appropriation is an adaptation that recontextualizes the content of the source text, applies it to different generic conventions, and often does not acknowledge its status as an adaptation. Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 26.
64 Soraya Murray, *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2018), 122.
65 Nae, *Horror Video Games as Procedural Narratives*, 227.
66 A critical adaptation is an adaptation that openly interrogates the adaptive value of the source text. Timothy Corrigan, "Emerging from Converging Cultures: Circulation, Adaptation, and Value," in *The Politics of Adaptation: Media Convergence and Ideology*, eds. Dan Hassler-Forest and Pascal Nicklas (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 59.
67 Andrei Nae, "Miranda Fights Back: Appropriating Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in Rockstar's Stealth Survival Horror *Manhunt 2* (2008)," in *Shakespeare 400 in Romania. Papers Commemorating the 400th Anniversary of William Shakespeare's Death*, eds. Mădălina Nicolaescu, Oana-Alis Zaharia and Andrei Nae (Bucharest: Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti, 2017), 373.
68 For an account of how video games communicate narrative meaning, see Andrei Nae, "The Narrative Communication Diagram Adapted for Video Games," in *Horror Video Games as Procedural Narratives: Extreme Colonial Encounters in the Digital Heart of Darkness* (Bucharest: Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti, 2019), 97–112.
69 For an overview of video games' relation to high art, see Grant Tavinor, "Videogames," in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, eds. Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes, 3rd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 565–574.
70 see Mark J.P. Wolf, "Arcade games," in *Encyclopedia of Video Games. The Culture, Technology, and the Art of Gaming*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2012), 28–34
71 Wolf, "*Abstraction in Video Games*," 59.
72 The ensuing discussion on the low level of narrativity evinced by the action games released until the latter half of the 1990s does not include the case of interactive movies which, if considered on an equal footing to other games, would contradict the tendency of action games to focus merely on immediacy and interactivity to the detriment of narrativity. By making use of the enhanced storage capacity of laserdisc in the 1980s and CDs in the 1990s, interactive movies feature extensive pre-rendered animated or filmed cutscenes in order to represent a branching narrative. Player input is minimal and revolves around timing the pressing of buttons in order to determine the selection of one branch of narrative or the other. Because of their emphasis on cinematic representation and the downplaying of interaction, interactive movies are not regarded as prototypical games. See Bernard Perron, "Genre Profile: Interactive Movies," in *Video Game Explosion. A History from Pong to PlayStation and Beyond*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008), 127–128; Mark J. P. Wolf, "Laserdisc Games," in *Video Game Explosion. A History from Pong to PlayStation and Beyond*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008), 99–102; Andrei Nae, "Remediation," in *Encyclopedia of Video Games: The Culture, Technology, and Art of Gaming*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf, 2nd ed. (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2021), 836–840.
73 In fact, the advertisement does not do justice to *Mortal Kombat*'s level of narrativity. The game uses internal and external heteromedial means (text in the game-rendered biographies of characters and physical tie-in comic books) to offer a diegetic background to the series of combats simulated by the game. At the same time, one must consider that the advertisement is for the arcade version of the game, which implies a different social protocol that is less compatible with storytelling than playing at home on the console.
74 Jo Bryce and Jason Rutter, "Spectacle of the Deathmatch: Character and Narrative in First-Person Shooters," in *ScreenPlay: Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces*, eds. Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (London and New York: Wallflower Press), 68.

75 For additional innovations of the *Doom* and *Quake* series in 1990s, see Bryce et al., "Spectacle of the Deathmatch," 69–72.
76 In Gordon Calleja's view, one component of immersion is that of kinaesthetic involvement, which he defines as "all modes of avatar or game piece control in virtual environments, ranging from learning controls to the fluency of internalized movement." In his discussion of kinaesthetic involvement, he distinguishes two control modes: symbolic control and symbiotic control. The former mode implies no semblance between the player's p-actions and the playable character's in-game actions, while the latter refers to that type of control where the p-actions map the playable character's movement in the game world. Evidently, it is the symbiotic control mode that is seen as more immersive. Calleja, *From Immersion to Incorporation*, 43, 63.
77 Bryce et al., "Spectacle of the Deathmatch," 66.
78 As a result of the CD-ROM and further advancements in rendering technology, game developers started remediating cinema either by using more conventional cinematic means, i.e. real actors on real sets or in front of the green screen, or by employing game specific means, i.e. the rendering capabilities of the game engine. The former are called live-action cutscenes, while the latter are named pre-rendered cutscenes. With the further advancement of rendering technology, game developers have started to render cutscenes live in order to avoid unnatural cuts between gameplay and the non-interactive cinematic moments. The use of real time cutscenes eventually paved the way for interactive cutscenes, also known as quick time events, in which the player has to correctly time pushing different buttons or combinations in order to beat a particular adversary. See Alexis Blanchet, "Cutscenes," in *Encyclopedia of Video Games. The Culture, Technology, and the Art of Gaming*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2012), 151–154; Rune Klevjer, "Cutscene," in *The Routledge Companion to Video Games*, eds. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 301–304.
79 "How long is Metal Gear Solid (1998)?" How long to beat, accessed April 15, 2020. https://howlongtobeat.com/game?id=5908.
80 Bolter et al., *Remediation*, 21.
81 According to Steven Conway, such game design choices amount to an expansion of the magic circle which goes beyond the screen, speakers, and controller. See Steven Conway, "A Circular Wall? Reformulating the Fourth Wall for Videogames," *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds* 2, no. 2 (2010): 147, doi: 10.1386/jgvw.2.2.145_1
82 According to Linda Hutcheon, postmodernism rejects modern realist aesthetics in a favour of a self-reflexive comment on the traditional means of achieving realism. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), x, 20.
83 See Jessica Aldred et al., "A Man Chooses, A Slave Obeys: BioShock and the Dystopian Logic of Convergence," *Games and Culture* 6, no. 5 (2011): 479–496, doi: 10.1177/1555412011402674.
84 See Soraya Muray, *On Video Games*, 121–130.

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2 The gender politics of immersion

The player as enactor of gender

Video games are not politically neutral artefacts. Like other narrative media such as novels, films, or comic books, video games entertain a complex dialogue with many of the values, norms, and practices fostered by the culture they belong to. Action video games usually focus on the experience of one or more human or human-like characters who are actively engaged in altering the state of their storyworld. The construction of these storyworlds taps into our cultural fears and fantasies[1] and stages a conflict between sameness and otherness which usually results in the former's triumph. In many games, sameness and otherness are predicated on gender identity, which enmeshes video games in the cultural construction of gender.[2] The choice to adopt a certain ideological position concerning gender must not always be regarded as a conscious game design choice.[3] Actually, most such choices are implicit in the sense that, although many game designers may create a game with a particular political purpose in mind, they often rely on ready-made conceptions of gender which they may not be aware of or do not interrogate.

While these political aspects apply transmedially, because video games feature narrative affordances different from the ones of novels, comic books, or films, understanding the gender politics of video games calls for an understanding of their particular means of expression. As I have already pointed out, video games oscillate between representation and simulation, with the latter dominating the unfolding of the game. On the one hand, video games imitate traditional linear media by reproducing pre-rendered aural, visual, or even textual content, while, on the other hand, games employ their game engine to produce/render an audio-visual simulation in accordance with the rules inscribed in its code and the player's input, which is itself governed by rules predetermined by the game designer.

Due to the predominantly simulational nature of video games, Ian Bogost claims that the main means of expression of a video game is neither sound, nor image, but rather process.[4] For example, a process such as shooting can be described in a novel through language via a sequential verbal representation of the events: he took out his gun, aimed, and pulled the trigger. In a comic book, this might be done by chronologically displaying a series of panels that represent the

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three stages of the shooting process that I have just described verbally. Similarly, in a more continuous manner, a film might do the same by showing an actor perform the process of shooting. A video game, on the other hand, will provide a computational process that will render a representation of the process of shooting. This representation will most likely share the semiotic codes of other visual media[5] and might even employ some of their conventions,[6] but in its deep structure procedural representation, also referred to as simulation, is fundamentally different.

Ian Bogost goes on to separate the process into several constitutive elements which he calls unit operations,[7] or procedural figures if we are dealing with unit operations which are so common that they have become standard.[8] To continue the example given above, in a process that simulates shooting there will be a procedural figure for pulling the gun out, one for aiming, and one for firing. Naturally, the game engine needs to have one or more rules inscribed in its code that allow the player to interactively perform each individual figure. The rules that govern the abilities of the playable character which the player can activate with her controller are called core mechanics.[9] Figure 2.1 illustrates the process behind the audiovisual representation of shooting and, consequently, how video games differ from other narrative media that also employ sound and image.

At their heart, games are computational processes which allow players to enact a multitude of physical or cultural processes.[10] Their ability to interactively simulate processes rather than represent them in a predetermined sequence makes video games particularly effective in constructing gendered social subjects. According to Judith Butler, gender identity is culturally constructed, since gender is not a pre-existing fixed ahistorical category that can be expressed through language, images, and other modes of representation such as computational processes.[11] On the contrary, gender is itself constituted through performative expression in various modes of representation.[12] The performativity of gender identity implies that procedural media occupy a privileged position in the social construction of gender since, unlike linear media, they turn passive recipients of expressions of gender into enactors of gender.

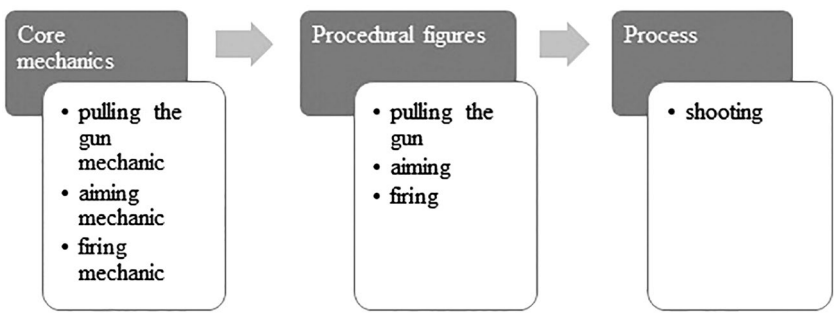

Figure 2.1 Process of shooting © Andrei Nae.

In proposing the concept enactor of gender, I also rely on Derek Burrill's analysis of video games as a technology of gender identity whose simulational content coerces the players of mainstream action games to play out a reckless, violent, ruthless, adolescent version of masculinity which, drawing on Donna Haraway,[13] he calls hypermasculinity.[14] In claiming this, I do not assume that there is a natural process of identification occurring between the playable character and the player as a result of the inherent qualities of the medium. This is neither the case for the main target audience consisting of heterosexual cisgender white middle-class young males nor for members of marginal groups who have historically been marginalized by video games culture, to refer back to Adrienne Shaw's findings.[15] What video games do offer is an economy of self-referentiality and identification.[16] Their design does not naturally determine the player to adopt one type of attitude as a result of the game design, but rather meaning can be differently actualized by different players in different contexts. As Stuart Hall argued, the decoding of the messages delivered by media products does not entertain a relation of perfect symmetry to the process of encoding.[17] Players with different ideological affiliations than those of the game may very well negotiate the meaning engendered by the game or oppose it altogether. Even those players that adhere to the ideological position of the game will fail to acknowledge the entire implied message of the game, despite not challenging the legitimacy of its procedural rhetoric.

At the same time, one cannot discard the fact that video games have a particular rhetoric embedded within their interactive design and that there is a rhetorical effect that games pursue vis-à-vis gender. Because the player has no other choice but to enact the playable character's gender identity in the terms determined by the programme, action-adventure video games procedurally define the space of possibility in terms of gender identity and gender performance.[18] Moreover, the rhetorical purpose of mainstream action-adventure games is to convince the player that her actions are not determined to a large extent by the architecture, the AI, and the gaming platform, but rather that they are the result of her own agency.[19] In order to foster the illusion of anthropocentric player agency, video games attempt to maximize the immersion of the player and in doing so persuade the player thereof that her enaction of gender is a consequence of her own knowledge, expectations, and desire concerning gender identity. By means of this ideological operation, action-adventure games achieve two goals. First, they shape our knowledge of potential identities, reify gender, and discursively, i.e. procedurally, establish which identities are socially acceptable and which are not.[20] Secondly, these games interpellate[21] the player as a gendered subject.[22] Interpellation does not presuppose a direct one to one, player to playable character identification process; instead it refers to the process whereby the player is compelled to adopt the body of knowledge concerning gender implied in the game (what Michel Foucault would call discourse)[23] as her own and imaginatively[24] assumes a gender identity provided by the said discourse.[25]

In the process of interpellation, a vital role in the player's submission to gender norms is fulfilled by the implied player. Gerald Farca defines the implied

player as an "affordance and appeal structure of the game which holds all the preconditions necessary for the game to 'exercise its effect'."[26] In other words, the implied player is the entity whose decoding of the game's procedural rhetoric is fully symmetrical to its encoding, to refer back to Stuart. Although no such player actually exists, the implied player functions as an inferred, i.e. implied (hence the name), ethical and ideological benchmark that players relate to when assigning meaning to the material signs emitted by the video game.[27] In action games, the role of the implied player is that of imposing white male supremacy as the norm for the game's reception.[28] The implied player is expected to make sure that during virtual recentering the player construes the mentally constructed storyworld through the ideological spectacles of patriarchy. (Interpellation through virtual recentering is, of course, most successful when the playable character, from whose vantage point the player interprets the storyworld, is ideologically co-extensive with white male supremacy. When this is not the case, there is the potential for white male supremacy to be challenged, as subsequent sections of this chapter, as well as future chapters of this book will show.)

The procedural rhetoric of mainstream action games strives to naturalize the superiority of white cisgender heterosexual masculinity, but this superiority is unstable and must be constantly reaffirmed through violence as a form of gender performance. The illusion of freedom of action fostered by mainstream games is, in fact, a freedom of violence against other white heterosexual males, the gender/racial/sexual other, and the white heterosexual male self.[29] As the next section shows, mainstream action video games are a safe haven for a violent performance of masculinity unparalleled by any other medium,[30] which calls for a deconstruction of the agent of this hyperviolence, namely the positive/normative construct of white heterosexual masculinity.

Simulating hypermasculinity in action games

The representation and simulation of gender have always been central to action video games even in the case of early platforms such as the Atari 2600, which, due to its limitations, was rather incapable of rendering mimetic gendered anthropomorphic characters. Judging by their visual representation, Mark J. P. Wolf distinguishes two types of playable characters featured in early video games: implied and surrogate-based playable characters. The former category refers to characters which are not represented on-screen and whose presence is deducted from the on-screen result of the player's actions and the change in point of view, while surrogate-based playable characters do benefit from an on-screen visual representation. Player surrogates can themselves be of two types, either function-based (tanks, spaceships, cars, etc.) or anthropomorphic.[31] Action games lacking anthropomorphic surrogate playable characters would gender their content through gameplay and with the help of extraludic elements. Games featuring implied playable characters such as *Missile Command* (Atari, 1980), or featuring function-based player surrogates, such as *Combat* (Atari, 1977), simulate military operations[32] which are regarded as primarily masculine activities.

Moreover, in *Missile Command* (Atari, 1980), for instance, the player can infer the male gender of the character with the help of the game's cover which features a mimetically represented white man operating a missile.[33]

The on-screen presence of anthropomorphic characters made the gendering of the game's content easier, yet their abstract representation also required heteromedial visual elements in order to associate the schematic, non-mimetic entities with male or female characters.[34] Early games would offer the protagonist a gendered name, display a mimetic representation of the male protagonist on the cover of the cartridge and inside the game manual, and even offer an introductory narrative text that clarified the associations between the simple geometric forms on the screen and the elements populating the storyworld. In the case of Atari 2600's iconic game, *Pac-Man* (Namco, 1980), the playable entity is represented by a small yellow circle which could not be associated with any gender, had it not been for the name of the game. "Pac-man" not only identifies the gaping yellow circle with masculinity but also taps into the player's knowledge of superhero comic books and their conservative gender politics which privileges masculinity.[35] In the case of games such as *Indiana Jones: Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Atari, 1982), the cover of the cartridge mimetically represents the Indiana Jones of the movie personified by Harrison Ford, thus associating the androgynous humanoid playable entity with the male protagonist of the film. The game manual further strengthens the bond between the playable entity and Indiana Jones through an introductory second-person narrative that directly addresses the player as if he were the playable character.

Atari 2600's limited graphic affordances were topped by the ones of the Nintendo Entertainment System which rose to prominence in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Although still 2D, the visual representations/simulations of the characters and locations were considerably more mimetic. These games could now gender their characters not only with the help of extra-ludic elements such as the cover and game manual but also by means of the in-game representations of characters. The unbalanced gender power relations of the Atari 2600 and early arcade games were maintained in the sense that, while women were usually portrayed as passive victims, men were playable characters that eventually saved the damsel in distress.[36] What is more, in order to achieve this goal, male playable characters had to singlehandedly kill off a multitude of enemies representing various forms of otherness, thus setting white masculinity as the norm.[37]

Since the 1970s and 1980s the evolution of gaming platforms has progressively facilitated the gendering of its characters and has instituted white heterosexual supremacy as the norm. The AAA action games industry has produced a multitude of male characters who save the day by reinforcing the status quo. Some of these characters are silent nameless protagonists, such as the iconic 'doom guy' of the first four *Doom* games, while other protagonists have more complex identities and are at the heart of long-lasting game franchises, such as Kratos in the *God of War* series (SIE Santa Monica, 2005–2018), Solid Snake/Big Boss in the *Metal Gear* series (Kojima, 1987–2015), the prince in the *Prince of Persia. The Sands of Time* series (Ubisoft, 2003–2010), Dante in the *Devil*

May Cry series (Capcom, 2001–2020), Max Payne in the eponymous trilogy (Remedy Entertainment, 2003–2011; Rockstar, 2012), 47 in the *Hitman* series (IO Interactive, 2000–2016), Nathan Drake in the Uncharted series (Naughty Dog, 2007–2017), and others.[38] All these mimetically represented white male characters feature a set of core mechanics that allow them to perform a series of unnatural actions such as the killing of an insurmountable number of foes, surviving physical traumas that would normally lead to one's instant death, daredevil jumps that defy the laws of physics, or instant healing. The unnaturalness of these procedural figures of white masculinity would normally raise awareness with respect to the artificiality of the simulation and, consequently, undermine the ideology of white heterosexual male supremacy. However, with the help of the means of immersion illustrated in the previous chapter, video games manage to naturalize these procedural figures and the ideology inscribed within the process of simulating white masculinity.

Mainstream action games seem to collude with what Kaja Silverman calls the dominant fiction, which she defines as the "ideological reality through which we 'ideally' live both the symbolic order and the mode of production"[39] and which rests on the totality of images and narratives that define patriarchal gender categories.[40] In coining the concept of dominant fiction to discuss normative masculinity, Silverman adopts a set of Lacanian assumptions regarding subject formation according to which "lack of being is the irreducible condition of subjectivity"[41] and psychic formation is the corollary process whereby the lack is filled with a culturally constructed subjectivity.[42] In the case of men, the dominant fiction compensates for their lack by equating the anatomical penis with the phallus, a concept used in post-structuralism and Lacanian psychoanalysis to refer to positive heterosexual masculinity. In her book *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, Silverman shows how the aesthetics of realism is employed by the cinema in order to create the illusion of a natural link between the penis and the phallus, thus establishing phallic masculinity as the norm.

By the same token, immersion in mainstream video games aims to attain a similar ideological result.[43] As already pointed out, the history of action games is, to a great extent, a history of increasing the player's immersion in the game world. This aim is achieved through the increase in the level of audio-visual mimeticism (immediacy), the complexity of the mechanics and the symbiotic nature of the controls (interactivity), and, beginning with the mid-1990s, through the creation of complex and consistent storyworlds (narrativity). The illusion of naturality of the otherwise unnatural actions performed in games is firstly achieved by means of a mimetic representation of the male protagonist. The use of motion capture to make the movement of the 3D polygons look natural, the antialiasing effect that makes curves look smooth and continuous, the shader effects and bump mapping that make the surfaces of the character seem rough and irregular, as well as other technologies, make the visual representation of characters seem real and create an assumption of realness for the actions of the character.

Secondly, the character can be manipulated into performing a variety of actions that resemble some of our basic physical capacities. These male characters

can walk, run, jump, crawl, stand, sit, and can also interact with their environments in a limited number of ways. While all these core mechanics merely reflect the natural capabilities of the human body, the protagonists of action games also feature other mechanics that thwart our notion of the human body. For example, playable characters can have a number of health points that enable them to survive the impact of a grenade explosion. In order to make such unnatural capacities seem natural, video games use a whole array of mechanics in order to conceal their artificiality. For instance, the now low health bar will make the playable character move more slowly and grunt in pain as he moves. Additionally, the grenade explosion will also affect the environment by causing the windows of the room to break, creating fire and smoke, and permanently marking the place where the grenade exploded. The naturalization of the core mechanics of hypermasculinity is also aided by a process of narrativization which makes these mechanics consistent with the storyworld. To continue the example with surviving a grenade explosion in one piece, the game's storyworld might present the male playable character as the product of a genetic experiment that had provided him with superhuman strength.

The mimetic representation, the realistic game mechanics, and the consistency of the playable character's core mechanics with the game's storyworld work together to create a seamless simulation of masculinity. Yet, as already mentioned, video games are not politically neutral cultural products. Like all forms of art and entertainment, they carry an ideological load that either reinforces or contests existing identitary cultural constructs which entail a particular social hierarchy. The effectiveness of video games' ideology consists in their capacity to conceal their ideology and render it implicit. In the case of action games, their seamlessness conceals their gender politics and naturalizes the social hierarchy that places the white heterosexual man at its peak.

Simulating gender otherness in action games

The prominent position that masculinity occupies in the action genre has led to the marginalization of women and gender minorities.[44] The number of female playable characters is significantly lower than the one of their male counterparts,[45] and those that do manage to make the cover of an action game have to compensate for their ludic and narrative agency either by satisfying the male gaze or by submitting themselves to some form of patriarchal authority.[46] Queer identities are sometimes present as non-playable characters, but as playable characters, they are very few in number. The *Tomb Raider* (Core Design, 1996–2003; Crystal Dynamics 2006–2018) video game franchise is a good example of the kinds of political negotiations that gender otherness, in this case, femininity, has to engage in so as to become central to an action video game.

In the early instalments of the game, Lara Croft, the series' protagonist, is an overeroticized character who stands out due to her unnaturally oversized breasts and thin waist. The size and form of her body are also stressed by the revealing clothes that she wears, namely a tank top and shorts.[47] Players can choose

different outfits for the playable character, but the outfits that are offered as a ludic reward only play up the fetishism of the game's treatment of Lara Croft. Ever since the franchise's reboot in 2013, the games have toned down the fetishism of their female protagonist.[48] Although Lara Croft still abides by patriarchal beauty norms, her body has a more natural proportion, while her outfits are less revealing and more in tune with the type of activities the character is involved in during the game. In addition to this, the character is now a more diegetically round one, who is more likely to trigger identification along the lines of Adrienne Shaw's "identification with" rather than be othered by means of fetishization.[49] Nevertheless, patriarchy is still imposed through the subjugation of Lara Croft to her father's will and the heteronormative male gaze that governs the player-playable character relationship.

As I argue at greater length elsewhere,[50] *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamic, 2013) and *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics, 2016), the first two games of the franchise's reboot, reveal Lara Croft's evolution from a rebellious daughter to a submissive one. The beginning of *Tomb Raider* presents a Lara Croft that has conflicting feelings towards her dead father. Although she is indebted to him for her knowledge and passion for archaeology, she blames him for being too obsessed with his work on the supernatural and for neglecting her. As a result, she refuses to continue her father's research and embarks on expeditions of her own. By the end of the game, she realizes that her father had been right all along and claims: "I've been so blind, so naive. For years I resented my father, doubted him like the rest. But he was right about so much."[51] In the sequel, *Rise of the Tomb Raider,* Lara Croft takes up her father's search for a mysterious artefact, called the divine source and sets out on an expedition to obtain it. Throughout the two games, Lara Croft's ludic and narrative agency is sanctioned by figures of patriarchal authority.[52] The character's core mechanics (dubbed hunting and survival skills in the game) are narratively framed as the result of the training provided by Roth, one of her father's friends, while her search for ancient artefacts is a continuation of her father's interests and activities. Consequently, Lara Croft's agency in the storyworld of the video game is regulated by patriarchal authority and fails to challenge the gender power relations of the action genre.

Furthermore, as far as the player's relation to Lara Croft is concerned, the game's third-person view places the player in an ambivalent predator/protector position which, on the one hand, grants him a privileged visual perspective onto the female playable character's body, yet, on the other hand, assigns him the role of protecting Lara from the dangers surrounding her. These power relations between the implied male player and the game's female protagonist are supported by Lara Croft's helplessness in the game's early stages.[53] Although far from the norms of survival horror video games, Lara Croft's monologues, her recurrent exclamations of physical pain, her wounded condition simulated by the game when hobbling up a long valley early in the 2013 game, as well as the game's interface constantly reminding the player to scavenge for healing resources, imply that the female protagonist is vulnerable and in need of being saved. Considering all the above, it would seem the game's procedural rhetoric is tributary to patriarchal

conceptions of femininity and coerces the implied male player to enact a regulation of femininity which reifies the unbalanced power relations between the two genders. This way, the potential to challenge male supremacy consisting in having a female take up a traditionally male role is precluded and the status quo confirmed.[54]

The rhetorical strategies employed by the *Tomb Raider* games briefly discussed in this section are recurrently used in many action games with protagonists who represent subaltern groups. For example, in *Uncharted: The Lost Legacy* (Naughty Dogg, 2017), the player assumes control of Chloe Frazer, a female explorer of Indian origin. In addition to framing her agency as an enactment of patriarchal desire and imposing a male predator/protector gaze, *Uncharted: The Lost Legacy* also prevents any contestation of colonial power relations. Chloe Frazer's actions are those of an indigenous female Indiana Jones whose discovery of uncharted territories is fully inscribed within orientalist clichés and amounts to a colonial mastery of space. For the implied Western male player, Frazer fulfils the role of the indigenous guide who is fully subjected to the colonial gaze.

The recently released *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dogg, 2020) calls for a similar analysis. The developer is indeed to be praised for giving the central role in a much-anticipated video game to a young lesbian but one must also consider to what extent the game's scripted and emergent narratives challenge the patriarchal norms of the action genre, a task which is difficult (but not impossible) to achieve given the action video game's ideological assumptions.

The brief overview of the action genre provided so far reveals the fact that action games are strongly linked to patriarchy and boyhood and that, from their very beginnings, action games have been a privileged locus for the enactment of hypermasculinity. In the mid-1990s this dominant trend began to be challenged from within by a type of action games that undermined the patriarchal framework within which the action genre was (and still is) inscribed. These games were called survival horror and they offered a different approach to game design that contested the sexist assumptions of AAA action games, as the next section will show.

Classical survival horror—immersion via narrative compensation

As mentioned earlier, the history of action video games can also be regarded as a history of the means used to constantly increase the immersion of the player by maximizing immediacy, interactivity, and, beginning with the latter part of the 1990s, narrativity. Although never dismissed, this game design philosophy gained an important rival in the mid-1990s: survival horror. In the second part of this book, I look at the immersive strategies employed in classical survival horror video games and analyze them in relation to the dominant game design philosophy of the action genre. The aim of the second part is to show that the survival horror video games of the classical era (1992–2004)[55] do not seek to immerse players by giving them more immediacy and interactivity than their

predecessors. On the contrary, games such as *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996) impose very strict limits on interaction with the game world, offer a very cumbersome and unstable control over the playable character,[56] and feature a hypermedial use of cinematic language to represent the game world.[57] In order to compensate for these self-imposed limitations in terms of immediacy and interactivity, classical survival horror video games evince a high degree of narrativity which exceeds the narrative expectations of a genre which even by the mid-1990s had been enjoyed mostly for its ludic qualities.[58] I will be using the concept of narrative compensation to refer to the process whereby classical survival horror games maintain high levels of immersion by overemphasizing narrativity.

In this book, I will be using the term "classical survival horror" to make reference to those games that emulate the formula patented by *Resident Evil*. Consequently, classical survival horror games are characterized by the extensive use of cinematic language in the sense that they use cuts and angles which are rather atypical for action games[59] and which make navigation in the game world difficult[60] as they hide important ludic and diegetic objects[61] and thwart the sense of progression.[62] Additionally, these games have a minimal or no heads-up display, but feature an inventory which pauses game time upon activation. As far as combat is concerned, usually the games feature inefficient fighting mechanics which, coupled with the scarcity of resources, often coerce the player to avoid adversaries rather than confront them.[63] Classical survival horror games lay just as much stress on exploration as they do on fighting, which is why the game allows the player to investigate many objects in the game world. By pressing the 'interaction' button when next to an object, a game-time pausing caption will appear that indirectly shows the ludic relevance of that object.

This alternative immersion strategy that complicates gameplay, fragments representation, but overemphasizes narrativity in order to assure an immersive gameplay[64] is not without diegetic and, consequently, political relevance. Reflecting on the condition of AAA action video games in comparison to other mainstream narrative media, Soraya Murray deplores the fact that "with little exception, mainstream games present a vision of the world that is devoid of postmodern, post-structural, post-colonial, feminist, or any other cultural intervention."[65] The chapters of this book, especially those featured in the second part, focus on games that fall under what Soraya Murray deems the "exception." In keeping with Ryan's distinction between the scripted narrative and the emergent narrative, I argue that both the non-interactive narrative elements and the medium-specific ludic elements of classical survival horror games work together to create narratives that challenge the dominant gender roles of the action genre in a way reminiscent of a postmodern and/or feminist critique.[66] These games reject or undermine the naturalized image of the hyperpotent male protagonist or the overeroticized action girl who always saves the day, and instead they raise awareness with respect to the artificiality of gender roles.[67] The games discussed in the second part of this book achieve this in two ways: they deconstruct conventional representations and simulations of gender identity or they give a central position to the simulation of non-phallic masculinity.

The first strategy used to challenge the gender conventions of the action genre is to lay bare the artificiality of such constructs. Instead of narrativizing gameplay, some classical survival horror games immerse players in an interactive storyworld that repeatedly stresses the unnaturality of the gameplay experience and refutes the claim to veracity of their storyworlds and, implicitly, of the conventional gender constructs which populate them. An important rhetorical device in achieving this is modal irony, which is defined by Jason Hawreliak as the felicitous use of modal dissonance.[68] (Modal dissonance designates those cases when two or more modes of one medium convey non-complementary or opposing meanings.)[69] Modal irony prompts players to adopt a metanarrative attitude,[70] which is why it can serve classical survival horror games' purpose of highlighting the artificiality of gender constructs.

This strategy is best illustrated by the game *Resident Evil* which is discussed in Chapter 3, "Welcome to the Survival Horror: the Deconstruction of Gender in Resident Evil." *Resident Evil* raises the expectations of a conventional action game, only to systematically subvert the conventions of the genre by means of multiple forms of irony. The game subverts stereotypical representations of masculinity and femininity by allowing the player to assume control of characters who, although sharing the appearance of hyperpotent protagonists, are procedurally rendered weak, vulnerable, and only barely capable of prevailing.

The second strategy is similar to the one proposed by Judith Halberstam and D. Fox Harrell who point out that one way in which to decentre ideological gender knowledge is to contextualize it and shed light upon the alternative ways of being which patriarchy suppresses.[71] Some of the games discussed in this book adopt this strategy and represent and simulate realistic experiences of masculinity which reject the phallus and embrace the vulnerability of (usually) the male subject.[72] These often male characters are caught in an always already doomed to fail struggle to adopt the phallus, thus challenging the supremacy of normative gender constructs and disturbing the ideological functioning of the category of gender. In order for the procedural rhetoric of these games to be persuasive, they employ narrative compensation to foster high degrees of immersion. Narrative compensation operates here by narrativizing the anti-immersive gameplay characteristic of survival horror video games.

Games that employ this second strategy are *Silent Hill 2* (Team Silent, 2001) and *Fatal Frame* (Tecmo, 2001), which are discussed in Chapter 4, "The Verisimilar Representation and Simulation of Masculinity in Crisis in *Silent Hill 2*," and Chapter 5, "The Horrors of *Ie* Ideology in *Fatal Frame: Shōjo* Fights Demonic Ghost of *Otome* to Save *Otaku*," respectively. In both games, the protagonists are simulated as (male) final girls who defy the norms of the action genre. The gameplay is similar to that of *Resident Evil*, but is diegetically dressed as a procedural representation of the characters' vulnerability. Consequently, while *Resident Evil* is a game that thrives on modal irony, these games engender modal consonance.

Finally, Chapter 6, "The Crisis of Naturalizing Gender in *Forbidden Siren*," investigates a classical survival horror video game that combines the two strategies described above. On the one hand, *Forbidden Siren*'s (SCE Japan Studio,

2004) design is similar to that of *Resident Evil*. Although the game also seems to abide by patriarchal gender hierarchies, the simulation of the playable characters features a series of game mechanics that are incongruous with their diegetic profiles, thus shedding light upon the artificiality of gender and the alleged supremacy of masculinity. On the other hand, the diegetic profile is not fully incompatible with the procedural mode as many core mechanics are in a relation of modal consonance with the visual representation of the characters and can consequently be construed as a procedural representation of the characters' vulnerability.

In the games listed above, non-phallic masculinity and modal irony deny the player the spectacle of violence and the seamlessness of interaction customary of most mainstream action games. In doing so, they refute the aestheticization of life that conceals the instability of gender and the precarity of the human condition.[73] Classical survival horror video games provide players with a critical gameplay[74] that seeks not only to offer ludic and narrative pleasures, but also questions the gender-political establishment and shows that a video game can be economically successful without necessarily supporting the status quo. Classical survival horror games show a way out of the action genre's collusion with what Silverman refers to as the dominant fiction and command disbelief in normative gender roles.

Postclassical survival horror—between immersion via narrative compensation and immersion via maximization

After 2004, survival horror video games entered a new stage in which they started moving closer to the game design of conventional action games. What had up until that point been a very orthodox genre where most games elaborated on the formula of *Resident Evil*, now, especially after the success of *Resident Evil 4*, survival horror games started experimenting with the mechanics of first-person shooters, hack and slash games, cover-based shooters, etc. The implementation of these mechanics augmented the strength of the playable characters who were no longer the helpless (male) final girls of the previous era, but now started to have more in common with the hypermasculine protagonists of mainstream action games. The negotiation between vulnerability and hyperpotency produced different outcomes for each game, thus leading to a very heterogeneous genre. This heterogeneity was, of course, of political consequence, hence the postclassical survival horror games' vacillation between the critique of patriarchy specific to the classical era and the naturalization of white male supremacy characteristic of conventional action games.

The third and final part of this book is dedicated to the examination of four postclassical survival horror games that are indicative of the above-mentioned heterogeneity. Chapters 7 and 8, "*Resident Evil 4*: Reinventing the Survival Horror" and "Survival Horror's Normative Backlash in *Condemned: Criminal Origins*" are a case study of two survival horror games that depart from the subversive political roots of their predecessors and adopt a game design which,

by relying to a large extent on immersion via maximization, ends up reinforcing white masculinity as the norm. Although the male protagonists of both games do not fully live up to the expectations of hypermasculinity, the games fail to significantly challenge white male supremacy.

The last two chapters of the book, however, show how even a heterogeneous game design that does not fully reject immersion via maximization can nevertheless recover, at least to some extent, the undermining, anti-normative force of classical survival horror games. Chapter 9, "Amanda Ripley: From Final Girl to Action Girl in *Alien: Isolation*," reveals how the protagonist's transition from the simulation of a final girl to that of an action girl is incongruous with her diegetic profile. This engenders a multimodal dissonance similar to the modal irony prevalent in *Resident Evil* which reveals the artificiality of feminine gender roles. Chapter 10, on the other hand, entitled "Marginalization and Intersectionality in *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*," shares similarities with the game design of *Silent Hill 2*. Instead of revealing the artificiality of gender, the game provides players with a realist simulation of a subject who is doubly discriminated against. The game focuses on the plights of Senua, a female protagonist suffering from psychosis oppressed by both sexism and sanism. *Hellblade*'s (Ninja Theory, 2017) cumbersome gameplay functions as a procedural representation of the symptoms of psychosis and conveys a critique of how the marginalization of women living under patriarchy and suffering from mental illness can aggravate the symptoms of mental illness.

Notes

1 Soraya Murray, *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2018), 3.
2 Sara M. Cole, "Gender Identity Construction through Talk about Video Games," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 16, no. 5 (December 2014): 7, doi: 10.7771/1481-4374.2487.
3 Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska, *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders: Videogame Forms and Contexts* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris), 169.
4 Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games. The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007), 5, 44.
5 See a discussion on the relation between semiotic codes, modes, and media in Marie-Laure Ryan, "Narrative, Media, Modes," in *Avatars of Story* (Minneapolis and Lodon: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 3–30.
6 See the discussion on remediation in Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 44–50.
7 Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 7–8.
8 Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 12–13.
9 Vincent Mauger, "Game Design," in *Encyclopedia of Video Games: The Culture, Technology, and Art of Gaming*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2012), 226. See also Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 316–317. Alternatively, to refer to the rules (mechanics) of video games, Bogost employs Noah Wardrip-Fruin's concept of operational logics. Noah Wardrip-Fruin, *Expressive Processing: Digital Fictions, Computer Games, and Software Studies* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012), 13.
10 Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 7–8.

11 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990; repr. New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 5–9.
12 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 33.
13 Donna J. Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second_Millenium. FemaleMan©_Meets_OncoMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience*, 2nd ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 2018).
14 Derek A. Burrill, *Die Tryin': Video Games, Masculinity, Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 14, 73. See also Nicholas Taylor and Gerald Voorhees, "Introduction: Masculinity and Gaming: Mediated Masculinities in Play," in *Masculinities in Play*, eds. Nicholas Taylor and Gerald Voorhees (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 10.
15 Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
16 Eric S. Jenkins, "Updating Narcissus, the Ur-myth of Media, for Digital Gaming," *Games and Culture* 11, no.7–8 (2016): 660, doi: 10.1177/1555412015577734.
17 Stuart Hall, "Encoding, Decoding," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 515–517.
18 Burill, *Die Tryin'*, 79. Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm, "Introduction: Identity, Representation, and Video Game Studies beyond the Politics of the Image," in *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, eds. Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 3; Souvik Mukherjee, *Video Games and Storytelling: Reading Games and Playing Books* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 168.
19 Mukherjee, *Video Games and Storytelling*, 155.
20 Murray, *On* Games, 5; Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, 13.
21 Louis Althusser claims that one (mis)recognizes herself as a subject with an image provided by ideology. The processes whereby ideology forms the subjects Althusser calls interpellation. See Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 171–173.
22 Burill, *Die Tryin'*, 74.
23 Michel Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (1989, repr., London and New York: Routledge, 2002).
24 Jacques Lacan claims that the manner in which one assumes an identity is always imaginary in as much as one imagines an external, socially constructed identity as one's own. See Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (2002, repr., New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 75–81.
25 D. Fox Harrell acknowledges the role of discourse in cognition in his discussion of the representations of gender identities as cultural phantasms which he defines as a combination of mental/sensory images and ideas. In constructing and interpreting these gender identity phantasms, people rely on ideological knowledge concerning gender. This also the case with video games where preexisting, uninterrogated knowledge of gender shapes the way gender identities are represented in games, and how they are interpreted by players. See D. Fox Harrell, *Phantasmal Media: An Approach to Imagination, Computation, and Expression* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013), 2, 6, 20, 178–179, 184.
26 Gerald Farca, "The Emancipated Player," paper presented at *the First International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG,* Dundee, Scotland, August 2016 2016), 2.
27 See also an account of the implied reader/viewer in novels and films in Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1980), 147–151.
28 In order to understand why the implied player of action video games is young male, see Jenkins' account of the relation between the activities simulated by video games

and boy culture in Henry Jenkins, "Complete Freedom of Movement: Video Games as Gendered Play Space," in *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology*, eds. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmermann (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 330–363; see also Bagnall's comments on the sexism and heteropolitics of gaming hardware in Gregory L. Bagnall, "Queer(ing) Gaming Technologies: Thinking on Constructions of Normativity Inscribed in Digital Gaming Hardware," in *Queer Game Studies*, eds. Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 136–140.

29 Michael Kaufman, "The Construction of Masculinity and the Triad of Male Violence," in *Men's Lives*, eds. Michael S. Kimmel and Michael A. Messner (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1998), 4–17, quoted in Burrill, *Die Tryin'*, 34–36.

30 Violent video games can be seen as backlash against the relativization of phallic masculinity brought about by postmodernity, but also, more generally, against an adulthood which suppresses boyhood and replaces it with a cold, tempered, and 'objective' masculinity, a modest masculinity. In order to compensate for its destabilization and its suppression, patriarchy steps up the violence and compulsiveness of its own performance in the allegedly magic circle of the video game. King et al., *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders*, 178. Burrill, *Die Tryin'*, 16–18.

31 Mark J. P. Wolf, "Abstraction in the Video Game," in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, eds. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 50.

32 Mark Hayse, "Ideology," in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, eds. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 444.

33 The games released for the Atari 2600 support Patrick Crogan's more general claim that video games are an outgrowth of cold war military technoscience and technoculture. Crogan draws a technological (and implicitly ideological) genealogy of some of the basic game functions, which may or may not be explicitly military, linking them to the technological developments of the military-industrial complex. Like military technoscience, video games are driven by a logic of pre-emption. Through simulation, video games anticipate and regulate eventuality. While this may be more obvious in military-themed action video games, Patrick Crogan is of the opinion that the militaristic technocultural roots of video games are also present, although in a less obvious manner, in other games, as well. "In many action games with scenarios that do not seem to centre on conflict, the basic engine of gameplay is nonetheless some variation of tracking, targeting, and shooting/acquiring interactions, usually while navigating through a challenging environment. Most platform games can be characterized in this way, from the *Super Mario Bros.* Franchise to *The Simpsons Game* (Electronic Arts, 2007). Navigating, solving puzzles revolving around obstacles to progress through the terrain, and targeting and striking various objects and opponents are the core of gameplay." Patrick Crogan, *Gameplay Mode: War, Simulation, and Technoculture* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xxvii.

34 Wolf, "Abstraction on the Video Game," 59.

35 It is worth noting that the success of *Pac-Man* determined its North-American publisher to release a new instalment in the franchise, namely *Mrs. Pac-Man* (Midway, 1982). Although the playable character is now a woman, her status is still derivative of the original male character. The female protagonist of the game is not Pac-Woman, but rather Mrs. Pac-Man.

36 Cassel et al., 7.

37 Although many popular action games of that period were produced by Japanese developers, the privileged status of white masculinity is not challenged in the sense that these internationally released action games rarely feature Asian male protagonists. This is indicative of the cultural prestige enjoyed by the Western world, the US in particular, in Japan, which explains the success enjoyed by these games both locally

and in North America. Japanese audiences were more receptive to Caucasian playable characters than a North American audience would have been to Asian ones.

38 It should be noted that to a considerably lesser degree than the survival horror games analyzed in the second part of this book, some of the white heterosexual male characters enumerated here also experience moments of masculinity in crisis or convey other light forms of critique. For example, in *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots* (Kojima Productions, 2008), Solid Snake is undergoing a process of accelerated aging, which suggests that the protagonist, now dubbed Old Snake, is less capable than his earlier incarnations. This is stressed in the game's cutscenes in which Snake shows repeated signs of illness and impeding demise. However, despite this diegetic framing of the character as ill, wounded, and symbolically castrated, the game mechanics enable the player to simulate the same positive version of masculinity found in the previous instalments of the video game series. A more striking example is that of Max Payne whose contrast between his diegetic profile and the mechanics attributed to him is so evident that it may be considered a form ludodiegetic dissonance. Although the games enable Max Payne to perform spectacular feats such as the killing of a group of assailants during one forward plunge in slow motion, the cutscenes are replete with the protagonist's voiceover monologues in which he repeatedly complains about his impotency and failure to live up to the norms of patriarchy. The prince of *Prince of Persia*'s *Sands of Time* series (2003—–2010) and Kratos in the 2018 *God of War* game mount a soft critique of extreme violence in the action genre. The ending of *Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones* (Ubisoft 2005) faces the player with a moral choice: she can either continue to hit her opponent, upon which the opponent duplicates after each successful hit, or she can step away from the opponent and walk into a distant bright light, which leads to the completion of the game. In the case of the *God of War* games, the protagonist Kratos undergoes a critical shift in the latest instalment from an emblem of ultraviolent toxic masculinity to a more Stoic Kratos that seeks to avoid violence and castigates his son for his gratuitous violent behaviour. I refer to the critical attitude of *Prince of Persia* and *God of War* as soft because in both cases the critique does not substantially shape the gameplay which is not dissimilar to that of most violent action games. In fact, the use of such light forms of critique ironically end up helping conceal ideology. These minor against-the-grain design choices suggest that these games are above ideology and, in doing so, draw our attention away from how deeply entrenched in the status quo they are. As Kline et al. have noticed, "the games industry, like the rest of popular culture, has learned that irony is a no-lose gambit, a 'have your cake and eat it too' strategy whose simultaneous affirmation/negation structure can give the appearance of social critique and retract it in the same moment—thereby letting everything stay just as it is while allowing practitioners to feel safely above it all even as they sink more deeply in." Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter, *Digital Play. Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 277. See also Steven Conway, "Poisonous Pantheons: *God of War* and Toxic Masculinity," *Games and Culture* (June 2019), doi: 10.1177/1555412019858898.

39 Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 11.

40 Silverman, *Male Subjectivity*, 44–45.

41 Ibid., 13.

42 Ibid., 51.

43 Kaja Silverman's argument is a more encompassing one that attempts to show the relevance of Lacanian psychoanalysis to the ideology critique performed by Marxism. Her claim is that one's imaginary relation to the mode of production is, in fact, buttressed by one's assuming a positive/normative gender and sexual identity. In other words, ideological interpellation is founded on entering the Symbolic Order. By the same token, video games' relation to capitalism can be reassessed in

relation to the way they naturalize dominant gender constructs. If we agree with Althusser that ideology is one's imagined relation to the mode of production, then video games do a fine job of giving concrete form to the way our dominant culture images our relation to capitalism. Although Western capitalist societies have been struggling with structural inequality, video games claim to offer us a verisimilar simulation of Western capitalism that gives all players at the start the same amount of chances and submit them to the same rules. If success in the real world is only to a limited extent dependant on work ethic, video games give concrete, albeit digital, form to the meritocracy ideal by making sure that the hardest working player receives the highest reward. See Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009). King et al., *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders*, 198.

44 Justine Cassell et al., "Chess for Girls? Feminism and Computer Games," in *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*, eds. Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 7; Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media: Sexism, Trolling, and Identity Policing* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 76; Derek A. Burrill, "Queer Theory, the Body, and Video Games," in *Queer Game Studies*, eds. Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 28.

45 Kishonna L. Gray, Gerald Voorhees, and Emma Vossen, "Introduction: Reframing Hegemonic Conceptions of Women and Feminism in Gaming Culture," in *Feminism in Play*, eds. Kishonna L. Gray, Gerald Voorhees, and Emma Vossen (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 3.

46 Jeffrey A. Brown, *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 12.

47 Hye-Won Han and Se-Jin Song, "Characterization of Female Protagonists in Video Games: A Focus on Lara Croft," *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 20, no. 3 (2014): 35, doi: 10.1080/12259276.2014.11666189; H. W. Kennedy, "Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo? On the Limits of Textual Analysis," *Game Studies* 2, no. 2 (2002), http://www.gamestudies.org/0202/kennedy/; Amanda du Preez, "Virtual Babes: Gender, Archetypes and Computer Games," *Communication* 26, no. 2 (2000): 20; Anne-Marie Schleiner, "Does Lara Croft Wear Fake Polygons? Gender and Gender-Role Subversion in Computer Adventure Games," *Leonardo* 34, no. 3 (2001): 222, https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/002409401750286976.

48 Murray, *On Games*, 131.

49 In what may be construed as an anticipation of the main argument of Adrienne Shaw's *Gaming at the Edge*, Brown observes that the male gaze is thwarted if the object of the gaze shows her subjectivity. Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 111.

50 Andrei Nae, "From Male to Colonial Gaze: The Intersection of Patriarchy and Colonial Discourse in the Rebooted *Tomb Raider* Video Game Series," in *Video Games and Spatiality in American Studies*, ed. Dietmar Meinel (Boston, MA and Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), forthcoming.

51 Crystal Dynamics, *Tomb Raider*, Square Enix, 2013.

52 Han et al., "Characterization of Female Protagonists in Video Games," 39.

53 Murray, *On* Games, 134–136.

54 It should be noted that not all critics are sceptical of the subversive potential of overeroticized action heroines. For example, Jeffrey Brown claims that it is precisely the heroine's exaggerated sexuality that destabilizes gender binarism. See Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 46. For a more detailed presentation on the polemic concerning the subversive potential of action heroines, see Chapter 9 in this book.

55 Bernard Perron considers *Alone in the Dark*, released in 1992, the first survival horror game. See Bernard Perron, "Introduction: Gaming after Dark," in *Horror Video*

Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play, ed. Bernard Perron (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009), 15.

56 Bernard Perron, "Survival Horror Games," in *Encyclopedia of Video Games: The Culture, Technology, and Art of Gaming*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood), 637.

57 Laurie N. Taylor, "Gothic Bloodlines in Survival Horror Gaming," in *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, ed. Bernard Perron (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009), 50.

58 Ewan Kirkland, "Storytelling in Survival Horror Video Games," in *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, ed. Bernard Perron (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009), 65.

59 Ewan Kirkland, "Survival Horrality: Analysis of a Videogame Genre," *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* 10 (October 2011): 26, https://irishgothichorror.files.wordpress.com/2018/03/ewanc2a0kirkland.pdf; Tanya Krzywinska, "Hands-On Horror," in *ScreenPlay: Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces*, eds. Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2002), 209. Taylor, "Gothic Bloodlines," 51.

60 Taylor, "Gothic Bloodlines," 52.

61 Perron, "Survival Horror," 238.

62 Andrei Nae and Alexandra Ileana Bacalu, "Toward a Reconsideration of Hypermediacy: Immersion in Survival Horror Video Games and Eighteenth-century Novels," in *Playing the Field: Video Games and American Studies*, ed. Sascha Pöhlmann (Boston, MA and Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019), 140–141.

63 Carl Therrien, "Games of Fear: A Multi-Faceted Historical Account of the Horror Genre in Video Games," in *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, ed. Bernard Perron (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009), 26. Perron, "Survival Horror," 637.

64 Kirkland, "Storytelling," 65.

65 Murray, *On Games*, 23–24.

66 Laurie N. Taylor maintains that the games' tendency to transgress "those boundaries that define the normative power structures (e.g.; family, law, and society)" aligns survival horror with the gothic. Taylor, "Gothic Bloodlines," 49.

67 See Ewan Kirkland, "Restless Dreams in Silent Hill: Approaches to Video Game Analysis," *Journal of Media Practice* 6, no. 3 (2005): 174, doi: 10.1386/jmpr.6.3.167/1.

68 Jason Hawreliak, *Multimodal Semiotics and Rhetoric in Videogames* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 137.

69 Hawreliak, *Multimodal Semiotics*, 136–137.

70 Ibid., 138.

71 Judith Halberstam observes that dominant heroic masculinity rests on the suppression of alternative masculinities, while D. Fox Harrell maintains that one way to reveal the ideological bias of gender knowledge is to put multiple culturally specific sets of knowledge in a relation of contiguity. See Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1998), 1; D. Fox Harrell, *Phantasmal Media: An Approach to Imagination, Computation, and Expression* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013), 11, 27–28.

72 It is widely acknowledged that survival horror video games simulate the helplessness of their protagonists. See Kirkland, "Restless Dreams in Silent Hill," 172. Kirkland, "Storytelling," 64. Julian Novitz, "Scarcity and Survival Horror: Trade as an Instrument of Terror in Pathologic," *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association* 3, no. 1 (2017): 69, doi: 10.26503/todigra.v3i1.64.

73 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004), 148.

74 Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 6.

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Part II

Classical survival horror games

3 Welcome to the survival horror

The deconstruction of gender in *Resident Evil*

Although many of its game design elements can be traced back to previous games, *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996) is the video game that defined the survival horror genre.[1] It is an action-adventure game whose approach to combat and exploration marks a break from the dominant norms of the action genre in the mid-1990s. Instead of a seamless gameplay experience, the game offers players a fragmented gameplay with clunky controls and a set of core mechanics that hinder gameplay, rather than facilitate it. *Resident Evil* compensates for its hypermedial gameplay by laying significant stress on narrativity. Unlike most of its contemporary action games, it employs a wide variety of literary and cinematic means in order to create a complex storyworld that compensates for the cumbersome ludic engagement. However, the storyworld achieves immersion in an unorthodox way, undermining its own verisimilitude and cuing a critical, metanarrative involvement. The manner in which the video game draws attention to its own mediality has important consequences for the representation and simulation of gender. Contrary to the immersive action games that naturalize their gender constructs and the superiority of white heterosexual masculinity, *Resident Evil* reveals the artificiality of hypermasculinity.

In order to show this, my investigation of the game will go through the following steps. I first focus on the generic expectations raised by the game's heteromedial elements, i.e. those extraludic and intraludic elements that do not pertain to the core gameplay experience, in particular, the physical cover and the cutscenes, so as to show how the game appears to adhere to the gender norms of action games that revolve around the stock damsel-in-distress plot. My next step is to show how *Resident Evil*'s gameplay and visual aesthetics defy the expectations raised and, in doing so, denaturalize white heterosexual male supremacy. More specifically, I argue that the rules that underpin gameplay simulate a version of masculinity which is weak, vulnerable, and impotent, and which contradicts the visual representation of the protagonist. This contradiction of gameplay and visual representation (or procedural and visual modes, to refer back to Hawreliak)[2] produces the effect of modal irony which raises the player's awareness with respect to the artificiality of gender constructs in *Resident Evil* and, by extension, in the action genre. After showing how gameplay deconstructs gender, I go on to show that a similar destabilizing effect is also achieved

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by the B-series aesthetics of the live-action and pre-rendered cutscenes which undermine the realism of the storyworld and, consequently, of its gendered subjects. Lastly, I show that, since the game's visual aesthetics and gameplay imply a low level of immediacy and interactivity, immersion is salvaged by a high degree of narrativity determined by the exacerbation of what Marie-Laure Ryan calls metasuspense, which lends persuasiveness to the game's deconstructive procedural rhetoric.

Generic expectations

By 1996, the first-person shooter had established itself as a dominant subgenre of action games and a trendsetter in designing shooting games. Shinji Mikami, the director of *Resident Evil,* initially planned to make *Resident Evil* a first-person shooter with an important focus on exploration. This required a high level of details in 3D which could not be supported by the limited graphic rendering capacities of the PlayStation and the 700 Mb limit of the CD.[3] As a result, Mikami turned to *Alone in the Dark* (Infogrames, 1992) for inspiration.[4] Developed for the PC, the game featured fixed camera angles that represented superimposed 3D interactive entities onto 2D locations.[5] This system proved more adequate for exploration, but it also implied a rejection of the shooting mechanics of the first-person shooter.[6] Although it did not become a first-person shooter, *Resident Evil* gave the impression of being a shooting game that followed the norms of the action genre. These expectations were raised by extra- and intra-ludic heteromedial elements such as the box art, and the cinematic cutscenes at the beginning of the game[7] and were confirmed to some degree by the early stages of gameplay.

The front cover depicts a muscular white male soldier with a contorted grimace and clenched teeth, carrying an oversized shotgun, ready to face the dangers surrounding him. The representation of the soldier on the front cover taps into the player's experience of action movies and anticipates a simulation of the events of such a film. This expectation is underlined by the back cover that suggests an abundance of firearm options for the player to choose from: "Arm yourself with whatever you can find: knives, pistols, shotguns, flame-throwers—and search for hidden rounds to stay alive."[8]

The live-action cutscene played at the beginning of the game introduces horror to the action register and shows the two playable characters, Chris Redfield and Jill Valentine, along with the rest of the Alpha team, running away from a pack of zombie dogs. After the Alpha team finds shelter in an abandoned house, the cutscene ends with a presentation of the cast that switches to a typical action film register by showing cross-cuts of each character's mug shots with 1980s' heavy metal music playing in the background.

Resident Evil's apparent indebtedness to the action genre is also buttressed by the way it represents and simulates gender identity. Although by the mid-1990s the action genre had become more hospitable to more agentive female roles,[9] films, comics, and games developed various strategies with the purpose

of maintaining male superiority and, thus, reinforcing patriarchy.[10] *Resident Evil* appears to adhere to the trend of reinscribing action heroines within patriarchy. Shortly after the game starts and the difficulty level has been chosen, the player must opt for either Chris Redfield or Jill Valentine as playable characters. The two characters are not displayed simultaneously on the screen (as they are in *Alone in the Dark,* for instance), instead *Resident Evil* first provides the player with the option to play as Chris Redfield by showing his ID in the centre of the screen. Chris's ID card almost fully conceals that of Jill which can be brought to the forefront by pressing a button on the D-pad. The game's suggestion is that Jill's status as a playable character is secondary to that of Chris and that it is the latter who provides the player with the standard gameplay experience.

The foregrounding of Chris as playable character has important diegetic and political implications. *Resident Evil*'s scripted narrative differs depending on who the playable character is: if the playable character is Chris Redfield, then the protagonist must save Jill Valentine, but if the player chooses to play as Jill, then it is Chris who needs saving. The scripted narrative triggered by selecting Chris is a conventional damsel-in-distress plot that abides by the plot's conservative gender politics. In this scenario of the game, Chris Redfield assumes narrative agency and saves Jill, who takes up the role of the passive victim. Jill's scenario, on the other hand, threatens to reverse the gender politics of the damsel-in-distress plot by assigning narrative agency to the female character. In this version of the game, Jill has the potential to defy the traditional gender roles of victim, princess-to-be-rescued, or even final girl[11] and must save the now passive male figure. Since this version of the scripted narrative can challenge masculine superiority, the game employs a variety of strategies in order to establish Chris's scenario as the norm and that of Jill as a secondary, derivative one.

Besides offering Chris Redfield a privileged status as a playable character in the game's menu, the game also stresses Jill's weakness in comparison to Chris during gameplay. Chris is stronger, faster, more resistant to damage, and a better aimer, while Jill is inferior to Chris in all these respects. In order to compensate for her weakness, the game offers Jill a set of advantages: she is repeatedly aided by Barry Burton, has eight inventory slots and a lock pick that make her navigation significantly easier. Chris, on the other hand, has only six inventory slots, no lock pick, and does not receive help from other characters in the game.[12] It would appear that *Resident Evil* embraces the patriarchal assumption that women are naturally weaker than men and need several advantages and the support of a male partner to achieve the same goal as the male playable character.

The hierarchy between the two playable characters is further supported by their visual representation in the live-action cutscenes and during gameplay. Their bodies and costumes reflect the aesthetic norms of the action movie in which the body is a site of visual spectacle.[13] In *Resident Evil*, the bodily composition of Chris is indicative of the excessive strength which characterizes muscleman protagonists in the action films of the 1980s and early 1990s, while Jill's body is that of a stereotypical action girl who has to compensate for her agency by embodying the beauty standards imposed by patriarchy.[14] The body shapes

featured in the live-action cutscenes are augmented to new proportions in the in-game representations rendered by the engine, which further stresses the dichotomy between Chris Redfield as the hyperpotent character and Jill Valentine as a site of visual fetishism.[15]

Finally, an important role in establishing Chris Redfield's scenario as the norm is also the game's final cutscene for the best ending that can be achieved with either character.[16] If the player beats the game, then the engine plays a final live-action cutscene which features Jill resting her head on Chris's shoulder as the two fly into the sunset in a helicopter. This scene implying masculine superiority is played by the game engine irrespective of what scenario has been selected. If the player chooses Chris's scenario, the cutscene is consistent with the gender politics of the damsel-in-distress plot that construes the female character as a reward for the male character's successful exertion of narrative agency. On the other hand, as a resolution to Jill's scenario, the cutscene functions as a correction of the inverted gender politics of the reversed damsel-in-distress plot. After Jill has successfully saved Chris, she gives up her privileged narrative position and allows Chris to reassume his role as the leading figure in the game's narrative. Jill's scenario confirms Kaja Silverman's observations with respect to women in mainstream visual products that foreground masculinity in crisis.[17] In her reading of Silverman's work, Shohini Chaudhuri mentions that normative feminine identities refuse to acknowledge masculine impotency and invest belief in blatantly artificial representations of masculinity.[18] By extrapolating this observation to *Resident Evil*, Jill Valentine's scenario can also be construed as the female character's refusal to accept the crisis of patriarchy caused by Chris's disappearance, which turns her ludo-narrative agency from a potential subversion of patriarchy into an attempt to restore it.

At the same time, it should be stressed that the game's final cutscene is preceded by several hours of gameplay that, as the next sections show, will have systematically deconstructed the gender constructs of *Resident Evil*'s storyworld and encouraged a metanarrative reading of the game. Consequently, it is very likely that by this point in the game, the events portrayed will have been construed from an ironic stance.

Hypermedial gameplay and procedural deconstruction

In this section I analyze the manner in which the game's core mechanics and controls defy the horizon of expectations triggered by the game's extraludic elements. Instead of the hyperpotent characters featured in action films, comics, and games, the players of *Resident Evil* soon realize that the playable characters do not live up to their ramboesque appearance.[19] By means of its cumbersome controls and unreliable core mechanics, *Resident Evil's* gameplay systematically subverts the protagonists' status of action heroes and, consequently, procedurally deconstructs the stereotypical representations of gender in the action genre.

Because how the player sees the game world determines the player's agency in the game world, one of the main game design choices which contributes to the

subversion of hypermasculinity in *Resident Evil* is the use of the third-person view in combination with fixed camera angles. A fundamental core mechanic of action games is movement, which has to be intuitive, seamless, and, preferably, symbiotic. In *Resident Evil*, however, the fixed camera angles make movement counterintuitive and cumbersome.[20] The game employs the so-called "tank controls," i.e. the player can move only forward and backward by pressing up and down on the D-pad. The player cannot move sideways, and in order to change direction, he must turn either left or right by pressing the left-right buttons on the D-pad. While these controls may be functional with a tracking camera that does not change the angle, this is not the case with *Resident Evil* in which the angles change dramatically from one room to another, and sometimes even within the same room.[21] Although tank controls make sure that the shift to a new angle does not change the direction of movement, they also make movement counterintuitive and difficult to master. For example, if the camera is in front of the playable character, then the player is normally inclined to press the down button in order for the playable character to move towards the camera, yet, in *Resident Evil,* the player has to press up in order to do so. Similarly, when the playable character faces the camera, the player is inclined to press left or right relative to their perspective onto the game world provided by the camera, not that of the playable character. However, because in the tank control scheme the buttons for turning do not change relative to the camera angle, when the player presses right, the playable character will counterintuitively turn left and vice versa.

If one can briefly figure out by trial and error what button to press, the movement controls become frustrating when zombies are present in the room.[22] The scarce ammunition at hand often behoves the player to evade rather than confront the zombies.[23] In the absence of an evasion mechanic, manually holding the left or right button in order for the player to turn around until the right direction has been reached, and then finally running puts the playable character at great risk in the small rooms and tight corridors of the mansion. In such a situation, any wrong push of the button can lead you right into the arms of the zombie. My own gameplay experience is filled with cases when, instead of running away from a zombie, I accidentally walked directly into its grasp because, under the pressure of danger, I was not able to use the tank controls properly. The frustration arising from such accidents is augmented by the vulnerability of the playable character who succumbs after only a few bites.

Besides complicating movement, the fixed camera angles also serve other ludic and aesthetic purposes. Aesthetically, the remediation of cinema through the use of multiple angles, static lighting, sound, setting, and mise-en-scene offers players a filmic experience[24] that successfully integrates stock horror elements. In a manner similar to horror films, the cameras of *Resident Evil* often leave zombies off-screen,[25] so the player has to infer their position by relying on the sound they make or the diegetic music that suddenly starts.[26] However, if the player happens to be running when traversing a room, he may end up in the arms of a zombie before it can make a sound. The fixed angles also enable the game to create jump

scares.[27] For example, after passing the middle of the L-shaped hallway on the mansion's ground floor, the camera moves to a position close to the window. As the player moves away from the camera towards the corner of the hallway, a zombie dog suddenly jumps in through the window breaking the silence of the game and filling the frame of the screen.[28]

The confines imposed on the player by *Resident Evil*'s third-person view combined with fixed camera angles link the game to a recurrent theme of the horror genre, namely the threatening of individual agency.[29] The fact that the game does not allow the player to interact with the multiple angles from which the playable character is seen creates the impression of CCTV surveillance.[30] The visual aesthetics of the game suggests to the player that his agency in the story-world is subjected to external forces beyond his control that overdetermine how he will act.[31]

Shooting is another core mechanic that lacks the functionality that players of action games are accustomed to. In most shooting games, the player has to manually aim in the direction of his target. In order to make aiming easy, shooting games use a small symbol, typically crosshairs, in order to show the exact direction of aiming. Aiming is also supported by the camera which is either a first-person or a tracking third-person camera which offers the player a broad perspective into the game world and its potential dangers. In *Resident Evil,* aiming is also manual, but the aiming direction is not visually marked and the camera angles make it difficult for the player to position the playable character in the right direction. Moreover, because the attacking zombies are sometimes off-screen, the player has to infer the zombie's position in the game world, guess the direction in which to point the gun, and finally shoot, hoping to hear the sounds of pain that zombies make when they are hit. In a game that offers little ammunition, such situations can lead to the wasting of precious bullets.

In order to make shooting even more complicated, the game limits the player's ability to aim. The player can aim anywhere on the game's x-axis, thanks to the playable character's ability to turn around 360 degrees, but can only aim in three fixed directions on the y-axis—straight, upwards, and downwards. This has significant consequences for the player's confrontations with zombies. After being hit a number of times, zombies will fall down, but without dying. Unless they are shot while on the floor, they will rise again after a few moments and attack the playable character. Because the player can point his gun downwards at a predetermined angle, he must move close to the zombie lying down and infer the distance between him and the zombie that matches the playable character's shooting angle.[32] However, since there is no visual marker to guide the player's aim and because movement is very cumbersome, the player may not manage to give the zombie the killing shot in due time. This means that the zombie is now up on its feet and close enough to the playable character to strike.

Finally, shooting is also encumbered by the slow firing rate and the fact that the player cannot move while aiming. In the absence of any ducking mechanic, players have to hope that the distance between them and the zombie is long enough for the necessary number of bullets to be shot.[33] Consequently, the tight

corridors and small rooms of *Resident Evil* afford close-quarters confrontations that exceed the level of difficulty of similar challenges in average action games.[34] At the same time, this aspect of the game design can be regarded as an attempt to simulate stock zombie horror cinematic scenes where a cornered and petrified character shoots at a slowly approaching zombie that continues to move in spite of the shots it has taken.[35]

The overcomplicated gameplay and the weakness of the playable character are not a purely aesthetic choice, but, like most of *Resident Evil*'s game design, they were also determined by the affordances of the PlayStation. The game's steep difficulty curve meant that the player would die many times before overcoming an obstacle and/or that players would spend a lot of time exploring the convoluted and twisted Spencer Mansion where most of the action is set. By also limiting the player's ability to save his progress, more game time was gained without exceeding the CD's storage limits, thus satisfying the players' demand for more play time.[36]

The stress laid on exploration is made obvious from even before gameplay as the back cover of the game reads "[S]earch for hidden rounds to stay alive." Players have to wander the maze-like locations in search of clues and hidden objects that will help them eventually escape the mansion.[37] In order to interact with the objects in the game world, players must use a context-dependent command. The objects which are useful in the game are added to the player's inventory, a menu where players can inspect, equip or discard the objects they have gathered. The search for clues and relevant objects is marked by many interruptions of game time. Pushing the 'interaction' button next to an object will often prompt a caption that freezes time in the game world. If the object is useless, the caption will show a comment made by the playable character whereby he/she discards the respective object. However, if the object is indeed of any use, the caption is followed by a question "Will you take […]?" Upon an affirmative response, the player is prompted with the announcement "You've got […]"

All the objects carried by the playable character can be managed in an inventory with limited slots. Unlike conventional action games that let the player shuffle through her objects without pausing game time and exiting the game screen, *Resident Evil* uses the entire screen to show the inventory and offer game-relevant information such as health points and ammunition. Because the game features no heads-up display, the player must repeatedly access the inventory in order to equip a weapon, combine herbs, inspect the playable character's health level, combine ammo clips, discard useless objects, and so on. The repeated use of the inventory thwarts the illusion of mimesis entertained by the detailed visual representations of the 2D locations and the 3D playable characters.[38] In opposition to the simulation and the cutscenes, the inventory uses tables and menus, as well as remediations of other technologies that stress the anti-mimetic nature of the gameplay. For example, the inventory remediates the electrocardiograph in order to represent the playable character's health. After damage has been taken, the small ECG screen next to the playable character's face will change colour in order to show the health of the character.

The need to regularly visit the inventory also has a bearing on the already cumbersome combat mechanics.[39] During combat, it is sometimes necessary to change weapons. This simple task can become a frustrating one since, in the heat of combat, the player must exit the screen showing the game world, perform the tasks of selecting and equipping, and then finally return to the action. Such pauses during combat can disorient players and delay their response, especially in those cases in which the threat is off-screen. Furthermore, the incapacity to change weapons in-game can lead to absurdly long p-action sequences if the player has multiple weapons in the inventory, but not enough ammunition to finish off his foe with only one weapon. If, for instance, the player's inventory contains the shotgun with one shotgun shell left, the berretta with two bullets loaded, and the knife, disposing of a threat requires the following sequence of p-actions: aim, manually turn, shoot, enter inventory, select berretta, equip berretta, exit inventory, aim, shoot twice, enter inventory, select knife, equip knife, exit inventory, move, aim, hit. This sequence can be prolonged if the player did not equip the shotgun at some earlier point in the game and if the ammunition is not loaded into the gun. Not only do such situations make gameplay difficult, but they also impeach upon the ludic pleasure of shooting the enemy. One single shot may require up to seven p-actions in a row, which can affect the player's sense of extended embodiment which action video games aim to achieve.[40] The norm in the action-adventure genre is for the player's physical interaction with the controller to be mapped onto the playable character's movement. Such a game design would allegedly make the player feel as if the playable character were her embodiment and would heighten immersion. Through its controls, *Resident Evil* stresses the distance between the player and playable character, thus emphasizing the artificiality of the gameplay experience.[41]

In addition to the many interruptions determined by the player's use of the inventory, the gameplay is also paused by the loading of each new room. Due to the limited processing capabilities of the PlayStation, *Resident Evil* does not load entire locations at once, but rather each room separately. In order to fill up loading time, when entering a new room, the game plays a pre-rendered cutscene with the door of the room slowly opening with a screaking sound. Because the Spencer mansion is filled with small rooms, it sometimes takes longer for the pre-rendered cutscene to play than for the player to traverse the room. This aspect of the game is highlighted by the open-world nature of *Resident Evil* that coerces the player to repeatedly revisit previous locations in order to place the required items in the right position and open new pathways. The constant interruption of movement in the game world is frustrating for the player as it increases the fragmentariness of the gameplay experience already resulting from the need to repeatedly access the inventory. Not only does the level design of *Resident Evil* embrace an aesthetics of repetition, but the very redundancy that characterizes navigation in the game world is also regularly fragmented.[42]

Action games thrive on a seamless gameplay experience that relies on easily learnable controls and functional game mechanics, as well as mimetic aural and visual representations of the game world. As this section has so far shown, the

game mechanics of *Resident Evil* seem to work against the immersive goal of action video games. Its cumbersome and counterintuitive mechanics produce frustration and stress the material mediation of the gameplay experience. Moreover, through its repeated interruptions of gameplay, *Resident Evil* regularly extracts players from the ludo-diegetic temporality of the simulation and prompts them with anti-mimetic representations such as captions and the inventory. If we agree with Marc C. Santos and Sarah E. White that psychoanalitically *Resident Evil* is chiefly concerned with the return of the repressed,[43] then to a similar extent, from a media studies perspective, playing *Resident Evil* can be construed as the return of the repressed material medium. Through its design, the game constantly reminds players of the technologically mediated nature of the gameplay experience. Players cannot immerse themselves in the world of the game in the conventional manner achieved with the help of immersion via maximization because they constantly have to remove their senses from the representation/simulation of the Spencer mansion and redirect their attention either to the menu of the inventory or to the physical controller. (As we shall see further, *Resident Evil* does achieve immersion, but via narrative compensation.)

The hypermedial gameplay has an important bearing on the game's gender politics. On the one hand, the aural and visual representation of the game taps into the repertoire of media products related to the action genre to communicate to the player that Chris Redfield and Jill Valentine are capable soldiers ready to face the zombie threat. On the other hand, the gameplay fails to provide a simulation of the two characters that lives up to the narrative expectations engendered by the game. The ineffective mechanics and cumbersome controls make even the most simple in-game actions difficult to perform. Consequently, while visually strong and potent, the two protagonists are procedurally rendered weak and helpless by the game's simulation. Given the gap between representation and simulation, it is safe to claim that the procedural rhetoric of *Resident Evil* is that of modal irony, which means that, as a multimodal medium, *Resident Evil* communicates contradicting meanings across its multiple modes. To be more precise, the aural and visual modes belie the procedural mode and vice versa. Because a coherent dialogue between representation and simulation is central to the verisimilitude of the game's simulated storyworld, the contradiction foregrounded by *Resident Evil* lays bare the artificiality of its stereotypical gender constructs, in particular, that of phallic masculinity,[44] or hypermasculinity.[45] In other words, gameplay in *Resident Evil* deconstructs gender.

In the case of Chris Redfield, the deconstruction operates in a rather straightforward manner. As explained in the first section, in the cutscenes Chris Redfield is presented as a Ramboesque character expected to feature the same hypermasculine traits of his generic peers. Moreover, in order to naturalize the expected hypermasculinity of its male protagonist, *Resident Evil* uses live-action cutscenes, which feature real actors. In the context of the relatively underdeveloped realism of three-dimensional objects in action games in the mid-1990s, such a narrative design choice could augment the verisimilitude of the game, at least until the cutscene's B series register becomes obvious (see next section). Yet, when choosing Chris Redfield, the player is incapable of vicariously performing

masculinity in accordance with the expectations prompted by the game. The repetitive nature of gameplay (which presupposes multiple trials and deaths), makes the deconstruction of phallic masculinity particularly effective. If masculinity is, just as any other gender construct, essentially unstable, it relies on a compulsive repetition of its performance so that an illusion of stability might be (re)produced.[46] In the case of *Resident Evil*, the steep difficulty curve and the redundant level design coerce the player to repeat Chris Redfield's failure to be hypermasculine in a manner that no other non-interactive medium could afford to do. This way, the allegedly natural association between Chris Redfield's masculine sex and his gender identity as hypermale is revealed as constructed.

As far as Jill Valentine is concerned, deconstruction operates in a more indirect manner. In the first section of this chapter, I have argued that Jill Valentine's visual representation in the live-action cutscenes and especially in-game is constructed in such a way so as to satisfy the male gaze and that her entire scenario, besides being rendered subsidiary to that of Chris Redfield, is an attempt to restore patriarchy rather than a break from the normative, conventional male-female power relations in which the former is active and the latter passive. If the modal irony resulted from the clash between Chris Redfield's visual representation and the mechanics governing his simulation deconstructs the realism of conventional masculinity in the action genre, by the same token one should be able to argue that modal irony deconstructs the patriarchal relation embedded in Jill Valentine's scenario, as well. However, in the case of the female protagonist, there is one aspect that does not yield so readily to this line of argument.

Because Chris Redfield is a typical action game protagonist, players expect him to be a strong and potent playable character. It is the game's choice to deliver a weak and impotent playable character instead that leads to modal irony and its consequent deconstruction of hypermasculinity. In the case of Jill Valentine, the dialogue entertained by the visual and the procedural mode no longer engenders modal irony, but modal consonance[47] since the message conveyed by the two is dovetailed with the gender norms of the action genre. In keeping with the alleged inferiority of women postulated by the ideology of male supremacy, Jill Valentine's core mechanics and controls render her weaker than Chris, which confirms the expectations raised by the overt femininity of her visual (and aural) representation. In what follows, I argue that, despite the apparent consonance between representation and simulation, the procedural rhetoric of Jill Valentine's scenario also amounts to a deconstruction of patriarchy.

Jill Valentine's role within the political structure of *Resident Evil* is not very different from that of female protagonists in other action and/or horror media products. As feminist media scholars have argued throughout the years, the agency of heroines is strictly encoded within rigid patriarchal semantics.[48] Although it is the women who are the main narrative agents, patriarchal values are so deeply entrenched in our dominant Western culture that their narrative agency is always already coded masculine, while their looks are construed as feminine.[49] This means that in an interactive medium such as the action video game, the core mechanics buttressing the control of the playable character is

likely to be construed by the player as masculine, while the three-dimensional, polygonal representation of the female protagonist is interpreted as feminine. Such a dichotomous reception should not be surprising for an audience that in 1996 had rarely been exposed to action games featuring female protagonists in single-player games. (The first *Tomb Raider* would be released later the same year.)[50] Taking this into consideration, feminist game studies scholars have argued that action video games with heroines project a protector gaze onto the implied young male player.[51] If interactivity is coded masculine, but the body of the protagonist feminine, then action games enable the player to enact a conventional version of masculinity in the sense that, by beating the game, the implied male player eventually succeeds in saving the playable female characters.[52] Once again, the repetitive nature of video games comes into play. Although the player may often fail at saving the female playable character from death, the game allows him to repeat the attempt as many times it takes until he has successfully enacted his phallic masculine gender role.

The implied player of *Resident Evil* is also a young male, yet the game's haphazard, unreliable, and inefficient controls and mechanics coerce him to enact a version of masculinity that repeatedly fails to keep Jill Valentine safe. Because of her inferior resilience, Jill can take less damage than Chris and is therefore more likely to die than her male counterpart. Of course, the player can always go back to a previous save and try again, but even when he succeeds in overcoming the zombies and other obstacles, the process is tiresome, hectic, and non-seamless. Through his p-actions, the player enacts a version of masculinity that can always barely succeed, can hardly push forward, and is constantly on the verge of failing. The implied male player of Jill Valentine's scenario is a case of non-phallic masculinity, a masculinity that is in crisis.

Filmic irony and heteroglossia

Modal irony is not the only type that subverts the conventions of gender representation found in the action genre. In this section, I revisit the cinematic remediations of the game in order to show that the game's linear representation also undermines the gender politics of the action genre. In order to show this, I rely on two concepts borrowed from film and literary studies, respectively, namely filmic irony and heteroglossia.

In this section, filmic irony is understood as the rhetorical effect consisting in a more or less deliberate gap[53] between the discernible intention of the implied filmmaker[54] and the meaning which (the viewers believe) the film's aural and visual discourse actually conveys.[55] Moreover, because the multitude of non-interactive cinematic cutscenes, remediated analogue documents, and plot bottlenecks form a complex scripted narrative which players are cued to read in a traditional linear manner,[56] filmic irony can be felicitously used to uncover the rhetoric and politics of the game's linear representation.

At a first glance, *Resident Evil* seems to abide by the dominant aesthetics of realism. From its very beginning, the game attempts to create the illusion of

verisimilitude by setting its action in a recognizable temporal and spatial context. The events occur in July 1998 and the forest near Racoon City, where most of the action is set, is a familiar setting that stands for any American rural town surroundings.[57] The characters, their actions, and the material objects they use further underscore the verisimilitude of the *Resident Evil* storyworld and, thus, encourage the player to regard it as a possible world.[58] Although the game features unnatural elements such as zombies, the game naturalizes them with the help of its embedded narrative which offers a rational explanation for their existence—the outbreak of a virus conceived in a project of bioengineering.

Additionally, all the events seem to be temporally, causally, and logically linked. The narrative is triggered by the sudden disappearance of the Bravo Team, who were on a mission to investigate cases of "bizzar"[59] (sic) murder cases in Racoon City Forest. After contact with the Bravo Team is lost, S.T.A.R.S. (Special Tactics and Rescue Service) sends out Alpha Team, consisting primarily of Chris Redfield, Jill Valentine, Albert Wesker, and Barry Burton, to investigate. Alpha Team manage to find the derelict helicopter of the Bravo Team, but are soon attacked by a pack of zombie dogs and are forced to retreat into a mansion. Right after the team reach safety, they notice that one of their teammates is missing,[60] so the remaining Alpha Team members decide to split up and look for their missing comrade. As the game progresses, the player learns that the mansion is in fact a cover-up for an underground laboratory of a big pharmaceutical company called The Umbrella Corporation. In this hidden laboratory, the company was trying to develop a virus that would turn normal living beings into bioorganic weapons. However, due to a biohazard, the virus has spread uncontrollably and turned everyone in the mansion and the surrounding fauna into zombies. In addition to this, it turns out that Albert Wesker, an Alpha Team member, had been an undercover agent of Umbrella and that he had purposefully lured Alpha Team into the mansion in order to test the combat abilities of Umbrella's bioorganic weapons. The game has four endings which can be triggered by diegetically relevant decisions made by the player. While all endings feature the defeat of Albert Wesker and of Umbrella's most dangerous bioorganic weapon, the Tyrant, not all of them include the destruction of the mansion. They also differ in terms of how many S.T.A.R.S. members are saved.

When confronted with the storyworld of *Resident Evil*, the player can discern the intention of the game designer to create a verisimilar, realistic game with the help of cinematic elements, yet at the same time notices that the linear filmic representation of the storyworld is a blatantly artificial one. The discrepancy which is inferred by the player and produces filmic irony lies between the intended realism of the cutscenes and their actual lack of realism. The reason behind the cutscenes' failure to deliver on the level of the inferred intention of the implied game designer is the employment of B-series movie aesthetics. The association with B movies is not coincidental if we consider the fact that most zombie horror movies were independently produced B-series/exploitation films.[61] Being a zombie video game with cinematic pretensions, *Resident Evil* borrows not only the themes and motifs but also the form and style of B series zombie horror movies.[62] The game's two live cutscenes evince a very low production quality marked

by substandard acting and voice acting, a very simple setting, the repeated use of the stock footage, as well as unconvincing dialogues and an incoherent plot. The pre-rendered cutscenes maintain the same register by featuring substandard dialogues and voice acting.[63] Notwithstanding that the quality of the production might have been chiefly determined by the limited budget allotted to the filming of the cutscenes, the B movie aesthetics adopted by the game developers stresses the artificiality of the representation and subverts the game's claim to verisimilitude and realism. If the entire storyworld of the game is rendered an artifice, then its gender representations and their subsequent power relations also reveal their artificiality. Once the verisimilitude that underpins the representation of Chris Redfield and Jill Valentine is undermined, the normative representation of the two characters loses its ideological strength and is no longer seen as natural instances of masculinity and femininity.

Realism plays an important role not only in achieving filmic irony but heteroglossia, as well. Heteroglossia is a concept coined by the Russian literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin to describe the modern novel's accommodating of multiple or contradictory discourses pertaining to different social classes, regional/national identities, and even other literary genres.[64] In Bakhtin's view, a good novel is one that "represent[s] all the social and ideological voices of its era, that is, all the era's languages that have any claim to being significant; the novel must be a microcosm of heteroglossia."[65] This means that the novel is expected to coherently integrate these conflicting discourses. If by 'good' one understands that the novel is rhetorically efficient in creating the illusion of reality, then Bakhtin's conceptualization of discursive polyphony is helpful in further examining the manner in which visual representation in *Resident Evil* undermines itself.

Like the modern novel, *Resident Evil* features an agglomeration of genres, but unlike what Bakhtin calls 'good' novels, it does not seem to be able to coherently accommodate its multiple generic affiliations. Besides action, the video game combines elements pertaining to other (cinematic) genres such as gothic, science-fiction, and noir/detective. These genres do not harmoniously coexist in the storyworld of the game, but rather they undermine one another, thus yielding a parodic effect which further subverts the realism of the game. One relevant example is the game's save function. Because such a function is unnatural,

> [m]any horror games' save functions appear as remediated technologies: typewriter *(Resident Evil),* pen and notepad *(Silent Hill),* tape recorder *(The Thing),* diary *(Silent Hill* 4), computer disk *(Obscure).* Here, the potentially disruptive game saving act is naturalized through the strategy of immediacy, associated with the act of recording one's personal state, logging experiences of a journey or mission.[66]

Although Ewan Kirkland is right in pointing out the naturalizing effect of such remediations in *Silent Hill* (Team Silent, 1999), *The Thing* (Computer Artworks, 2002), and *Silent Hill 4: The Room* (Team Silent, 2004), in *Resident Evil* the effect is more likely one of denaturalization as a result of the tension between the

action and the gothic genre. In *Silent Hill* the protagonist, Harry Mason, is an average American man who is expected to use a pen and a notepad to take notes. In this case, the identity of the playable character and the remediated technology used to narratively dress the save function are consistent with one another, they are even monoglossic, if we were to return to Bakhtin, or, to put it in Hawreliak's terms, are in a relation of modal consonance. *Resident Evil*, however, does not integrate its save function in such a harmonious manner. Chris Redfield and Jill Valentine are conventional Ramboesque action characters with spectacular and overeroticized bodies, respectively, whose psychological and moral profiles lack the complexity characteristic of the protagonists of other genres. Their interaction with the old typewriter, which suggests that during the black saving screens the two take their time to sit and write down their memoirs in the middle of a zombie outbreak, comes off as blatantly unnatural.

The typewriter is not the only interactive object that is evidently incongruous with the assumptions of the game's storyworld and its horror atmosphere. Most items to be collected are "laughably arbitrary"[67] and their uses are incongruous with the premise of the storyworld.[68] What results from this is an emphasis on the heteroglossic nature of the game which further stresses its artificiality.

Another case of unaccommodated heteroglossia can be found in the game's representations of experientiality. As shown in the previous sections, *Resident Evil* employs 2D backgrounds which offer a high degree of photorealism, but elicit a low level of interactivity. In order to successfully complete the game, the player must inspect the 2D backgrounds and find the hidden interactive objects that are needed to progress. By pressing the interaction button next to objects in the game world, game time is paused and the engine provides the player with captions that render the thoughts of the playable character. The thought content and the interior language of Chris Redfield and Jill Valentine are incongruous not only with their identities as stereotypical action characters but also with the language they use during the cutscenes. For instance, in the early stages of the game, both Chris and Jill find a zombie eating out of a dead person. After the zombie is killed, the player can inspect the dead body who will turn out to be that of Kenneth, a fellow Alpha Team member. Upon this discovery, both Chris and Jill think that "Now he's become a mere shadow of his former self." The poetic nature of the thought content is inconsistent with the plain, sometimes ludicrous, language used in the game's voiced dialogues such as Jill being referred to as a "Jill sandwich."[69] The discrepancy between the visual representation and the thought content, as well as the one between how characters verbally express themselves and their short internal monologues, undermines the realism of Chris Redfield and Jill Valentine and, along with it, the culturally constructed normative gender identities they represent.

Metasuspense and narrative compensation

If we were to return to the definition of immersion proposed in the first part, it seems *Resident Evil* does not follow in the footsteps of most action games as far the immersion of the player is concerned. The game's visual representation of

the game world is a very fragmented one and its remediation of cinema further subverts the game's realism. In terms of interactivity, not only is the game very restrictive in terms of how the game can be beaten and what means of interaction are available, but even the actions afforded by the game engine can be performed only with great difficulty. Gameplay is constantly undermined by the clunky controls and the inefficient game mechanics, and the player finds it difficult to interiorize the commands. Instead of a seamless gameplay experience that erases the materiality of the medium, the controller and the screen persistently return to the player's attention. As I have already pointed out, these game design traits should not be regarded as flaws, but rather as productive choices that not only manage to adapt the aesthetics of horror cinema to the video game, but also challenge the gender norms of the action genre. But does such a critical game design not lead to a low level of immersion? And does this not affect the playability of *Resident Evil*? After all, if players are not engaged, then how are they expected to finish the game? In this section, I show that *Resident Evil* is indeed an immersive video game, but that its immersive strategy rests on a view different from the one endorsed by the dominant action game aesthetics. Rather than maximizing its immediacy and interactivity, *Resident Evil* compensates for the low level of the two by raising the level of its narrativity. This implies stressing sequentiality and worldmaking and supplementing the ludic motivation behind gameplay with narrative motivation in the form of metasuspense.

In order to show how the game immerses the player, I return to the relation between immersion, narrativity, and suspense and see how these categories are relevant for the immersiveness of *Resident Evil*. As the first part has shown, besides immediacy and interactivity, narrativity is also an important factor of immersion. Yet the narrativity of a video game is not one homogeneous trait, but rather it is itself contingent on four prototypical traits: situatedness, sequentiality, world-making/world-disrupting, and experientiality. Drawing on Adrienne Shaw, in the first part I linked identification with the playable character with the extent to which video games manage to represent the playable character's subjective experience of the events unfolding in the game. In the case of *Resident Evil*, as the previous section has shown, the representation of subjectivity is not only minimal, but is also undermined by the game's B movie aesthetics and its exaggerated heteroglossia.[70] As a result, the game hinders the player's identification with either of the two protagonists[71] and what ensues is a heightened sense of self-referentiality (which, of course, is also supported by the overall hypermedial game design).

Another prototypical trait which does not, or better yet did not characterize *Resident Evil* is that of situatedness. Because this feature is related to the appropriateness of the context of storytelling, assessing the extent to which playing the game was deemed a storytelling occasion presupposes a diachronic approach. In the first part of this book, I have argued that before the mid-1990s action video games featured a low degree of narrativity, which means that for the players of the action video games of 1996, playing *Resident Evil* was less likely to be considered a storytelling occasion. Although it was actually games such as

Resident Evil that started focusing on narrativity, it would be farfetched to argue that it alone turned playing action games from a merely ludic experience into an appropriate context for narrative communication, as well.

If situatedness and experientiality are two prototypical narrative features that are not to be found in *Resident Evil* in high degrees, the same cannot be said of sequentiality and world-making/world-disruption. The discussion of the storyworld of the game so far has revealed that *Resident Evil* does feature a series of temporally, logically, and causally linked events trigged by a disrupting element, namely the disappearance of the Bravo Team in the forest near Racoon City. What has been less stressed in this chapter so far is the aspect of worldmaking.

Worldmaking is a process inherent to any narrative medium since readers, viewers, spectators, or players have to mentally create a storyworld based on the material signs emitted by the narrative medium.[72] What is particular about *Resident Evil* (and games in general) is that the player is not a passive receiver of input, but he is also responsible for producing the material signs that cue the mental construction of the storyworld. Narrative progress hinges on the player's ability to overcome the obstacles and reach the predetermined plot bottlenecks that push the story forward.

Because finding out what will happen next in the narrative depends on gameplay, the motivation to play should be supplemented by 'what' suspense. Conversely, *Resident Evil* contains an embedded narrative which consists of a multitude of remediated documents scattered around game space. Once collected and read or viewed, the player can put together the recounted events and comprehend what happened before and who is responsible for the zombie outbreak.[73] Therefore, the exploration of game space, besides the ludic motivation of finding resources, should also receive narrative motivation in the form of 'how/who' suspense.

However, *Resident Evil*'s narrative design comes in to downplay the 'what' and 'how/who' types of suspense and foreground metasuspense, in their stead. As mentioned in the first part, metasuspense is the type of engagement engendered by highly predictable narratives. Interpreters of such narratives are not interested in what will happen next or what has led to a particular outcome in the storyworld, but instead they are eager to see what artificial means the medium will use to reach the narrative's predictable ending. *Resident Evil* cues such an engagement since its plot is so formulaic and the cinematic conventions so obvious that the player can already infer much of the outcome of the game after the first two cutscenes and a few minutes of gameplay. When playing the game, players are not cognitively engrossed in the task of solving the mystery and trying to infer the outcome, but rather in anticipating the artificial means that the game will use in order to reach its foreseeable outcome. This type of narrative engagement with video games is similar to what Gonzalo Frasca calls metaoutmersion, a player stance characterized by a critical attitude with respect to the game's artificiality and politics, but which also maintains player involvement.[74]

From its very onset, the game uses a set of cinematic clichés that trigger the player's metasuspense. The first live-action cutscene begins with Chris Redfield's

voiceover evoking the backdrop of the events—Bravo Team is lost investigating cases of murder where the victims had been "apparently" eaten. Although the kind of danger that awaits the Alpha Team is unbeknownst to its members, the mentioning of cannibalism helps the player to infer that the main threat in *Resident Evil* is represented by zombies. The presence of zombies taps into the player's experience of horror films and raises a wide set of expectations with respect to the storyworld of the game. Players know that zombies are dead people infected with a virus that makes them come back to life. They expect zombies to be slow, but resilient to physical trauma and to instantly die when shot in the head. Additionally, since zombie outbreaks are the result of a biohazard (as confirmed by the Japanese title of the game), players will not be surprised to encounter a laboratory at some point during the game.

The introductory live-action cutscene also provides clues with respect to the true identity of the characters. After Alpha Team escape from the pack of zombie dogs and run into the mansion, the game presents the cast. Each member of the Alpha Team is shown in a medium shot that lets the player see their faces, gear, and costumes. In keeping with the cinematic convention of linking exterior appearance to psychology and morality, the stark difference between Albert Wesker and the other S.T.A.R.S. members gives the former away as the villain. While all other Alpha team members wear white T-Shirts and coloured vests, the blonde Wesker is dressed in black, wears sunglasses, and poses for the camera in a smug manner. The player's suspicion that Wesker is, in fact, the villain is strengthened by a document called "Orders" which he finds in the early stages of the game in the taxidermy room:

> TOP SECRET July 22, 1998 2:13
>
> To the Head of the Security Department
>
> "X-day" is approaching. Complete the following orders within the week.
>
> 1. Lure the members of S.T.A.R.S. into the lab and have them fight with the B.O.W. in order to obtain data of actual battles.
>
> 2. Collect two embryos per B.O.W. type making sure to include all species except for Tyrant.
>
> 3. Destroy the Arkley lab including all researchers and lab animals in a manner which will seem accidental.
>
> White Umbrella

If Wesker's presentation has not been enough for the player to acknowledge his status as a villain, by corroborating the information in the written document with previous events of the game, the player can without much difficulty deduct that Wesker is the antagonist.

Considering all of the above, it safe to claim that *Resident Evil*'s storyworld generates a high level of metasuspense which manages to maintain the player's narrative engagement throughout the entire gameplay experience. This heightened narrative engagement compensates for the low levels of immediacy and interactivity and makes the immersion of the player possible. Immersion then lends persuasiveness to *Resident Evil*'s deconstructive procedural rhetoric.

Conclusion

This chapter has been an attempt to analyze the game design of *Resident Evil* in the context of the norms of the action genre with a focus on immersion and gender representation/simulation. The investigation of the game mechanics and the visual aesthetics has shown that the game fosters a hypermedial gameplay experience that immerses the player in a different manner than most of its contemporary action games and those that were to come. Instead of maximizing the realism of the aural and visual representation and the seamlessness of its controls, *Resident Evil* compensates for its low levels of immediacy and interactivity with a high degree of narrativity buttressed by sequentiality, world-making, and metasuspense.

This alternative game design enables the game to approach the representation and simulation of gender from an engaging but at the same time critical perspective. In opposition to most mainstream action games that seek to naturalize hypermasculinity, through its use of modal irony, filmic irony, and heteroglossia, *Resident Evil* immerses the player in a way that commands disbelief in the conventions of gender representation and simulation in action games and reveals their artificiality. The player of *Resident Evil* is coerced to perform a version of masculinity that defies the Ramboesque expectations generated by the game's heteromedial elements and the player's experience of action films, comics, and other games. When playing as Chris Redfield, the player controls a weak and vulnerable protagonist whose simulation is nowhere near the action spectacle offered by the male playable characters of other games but can be regarded as a simulation of masculinity in crisis. Conversely, when choosing Jill Valentine, the implied male player is coerced to systematically fail at keeping the female playable character safe, which amounts to a similar simulation of masculinity in crisis.

Notes

1 Richard J. Hand, "Proliferating Horrors: Survival Horror and the *Resident Evil* franchise," in *Horror Film: Creating and Marketing Fear*, ed. Steffen Hantke (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 118.
2 Jason Hawreliak, *Multimodal Semiotics and Rhetoric in Videogames* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018).
3 Nathan Birch, "Who to Blame for That Awful Voice Acting, and Other Things You Might Not Know about 'Resident Evil'," *Uproxx*, October 22, 2014, https://uproxx.com/gaming/10-facts-you-might-not-know-about-the-original-resident-evil/. Bernard Perron, "Survival Horror Games," in *Encyclopedia of Video Games: The Culture, Technology, and Art of Gaming*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood), 636.

4 Besides the obvious link to *Alone in the Dark* (Infogrames, 1992), *Resident Evil* pays tribute to other previous games, as well. In its early development stages, *Resident Evil* was intended to be a remake of *Sweet Home* (Capcom, 1989). The idea was eventually dropped, but *Resident Evil* maintained some of the salient gameplay elements such as the management of items, puzzle solving, the participation of multiple characters to the resolution of the game, the existence of multiple endings and the pre-rendered cutscenes with opening doors that play before entering a new location. Due to the common characteristics of the two games, scholars regard *Sweet Home* as an important forerunner of the survival horror genre. Some of *Resident Evil's* game design choices can also be traced back to *Metal Gear* (Konami, 1987) and *Metal Gear 2* (Konami, 1990). The two action games favour evasion to combat and require that the player collect and use a variety of items in order to make progress. These items are managed in an inventory that not only pauses game time, but also switches to a screen that is far more abstract and schematic than the live action simulation. See Peter Tieryas, "The NES Game that Inspired *Resident Evil*," *Kotaku*, December 16, 2019, https://kotaku.com/the-nes-game-that-inspired-resident-evil-1687040111. See also Ewan Kirkland, "Survival Horrality: Analysis of a Videogame Genre," *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* 10 (October 2011): 23, https://research.brighton.ac.uk/en/publications/survival-horrality-analysis-of-a-videogame-genre.

5 Richard Rouse III, "Match Made in Hell: The Inevitable Success of the Horror Genre in Video Games," in *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, ed. Bernard Perron (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009), 23; Laurie N. Taylor, "Gothic Bloodlines in Survival Horror Gaming," in *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, ed. Bernard Perron (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009), 51.

6 For a more detailed account of how the technological limitations of the PlayStation impacted the game design of *Resident Evil*, see Broc Holmquest, "Survival Horror, Metaculture and the Fluidity of Video Game Genres," in *Unraveling* Resident Evil. *Essays on the Complex Universe of the Games and Films*, ed. Nadine Farghaly (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2014), 82–103.

7 Although cutscenes are regarded as remediations of film, not all cutscenes are produced as films are. As discussed in Chapter 1, depending on how they are produced/rendered, cutscenes can be separated into three categories: live-action cutscenes, pre-rendered cutscenes, and real time cutscenes. *Resident Evil* features the first two types. Because live-action cutscenes are more referential, they are expected to increase the game's realism. Matthew Barton, "Resurrecting 'Obsolete' Video Techniques from *Alone in the Dark* and *Resident Evil*," in *The Playful Undead and Video Games: Critical Analyses of Zombies and Gameplay*, eds. Stephen J. Webley and Peter Zackariasson (New York and London: Routledge, 2020), 65.

8 Capcom, *Resident Evil*, Capcom, 1996.

9 Yvonne Tasker, "Action women: Muscles, Mothers and Others," in *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 65–88.

10 Jeffrey A. Brown, *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011).

11 Esther MacCallum Stewart, "'A Jill Sandwich' – Gender Representation in Zombie Video Games," in *The Playful Undead and Video Games: Critical Analyses of Zombies and Gameplay*, eds. Stephen J. Webley and Peter Zackariasson (New York and London: Routledge, 2020), 265.

12 The only exception is the puzzle in the bar where the Moonlight Sonata has to be correctly interpreted on the piano for a secret door to open. Because Chris cannot play the piano, he requires the help of Rebecca Chambers, another survivor who Chris comes across in the game.

13 Yvonne Tasker, *Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 9.

14 Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 7.
15 The oversexualization of Jill Valentine is developed in a successive version of the game, *Resident Evil Director's Cut* (Capcom, 1997). When playing the "arrange" mode, Jill Valentine wears a more revealing outfit which highlights her bodily shape to a greater extent than the costume in the original *Resident Evil* does.
16 The game has several endings which differ depending on how many of the Alpha Team members the player manages to save.
17 Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).
18 Shohini Chaudhuri, *Feminist Film Theorists* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 110.
19 Ewan Kirkland, "Storytelling in Survival Horror Video Games," in *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, ed. Bernard Perron (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009), 64; Hand, "Proliferating Horrors," 117; Holmquest, "Survival Horror," 89.
20 Taylor, "Gothic Bloodlines," 52.
21 Holmquest, "Survival Horror," 90.
22 For the unpredictability of the zombies' positions in game space, see Bernard Perron, "The Pace and Reach of Video Game Zombies," in *The Playful Undead and Video Games: Critical Analyses of Zombies and Gameplay*, eds. Stephen J. Webley and Peter Zackariasson (New York and London: Routledge, 2020), 317–318.
23 Tanya Krzywinska, "Hands-On Horror," in *Screen Play: Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces*, eds. Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2002), 210; Carl Therrien, "Games of Fear: A Multi-Faceted Historical Account of the Horror Genre in Video Games," in *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, ed. Bernard Perron (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009), 36.
24 See Kirkland, "Storytelling," 65–6; Holmquest, "Survival Horror," 87.
25 Taylor, "Gothic Bloodlines," 51.
26 Bernard Perron, "Sign of a Threat: The Effects of Warning Systems in Survival Horror Games," in *Proceedings of COSIGN 2004*, University of Split, Croatia, 2004, 1–10.
27 Such cinematic effects are difficult to attain in games where the player never loses control of the camera. For instance, in the horror-themed first-person shooter *F.E.A.R. 3* (Day 1 Studios, 2011), the player often misses jump scares because the player happens to be looking in a different direction. See also Bernard Perron, *The World of Scary Video Games* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 187.
28 Perron, "Sign of a Threat," 2.
29 Krzywinska, "Hands-On Horror," 207.
30 Ewan Kirkland, "Resident Evil's Typewriter: Survival Horror and Its Remediations," *Games and Culture* 4, no. 3 (2008): 121, doi: 10.1177/1555412008325483; Robert Meija and Ryuta Komaki, "The Historical Conception of Biohazard in *Biohazard/Resident Evil*," in *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History* (New York: Bloomsbury), 328.
31 Krzywinska, "Hands-On Horror," 207–208.
32 Matthew Wiese, "The Rules of Horror: Procedural Adaptation in *Clock Tower*, *Resident Evil*, and *Dead Rising*," in *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, ed. Bernard Perron (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009), 254.
33 See Christopher W. Totten, "Building a Better Zombie," *Gamasutra*, June 28, 2012, https://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/173144/building_a_better_zombie.php?page=3.
34 See the concept of flow discussed in Chapter 1.
35 See the section "Zombie Simulation" in Wiese, "The Rules of Horror."
36 Holmquest, "Survival Horror," 91.

37 Krzywinska, "Hands-On Horror," 217; Andrei Nae and Alexandra Ileana Bacalu, "Toward a Reconsideration of Hypermediacy: Immersion in Survival Horror Video Games and Eighteenth-century Novels," in *Playing the Field: Video Games and American Studies*, ed. Sascha Pöhlmann (Boston, MA and Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019), 141.
38 Nae et al. "Toward a Reconsideration of Hypermediacy," 136.
39 Ibid.
40 See the discussion on interactivity in Chapter 1. See also Andreas Gregersen and Torben Grodal, "Embodiment and Interface," in *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*, eds. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), 67.
41 Nae et al., "Toward a Reconsideration of Hypermediacy," 135.
42 For a discussion of the tension between moving and not moving and the redundancy of the level design, see Krzywinska "Hands-On Horror," 218 and Nae et al., "Toward a Reconsideration of Hypermediacy," 141.
43 Marc C. Santos and Sarah E. White, "Playing with Ourselves: A Psychoanalytic Investigation of *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill*," in *Digital Gameplay, Essays on the Nexus of Game and Gamer*, ed. Nate Garrelts (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc, 2005), 69–79.
44 Silverman, *Male Subjectivity*.
45 Derek A. Burrill. *Die Tryin': Video Games, Masculinity,* Culture (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).
46 Burrill. *Die Tryin'*, 21.
47 Hawreliak, *Multimodal Semiotics*, 88.
48 Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism,* Psychoanalysis (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); Brown, *Dangerous Curves*. Carol J. Clover. *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992, 2015); Soraya Murray, *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2018).
49 Brown's claim also implies an identification of the male player with the action heroine's masculine attributes. As discussed in the introduction, it is not necessary for the player to identify with the playable character for the ideology implicit in the game design to work. Irrespective of where the player finds himself between total self-referentiality and total identification, by not questioning the gender roles the player is coerced to enact, games often render gender a natural category inextricably linked to biological sex. See Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 115.
50 As Esther MacCallum-Stewart points out, male players had been accustomed to female playable characters, although not in narrative leading role, in fighting games such as the *Street Fighter* series. Their relation to the playable characters, rather than being one of identification leading to transgendering (a thesis also refuted later by Adrienne Shaw's ethnographic study), is a more pragmatic one based on gameplay, tactics, and strategy. See Esther MacCallum-Stewart, "Real Boys Carry Girly Epics: Normalising Gender Bending in Online Games," *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture* 2, no. 1 (2008): 27–40, https://www.eludamos.org/index.php/eludamos/article/view/vol2no1-5/51. Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
51 Hye-Won Han and Se-Jin Song, "Characterization of Female Protagonists in Video Games: A Focus on Lara Croft," *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 20, no. 3 (2014): 36, doi: 10.1080/12259276.2014.11666189. Maja Mikuila, "Gender and Videogames: The Political Valency of Lara Croft," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 17, no. 1 (2003): 81, doi: 10.1080/1030431022000049038. Murray, *On Video Games*, 134–136.
52 See the discussion of the most recent *Tomb Raider* games in Chapter 2.
53 I describe irony by using the phrase "more or less deliberate gap" because irony is not always an effect desired by the film maker. It is often the case, especially in B series

movies, that the film maker(s) genuinely wishes to convey a particular message, yet their endeavour is undermined by the limited budget.

54 It is well known that film is the product of collective authorship. However, as David Herman has argued, when making sense of a film, viewers ascribe intention to a singular authorial entity, irrespective of the extent to which the film in case is the result of collaborative creative work. David Herman, "Authors, Narration, Narrators," in *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates*, eds. David Herman, James Phelan, Peter J. Rabinowitz, Brian Richardson, and Robyn Warhol (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012), 48–49.

55 James MacDowell, *Irony in Film* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 172.

56 See Kirkland, "Storytelling," 65.

57 In an attempt to market *Resident Evil* internationally, Racoon City was bereft of local Japanese identifiers. However, the idea of universality embedded in the conception of Racoon City is ideological. "The Raccoon City of *Resident Evil 1* is positioned as an innocent, traditional, "every city," and, along with its protagonists, who are conceived as universal subjects, configured as sympathetic sites and populations: the victims are either predominantly White or unmarked (and hence, presumed to be White), and so too are the protagonists. This particular articulation of whiteness in relation to the outbreak narrative is significant, for, as Priscilla Wald argues, the discourses embedded within epidemics carry with them suggestions as to how to understand who suffers and what must be done in the face of potential epidemic.12 So though the franchise's biopolitics operates unevenly and at the transnational level, the Resident Evil franchise established a particular configuration of the White, gendered, classed, and heterosexual subject as the primary population of concern, as well as primary agents of action." Mejia et al. "The Historical Conception of Biohazard," 329–330.

58 According to Marie-Laure Ryan, at the core of interpreting fictional worlds lies the process of recentering. Recentering means that, when faced with fictional worlds, interpreters construe them as if they were real, although they are always aware of their nonfactuality. The more similar the fictional world is to the real world, the easier it is for interpreters to see it as a possible world and for them to be immersed in it. See Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 103.

59 Capcom, *Resident Evil*, Capcom, 1996.

60 The missing character depends on the role assumed by the player at the beginning of the game. If the player opts for Chris Redfield, then it is Jill Valentine who is missing. If the player plays as Jill, then Chris Redfield is the missing member.

61 I am aware that historically and economically B movies and exploitation films do not necessarily denote the same thing, although aesthetically they are both considered of 'low' value. B movies were independently produced films of low quality which were screened after the main feature of a double bill. Due to practices such as block booking and flat rental, the profitability of the movies could be accurately estimated even before they premiered. As a result, the studios were mostly interested in the quantity, rather than the quality of the pictures. The antitrust ruling of 1948 led to the abolition of block booking, and, eventually, to the end of the B movie as defined by its historical and economic circumstances. Unlike B movies, exploitation films were not ended by the antitrust ruling, since they hadn't obligatorily been part of a double feature. In fact, exploitation existed even before cinema emerged and could be found in pre-cinematic technologies such as magic lanterns, zoetropes, kinetographs, kinetoscopes, and other precursors of cinema. Exploitation films are defined by controversial, taboo or even banned topics, a low production value, independent distribution, that often operated within state limits, screening in grindhouses, and a set of particular viewing practices. After the relaxation of the Production Code, which beginning with 1956 started to tolerate the display of abortion, drug use, prostitution,

and miscegenation, exploitation films as defined by their relation to censorship found their end. Although the historical contexts that afforded this classification are no longer valid, like many film studies scholars I employ the terms B movie and exploitation to refer to the particular aesthetics of these films that were able to transcend the historical and economic context of the 1940s and 1950s, respectively. See Blair Davis, "The 1950's B-Movie: The Economics of Cultural Production." (doctoral thesis, McGill University, 2007), 2, 16, 24; Eric Schaefer, *"Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!" A History of Exploitation Films, 1919–1959* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 4–6; Paul Watson, "There's No Accounting for Taste: Exploitation Cinema and the Limits of Film Theory," in *Trash Aesthetics: Popular Culture and Its Audience*, eds. Deborah Cartmell, I. Q. Hunter, Heidi Kaye, and Imelda Whelehan (London: Pluto Press, 1997), 72.

62 It should be pointed out that the analysis of cinematic irony starts from the assumption that the implied game designer does not want to undermine the realism of the game. The narratological enquiry proposed here is indebted to one of the main assumptions of narrative theory, namely that the implied author, film-maker, or game designer etc. is a heuristic tool different from the actual creator of the narrative whose genetic intention cannot be determined. See Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1980), 147–151.

63 One particular dialogue has become viral among fans due to its unrealistic lines and poor delivery. After Barry Burton saves Jill from a room where the latter was on the verge of being crushed by a lowering ceiling, Barry comments: "That was too close. You were almost [*sic*] a Jill sandwich."

64 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 262–264.

65 Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 411.

66 Kirkland, "Resident Evil's Typewriter," 122.

67 Holmquest, "Survival Horror," 90.

68 Adam M. Crowley, "Why They Keep Coming Back: The Allure of Incongruity," in *Unraveling* Resident Evil. *Essays on the Complex Universe of the Games and Films*, ed. Nadine Farghaly (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2014), 52–53.

69 Commenting on the ludicrous cutscenes, Crowley notices their potential to disrupt the horror atmosphere of the game as a result of their non-interactive nature. During its interaction, the player is less likely to be bothered by the absurdity of the game. See Crowley, "Why They Keep Coming Back," 59.

70 Interestingly, one of the most experientially rich elements of *Resident Evil* pertain to an absent character, an infected security guard who used to keep a diary. The successive diary entries keep track of his subjective experience of the events and give the players direct access to the psychological decay inherent to his progressive transformation into a zombie. See Charlie Reed, "Resident Evil's Rhetoric: The Communication of Corruption in Survival Horror Video Games," *Games and Culture* 11, no. 6 (2016): 633. doi: 10.1177/1555412015575363.

71 For an account of this monograph's view on identification, see Chapter 1 and Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*.

72 See Marie Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 7.

73 According to Ewan Kirkland, the game's narrative architecture dispersed in anachronistic media technologies is one of the traits that links *Resident Evil* to the gothic. Ewan Kirkland, "Gothic and Survival Horror Videogames," in *The Gothic* World, eds. Glennis Byron and Dale Townshend (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 460.

74 See Gonzalo Frasca, "Immersion, Outmersion & Critical Thinking" (2006), quoted in Souvik Mukherjee, *Video Games and Storytelling: Reading Games and Playing Books* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 189.

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4 The verisimilar representation and simulation of masculinity in crisis in *Silent Hill 2*

Resident Evil's (Capcom, 1996) strongest competitor on the gaming market in the late 1990s and early 2000s was the video game franchise *Silent Hill* (Team Silent) owned by Konami which debuted with the series' eponymous instalment in 1999.[1] Although the game was both critically and financially successful, it would be the 2001 released *Silent Hill 2* (Team Silent) that would stand out as the series' most representative instalment. Although the gameplay of *Silent Hill 2* is indebted to that of *Resident Evil*, in terms of narrative design, the two take two different avenues. While *Resident Evil* fosters metasuspense in order to immerse the player in an interactive storyworld whose realism is systematically undermined by the productive use of modal irony, filmic irony, and heteroglossia, the narrative of *Silent Hill 2* is constructed with a view to maintaining the illusion of realism and verisimilitude.

In his analysis of its game design, Ewan Kirkland mentions that, despite the anti-immersive gameplay inherited from *Resident Evil*, *Silent Hill 2* nonetheless manages to be an engaging gameplay experience. Drawing on Jeffrey Sconce's reflections on the function of anti-mimeticism in horror cinema,[2] Ewan Kirkland intimates that hypermediacy, rather than disengaging the players from the game, actually further augments their involvement.[3] This chapter elaborates on Kirkland's observation and shows how the storyworld of *Silent Hill 2* manages to naturalize and narrativize the otherwise hypermedial mechanics and controls typical of the survival horror genre. As in the case of *Resident Evil*, immersion is achieved by means of narrative compensation with the important difference that now the role of metasuspense is fulfilled by the 'what' and 'how/why' forms of suspense and that the storyworld offers diegetic explanations for the constricting and dysfunctional game mechanics and controls that would normally prompt a self-referential, anti-immersive stance. Consequently, instead of modal dissonance, *Silent Hill 2* can be regarded as a case of modal consonance where the procedural, visual, and aural modes complete one another.

The manner in which *Silent Hill 2* constructs its storyworld has a strong bearing on how gender is represented and simulated. Instead of flaunting the artificiality of hypermasculinity, the game offers a verisimilar alternative to it. James Sunderland, the game's protagonist, is a white heterosexual everyman experiencing a crisis of masculinity: he is weak, helpless, vulnerable, and overcome by

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the obstacles he faces. By focusing on the character's complex psychology and on his subjective experience of traversing the town of Silent Hill looking for his presumably dead wife, the game contributes to the diversification of the male gender construct and challenges the overconfident, hyperpotent white heterosexual male protagonists that dominate the AAA gaming industry.[4]

In order to show how the game's immersive strategy leads to a critique of conventional representations and simulations of masculinity in action games, I first investigate the narrative expectation engendered by the game's paratexts and heteromedial elements. My next step will be to show how gameplay and the linear story which is revealed as one plays confirm these expectations. A great focus will be laid not only on how the game mechanics are harmoniously implemented in the storyworld by means of narrativization, but also on how these mechanics strip the playable character of potency. After examining the relation between mechanics and narrative, I move my attention to the scripted and the embedded narrative to show how the predetermined sequence of events subverts the conservative gender politics of the damsel-in-distress plot. I further argue that this process of subversion has a series of consequences for immersion and narrativity and show that by thwarting player identification with the protagonist *Silent Hill 2* raises awareness with respect to the sexist ideology underpinning white heterosexual masculine heroism. Finally, I examine the game's three endings and the algorithm used by the game engine to select one of the three. I reveal that, in an attempt to harmoniously link the emergent narrative resulting from gameplay with the scripted narrative, the engine takes into account ludically trivial, but allegedly diegetically relevant in-game actions in its attempt to provide players with an ending that is narratively consistent with their emotional and ethical involvement in the game. This final game design choice may, however, impede the overall procedural rhetoric of the game which consists in a critique of the positive, normative masculine construct.

Implicit in the analysis provided below is an assessment of *Silent Hill 2*'s level of narrativity with focuses on the four prototypical features proposed by David Herman. The focus on narrativity is relevant for understanding the game's immersive strategy which consists in compensating by diegetic means for the low levels of immediacy and interactivity fostered by gameplay. Thanks to its ability to immerse the player in its interactive storyworld, the game can persuasively mount a procedural critique of patriarchy.

Art-house horror

Even before gameplay begins, *Silent Hill 2* encourages players to construe the game as if it were an interactive art-house horror film. To this end, the game makes use of a variety of markers which function as narrative frames that bring up the cinematic register. The game rejects *Resident Evil*'s association with B-series/exploitation films and borrows form and content from high art cinema.[5] Its 2001 E3 trailer consists mostly of the game's cinematic cutscenes and only briefly does it show gameplay. The cinematic fragments have nothing of the substandard

acting and production of the first *Resident Evil* games or the shocking taboo subjects of exploitation horror. Instead, the well-delivered dialogues bring up issues such as love, betrayal, desire, and authenticity, which are evidence for the psychological complexity of the characters[6] who are marked by internal struggles. The conflict of *Silent Hill 2* is presented to prospective players not so much as an external one, where an indisputably good protagonist usually has to defeat a series of essentially evil antagonists, but rather the player must guide the avatar along a rigidly designed plot that will eventually lead to a resolution of James's internal struggle, which the trailer announces as being related to his conflicting feeling towards his wife, Mary, who has allegedly died of a terminal illness.

Silent Hill 2's high art register and the subsequent narrative expectations it raises do not only bring the game closer to the art-house cinema, but they also distance it from the norms of the action-adventure genre.[7] That a trailer should feature lengthy cinematic segments is not uncommon if we consider the cinematic origins of the trailer, a promotional material which demands that the content look good and which sets out the main narrative coordinates of the game. However, on top of this, video games also use cinematic trailers in order to give potential gamers a glimpse of the action spectacle that the gameplay will offer. In the trailer for *Silent Hill 2*, the presentation of its action spectacle[8] is subsidiary to the personal drama of James Sunderland which is presented through intense and dramatic dialogues that take up most of the trailer. Judging by the trailer, *Silent Hill 2* seems to be twice removed from the conventions of mainstream action games: first, being a survival horror game in the vein of *Resident Evil*, it rejects the mainstream game design norms that call for a seamless gameplay experience based on easily learnable core mechanics and controls; second, while some survival horror games still focus on action and combat, *Silent Hill 2* foregrounds the psychological evolution of the protagonist and the secondary characters.

Besides art-house cinema, the trailer is also indicative of the game's association with the horror genre. For those who had already played *Silent Hill*, the horror register of *Silent Hill 2* was implicit, but the players who were not familiar with the first instalment of the series had to rely on other markers in order to create their own horizon of expectation concerning the game's genre.[9] In the game's E3 trailer, the most obvious horror elements are the forms of abjection present in the short recorded gameplay moments. According to Julia Kristeva, abjection refers to those objects that "take the ego back to its source on the abominable limits from which, in order to be, the ego has broken away—it assigns it a source in the non-ego, drive, and death."[10] Kristeva's account of abjection pays tribute to Jacques Lacan's theory of the formation of the subject which posits that the child becomes a conscious individual by gradually separating itself from its mother. This process has two important stages: the mirror stage and that of entering the symbolic order.[11] The mirror stage refers to that period in the child's development when it identifies with its own image in the mirror and by doing so acknowledges that it is different from the other objects and bodies surrounding it, including that of its mother.[12] Second, through the successful resolution of

the Oedipus complex, the child interiorizes the law of the father which stands for the language and norms of the culture it is brought up in.[13] Once the child has embraced the symbolic order, its self is culturally constructed and its natural bond to the mother is forever severed. From this, Kristeva draws the conclusion that, since the subject is symbolic, i.e. cultural, the subject's constitution can be destabilized by objects that remind one of one's pre-subjective natural stage. To these objects, she refers as instances of abjection.[14]

The concept of abjection has proven particularly relevant for understanding the aesthetics and politics of horror. In her seminal work *The Monstrous-Feminine*, Barbara Creed observers that horror films abound in representations of abjection in the form of bodily wastes, bodily fluids, cadavers, and unbridled maternal authority.[15] The monsters featured in *Silent Hill 2*'s E3 trailer, the lying figure, the mannequin, and the bubblehead nurse, embody the conventions of monstrous femininity as they are undead feminine beings with excessive corporeality. Their femininity is deceiving[16] since the lower human parts of their bodies uphold amorphous live entities (lying figure), cancerous faces (Bubblehead Nurse), or soulless non-anthropomorphic entities (mannequin).[17] Besides their visual design, the mechanics governing these non-playable characters also stress the hyperproductivity of their feminine bodies: they are all characterized by excessive bleeding upon physical trauma, and lying figures, in particular, attack the playable character by spitting corrosive saliva on him, thus eliciting the fear of contamination.[18]

Just as important as the trailer in setting up player expectations is the cover of the game. Instead of the image of an armed muscular male protagonist typical of action games, the standard PlayStation 2 cover features an edited close-up shot of Angela Orosco, a non-playable secondary character in the storyworld of the game. The absence of any suggestion of combat and the focus on the facial expression once again cue players to expect a video game where the psychological evolution of the characters supersedes the action spectacle one expects to result from interaction with the game world.

The trailer and the cover of the game imply a denial of the ludic[19] which compels players to rely on their experience of linear media such as cinema in order to mentally construct the storyworld of *Silent Hill 2*.[20] In addition to expectations concerning character profile, realism, psychological motivation, narrative structure, and other such elements pertaining to diegesis, the expectations raised by *Silent Hill 2*'s heteromedial elements also affect the situatedness, the trait of narrativity accounting for storytelling context appropriateness. At the turn of the millennium, video games were far from being generally considered a conventional storytelling situation, yet it is through such strategies of evoking narrativity that games like *Silent Hill 2* actively shape socially constructed notions of what counts as a narrative and a storytelling context. Moreover, if we narrow our focus to the subculture of survival horror fans, playing *Silent Hill 2* may very well have been considered a narrative situation due to the preceding survival horror video games that beginning with *Resident Evil* had entertained a strong intermedial bond with the cinema.

The narrativization of gameplay and the mechanics of vulnerability

If *Resident Evil*'s gameplay denies the horizon of expectations engendered by the game's cover and introductory cutscenes, the mechanics of *Silent Hill 2* converge with the generic and diegetic expectations determined by the game's heteromedial elements. From a strictly functional perspective, gameplay follows the same principles as those of *Resident Evil*, despite some notable additions that may seem to make the control of the character somewhat more intuitive. For starters, besides the traditional tank controls, the game offers the player an alternative movement control scheme called "directional control," which can be activated in the options menu. When it is activated, the player can move relative to the camera angle by pressing the corresponding movement button on the keyboard or controller by using the controller's D-pad or left analog stick.

Another addition to the game design of *Resident Evil* which one might expect to facilitate gameplay is that of tracking cameras. Because movement in earlier survival horror games was also encumbered by the use of fixed camera angles, *Silent Hill 2* features tracking cameras in big locations such as the outdoors of Silent Hill and limits the use of fixed camera angles to small indoor spaces. Employing tracking cameras means that there are fewer cuts and the change of angle looks more natural, making the control of the player more predictable and seamless. Furthermore, *Silent Hill 2* lends players indirect control of the camera by means of a recentering function dubbed "search view." Whereas in previous games players had no direct control over the angle from which the playable character was seen, the players of *Silent Hill 2* can move the camera behind the playable character to a pre-established position. This way, the game can sometimes preclude the situation when the playable character has to move forward or is threatened by something standing in front of him, but the camera faces the playable character.

Another significant addition to the original formula consists in stealth mechanics. Despite the few available resources and the inefficient combat mechanics, survival horror games do not usually feature stealth mechanics that might aid the player in avoiding confrontation. *Silent Hill 2* once again strays from this convention and introduces this possibility. In order for the player not to be noticed by the monsters roaming Silent Hill, he must turn off the flashlight and walk beside them by relying on the radio static whose volume indicates how close the monsters are.

Although *Silent Hill 2* apparently tries to make gameplay less cumbersome and, therefore, align itself to the more hospitable, player-friendly conventions of mainstream action games, in what follows I would like to argue that the new mechanics fall short of their apparent goal and that they end up simulating a version of non-phallic masculinity which conforms to the survival horror canon established by *Resident Evil*. But, while *Resident Evil*'s simulation of non-phallic masculinity is incongruous with the visual representation of hypermasculinity, in *Silent Hill 2* the visual, aural, and procedural mode are complementary, i.e. they are in a relation of modal consonance. The congruence of the three relies on

the game's capacity to narrativize most of its mechanics. By means of narrativization, the game maintains a high degree of narrativity which compensates for the low level of interactivity determined by the cumbersome mechanics and controls and, consequently, it manages to preserve the level of immersion. Moreover, the narrativization of the mechanics and controls engenders an emergent narrative which, as it will be discussed in the next section, is consistent with the game's scripted events (the scripted narrative)[21] and the diegetic information found in remediated documents scattered around game space (the embedded narrative).[22]

Narrativization is a concept proposed by the literary scholar Monika Fludernik which entails that

> [w]hen readers are confronted with potentially unreadable narratives, texts that are radically inconsistent, they cast about for ways and means of recuperating these texts as narratives motivated by the generic markers that go with the book. They therefore attempt to re-cognize what they find in the text in terms of the natural telling or experiencing or viewing parameters, or they try to recuperate the inconsistencies in terms of actions and event structures at the most minimal level. This process of narrativization, of making something a narrative by the sheer act of imposing narrativity on it, needs to be located in the dynamic reading process where such interpretative recuperations hold sway.[23]

This reception process of making the unnatural elements of a narrative consistent with the storyworld occurs not only in novel reading but also in gameplay, an experience that calls for a constant naturalization and narrativization of otherwise overtly anti-mimetic game functions. Although narrativization is part of the reception process and is based on our in-world experience as embodied beings, including here our experience of previous narratives, it can also be encouraged by the medium which delivers the narrative. An example in this respect is *Silent Hill 2* which attempts to offer more or less direct diegetic explanations for the cumbersome controls and unreliable core mechanics.

The most readily available example of how *Silent Hill 2* narrativizes gameplay is the manner in which it visually obstructs the player's sight. While *Resident Evil* uses only its artificial means of representation to block player sight, i.e. through fixed camera angles that leave out considerable portions of the playable character's location (what Bernard Perron calls discursive blind space),[24] *Silent Hill 2* approaches visual obstruction differently. As already mentioned, in most locations the player can reposition the camera behind the playable character, but the activation of this mechanic does not broaden the field of vision. When the playable character is not blinded by fixed camera angles (although this still happens in small rooms), his vision is obstructed by elements in the physical game world, namely thick fog and darkness (what is referred to by Bernard Perron as diegetic blindness).[25] If in the case of *Resident Evil* this kind of visual obstruction leads to hypermediacy because it is determined by extra-diegetic elements, in *Silent Hill 2* it is not perceived as disruptive because it is coherently included in

the game's storyworld. Although the camera recentering mechanic can frustrate the player due to its inefficiency in clearing out what lies ahead, its use does not impeach upon immersion.

A good example of how *Silent Hill 2* engenders disempowering blindness, while also narrativizing it, is provided by the stark contrast between the visual rhetoric of the incipient cinematic cutscene and that of the early moments of gameplay. To understand *Silent Hill 2*'s visual rhetoric, a recourse to Christian Metz's contentions on the relation between sight, (in)visibility, and power in visual media, especially cinema, is particularly useful especially given the game's strong intermedial bond to film. Metz claims that the cinema is a locus of privileged sight. The viewer is an all-seeing god who is present in the world of the film but is not seen by the other characters. In the darkness of the film theatre, the viewer adopts a peeping-Tom stance whose keyhole, the screen, is more generous and intrusive than the actual keyhole of any door.[26] By naturalizing the visual grammar of cinema, the viewer becomes so immersed in the film that she believes that the movements of the camera are, in fact, the movements of her own head and, hence, her own sight. The viewer is therefore empowered with an all-penetrating sight that is not confined to bodily-natural or social restrictions.

The first cutscene of *Silent Hill 2* (which is a live-action cutscene, therefore highly cinematic) seems to abide by this logic of empowerment. The cutscene finds James Sunderland filmed from behind while looking at himself in the mirror of a derelict public toilet on the outskirts of Silent Hill. Although the presumable onlooker standing behind the character, i.e. the player, should also be seen in the mirror, behind James Sunderland there is nobody. Through this use of angles and mise-en-scène, the player is placed in the privileged position of the cinema viewer who sees everything without being seen. However, after actual gameplay begins, this position of empowerment is taken away. In order to leave the public toilet, the player must navigate through three visually disorienting camera angles that encumber movement to such an extent that the simple act of guiding James outside the toilet becomes a complicated task. Once James is out, the camera cuts to a wide shot of the parking lot adjacent to the toilet where the player must direct the playable character to the car where another cutscene begins. In this pre-rendered cutscene, we learn about the letter James has received from his wife, urging him to come to meet her in Silent Hill. After the cutscene ends, the player has to exit the parking lot, upon which the camera becomes mobile but is positioned in front of the playable character as he walks down a long path while hearing multiple ominous sounds. Should the player activate the recentering function that moves the camera to a pre-established position behind the playable character, the player is still unable to see what lies ahead because of the thick fog. For the remainder of the game, the camera will remain mostly mobile, but without efficiently aiding the player's sight.[27] The beginning of *Silent Hill 2* is an illustrative example of how the game visually disempowers the playable character, while at the same time maintaining immersion. The game's visual aesthetics transition from cinematic visual empowerment, to discursive

blindness before, eventually, diegetically blinding the playable character for the most part of the game.

Movement is another important component of the simulation which is narrativized by the storyworld of *Silent Hill 2*, despite the encumbering controls and mechanics. At the first glance, it would seem that the simulation of movement is hypermedial. Even if the player chooses the alternative movement control scheme instead of the traditional tank controls, the camera angles, be they stationary or mobile, still vary enough for the player to get confused with respect to what direction of movement each button implies. The confusion is augmented by the lack of any way of foretelling what camera angle to expect in the next location. Upon entering a new room or location, the game can switch from a tracking camera to a fixed one or vice versa, which confuses the player with respect to directional commands and prevents the naturalization of the movement controls. What is more, the recentering function, which should recalibrate the relation between the camera angle and movement, is very slow and can be disorienting when running away from danger, a situation in which the player finds himself very often.

Although in this case, the game does not offer an overt diegetic explanation for the confusing, frustrating, and inefficient simulation of movement, narrativization still occurs via the process of world-making which is inherent to the reception of narratives.[28] The male protagonists of the *Silent Hill* series "frequently contrast with the assured, unquestioning, militarized hypermasculinity regarded as standard across the industry; instead, they are ordinary, flawed, even neurotic to the point of psychosis."[29] This is particularly valid for James Sunderland whose sanity is questioned from the beginning of the game. (As we have just seen, James Sunderland claims that he has received a letter from his deceased wife in which she beseeches him to come to pick her up from Silent Hill.) Given the psychological state of the playable character, players infer that it is natural for him to be disoriented when exploring a ghost town engulfed in fog using an unreliable map. The movement mechanics and controls can therefore be narrativized as a procedural representation of James Sunderland's dire psychological state and its consequences on his spatial orientation. The game achieves modal consonance by harmoniously coordinating the textual mode present in the remediated letter with the aural mode representing James's internal monologue in which he reveals himself to be a bereft husband and with the procedural mode which affords the simulation of James's confused movement.

The narrativization of combat mechanics occurs in a similar fashion. Combat in *Silent Hill 2* is very similar to that of *Resident Evil*, with the difference that the former lays more stress on melee combat and offers the player a wider range of melee weapons. The mechanics are ineffective, the controls unpredictable, and the small rooms and tight corridors which the player must explore make evasion difficult. Shooting is as unmanageable as melee combat. The not very functional aiming system inherited from *Resident Evil*, coupled with the extensive use of discursive and diegetic blind spaces that conceal the oncoming threats, leads to the wasting of precious bullets. The clunky movement mechanics and the

inventory make it difficult to defeat even ordinary opponents. As in *Resident Evil*, once the monsters have been knocked down, the player must deliver a final blow for them to stay dead. However, moving in the position required for this final hit to be delivered is not always successful due to a series of bugs[30] that sometimes delay the game engine's response to player commands once the playable character is in the proximity of the monster. As a result, although the player has pressed the right buttons at the right time, it may be the case the monster rises and hits the playable character who is now in range. The inventory is another core mechanic that pays tribute to the game design of *Resident Evil* and which can affect combat in a manner similar to Capcom's 1996 game. If the player does not have enough bullets to kill the opposing monster, the player has to access the inventory screen in order to select another weapon. This interruption can disorient the player and slow down his reaction, thus rendering him vulnerable.[31]

In *Resident Evil*, the hypermediacy of combat is not narrativized, but stands in stark opposition to the visual representation of its Ramboesque playable characters, which produces modal irony. In *Silent Hill 2*, the visual representation and the narrative profile of James Sunderland make the cumbersome simulation of combat seem consistent with his status of a weak and traumatized everyman. This consistency relies firstly on our experience as embodied beings and secondly on our experience of horror cinema. As far as the former is concerned, by extrapolating our knowledge of how people react in the face of great danger, it is only natural to assume that one will very likely not be able to swiftly pull out the gun, properly aim and shoot, or skilfully use a melee weapon to kill a monster that embodies one's deepest repressed traumas. Concerning the player's experience of horror cinema, the simulation of James Sunderland's clumsiness in wielding weapons and his need to flee from danger can be construed as a procedural adaptation[32] of traditional horror scenarios in which a weak protagonist painstakingly tries to survive an overly powerful threat.[33] Given the currency that this scenario has in cinema, players are likely to find the simulation of combat in *Silent Hill 2* familiar enough for it not to seem unnatural. Taking all this into account, it would seem that once again the visual mode and the procedural mode complete one another producing modal consonance and thus maintaining the immersion of the player.

The last aspect of the game design that needs to be analyzed from the point of view of narrativization is the set of stealth mechanics. Although in action games invisibility is associated with empowerment,[34] in *Silent Hill 2* being unnoticeable further augments the helplessness of the playable character. Because the monsters are attracted to light, the player can choose to navigate the dark rooms of the game with the flashlight off and rely on the static noise emitted by his portable radio to determine whether there is a potential threat nearby. Should the player adopt such a strategy, he would soon realize that it is impractical for two reasons. Firstly, the fact that the sound of the game does not indicate the position of the threat relative to the playable character but only the distance between the two,[35] can in fact significantly hinder progress. The player has to blindly move in several directions until the volume of the radio static has

decreased in order to finally move forward. Secondly, searching for items that unlock doors or offer solutions to puzzles in the dim light of the room can be very frustrating, which is why the player is eventually forced to turn the flashlight on and, by doing so, also alerts the monsters of his presence.

As with other core mechanics, stealth is narrativized by the game's storyworld. Because the monsters of *Silent Hill 2* are not referential entities, players cannot fully rely on their knowledge of the real world so as to make sense of their behaviour.[36] In the absence of a term of comparison, it is easy for the players to suspend their disbelief and take for granted the narrative information offered by the storyworld, i.e. that the monsters react to light. As a result, the stealth mechanics do not lose their narrative coherence and maintain the immersion of the player, despite their relatively weak functionality.

In this section, I have analyzed the interactive means employed by the game to simulate a verisimilar version of non-phallic masculinity. I have shown that the cumbersome controls and inefficient game mechanics that would otherwise break immersion are narrativized by the storyworld of the game and made consistent with the visual representation and narrative profile of the playable character. Unlike *Resident Evil*, the gameplay of *Silent Hill 2* confirms the narrative expectations engendered by the trailer and the cover and provides a gameplay experience that accords with the player's experience of horror narratives across other (linear) media. Consequently, the mechanics of *Silent Hill 2* are not seen as poor game design, but rather as signifiers of helplessness, as mechanics of vulnerability that generate an emergent narrative offering a realistic simulation of masculinity in crisis.

The distressed damsel-in-distress plot

The previous section has investigated the narrative dimension of gameplay on a micro level in order to highlight how core mechanics are narrativized in an effort to compensate for the low level of interactivity characteristic of the mechanics and controls of classical survival horror games. In this section, I move on to investigate the narrative design of the game on a macro level with a focus on the game's scripted and embedded narrative. Here I focus primarily on how the game adapts the conventional damsel-in-distress plot to the non-phallic version of masculinity it simulates. My discussion of how the game bends the gender politics of the traditional damsel-in-distress scenario also entails an analysis of the levels of immediacy and narrativity supported by *Silent Hill 2*'s remediated media, as the two are relevant for immersion and, consequently, for the persuasiveness of the game. Finally, I show how the scripted and the embedded narrative influence the diegetic reception of gameplay.

As explained in the first section, the game's paratexts cue prospective players to read the game in accordance with their experience of narratives and linear media, especially cinema. The game fully meets this expectation by fostering a high degree of narrativity based on appropriateness, sequentiality, worldmaking/world-disrupting, and experientiality. Thanks to its modal consonance and,

as this section argues later on, transparency of its remediations, the game's narrativity does not engender metasuspense as in the case of *Resident Evil*, but rather it foregrounds 'what' and 'how/who' suspense.

In order to ensure that each play of the game generates the same sequence of relevant diegetic events, the game employs many plot bottlenecks marked by cinematic cutscenes and significantly restricts the player's freedom of action as he interactively travels from one plot bottleneck to the other.[37] James is a bereft husband who receives a letter from his dead wife Mary. In the letter, the presumably dead Mary exhorts James to come to meet her in their "special place"[38] in Silent Hill. As he traverses the town looking for his wife, he encounters other traumatized characters who are processing their own troubled past. With each new location inspected, we learn more about James's own trauma and also get closer to the place where Mary, James's wife, is presumably waiting for him.

Of vital importance to the narrativity of *Silent Hill 2* is the arrival of the letter from Mary. This world-disruptive event functions as a trigger of 'what' and 'how/who' suspense. Because receiving a letter from a deceased loved person is such an intriguing event, players are interested in finding out, firstly, where Mary is, what situation she finds herself in and how James will reach her, and, secondly, how it is possible that a dead person should send a letter. Was Mary really the one who sent the letter, or was it someone else? These questions concerning the outcome of the events and the events that preceded the state of the storyworld encountered at the beginning of the game feed into the player's narrative engagement with *Silent Hill 2* and help maintain the game's immersive trance.

The 'what' and 'how/who' types of suspense become narrative incentives for gameplay which supplement the more ludic, game-oriented motivation which is characteristic of video games. On the one hand, the 'what' suspense impels players to progress in order to reach the next plot bottleneck and get one step closer to Mary, while in-between cinematic cutscenes the narrativized gameplay of *Silent Hill 2* maintains the engagement of the player. On the other hand, players are compelled by the 'how/who' suspense to explore game space in order to collect diegetically relevant remediated non-digital documents and learn more about the past of James Sunderland, as well as the source of the letter. The sum of these remediated documents forms an embedded narrative which functions as a backstory for the game's scripted narrative. Because the mediality of embedded narratives is typically more heterogeneous than that of the scripted narrative and, therefore, more prone to hypermediacy, *Silent Hill 2* has to adopt different strategies in order to convince players of its realism.

As explained in the introduction, hypermediacy refers to those formal traits of the medium that highlight its materiality. In their discussion of the "double logic of remediation,"[39] Bolter and Grusin argue that, although flaunting the artificiality of the representation, hypermediacy can also lead to a version of realism of its own in the sense that, through hypermediacy, the object of representation becomes the medium in itself.[40] Although hypermediacy would seem to draw

interpreters away from the storyworld represented by the medium, in the case of *Silent Hill 2*'s embedded narrative, the effect is the opposite.

In order to understand the immediacy/hypermediacy dynamic of remediation in video games, a brief investigation of non-digital and digital media is necessary. Visual media, such as the photograph or the cinema, have an object of representation which exists or existed outside the medium at some point in time and space. The object of representation is absent at the moment of watching and what the viewer sees is only the trace left by the object on the materiality of the medium. This leads Christian Metz to claiming that cinema, and by extension, non-digital visual media in general, are absent signifiers.[41]

The relation between digital media like video games and their objects of representation is different from the one mentioned above. Video games do not represent something which exists or existed outside the screen, but rather representation is generated by their game engines.[42] If cinema is the absent signifier, then video games are the absent signified. In order to compensate for the absence of the represented object, video games remediate non-digital media so that they may suggest the existence of a real exterior object of representation and, thus, strengthen the veracity of their representation.[43] Yet this visual rhetoric can be effective only if the materiality of the remediated non-digital medium is visible. This coerces video games to imitate the hypermedial elements of visual (analogue) media (white noise, film grain, damaged celluloid, and so on),[44] elements which non-digital media usually try to erase. Paradoxically, what counts as hypermedial in non-digital visual media becomes immediate in video games.

The use of hypermedial visual elements in order to create the illusion of realism is pervasive in *Silent Hill 2*. Most of the documents scattered across game space are to some extend damaged: tattered letters, wan photographs, damaged VHS cassettes, and torn maps. For example, the storyworld of *Silent Hill 2* contains two letters which can be examined in the inventory. The images of two letters show evident signs of tear either in evident traces from the folds and in the wan shade of the paper. Other remediated documents with evident materiality are the maps that James collects throughout the games: they are either torn, dirty, or scribbled. Another example is the three tablets depicting three Aztec deities whose legends can be linked to the narrative profiles of the secondary characters. Besides representing the deities, the obvious rust of the material medium acts as a signifier of the medium's materiality. The most damaged non-digital document, which is also the most diegetically relevant one, is the VHS cassette whose finding marks the twist of the narrative. When James plays the cassette, the recording shows obvious signs of damaged tape and television noise. The hypermediacy of the representation serves two purposes: it suggests the morally corrupt nature of the depicted events (which will be analyzed in the subsequent paragraphs) and suggests to the player that the recording being played by the game engine is not a digital construct, but an analogue recording, which contributes to the realism of the representation.

The use of visual hypermediacy to better the realism of the digital representation and simulation of *Silent Hill 2* is not only restricted to the embedded narrative, but is also used during gameplay. Throughout the entire gameplay, the screen is overlaid with a white noise reminiscent of bad television transmissions. Although in the case of an actual television programme, this effect would raise the viewer's awareness with respect to the mediated nature of her experience, in the case of *Silent Hill 2*, it strengthens the game's claim to realism.[45] By imitating analog visual media, the game attempts to persuade its players that the town of Silent Hill is not a digital construct generated by the game engine and confined to the screen, but that it could be a real, historical location, a possible world that could exist outside the screen. This visual rhetoric is all-encompassing in the sense that, if the town is real, then so are all the events that occur in it.

By generating 'what' and 'how/who' suspense, as well as by entertaining a high level of immediacy, the scripted and the embedded narrative contribute to player immersion and, therefore, to the persuasiveness of the game's rhetoric. What remains to be discussed is how the dialog entertained by the two inflects the game's grand narrative design and what bearing it has on the representation of gendered identities. *Silent Hill 2*'s scripted narrative has the structure of a damsel-in-distress plot, a narrative scenario that implies a male-female dichotomy which strongly favours the former. In a world replete with obstacles, the male protagonist has to successfully exercise his agency in order to reach the female character who is both a passive victim of evil forces and a reward for the male hero. At the beginning of *Silent Hill 2*, the player assumes control of James Sunderland, a rather atypical male hero, and is informed from very early on that his task is to guide James to his wife. At the onset, *Silent Hill 2* seems to abide by conventional notions of gender by ascribing agency to the interactive male playable character and by rendering Mary an absent, passive character which the game will offer to the player/playable character as a reward once he has successfully performed his masculine saviour gender role. Yet as the game progresses, the scripted and the embedded narrative challenge the gender politics of the damsel-in-distress plot by undermining the protagonist's role as a saviour. In doing so, they reinforce James's masculinity crisis which results from the emergent narrative.

One way in which the scripted narrative undermines the conventional damsel-in-distress is based on James Sunderland's relation to Mary's double, Maria,[46] a character whom James Sunderland encounters in Rosewater Park. From that point onward, Maria will sporadically accompany James as he searches for his dead wife. Maria is unarmed and does not take part in combat so James must make sure she is not harmed. As a non-playable character, Maria is another damsel in distress, much like Mary. As the game progress, James will repeatedly fail to save Maria from being killed during multiple plot bottleneck. After each demise, she reappears and follows James anew, only to be killed again. James's repeated failure to save Maria from fatal danger in the game's cutscenes is a

confirmation of his masculinity crisis and also a compulsive repetition of his incapacity to save his wife from her terminal illness.

The game's embedded narrative adds a final twist to the subversion of James Sunderland's saviour status. In one of the game's climatic moments, James Sunderland reaches the "special place" where he expects to find Mary, namely the hotel room where they had been accommodated during their previous stay in Silent Hill. Instead of Mary, he finds a tape he recorded of his wife while they were in their hotel room. The tape represents the most relevant missing piece of diegetic information pertaining to the embedded narrative. After introducing the tape in the VCR player, the television screen shows Mary telling James, who is holding the camera, how nice their stay has been when the image suddenly cuts to a distorted VCR recording of James killing his wife.[47] According to the embedded narrative, James Sunderland is not a weak saviour but rather a perpetrator, while Mary becomes the victim. The unveiling of James as the murderer determines the player to reassess the moral grounds of his investment in the game and his identification with the protagonist in terms of empathy, and problematizes the positive ethical assumptions of heroic masculinity.[48]

Agency in action games is buttressed on the uncontested moral superiority of the white male heterosexual protagonist. Our transmedial experience of the action genre encourages us to take the hero's gender and racial identity as a guarantee for the morality of his deeds in the game's storyworlds, even if the games we play do not always offer enough diegetic information to vouchsafe the morality of the white male protagonist's agency. Through its narrative design, *Silent Hill 2* calls for a questioning of masculine agency. After immersing the player in the game world and prompting him to be emotionally invested in James Sunderland's goals and safety, the game abruptly breaks the immersive trance and elicits a self-referential stance from the player who now self-consciously re-evaluates his own involvement in the game. Paradoxically, the moment of self-conscious reflexion determined by the narrative twist does not lead to a lack of involvement in the game. On the contrary, 'how/who' suspense is further galvanized as the player is likely to be even more interested in what will eventually happen to James Sunderland, albeit the negative, or conflicting attitude that he may entertain with respect to the character. Considering the critical involvement that the game achieves, it is safe to claim that like *Resident Evil*, but by different means, *Silent Hill 2*'s procedural rhetoric also leads to metaoutmersion.[49]

In the previous section, I have shown that the gameplay of *Silent Hill 2* engenders an emergent narrative whose male hero undergoes a crisis of masculinity. This section has shown that both the scripted narrative and the embedded narrative attest to his masculinity crisis and, consequently, further harmonize the game's modal consonance. However, especially by means of its embedded narrative, *Silent Hill 2* does not only offer an alternative to the hypermasculine heroes of the action genre, but also mounts a critique of the positive prejudice from which white heterosexual male heroes benefit.[50] This comes at the cost of player identification which is temporarily thwarted so that the player may become critical of

the sexist framework that undergirds the action genre, but, at the same time, the game facilitates other processes of narrativization, as the next section will show.

Reading gameplay before and after the tape: the narrativization of the monsters and of the town

The scripted and embedded narrative are highly relevant for the manner in which the player reads the emergent narrative, i.e. the narrative consisting of the events resulting from gameplay. Taking into consideration the conclusion of the previous section, I revisit the emergent narrative in order to see how the scripted and embedded narrative inflect experientiality and identification with James Sunderland. Here I show how, despite prompting a self-referential attitude, the narrative twist consisting in finding out that James Sunderland is the murderer of his wife increases the game's level of experientiality and, therefore, narrativity. By focusing on Sunderland's subjective experience of the events, the game also manages to narrativize elements of the storyworld which until the viewing of the tape have been unexplainable to the player: the monsters and the town. In doing so, the game facilitates the process of world-making.

As explained at greater length in chapter 1, experientiality is a core trait of narrativity which designates the extent to which the medium represents (or simulates, in the case of video games) the characters' subjective experience of the disruption of the storyworld's equilibrium and the sequence of events it determines.[51] Unlike *Resident Evil*, where experientiality is better represented with absent minor characters than with the protagonists, *Silent Hill 2* foregrounds the subjectivity of James Sunderland and other non-playable characters. High levels of experientiality are maintained not only in its cinematic cutscenes and remediated documents that enable the game to imitate more traditional storytelling means, but also more indirectly during gameplay. In *Silent Hill 2* the visual design of the monster and the level design serves both ludic and diegetic purposes. Not only do they pose engaging challenges that deter the player from reaching his destination,[52] but they also lend the player indirect insight into the consciousness of James Sunderland, as well as other characters.[53]

With respect to the diegetic relevance of the monsters, Karla Schmitt points out that the town generates different monsters for each character that happens to traverse it depending on their unresolved guilt.[54] (This is why Laura, an innocent child who is not guilt-ridden, can freely roam the town without being threatened.) The monsters and challenges that James faces are reflections of his unresolved internal conflicts. It comes as no surprise that most of the monsters are deviant forms of feminine sensuality which reflect the protagonist's repressed sexual desire for his dead wife, but at the same time coerce the protagonist to repeat the trauma of (mercy-)killing his wife, as it becomes clear for the player after seeing the tape. (See the first section for an account of the monster's liminal humanity.)

In order for the game's procedural rhetoric to be effective, the simulation of the monsters is a realistic one, which lends credibility to the protagonist's

trauma. Visually, the monsters are real 3D entities whose movement and physics confirm the player's knowledge of mobility in the real word. Their abject visual representation is supported by the aural representation of the sounds they make:

> The sounds speak of excess, with elaborate and intimate sounds contributing to the vivid and visceral experience of disgust created by the game. Sounds and graphics partly fill in for the olfactory and tactile sense that is lacking from the medium. Monsters in *Silent Hill 2* make burplike or hissing gaseous sounds and when they are successfully hit, the impact sounds wet and mushy.[55]

Besides the monsters, the level design of Silent Hill also gives us indirect access to the psychological reality of James Sunderland. Silent Hill is both labyrinthic and carceral since it strictly limits the player's freedom of movement in the game world. When carcerality is not directly implied by means of prison bars (as in the bars that block an important corridor in Wood Side Apartments), it is achieved with the help of environmental barriers such as crumbled rocks, crevices, or locked doors.[56] Most of these blockages are not mentioned in the maps the player can collect so the player will constantly come across dead ends, which stresses the feeling of imprisonment and determinism.[57] While this ties in with the common survival horror theme of loss of control and being subjected to Other forces,[58] viewing the tape in which James murders his wife also cues the player to narrativize the carceral design of Silent Hill. The confinement which the town enacts upon the protagonist can now be read by the player as punishment for James's murder and, therefore, functions as another signifier of the protagonist's strong feeling of guilt. Like the monsters, the town becomes an external reflection of the protagonist's psyche, which increases the experientiality of the game.[59]

To sum up the last two sections, the late narrative twist determines a reshuffling of player identification with James Sunderland which is likely to involve a lower level of sympathy towards the playable character and a more critical attitude with respect to the actions that the game forces the player to enact. The more self-referential attitude that should normally affect immersion is compensated for by a higher degree of experientiality which narrativizes elements of the game design that would otherwise fall short of a coherent integration into the story-world, i.e. the monsters and the town, which are diegetically framed as physical reflections of James Sunderland's trauma. Secondly, *Silent Hill 2* is a rare case of diverging experientiality and identification. While most narrative video games provide insight into the minds of their protagonists in order to construct a complex narrative profile which makes the characters relatable, in this case, access to the character's interiority leads to self-referentiality as players are made aware of the morally dubious grounds of their characters agency. This game design choice will become a hallmark of other games that self-consciously comment on the ideology of the action genre such as *Bioshock* (2K Boston, 2007), *Manhunt 2* (Rockstar London, 2007), or *Spec Ops—The Line* (Yager Development, 2012).

Narrative closure algorithm

Silent Hill 2's high level of narrativity (and, consequently, of immersion) is also supported by the way it achieves narrative closure. In keeping with its generic forerunners, *Silent Hill 2* features multiple endings determined by in-game actions performed by the player. But while in games such as *Resident Evil* the endings depend on the player's ludic achievements, in *Silent Hill 2*, they are triggered by ludically trivial actions. In this final section, I further elaborate on the issue of identification with James Sunderland and argue that the game engine is programmed to read gameplay in accordance with the presumed emotional and ethical involvement of the player so that the ending may best dovetail with the player's reading of the game. It seems that for the game designers, the implied player's gameplay is determined first and foremost not by pragmatic tactical thinking, but by his interest in the narrative and the way he relates to James Sunderland.[60]

When playing *Silent Hill 2* for the first time, players can obtain one of the following three endings: "Leave," "In Water," or "Maria."[61] The ending which is most consistent with the game from a diegetic and political perspective is "In Water." In this ending, the player reaches Maria who, dressed like Mary in the photo James carries, castigates James Sunderland for always thinking about his wife and rejecting her. She then turns into a bedridden monster whom James kills in yet another reiteration of his trauma. Once the player has killed Maria, the game cuts to a cutscene with James sitting beside the dying Mary where he confesses to the misogyny that compelled him to murder her. Being overburdened with guilt and realizing he cannot live without his wife, James finally commits suicide.

This ending is played by the game engine if the player fulfills the following conditions: he often examines the knife held by the secondary non-playable character Angela when contemplating suicide, reads the diary of a patient on the Brookhaven hospital roof, listens to the entire hallway conversation in the Lakeview hotel, listens on the headphones in the reading room after watching the tape in the same hotel, reads the second message addressed to James scribbled on a wall in Neely's Bar and does not heal immediately after taking damage. The game designers of *Silent Hill 2* assume that the players more interested in James's past rather than in his prospects will pay more attention to the details of his wife's death, watch the photo of Mary often, repeatedly read her mysterious letter in the inventory, and attentively listen, watch, or read documents that might offer information regarding Mary. Additionally, the more it becomes obvious that James is the killer of his wife, the less possible it will be for players to identify with the playable character and be invested in keeping him safe and aiding him to attain his goals. Such players are likely to be less rigorous in regularly healing James and keeping him out of harm's way.

Provided that the game design has succeeded in hindering the player from being efficient in combat and evasion, this ending dovetails very well with the masculinity in crisis represented and simulated by *Silent Hill 2*. It is consonant both

with the clunky and inefficient gameplay that engender an emergent narrative whose protagonist is weak, vulnerable, and helpless, and with the scripted and embedded narrative that offer the player further insight into the protagonist's crisis. Given the consonance of linear representation and non-linear simulation, James Sunderland's suicide is a predictable outcome for a non-phallic male anti-hero who cannot come to terms with the artificial gender standards imposed by patriarchy, standards which he has nevertheless internalized.

In stark opposition to "In Water" is the "Leave" ending which sees James finally overcome his wife's death. His confrontation with Maria is very similar, but the last scene where he stands by Mary's bedside renders the killing a fulfilment of Mary's own wish to die. After Mary finally passes away, we see James leave Silent Hill alongside Laura, the child whom Mary met in hospital. In order to reach this ending, the player has to listen to the entire hallway conversation in Lakeview Hotel, examine Mary's picture and letter occasionally, heal immediately after being hurt, and spend as little time as possible with Maria.

This ending is predicated on a positive emotional investment in James Sunderland. The player identifies with his goals and his ethical evaluation of the character's past does not lead to aversion, i.e. the player is likely to read James's ambiguous killing of his wife as mercy-killing or euthanasia. In this situation, the game designers assume that players want James to get over Mary, so their main concern will be to safely guide James out of Silent Hill and not irremediably dwell on his past by repeatedly inspecting the documents reminding of James's trauma—Mary's photo and her letter.

Ideologically, this ending ties in with a more conventional approach to masculinity. The "Leave" ending is more consistent with hypermasculinity as James Sunderland overcomes his masculinity crisis and enacts a protector role by adopting Laura. Such a scenario could be consonant with the emergent narrative, provided that the player is proficient enough so as not to be encumbered by the dysfunctional controls and mechanics. Such an ending does, of course, relativize the critique of stereotypical representations and simulations of masculinity in action games conveyed by the scripted and the embedded narrative, but makes the overall narrative coherent with a very proficient gameplay.

The "Maria" ending is similar to "Leave" since it also presupposes a divergence from the critique of patriarchy. In this concluding scenario, James finally reaches the real Mary, instead of Maria, admits it was hate that determined him to murder her and kills her again in battle. Afterwards he and Maria are seen heading together to James's car while the latter coughs worryingly. In order for the game engine to play this ending, the player has to return to Maria's cell after she dies, stay close to her when she accompanies him, and successfully protect her from the monsters.

The ending "Maria" is predicated on James's refusal to accept the loss of Mary, which leads to the creation of her alter ego in the form of Maria. This ending is supposed to be coherent with the gameplay experience of those players who disavow James Sunderland's masculinity crisis and consequently must accept Maria's role as the new Mary so that they may successfully bring to a conclusion

the traditional damsel-in-distress plot. The game designers assume that these gamers will do their best to maintain the health level of Maria and that they will be less interested in what happened to Mary, which is why they are likely to spend little time investigating the documents related to Mary's death. As in the "Leave" ending, for this scenario players must also overcome the encumbering controls and mechanics and successfully perform hypermasculinity. The emergent narrative thus engendered is incoherent with the game's scripted narrative which linearly represents James Sunderland's repeated failure to save the life of Maria.

The algorithm used to select either of the endings tries to relate the in-game decisions of the player to his ethical judgements and his emotional involvement in the storyworld, in an attempt to make the ending fit the player's experience of the game and, thus, give feedback on a macro-narrative level to the player's sequential micro-inputs. This endeavour may in some cases lead to a higher degree of immersion of the player, but it may also backfire due to its inability to account for the more tactical, ludic-oriented reasons why players adopt a particular gameplay strategy. Because survival horror games are very scarce in terms of resources and players need to be very economical in managing the limited resources, players may choose to play for a long period of time without healing the wounded James Sunderland for fear that they might consume their healing resources in a non-critical moment and that the game might not provide them with a health pack for a long stretch of the game. The decision to sparingly use health kits may not be a consequence of the player's lack of attachment to the playable character or of a negative ethical evaluation of his profile, but rather a safe gameplay strategy that would ensure the survival of the player avatar in the inhospitable environment of Silent Hill.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that *Silent Hill 2* is a video game with a high degree of narrativity. *Silent Hill 2* cues players to mentally create a storyworld which features all the main traits of narrativity: situatedness, sequentiality, world-making/world-disrupting, and experientiality. In terms of situatedness, the paratextual elements prompt players to read the game in keeping with their experience of more conventional storytelling media such as the cinema. The gameplay fully delivers on the expectations by featuring a storyworld whose equilibrium is disturbed by James Sunderland's receiving a letter from his presumably deceased wife. This triggers a sequence of temporally, logically, and causally linked events whose meanings are constantly re-evaluated as the game unfolds. Moreover, the game lays emphasis on the protagonist's subjective experience of his adventures in *Silent Hill*, which encourages the player to identify with the playable character at least until the game reveals that James Sunderland is the murderer of his wife. Because the interactivity of video games means that game designers have less authorial controls than creators of content working with linear media such as print, in order to ensure that the game's ending is consistent with the emergent

narrative generated through gameplay, *Silent Hill 2* plays one of its three endings depending on narratively relevant action performed by the player in-game. On the other hand, under specific conditions, this game design choice can relativize the game's overall critique of patriarchy.

The high level of narrativity fostered by *Silent Hill 2* plays a vital role in immersion since it manages to narrativize elements that might impeach upon the coherence of the storyworld and hinder the world-making process. The cumbersome hypermedial survival horror mechanics and controls inherited from *Resident Evil* are narrativized as a procedural representation of James Sunderland's vulnerability and helplessness, while the shape of the monsters and the unexplainable carceral environment of Silent Hill are narrativized as reflections of the protagonist's longing for his wife and a strong feeling of guilt for murdering her. Immersion also hinges on the realism of the remediations which form the game's embedded narrative. The analog documents scattered around the town are all worn, tattered, and damaged, which stresses their materiality. Given the digital nature of *Silent Hill 2*, the hypermediacy of these remediated analog media supplements the video game's lack of materiality and increases its realism and immersion.

By providing players with an immersive gameplay experience, *Silent Hill 2* lends persuasiveness to its critical procedural rhetoric. By representing and simulating a verisimilar version of non-phallic masculinity as the main ludic and narrative agent in an action-adventure game, *Silent Hill 2* mounts a critique of the gender norms of the action genre. The narrative-oriented game design of *Silent Hill 2* and its use of narrative compensation to achieve player immersion offers an alternative to the immersion ideal based on the maximization which undergirds the game design of mainstream action and which enables the simulation of hypermasculinity. The game's procedural rhetoric amounts to a diversification of masculinity which challenges the hegemonic status which hypermasculinity still enjoys in action games and commands disbelief in normative gender roles.

Notes

1 Tiago Jose Lemos Monteiro, "Shattered Identities: The Weakness of the Male Hero in the *Silent Hill* Game Franchise," in *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Comics, Games and Transmedia*, eds. Robert Shail, Samantha Holland, and Steven Gerrard (Bingly: Emerald Group Publishing, 2019), 58.
2 Jeffrey Sconce, "Spectacles of Death: Identification, Reflexivity, and Contemporary Horror," in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, eds. J. Radner H. Collins and A. P. Collins (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 103–129.
3 Ewan Kirkland, "The Self-Reflexive Funhouse of *Silent Hill*," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 13, no. 4 (2007): 405, 414, doi: 10.1177/1354856507081964.
4 Monteiro, "Shattered Identities," 58, 65.
5 Ewan Kirkland, "Discursively Constructing the Art of Silent Hill," *Games and Culture* 5, no. 3 (2010): 314–328, doi: 10.1177/1555412010364976.
6 Kirkland, "Discursively Constructing," 319. See also Ewan Kirkland, "Survival Horrality: Analysis of a Videogame Genre," *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror*

Studies 10 (October 2011): 25, https://research.brighton.ac.uk/en/publications/survival-horrality-analysis-of-a-videogame-genre.

7 Kirkland, "Discursively Constructing," 318.

8 It should be noted that the gameplay recording shown in the trailer is more fast-paced than the actual gameplay. This way, the trailer wants to cater to the tastes of more conservative players of action games that might be put off by the slow and fragmentary gameplay of the *Silent Hill 2*.

9 Because *Silent Hill* is one of the few instalments of the franchise not to have been released for the PC, player without a PlayStation who wanted to play the series began with *Silent Hill 2*. This was often the case in developing countries where few teenagers and young adults could actually afford a PlayStation and then be able to buy each new original game. In these countries, gamers would usually purchase a PC and play pirated copies of the video games. In Romania, for example, in the 2000s many gamers were familiar with *Silent Hill 2, 3,* and *4*, but few of them had played the first instalment in the series.

10 Julia Kristeva. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 15.

11 Jacques Lacan, "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," in *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company), 197–168.

12 Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the/Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company), 75–81.

13 Jacques Lacan, "On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis," in *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company), 445–488.

14 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 1–2.

15 Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

16 Kristeva stresses the ambivalence and deceitfulness of abjection. See Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 9–10.

17 See Bernard Perron, *Silent Hill. The Terror Engine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 43. See also Fun TV's documentary on the making of *Silent Hill 2* in Team Silent, *Silent Hill 2. Special Edition*, Konami, 2002.

18 Inger Ekman and Petri Lankoski, "Hair-Raising Entertainment: Emotions, Sound, and Structure in *Silent Hill 2* and *Fatal Frame*," in *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, ed. Bernard Perron (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2009), 191.

19 Kirkland, "Discursively Constructing," 320.

20 Ewan Kirkland, "Storytelling in Survival Horror Video Games," in *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, ed. Bernard Perron (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009), 65.

21 As mentioned in Chapter 1, the scripted narrative consists of the predetermined sequence of events that the game renders via game specific or heteromedial means. Marie Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 14.

22 An embedded narrative is the backstory of the events represented and simulated by the game engine which consists of the sum of remediated documents scattered around game space. See Henry Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, eds. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 126.

23 Monika Fludernik, *Towards a "Natural" Narratology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 25.

24 Bernard Perron, *The World of Scary Video Games* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 121. See also Tanya Krzywinska, "Gaming Horror's Horror: Representation, Regulation, and Affect in Survival Horror Videogames," *Journal of Visual Culture* 14, no. 3 (2015): 296, doi: 10.1177/1470412915607924.
25 Perron, *The World of Scary Video Games*, 120.
26 Christian Metz, "Identification, Mirror," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press), 697.
27 Krzywinska maintains that survival horror simulate the fragility of human agency by subduing the player to a rhythm of control and loss of control. See Tanya Krzywinska, "Hands-On Horror," in *ScreenPlay: Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces*, eds. Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2002), 217.
28 As mentioned in Chapter 1, when playing video games, players use the material signs offered by the game engine in order to construct a mental storyworld. In creating this storyworld, they employ their knowledge of the real-world to make inference and deductions concerning the causes of the state of affairs in the storyworld. In the case of *Silent Hill 2*, players try to infer the cause behind the vulnerability of the protagonist and rely on his diegetic profile in order to identify the cause. See David Herman, *Basic Elements of Narrative* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 105; Marie Laure Ryan, *Avatars of Story* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 7; Marie-Laure Ryan, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1991), 51.
29 Ewan Kirkland, "Masculinity in Video Games: The Gendered Gameplay of *Silent Hill*," *Camera Obscura* 24, no. 2(71) (2009): 178, doi: 10.1215/02705346-2009-006. See also Perron, *Silent Hill*, 52.
30 It is sometimes difficult to acknowledge whether the way the engine responds to player input is intended or whether it is a bug.
31 See the discussion of the use of the inventory during combat in the section "Hypermedial Gameplay and Procedural Deconstruction" in the previous chapter.
32 Procedural adaptation is the process whereby the computational process manages to adapt a linearly represented narrative content via simulation. See Matthew Wiese, "The Rules of Horror: Procedural Adaptation in *Clock Tower*, *Resident Evil*, and *Dead Rising*," in *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, ed. Bernard Perron (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009), 238–240.
33 Ewan Kirkland associates the male protagonists of the early *Silent Hill* games with the final girls of horror cinema. Kirkland, "Masculinity in Video Games," 169, 172; Ewan Kirkland, "Remediation, Analogue Corruption and the Signification of Evil in Digital Games," *At the Interface / Probing the Boundaries* 63 (2011): 232, doi: 10.1163/9789042029408_014.
34 Toni Pape, "The Aesthetics of Stealth: Towards an Activist Philosophy of Becoming-Imperceptible in Contemporary Media," *Feminist Media Studies* 17, no. 10 (2017): 639–640, doi: 10.1080/14680777.2017.1326564.
35 See also Bernard Perron's comments on the emotional effect of the radio mechanic in Perron, *The World of Scary Video Games*, 333.
36 See Ryan's principle of minimal departure. Ryan, *Possible Worlds*, 51.
37 See Tanya Krzywinska's comments on how playing survival horror games is an experience of being subjected to an Other(ed.) will. Krzywinska, "Gaming Horror's Horror," 297.
38 Team Silent, *Silent Hill 2*, Konami, 2001.
39 Jay D. Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation. Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000), 5.
40 Bolter et al., *Remediation*, 33–34.
41 Metz, "Identification," 695.
42 This is why Rolf F. Nohr claims that analogue media represent, while digital media simulate. Nevertheless, I avoid this use of the representation/simulation dichotomy ("Bild"/"Simulation") because in this book I use representation to refer to the

affordances of linear representation of video games and simulation to refer to the manner in which narrative emerges through gameplay. See Rolf F. Nohr, "Das Verschwinden der Maschinen. Vorüberlegungen zu einer Transparenztheorie des Games," in *"See? I'm real -", multidisziplinäre Zugänge zum Computerspiel am Beispiel von „Silent Hill"*, eds. Britta Nietzel, Matthias Bopp, and Rolf F. Nohr (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2010), 100–101.

43 Kirkland, "Remediation," 235.

44 Markus Rauztenberg, "Vom Rausch(en) des Realen: Zur Geburt des Unheimlichen aus dem Geist des Mediums in Silent Hill 2," in *"See? I'm real -", multidisziplinäre Zugänge zum Computerspiel am Beispiel von „Silent Hill"*, eds. Britta Nietzel, Matthias Bopp, and Rolf F. Nohr (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2010), 130.

45 My phrasing deliberately mirrors that of Michael McKeon who discusses the early novel's claim to historicity. See Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 45–47. On the aesthetic continuities between survival horror games and eighteenth-century novels, see Andrei Nae and Alexandra Ileana Bacalu, "Toward a Reconsideration of Hypermediacy: Immersion in Survival Horror Video Games and Eighteenth-century Novels," in *Playing the Field: Video Games and American Studies*, ed. Sascha Pöhlmann (Boston, MA and Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019), 143.

46 See Kirkland's observations on the problematic "virgin/whore" dichotomy embodied by Mary and Maria. Kirkland, "Restless Dreams," 174.

47 Ewan Kirkland also contends that the corruption of analog media is a sign of the unnatural. Kirkland. "Self-Reflexive Funhouse," 410. Kirkland, "Remediation," 232.

48 See also Perron, *Silent Hill*, 61.

49 See Gonzalo Frasca, "Immersion, Outmersion & Critical Thinking" (2006), quoted in Souvik Mukherjee, *Video Games and Storytelling: Reading Games and Playing Books* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 189.

50 See also Kirkland, "Masculinity in Video Games," 174.

51 See discussion in Chapter 1 on the link between immersion, narrativity, and experientiality.

52 According to Lantz, the ludic nature of a game consists therein that it coerces the player to achieve a goal by the least direct means. Frank Lantz, "Game Developers Rant," 2012, quoted in Jesper Juul, "On Absent Carrot Sticks: The Level of Abstraction in Video Games," in *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, eds. Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 189.

53 Marc C. Santos and Sarah E. White, "Playing with Ourselves: A Psychoanalytic Investigation of *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill*," in *Digital Gameplay, Essays on the Nexus of Game and* Gamer, ed. Nate Garrelts (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2005), 75–76.

54 Karla Schmitt, "Der Archeplot im Game. Silent Hill 2 als klassische Heldenreise," in "See? I'm real" Multidisziplinäre Zugänge zum Computerspiel am Beispiel von 'Silent Hill', eds. Britta Nietzel, Mat-thias Bopp, and Rolf F. Nohr (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2010), 20-40.

55 Ekman et al., "Hair-Raising Entertainment," 191.

56 Kevin S. Steinmetz, "Carceral Horror: Punishment and Control in *Silent Hill*," *Crime Media Culture* 14, no. 2 (2017): 11, doi: 10.1177/1741659017699045.

57 Simon Niedenthal, "Patterns of Obscurity: Gothic Setting and Light in *Resident Evil 4* and *Silent Hill 2*," in *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, ed. Bernard Perron (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009), 175.

58 Krzywinska, "Gaming Horror's Horror," 297.

59 By the same token, Pyramid Head, the monster who follows James Sunderland around Silent Hill, also undergoes a process of narrativization and can be construed as a materialization of the protagonist's guilt who will pursue James in order to punish him.

This narrativization is made explicit in the cutscene preceding the final confrontation with Pyramid Head in which James declares "I was weak, that's why I needed you, needed someone to punish me for my sins."

60 This ties in with the general anti-ludic attitude of the game.

61 There are three more other endings which can be triggered if certain conditions are met in replay. See Konami, *Lost Memories: Silent Hill Chronicle* (失われた記憶～サイレントヒル・クロニクル～) (Tokyo: NTT Puublishing, 2003), 50–51. See the same source for the requirements for the first three endings.

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5 The horrors of *ie* ideology in *Fatal Frame*

Shōjo fights demonic ghost of *otome* to save *otaku*

The previous two chapters have analyzed two hallmark video games of the survival horror genre produced by Japanese game design teams primarily for the North-American market. In this chapter and the subsequent one I move my attention to the Japanese survival horror games created for the local Japanese gaming community in order to reveal how this affects the manner in which the gender status quo is challenged. In this chapter, I examine the video game *Fatal Frame* released by Tecmo in late 2001 for the PlayStation 2 in Japan as well as other consoles and platforms in the following years in North America and the rest of the world. I argue that the game design of *Fatal Frame* is similar to that of *Silent Hill 2* (Team Silent, 2001) in terms of how it manages to narrativize the fragmented and cumbersome gameplay typical of classical survival horror games and, in doing so, compensate for the low levels of immediacy and interactivity that such a gameplay engenders. But, while in *Silent Hill 2* such an approach lays the foundation for a subversion of the Western gender norms of the action genre, the same game design approach yields a different result in combination with local Japanese horror conventions. Like most classical survival horror games, *Fatal Frame* criticizes traditional gender roles, but at the same time, in keeping with Buddhist and Shinto notions of complementarity and equilibrium, the game advocates that traditional Japanese and modern, progressive Western notions of gender can harmoniously coexist. In order to defend this claim, I will consider the game in its national cultural context with focus on its generic affiliation to Japanese horror cinema, especially the Edo Gothic and the modern cinematic melodrama, and the way it reflects the historical transformations that took place after Japan lost the Second World War.

In putting forth my argument, I will go through the following steps. I first look into the gameplay to see how the core mechanics are framed as mechanics of vulnerability and what ideological consequences such a narrative framing can have while keeping in mind the female identity of the protagonist and the implied young male player of the video game. My next step is to investigate gameplay in the context of the scripted and the embedded narrative in order to show how the game's appropriation of the damsel-in-distress plot defies conventional expectations concerning masculine and feminine agency. My analysis of *Fatal Frame* is further refined in the next section where I take into account

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the game's broader cultural affiliations and historical references. I argue that the game's double timeline (the events of 1987, when the scripted narrative is set, and those of 1831 featured in the embedded narrative) are marked by a masculinity crisis which leaves the female protagonist no other choice but to solve the failures of the crumbling patriarchal social orders of two historical periods characterized by historical change: the crisis of the Edo period that ushered in the Meiji restoration and the crisis of traditional Japanese family values in the context of surging consumer culture in the aftermath of the Second World War. As the title of this chapter implies, my analysis lays emphasis on the conflict between two versions of femininity: the young female adolescent of late capitalist Japan (the *shōjo*) and the antagonist representing a ghostly demonic version of the idealized traditional young Japanese maiden (the vengeful ghost of an *otome*). The resolution of the plot suggests an ambivalent attitude towards patriarchy in the sense that, not only does the triumph of modern femininity bring about the antagonist's submission to patriarchal regulation, but the very agency of the female protagonist is framed as the fulfilment of duty towards the patriarchal family. The reconciliation of Western modernity and Japanese tradition conforms to the local Buddhist/Shinto worldview that maintains that opposites must be held in a state of balance.

Who is weak? The player or the playable character?

Despite a few innovations that will be accounted for in this section, the mechanics governing gameplay in *Fatal Frame* have the same aim as that of other classical survival horror games, namely to disempower. The game employs a combination of multiple mobile and fixed camera angles that are positioned at different heights throughout the game in order to create confusion, make navigation difficult, and conceal important items and resources by rendering them off-screen. In terms of combat, the player encounters a series of malevolent ghosts whom the female protagonist, Miku Hinasaki, must exorcize with her camera obscura by taking a photo of them.[1] When using the camera obscura, the game switches to a first-person view similar to that of first-person shooters by showing the game world through the lens of the camera. Although such a view is considered empowering in video games,[2] in *Fatal Frame* the effect is the opposite.[3] First, the movement speed of the camera in first person cannot keep up with the ghosts that quickly teleport outside the field of view of the camera. Second, the player must make sure that the playable character faces the ghost when looking through the camera. If not, moving in first person is so counterintuitive that there is a great chance of being hit by the attacking ghost.[4] Sound is also of little help since, besides simply alerting the player to the presence of a ghost in the proximity, it does not indicate the position of the threat relative to the playable character.[5] As Michael Nitsche observes, the player cannot know where the next ghost will strike from, which makes combat in *Fatal Frame* mostly reactionary.[6] In addition to all this, Miku cannot sustain a lot of damage, as she succumbs after as little as three hits.

As with James Sunderland in *Silent Hill 2*, Miku's procedural vulnerability is well-wrought within the diegetic texture of the video game. She is represented as an average female teenager with no supernatural abilities or special training in

combat of any kind, thus making her clumsiness in staving off or running away from ghosts consistent with her diegetic profile. The camera obscura, which features a series of game functions that cannot be narrativized by Miku's diegetic profile, is explicitly implemented in the storyworld of the game with the help of the embedded narrative. As the player progresses, he learns that Miku and her brother had received the camera obscura from their deceased mother who could see ghosts and used the camera to take pictures of them.[7] In addition to this overt diegetic explanation, players can assign meaning to the mechanic by relying on their knowledge of spirit photography, the historical practice of taking photographs in order to reveal the existence of ghosts. The player's knowledge on the topic can further naturalize the use of the camera obscura, which enables the game to maintain a high level of verisimilitude.[8] Like *Silent Hill 2*, the visual representation of the female protagonist in *Fatal Frame* is consistent with her simulation, thus engendering modal consonance. However, in terms of the gender ideology embedded in the player-playable character relationship, the female identity of Miku complicates the procedural rhetoric of the gameplay experience.

In the second chapter, I have mentioned that action video games with female playable characters project onto the implied male player a saviour gaze whereby the player saves the female protagonist from danger with the help of the masculine means of violence that she happens to possess. In the case of *Resident Evil*, I have argued that when playing as Jill Valentine, the dysfunctional mechanics and controls leave no option to the player but to fail to keep Jill Valentine safe, thus challenging the hypermasculinity inherent to the interactivity of action games. The case of Miku Hinasaki, however, differs significantly. While Jill Valentine provided the player with the masculinely coded means of violence (guns, knives etc.), the female protagonist of *Fatal Frame* lacks access to such means, her only 'weapon' being a camera, an object associated with feminine youth culture in Japan.[9] In this context, the simulation of Miku Hinasaki approximates conventional notions of femininity found in the action genre according to which access to violence is a male privilege and women can only be passive receivers (abused victims) or beneficiaries (rescued victims) of the violence exerted by the men around them. As a result, the implied male player's inability to tend to the safety of the female playable character no longer subverts phallic masculinity to the same extent that *Resident Evil* did, since now Miku's simulation is more consistent with the expected gender role that is ascribed to women in action video games. In other words, *Fatal Frame* projects weakness not onto the implied male player as in *Resident Evil*, but onto the playable character whose simulation seems to confirm patriarchal associations of femininity with weakness and vulnerability.

A reversed damsel-in-distress plot? Gender equality in weakness

Despite the emphasis that the game places on the female playable character's vulnerability during gameplay, its grand narrative arc does not establish phallic masculinity as the norm; instead, the game also simulates masculinity as being weak and helpless in what may be called a reversed damsel-in-distress plot.[10]

In keeping with the tradition inaugurated by *Silent Hill* (Konami, 1999),[11] *Fatal Frame* begins with a false opening. In the game's prologue, you play as Mafuyu Hinasaki, a young aspiring folklorist who goes into the Himuro Mansion to find Junsei Takamine, a best-selling novelist who had been reported missing along with his editorial team after visiting the mansion in order to document its past. Armed only with the camera obscura inherited from his mother, Mafuyu explores the mansion and confronts a few ghosts until he is finally subdued by the evil spirit of Kirie, the main antagonist of the game. Two weeks later, Miku Hinasaki, Mafuyu's sister, decides to look for her brother in the mansion, fearing what might have happened to him.

Notwithstanding Miku's procedural weakness, the game's intro sets the stage for a reversal of the traditional damsel-in-distress plot[12] as a result of a crisis of masculinity which transcends generations and even historical periods in the game's storyworld. Junsei Takamine's failure to symbolically colonize the Himuro Mansion by unravelling its mysteries and leaving it in one piece[13] is paralleled by the floundering of Mafuyu's own attempt to find the novelist and understand the mansion's mysterious past. What is more, as the player progresses, he learns that the traumatic history of the mansion is caused by the repeated failure of patriarchy to uphold its gender norms.[14] (A deeper insight into the matter will be provided in the next section of this chapter). In this context of repeated masculine failings, it is up to Miku Hinasaki to perform the tasks traditionally ascribed to men: she must venture into the haunted mansion, understand its secrets and save her brother. Although it is not uncommon for narrative visual media to feature heroines rescuing men in distress, *Fatal Frame*'s approach to the reversed damsel-in-distress plot (or the man-in-distress plot) differs from that of most mainstream narrative media.

Through their dynamics of equilibrium, disruption, and eventual regaining of equilibrium, narratives often function as ideological apparatuses discriminating between normal and abnormal states of affairs. In narratives featuring heroines, masculinity in crisis is often framed as the abnormal state of the storyworld that must be resolved by the female protagonist who has no other choice but to provisionally adopt the phallus herself.[15] For example, as pointed out in Chapter 3, Jill Valentine's scenario in *Resident Evil* (apparently) follows this ideological formula by rendering her saving of Chris, a stronger playable character, a struggle to reinstate phallic masculinity as the norm.[16] In *Fatal Frame,* however, the reversal of the damsel-in-distress plot does not imply the gender normative discourse typically featured in Western mainstream media. Indeed, Mafuyu's capture is a world-disrupting event, but his victim status is not unnatural since his in-game attributes are not superior to those of Miku. Unlike Chris Redfield, who in comparison to Jill Valentine has superior attributes, Mafuyu is not faster, stronger, or more resilient to damage than Miku, nor does he have access to what is conventionally perceived as masculine means of violence. In short, neither does he embody hypermasculinity, nor does the game cue players to expect that he should be hypermasculine (as is the case with Chris Redfield who eventually turns out to be the opposite). Therefore, Miku's journey to save her brother does

not entail a restoration of patriarchy, but is rather motived merely by brotherly love and duty towards the family (*giri*). If Miku's vulnerability only mirrors that of her brother, then *Fatal Frame*'s procedural rhetoric thwarts the patriarchal strategies of othering whereby masculine anxieties are projected onto femininity. The game does not simulate femininity as a negative counterpart of masculinity, but rather simulates both of them as equally weak, vulnerable, and helpless.

The gender equality in weakness simulated by *Fatal Frame* may be surprising to Western players, yet for a Japanese audience at the turn of the millennium, such gender dynamics were not unfamiliar. In terms of subcultural identity, the two siblings adhere to two gender-specific cultural representations of adolescence: *shōjo* and *otaku*. *Shōjo*, which literally means young girl, designates a feminine cultural identity[17] characterized by openness to Western culture and the rejection of adulthood together with its inherent responsibilities embodied by the good wife, wise mother (*ryōsaikenbo*) gender role.[18] *Shōjo*s adopt Western notions of self-determination and empowerment, which nevertheless often take the form of conformism to Western capitalist consumption norms especially in terms of fashion.[19] To depict their social agency and resistance to tradition, visual media rely on a combination of feminine asexual[20] cuteness (*kawaii*)[21] and masculine assertiveness.[22] In the context of Japan's economic recession in the 1990s and 2000s, called Japan's lost decades, when the rise in unemployment challenges dominant masculine gender constructs such as the breadwinner (*daikokubashira*) and the *salaryman*, *shōjos* start to emerge as battle heroines that must supplement the role of men who are experiencing a crisis of masculinity.[23]

In this context, Miku's role as an agentive saviour corresponds to prevailing representations of young femininity at the turn of the millennium in Japan since she, too, has to compensate for Mafuyu's crisis of masculinity. What is particularly interesting about Miku is that, unlike other *shōjos* in the visual media of the time, her agency is adapted to the norms of the survival horror genre. Instead of a female battle heroine, Miku is a *shōjo* final girl[24] who has to manage her weakness and find alternative ways to survive the Himuro mansion, hence the game's privileging of flight over fight and reactionary attacks rather than a frontal assault.

As far as Mafuyu is concerned, his passivity is not only related to dominant notions of masculinity in Japan's lost decades but also to his subcultural identity as an *otaku*. Emerging in the 80s, *otaku* is a subculture of usually young males who are so engrossed in the object of their hobby or interest that they constantly pursue knowledge of their interests and lose touch with reality.[25] They usually lead secluded lives and avoid social contact. Their lifestyle is also seen as a form of resistance against adulthood and traditional notions of masculinity.[26] Mafuyu's identity as an *otaku* is confirmed by his obsession with the novelist which determines him to risk his own life in order to learn more about him and by his inability to perform the heroic masculinity expected of male protagonists in action visual media. Given Mafuyu's rejection of conventional masculinity, his cultural identity functions as a suitable complementary for the agentive *shōjo* of the 2000s represented by Miku.

Immersing the player in the reversed damsel-in-distress plot

In order for the games' procedural rhetoric to work, the storyworld containing the reversed damsel-in-distress plot has to be believable. To this end, *Fatal Frame* adopts an immersive game design similar to that of *Silent Hill* 2 that aims to persuade players of the realism of their gameplay experience. The game features a high degree of narrativity which rests on the prototypical features of situatedness,[27] world-making, sequentiality, and experientiality. The stress laid on narrativity in *Fatal Frame*, as in other classical survival horror games, enables the game to compensate for its low level of immediacy and interactivity determined by its fragmented, haphazard, and overcomplicated gameplay and, in doing so, to maintain a high level of player immersion which galvanizes the rhetorical effect of the game.

Two of the four features mentioned above, world-making and sequentiality are the most emphasized and, consequently, the most relevant for the game's realism. In a manner similar to *Silent Hill 2*, *Fatal Frame* facilitates the construction of its storyworld by narrativizing the mechanics that govern Miku's simulation. Yet, unlike *Silent Hill 2*, whose events are set in a nonfactual town are blatantly fictional, *Fatal Frame*, in keeping with the realist aesthetics of J-horror films, blurs the line between fiction and reality by claiming that its events are based on a true story.[28] Indeed, Makoto Shibata, the lead game designer of *Fatal Frame*, took inspiration from an urban legend according to which near Tokyo there is an actual Himuro mansion where ritual sacrifices took place.[29]

Knowledge of the urban legend can help players anticipate the game's scripted sequence of events. In *Fatal Frame,* the main events take place in 1986 and revolve around Miku's attempt to rescue her brother from the Himuro mansion. The closer Miku is to finding her brother, the more she discovers about the mansion's past and the reason why it is now haunted. As it turns out, for centuries the Himuro family had been charged with preventing an evil force called the Malice from entering the world. In order that this might be achieved, a series of rituals had to be completed every ten years: the blinding ritual, demon tag, the strangling ritual, and the rope ceremony. The blinding ritual required that a maiden should be blinded and asked to play tag along with ten other girls. The first girl to be tagged would become the next blinded maiden, while the last girl tagged would become the Rope Shrine Maiden to be sacrificed in the strangling ritual. Once the Rope Shrine Maiden was established, she would be held in seclusion in the mansion for ten years and then used in the strangling ritual. In this ritual, ropes would be tied to her neck, hands, and feet and, with the help of a mechanism called the Rope Altar, these ropes would be pulled until the girl was dismembered. The blood-soaked ropes would then be used in the Rope Ceremony to bind the Gates of Hell and keep the Malice out. Because the ropes would hold for no more than ten years, immediately after each rope ceremony new blinding and demon tag rituals were performed so that a new maiden could

start being prepared for the next sacrifice. The dire state of the mansion is caused by a failed strangling ritual in 1831. Kirie, the last Rope Shrine Maiden, broke her seclusion and fell in love with a young man who had visited the Himuro mansion. Because she was no longer pure, the blood-soaked ropes resulting from her dismembering could no longer keep the Gates of Hell closed. This resulted in the outbreak of Malice which killed most of the inhabitants of the Himuro mansion and turned Kirie into a vengeful ghost (*onryō*).

As in the case of *Silent Hill 2*, *Fatal Frame*'s sequence of events produces a double temporality which engenders both a 'what' and a 'how/who' type of suspense. On the one hand, the game produces suspense with respect to future events, i.e. players are eager to find out what will happen next in the game, how they are going to find Mafuyu, and what state he will be in. On the other hand, the game also stirs the player's interested in the backstory of the events. During gameplay, the player gradually uncovers the mansion's past, the rituals that were conducted regularly within, the identity of Kirie, and how she became the vengeful ghost that haunts the female protagonist while she explores the mansion looking for the brother.

Besides sequentiality and world-building/world-disruption, experientiality is also featured in the game, although it is not as developed as the former two. Players get a sense of the main characters' subjective experience of their survival by means of cutscenes and the embedded narrative. In the case of Miku, the game stresses the agonizing nature of her quest to save Mafuyu. The cutscenes and her animations show her in a a state of physical pain, psychological stress, and shock, thus reducing her subjectivity to a visceral, more affect-oriented experience of dread. In the case of Kirie, cutscenes play only a minor role in the construction of her subjectivity, as it is up to the player to collect the scattered textual and audio texts comprising the embedded narrative and learn about her tragic destiny. Once her story is reconstructed, Kirie stands out as a more psychologically complex character who, as the next section will show, has to manage an internal struggle between her duty towards the community and her newfound love.

Judging by the levels of appropriateness, sequentiality, world-making/world-disrupting, and experientiality evinced by *Fatal Frame*, it is safe to conclude that the game features a high level of narrativity which compensates for the low levels of immediacy and interactivity fostered by gameplay. By maintaining the player in its narrative grip, the game succeeds in immersing the player and, thus, lends persuasiveness to its reversed damsel-in-distress plot which commands disbelief in male supremacy.

Reconciling conflicting versions of femininity: Western culture meets Japanese tradition

In order to better understand the political implications of the reversed damsel-in-distress plot persuasively simulated by *Fatal Frame*, one has to take into consideration the wider sociocultural local context of the economic depression of the 1990s and 2000s (Japan's so-called lost decades)[30] succeeding the "Japanese

economic miracle,"[31] as well as two traumatic events that shocked Japanese society during the same decades: the subway gas attacks conducted by the religious group Aum and the Kobe child murders perpetrated by the anonymous juvenile delinquent referred to as Shonen A.[32] These two events that sparked wide cultural anxiety with respect to religious violence and adolescence[33] are strongly related to the economic recession which raised doubts in Japanese society with respect to the manner in which Japan embraced Western culture and globalization after the Second World War. Horror visual media released at the turn of the millennium evoke this sense of cultural crisis based on the fear that the individualism and consumer culture brought along with globalization have altered Japanese social structures and mores to such an extent that traumatic events such as those mentioned above could no longer be avoided.[34] *Fatal Frame*'s procedural rhetoric articulates this tense cultural climate, but, in conjugation with its linear storytelling means, lacks the reactionary undertones of other media such as horror cinema, which has historically been a means to express scepticism concerning globalization in the context of the American occupation and beyond.[35] In this section, I wish to offer a deeper insight into the narrative and cultural meaning embedded in the game's representation and simulation by examining the manner in which *Fatal Frame* appropriates the tropes of horror cinema in the pursuit of its pro-Western agenda, while simultaneously managing to reconcile Westernized Japan with tradition. In other words, I reveal how the subversive emergent narrative engendered by gameplay is balanced with a more conservative scripted narrative, whereby the game attains what I later refer to as a secular ideological syncretism.[36]

As Michael Nitsche and Martin Picard point out, generically *Fatal Frame* is strongly indebted to the avenging spirit tradition in Japanese cinema[37] which grew to fruition in the Edo Gothic.[38] The heyday of the Edo Gothic is considered the 1950s and the 1960s, a period which roughly overlaps with the American Occupation following Japan's traumatic defeat in the Second World War and the immediate postoccupation period. In this context of rapid social change marked chiefly by the import of capitalism and Western values, Edo Gothic films can be construed as a reaction to the wave of globalization which was not only regarded as foreign but itself a reiteration of defeat.[39] These films reinforce traditional Japanese values by highlighting the tragic consequences that renouncing such values can yield.[40] Specifically, the horror films termed Edo Gothic focus on how local traditional conceptions of patriarchy and debt/duty are undermined by the consumerism inherent to capitalism and the alienation caused by urbanization.[41]

The local Japanese concept used to designate patriarchal gender power relations is *ie*. Lexically, *ie* can mean house, household, or family, but ideologically it "represents a quasi-kinship unit with a patriarchal head and members tied to him through real or symbolic blood relationship."[42] According to this patriarchal ideology, the man is expected to be the breadwinner (*daikokubashira*), is granted absolute authority within the extended family, but is at the same time responsible for the well-being of the family members under his authority.[43] Women,

on the other hand, are expected to be good wives and wise mothers (*ryōsai-kenbo*), a gender role which idealizes motherhood and restricts women's agency to household duties.[44] Although the legal framework maintaining *ie* ideology underwent significant changes after the Second World War, the gender roles inherent to *ie* ideology have continued to enjoy currency in Japanese dominant culture as suggested by the endurance of some legal practices such as the family registry (*koseki*),[45] the division of labour and its regulation,[46] as well as the dominant normative notions of masculinity and femininity.[47] *Ie* ideology rests on two complementary values: *giri* and *ninjo*. Colette Balmain claims that "*[g]iri* refers to a strong sense of obligation, and is the 'social cloth' that binds Japan together, whilst *ninjō* denotes 'generosity or sympathy towards the disadvantaged, and sympathy towards each other.'"[48] Typically, *giri* applies to one's relation to society, while *ninjo* belongs to the intimate realm of the self[49] and it is expected that individuals privilege *giri* over *ninjo*.[50]

Often, the world-disrupting event of Edo Gothic films leads to a corruption of, or a conflict between *giri* and *ninjo*, which affects the entire *ie* system.[51] This usually amounts to the head of the family no longer fulfilling his duty (*giri*) towards society and showing compassion (*ninjo*) to his wife[52] because he is corrupted by selfishness and avarice[53] which determine the husband to cause his wife's death. The wronged wife then turns into a vengeful ghost (*yūrei* or *onryō*)[54] who comes back to haunt the husband whose moral decay is reflected onto the monstrous body of the ghost.

That the Edo Gothic emerged in a time of great social upheaval in Japanese society is not coincidental and calls for a reading of the genre as a retelling of the past that is more indicative of the cultural anxieties of the 1950s and 1960s than those of feudal Japan.[55] Because the aftermath of the Second World War forced Japanese culture to open up to Western cultural influence that affected the *ie* system, it should come as no surprise that the conservative side of society should idealize the Edo period, when the *ie* system emerged and when external cultural influences were strongly rejected,[56] and that they should instrumentalize its memory in an attempt to reassert traditional family values.[57] The monstrosity of the *yūrei* is not only an externalization of the samurai husband's moral decay, but the *yūrei* is also a symbol of the nation's war trauma.[58] By giving concrete visual form to the cultural trauma, the films comment on the negative effects that the materialism of Western consumer culture has had on the moral fabric of the Japanese nation. However, this reassertion of tradition is not a triumphant but a fatalist one. Edo Gothic films evince a victim consciousness[59] which manifests itself in the nostalgic representation of an ideal past which can never be recovered.[60] At the same time, by moving the focus onto the subjectivity of the female characters, the films also adhere to the directives of gender equality that were imposed by new democratic policies adopted by Japan.[61]

The decades to come would maintain the centrality of the *onryō* in horror films, but, in the context of women's gradual emancipation, the *onryō* would become ever more vicious, powerful, and uncontainable. With the emergence of youth subcultures, anxieties with respect to the growing independence of women

started being redirected from wronged *ryōsaikenbo* to female teenagers or even younger girls. In the 1990s and the 2000s, some of the films would go as far as to portray these young girls before their deaths not as victims but as victimizers, thus evincing an emerging anxiety concerning young femininity and a connected concern with the dysfunctional family that can no longer regulate adolescence.[62] These concerns regarding the conflict between *giri* and *ninjo*, the dissolution of the traditional family, and the excessive independence of young female adolescents find articulation in *Fatal Frame*, as the next paragraphs will show.

As explained in the previous section, the events of the game unfold across two temporalities which are causally linked. The game simulates the adventures of Miku Hinakasaki who in 1986 ventures into the Himuro mansion to rescue her brother. As she explores the mansion, she uncovers the tragic events of 1831 when the failure of a Strangling Ritual led to the outbreak of Malice into the mansion. The choice of the 2001 released video game for the years 1986 and 1831 is connected to the tense cultural climate described in the beginning of this section. The year 1986 designates one of the peaks of capitalist economic growth in Japan, a period of thriving individualism and consumerism, but it also marks the fast-approaching end of prosperity which was abruptly interrupted in 1990 when Japan's lost decades began. 1831 is also a year which designates a period of transition. By the 1830s, the Tokugawa shogunate, i.e. the form of government coextensive with the Edo period, had entered a time of crisis[63] which anticipated the Meiji restoration in 1868. If Edo Gothic films used family trauma in the Edo period as a metaphor for (post)occupation cultural ills, *Fatal Frame*'s metaphoric use of the past is double-layered. Like its cinematic generic peers, the game suggests that the root of contemporary cultural ills lies in the unresolved Japanese past which has been forgotten[64] or even repressed[65] by the new Western Japanese self and which must be recuperated. Yet, while Edo Gothic films made the causal link between past and present covert, *Fatal Frame*'s double temporality explicitly emphasizes the link. By setting its simulation in 1986, the heyday of Japanese capitalism, the game overtly indicates Western cultural influences, i.e. individualism and consumerism, as being to blame for the manner in which traditional Japanese values have been forsaken.[66] Consequently, in order for the protagonist to solve the problems of the present (save her brother), she has to exit the new capitalist Japan, travel deep into Japan's medieval past (the Himuro mansion), uncover the events of 1831, and deal with its unresolved issues (Kirie's trauma).

Of vital importance for the rhetoric of the game is Kirie's double-identity: as an innocent child and as a monstrous feminine adolescent. As Barbara Creed observes in her seminal work, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, patriarchy establishes masculinity as the norm by projecting its anxieties onto femininity.[67] In a time of social crisis, which in a patriarchal framework is always also a crisis of masculinity, these anxieties are galvanized and the women that embody them become monstrous. This gender economy is very much at work in the storyworld of *Fatal Frame* since the world-disruptive event occurs in a time of historical transition when the crisis of the shogunate social order destabilizes the *ie* system, as well. The failure of the

Strangling Ritual is determined by the Himuro family headmaster's inability to fulfil his role as head of the family, as he is incapable of properly keeping Kirie secluded and preventing her from falling in love with the visitor.

Connected to patriarchy's failure to regulate femininity is the Japanese anxiety regarding adolescence which prevailed at the turn of the millennium.[68] In a time of transition when the traditional social structures of the Edo period are challenged, the adolescent Kirie experiences a conflict between her duty (*giri*) to sacrifice herself for the better of the community in the Strangling Ritual and her feelings of love (*ninjo*) towards the young visitor. Because *ninjo* overwhelms *giri*, Kirie is no longer pure and the ritual fails. As a result of her unrequited love and brutal death, Kirie returns to haunt the living in two shapes: as a monstrous vengeful ghost (*onryō*)[69] and as the ghost of an innocent child. Kirie's adolescent feminine monstrosity is constructed in keeping with Japanese religious conceptions of defilement. Her graphic representation is characterized by excessive blood and hair, both symbols of pollution and feminine sexuality in the Shinto religion.[70] As an *onryō*, she represents an unbridled form of femininity with hyperactive reproductive functions that lie outside the ambit of any patriarchal regulation. Conversely, the child ghost is pure: there is no trait of blood, and her hair is cut and combed, which suggests a successful exertion of patriarchal control over the female body. The visual antithesis between the two alter-egos has moral significance: the child-ghost of Kirie acts as a benevolent helper aiding Miku in crucial moments of the plot (for example, it is the child-Kirie who delivers the camera obscura to Miku early on in the game), while the adolescent Kirie tries to prevent Miku from saving her brother and closing the Gates of Hell.

If monstrous women give concrete to form to patriarchal anxieties, then the representation and simulation of Kirie may be considered reactionary, but, at the same time, a closer reading will reveal that the video game leaves room for a critical reading of *ie* ideology. The sequence of events represented in the game's embedded narrative suggests that Kirie's monstrosity is not only the result of her inability to fulfil her social obligations but also that of her treatment by the Himuro family master who, by prioritizing his duty to keep Malice out (*giri*) over his compassion for the socially inferior Kirie (*ninjo*), submits the latter to a brutal death. Consequently, her monstrosity is also a representation of the traumatic experience of womanhood in a rigid patriarchal culture buttressed by the precedence of *giri*.[71]

Typically, vengeful ghosts in Japanese horror films are not simply defeated or exorcized as in Western Gothic/Horror narratives. In the Edo Gothic, for instance, the ghosts vanish once their wrong-doer, their former samurai-husband, is punished for his concession to avarice and selfishness. In later films, especially the highly popular family melodramas such as *Ringu* (Nakata, 1998), or *Dark Water* (Nakata, 2002), the *yūrei* has to somehow be appeased either through deferral of the curse or by having its demands satisfied,[72] lest the vengeful ghost resulting from the crumbling of the traditional Japanese family of the lost decades should cause the destruction of Japanese society as a whole, as it is the

case in *Ju-On: The Grudge* (Shimizu, 2002). The case of *Fatal Frame* is different since, in a Western fashion, it simulates the triumph of Miku over the monstrous ghost of Kirie. With the help of her camera obscura, Miku manages to exorcize the *yūrei*, which allows Kirie to return to her human condition prior to her submission to the Strangling Ritual.

Miku's final victory against the *yūrei* stands out as unorthodox in the context of the dominantly anti-modern, anti-feminist rhetoric of Japanese horror films. As already mentioned, Japanese films pertaining to the Edo Gothic evince nostalgia for a medieval Japan that was cut off from any Western influence and that had a rigid social structure in accordance with *ie* ideology. The disruption of *ie* in such films was a device used to comment on the effects of capitalism on Japanese culture. *Fatal Frame* also employs this narrative device to criticize the effects of the Western influence on Japan, but, whereas Edo Gothic films were characterized by a sense of fatalism, the game sees the solution to its cultural crisis in the new young Japanese woman whose embracing of Western culture enables her to solve the ills of the past in an attempt to cure the present.

Miku Hinasaki's identity as a *shōjo* is instrumental in the rejection of passivity[73] and fatalism if we consider the cultural connotations of agency, empowerment, and a Western sense of self-determination that this subcultural identity entails. Of similar importance to the matter is also the cultural affiliation of Kirie, whose defeat symbolizes a rebuttal of the values that her subcultural identity embodies. Kirie's diegetic profile associates her with the *otome*. *Otome* is a nostalgic male conception of femininity addressed to female adolescents which emerges as a reaction to the growing cultural currency of the *shōjo*.[74] Due to its submissiveness to patriarchal authority and passivity with respect to social order, in visual media *otome* is often used to associate femininity with victimhood.[75] The clash between Miku the *shōjo* and Kirie the *otome* can therefore be read as a clash between modernity and tradition. By simulating the eventual triumph of the former, the game's procedural rhetoric seems to endorse the new westernized cultural identity of *shōjo* and Western culture in general to the detriment of tradition. Yet, to the surprise of the Western audience, the resolution of the plot consisting in the triumph of Western modernity does not imply a rejection of Japanese tradition.

The game features three endings whose activation depends on the level of difficulty on which the game is finished. In all three Kirie's fate is roughly the same. Once the monstrous adolescent ghost of Kirie is exorcized, she returns to her original teenage self. Shortly after, her innocent child alter ego reappears and tells her "Don't forget your duty,"[76] while pointing towards the Gates of Hell. Kirie then goes to the gates and binds herself to them with the ropes of the Strangling Ritual so as to stop the Malice. She will remain there suffering for eternity in order to fulfil her social duty (*giri*).[77] Although, for the most part, on a symbolic level *Fatal Frame* simulates a conflict between the imported Western culture and Japanese tradition, the ending suggests that the two sides are reconcilable. It is by means of Miku's providential intervention in the Himuro mansion that Kirie finally accepts her fate to be the Rope Shrine maiden.[78]

As a result, *Fatal Frame* implies that traditional norms can be reinforced with the help of modernity.

To a Western audience, the amalgamation of these two apparently contradictory cultures may seem puzzling.[79] However, one has to retain that such a reception stems from Western secular notions of orthodoxy that do not apply to Japanese culture. The dominant Japanese worldview stemming from Buddhist and Shinto notions of structure and equilibrium maintains that opposites have to be kept in a state of balance. The tendency towards syncretism instead of orthodoxy can also be seen in the diverse religious life of the Japanese where "Shinto birth rituals are followed by Western wedding rituals and funerary customs from Japanese Buddhism."[80] In this context, the merging of Western modernity, with its late capitalism, consumer culture, and humanist individualism, and Japanese tradition, with its hierarchical social structure, precedence of *giri* over *ninjo*, and positive valuation of passivity, is a form of secular ideological syncretism which local Japanese players are not likely to find as quizzical as Western players might.

Taking all this into account, it is safe to claim that the overall rhetoric of *Fatal Frame* amounts to a Japanese localization of the civilizing mission. Western intervention is providential not so that emancipation in accordance with Western humanism and democracy may be obtained, but rather so that local Japanese notions of balance and structure may be reinforced.

Melodrama and male passivity

The idea of a reconciliation between Western and local Japanese values is also conveyed by the multiple fates that Mafuyu can have in the game. While all three endings feature Kirie suffering eternally for the better of the community, Mafuyu's fate differs from one ending to the other. In order to understand the ideological implications of Mafuyu's actions in the three different endings, this section considers the love subplot of *Fatal Frame* in relation to another cinematic genre of Japanese cinema, the melodrama, and two of its defining conventions: the all-suffering woman and the weak passive male.

While Western romance is typically predicated on the male partner's active pursuit of his loved one, an endeavour which often implies defying social norms, the Japanese romance tradition, stemming from Kabuki theatre and reaching its peak in the form of cinematic melodrama in the mid-twentieth century, foregrounds the passivity of the male lover and the noble suffering of the female lover whose love cannot be fulfilled because the two belong to different social classes. Romance narratives play out a conflict between social obligation (*giri*) and intimate feelings (*ninjo*) and typically end with the sense of social responsibility prevailing, hence the passivity of the male partner and the nobility of the woman's suffering. When such love relationships are consummated, the narrative typically reinforces social norms by featuring the eventual suicide of the lovers.[81]

Romance is an important element of the storyworld of *Fatal Frame* as the embedded narrative represents the impossible love of Kirie and the visitor. As discussed in the previous section, all endings present Kirie embodying the trope

of the all-suffering woman who renounces her wellbeing in order to carry out her social duty. Mafuyu, on the other hand, does not fit as neatly within the weak passive male convention. In the ending triggered by beating the game on normal difficulty, after Mafuyu is freed from the grasp of the monstrous ghost, he nevertheless decides to remain by Kirie's side to alleviate her eternal suffering as she keeps the Gates of Hell closed. In this scenario, Mafuyu does not conform to the "natural" order of things and, in a typically Western manner, defies social norms (*giri*) in order to be with his loved one (*ninjo*). This ending dovetails with the overall rhetoric of the game which suggests that Western culture and Japanese tradition are not mutually exclusive and can be reconciled.

The ending obtained when finishing the game on "nightmare" difficulty features Mafuyu heeding his sister's call and leaving the mansion by her side, despite a moment of hesitation. In this version of the ending, Miku's brother acts in defiance of his feelings of love towards Kirie and submits to social norms. This scenario is tributary to the conservative ideology of Japanese melodrama which reasserts the superiority of the community's wellbeing to that of the individual. Although now Mafuyu adopts a more traditional Japanese behaviour, the ending does not significantly alter the game's rhetoric. Mafuyu's submission to *giri* parallels that of Kirie and both are determined by the Westernized Japanese young woman's agency in the storyworld. The implication is once again that Western culture can, in fact, reinforce traditional values.

Finally, if completing the game on "fatal" difficulty, the player obtains the third ending consisting of a collage of pictures. The photos show Miku and Mafuyu leaving the Himuro mansion together and Kirie joined by her initial lover as she struggles to keep the Gates of Hell closed. This ending suggests that a true fulfilment of *ninjo* can be obtained only if one is steadfast in performing one's duty towards society. The "fatal" ending is ideologically consistent with the other two, in the sense that once again the felicitous fulfilment of both *giri* and *ninjo* is indebted to Western culture's intervention in Japan's repressed past.

Having seen the manner in which the three possible endings differently affect Mafuyu and Kirie, what must be asked is how one can account for the different treatment that the two characters receive and how this ties in with the game's overall approach to gender. Once again, a return to the game's intermedial and intertextual links will aid us in answering this question. Throughout its history originating in Kabuki theatre, through Shinpa plays, and finally achieving its final metamorphoses in the cinema of the first half of the twentieth century, the Japanese melodrama reflected the evolution of Japanese social structures and the influence that historical events such as the Sino-Japanese Wars and the American Occupation had had on these structures.[82] One of the most significant mutations that the genre underwent was that, under the influence of Hollywood, the cinematic melodramas of the 50s and 60s started to represent the successful unification of the two lovers, despite inimical external elements such as class affiliation or tradition.[83] Although many of its conventions were subject to change, the all-suffering woman trope remained a constant for most of the genre's history. *Fatal Frame*'s three different endings are consistent

with melodrama's variables and invariables. While the manner in and extent to which the lovers succeed in being together varies, Kirie's role as the all-suffering woman is present in all three endings. Mafuyu, on the other hand, vacillates between *giri* and *ninjo*, which suggests that, by the standards of *Fatal Frame*'s storyworld, it is acceptable for the male partner of the loving couple to have more freedom in terms of choice and free will than the female partner.

The different degrees of freedom enjoyed by Mafuyu and Kirie, respectively, in the game's multiple endings serve as another example of how *Fatal Frame* achieves a secular syncretism of Western modern and traditional Japanese views on gender. As previously argued, Mafuyu's procedural representation in the reversed damsel-in-distress plot pays tribute to an egalitarian conception of gender whereby Mafuyu is in no way superior to Miku. Nevertheless, the Western notion of gender egalitarianism is balanced by the game's endings which reinforces feminine subsidiarity. By intervening in the affairs of the Himuro mansion, Miku, the female representative of Western culture, restores local gender hierarchies between masculinity and femininity. Her successful defeating of the monstrous Kirie results in Mafuyu having a choice between staying by Kirie's side or leaving her, while Kirie has no other choice but to remain within the domestic sphere and fulfil her duty towards the community (*giri*).

Conclusion

Chapters 3 and 4 have shown how two emblematic survival horror games produced in Japan, *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill 2*, employ an immersive game design in order to undermine Western patriarchy. This chapter has investigated yet another survival horror game produced in Japan, *Fatal Frame*, which this time sets its adventures in a local Japanese context and, in doing so, primarily targets a local Japanese audience. The shift in cultural content and target audience localizes the critique of patriarchy, imbues it with local conventional representations of masculinity and femininity, and enmeshes it within more overarching discourses concerning national identity in post-Second World War Japan.

The game's procedural rhetoric relies principally on its simulation of Miku's adventures in the Himuro mansion. Her ludic and narrative agency is framed as a reversed interactive damsel-in-distress plot in which Miku must save her brother Mafuyu who is procedurally represented as weak and vulnerable as his sister. The gender egalitarianism implied in the game's simulation is balanced by the game's scripted narrative which recuperates local traditional gender hierarchies.

In order for Miku to rescue her brother, she must face the main antagonist of the game, the monstrous adolescent ghost of Kirie. The struggle between the two represents a conflict between two contending versions of femininity: the young Japanese adolescent who embraces Western culture and the traditional version of femininity which abides by the traditional Japanese value inherent to *ie* ideology. Although Kirie's monstrosity can be read as a symbol of the traumatic experience of womanhood under the *ie* family system, contrary to Western expectations, Miku's eventual triumph against Kirie does not abolish tradition.

Instead of enacting a civilizing mission that emancipates Kirie from her position within the *ie* family system and elevates her to the same social status as Mafuyu, Miku's western-type intervention in the past forgotten affairs of the mansion offers Kirie providential aid in fulfilling her duty as ascribed to her by Japanese patriarchy, thus achieving a balance between Western modernity and Japanese tradition. Compared to *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill 2*, *Fatal Frame*'s critique of patriarchy stands out as politically unorthodox, yet this ideological syncretism is not unexpected for Japanese culture where syncretism is one of the main traits of religious life.

In order for the game's storyworld to be believable and its political message effective, the game immerses the player in a manner similar to *Silent Hill 2*. The cumbersome game mechanics and controls are narrativized by means of Miku's diegetic profile: she is a weak, young female with no access to other weapons except a camera obscura. The game's high level of narrativity compensates for the low levels of interactivity and immediacy, thus maintaining the player's engagement with the simulated and represented events of *Fatal Frame*. This renders the events verisimilar and strengthens the game's procedural critique of patriarchy which it mounts in accordance with the specificity of Japanese national culture.

Notes

1 Martin Picard is of the opinion that the manner in which the camera's game functions are implemented in the storyworld pays tribute to local Japanese folklore according to which photography is harmful to the soul of the photographed. See Martin Picard, "Haunting Backgrounds Transnationality and Intermediality in Japanese Survival Horror Video Games," in *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, ed. Bernard Perron (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009), 109.
2 Alex Wade, *Playback—A Genealogy of 1980s British Videogames* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 137.
3 Gabi Kirilloff, "Subversive Game Mechanics in the *Fatal Frame* and *Portal Franchises*: Having Your Cake and Eating It Too," in *Feminist War Games? Mechanisms of War, Feminist Values, and Interventional Games*, eds. Jon Saklofske, Alyssa Arbuckle, and Jon Bath (New York and London: Routledge, 2019), 216–217.
4 In *Fatal Frame*, players use the left analog stick for playable character movement and the right analog stick for the movement of the flashlight. Counterintuitively, when looking through the camera, the analog sticks change function as now the left controls the camera's aim, while the right controls the playable character. What is more, although the game does have a 'turn around' button, performing a 360 degrees spin does not guarantee that the player will be facing the ghost.
5 Inger Ekman and Petri Lankoski, "Hair-Raising Entertainment: Emotions, Sound, and Structure in *Silent Hill 2* and *Fatal Frame*," in *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, ed. Bernard Perron (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2009), 194.
6 Michael Nitsche "Complete Horror in *Fatal Frame*," in *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, ed. Bernard Perron (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2009), 214.
7 The game warns the player that an excessive use of the camera could be harmful for the owner and could lead to his or her death, as it was the case with Miku's mother who eventually committed suicide.

8 Nitsche, "Complete Horror," 207–208.
9 As I argue at greater length in the upcoming sections, the female protagonist's representation associates her with the *shōjo* subculture, a cultural identity adopted by many young girls who reject tradition, embrace Western consumer practices, and are interested in their appearance and fashion. Her interest in the latter is also signified by her short uniform skirt which is distinctive element of the *kogyaru* (meaning high school girl) fashion subculture. Kumiko Saito, "Magic, *Shōjo*, and Metamorphosis: Magical Anime and the Challenges of Changing Gender Identities in Japanese Society," in *The Journal of Asian* Studies 73, no. 1 (February 2014): 146, doi: 10.1017/S0021911813001708; Maya Keliyan, "*Kogyaru* and *Otaku*: Youth Subcultures Lifestyles in Postmodern Japan," in *Asian and African Studies* XV, no. 3 (2011): 98–99, doi: 10.4312/as.2011.15.3.95-110.
10 See also Kirilloff, "Subversive Game Mechanics," 215.
11 Ewan Kirkland, "The Self-Reflexive Funhouse of *Silent Hill*," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 13, no. 4 (2007): 404, doi: 10.1177/1354856507081964; Andrei Nae and Alexandra Ileana Bacalu, "Toward a Reconsideration of Hypermediacy: Immersion in Survival Horror Video Games and Eighteenth-century Novels," in *Playing the Field: Video Games and American Studies*, ed. Sascha Pöhlmann (Boston, MA and Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019), 138.
12 Nitsche, "Complete Horror," 214.
13 In his seminal work *Orientalism*, Edward Said famously articulates that colonialism is founded on the production of a body of knowledge, i.e. a discourse, by means of modern sciences such as anthropology. Junsei Takamine's journey into the mansion mirrors the colonizer's journey into foreign territories in the sense that he also tries to rein in the otherness of the mansion by providing a 'rational' explanations for its mysteries. See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); Michel Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (1989, repr., London and New York: Routledge, 2002).
14 Raechel Dumas, *The Monstrous-Feminine in Contemporary Japanese Popular Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 149.
15 I am not denying that the presence of action heroines in the action genre has led to a diversification of the genre, but, at the same time, it must be acknowledged that patriarchy has also updated the means by which masculinity is reinforced as the norm.
16 As I explain in more details in Chapter 3, *Resident Evil's* scripted sequence of events in Jill Valentine's scenario suggests that her ludic and narrative agency have the aim of restoring patriarchal order by reinstituting Chris Redfield as the holder of phallic masculinity. However, by means of its modal irony, heteroglossia and cinematic irony, the gender economy embedded in the storyworld is rendered artificial, which deconstructs conventional notions of masculinity and femininity. Hence my claim in this section that *Resident Evil* only apparently abides by the ideology of reversed damsel-in-distress plots.
17 Jaqueline Berndt, "Introduction: Shōjo Mediations," in *Shōjo Across Media: Exploring "Girl" Practices in Contemporary Japan*, eds. Jaqueline Berndt, Kazumi Nagaike, and Fusami Ogi (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 2.
18 Emily Jane Wakeling, "'Girls Are Dancing': *shōjo* Culture and Feminism in Contemporary Japanese Art," *New Voices* 5, no. 131 (2011), 131, doi: 10.21159/nv.05.06.
19 Saito, "Magic, *Shōjo*, and Metamorphosis," 146, Wakeling, "Girls Are Dancing," 132.
20 Because *shōjo* represents a never-completed passage to gendered adulthood, *shōjos* typically have no sex interests. Consequently, in keeping Miku's identity as a *shōjo*, the to-be-rescued boy could only be a family member. See Saito, "Magic, *Shōjo*, and Metamorphosis," 151; Berndt, "Introduction," 2.
21 Wakeling, "Girls Are Dancing," 140; Saito, "Magic, *Shōjo*, and Metamorphosis,"150.

22 Robin M. LeBlanc, "The Politics of Gender in Japan," in *Routledge Handbook of Japanese Culture and Society*, eds. Victoria Lyon Bestor, Theodore C. Bestor, and Akiko Yamagata (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 123.
23 Saito, "Magic, *Shōjo*, and Metamorphosis," 156.
24 For an account of the final girl trope in horror cinema, see Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992, repr., Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), 35–41.
25 Saito, "Magic, *Shōjo*, and Metamorphosis," 146.
26 Keliyan, "*Kogyaru* and *Otaku*," 103.
27 Because all survival horror games discussed in Chapters 4–10 can be regarded as evincing similar levels of situatedness, see the comments on situatedness in Chapters 1, 3, and 4.
28 Steven T. Brown, *Japanese Horror and the Transnational Cinema of Sensations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 2–3.
29 For an overview of the urban legends surrounding the Himuro mansion, see Lucia Peters, "Scare Yourself Silly: The Curious Case of the Himuro Mansion," *The Toast*, January 21, 2014, https://the-toast.net/2014/01/21/scare-yourself-silly-the-himuro-mansion/.
30 For an account of the recession, see Yoichi Funabashi and Barak Kushner, eds., *Examining Japan's Lost Decades* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015).
31 Colette Balmain, *Introduction to Japanese Horror Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 53.
32 Dumas, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 134.
33 Ibid.
34 Jay McRoy, *Nightmare Japan*: *Contemporary Horror Cinema* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2008), 80; Balmain, *Japanese Horror*, 52–53, 82.
35 Balmain, *Japanese Horror*, 52; McRoy, *Nightmare Japan*, 76.
36 For a comment on religious syncretism, see Brenda S. Gardenour Walter, "Silent Hill and Fatal Frame: Finding Transcendent Horror in and Beyond the Haunted Magic Circle," in Playing with Religion in Digital Games, eds. Robert Alan Brookey and David J. Gunkel (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014), 95.
37 Nitsche, "Compete Horror," 202; Picard, "Haunting Backgrounds," 97.
38 Balmain, *Japanese Horror*, 50.
39 Japan's defeat and the subsequent American Occupation meet all the characteristics that Piotr Sztompka ascribe to a cultural trauma. The cultural change undergone by Japan is sudden, it affects Japanese social life in all its aspects, it is perceived as foreign, i.e. imposed from outside, and, finally, it is unexpected and undesired. See Piotr Sztompka, "Cultural Trauma: The Other Face of Social Change," *European Journal of Social Theory* 3, no. 4 (2000): 452, doi: 10.1177%2F136843100003004004.
40 Balmain, *Japanese Horror*, 52.
41 Ibid., 82.
42 Yoshio Sugimoto, *An Introduction to Japanese Society*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 147.
43 Sugimoto, *Japanese Society*, 148.
44 Balmain, *Japanese Horror*, 61; Vera MacKie, "ryōsai kenbo," in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Japanese Culture*, ed. Sandra Buckley (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 427.
45 Sugimoto, *Japanese Society*, 148.
46 Commenting on women and the labour market in the 2000s, Sugimoto notices the creation of a "housewife part-time labor market." She goes on to argue that "to cope with the chronic labor shortage of the last three decades, Japanese capitalism has sought to recruit women, chiefly as supplementary labor, at low wages, and under

unstable employment conditions. […]These women work, not to secure economic independence, but to supplement their household income. On average, the contribution a woman makes to the family income remains less than a quarter of the total, an amount too small to achieve economic equality with her husband in their household. To the extent that the second compromise keeps women in deprived positions in wage labor as well as in domestic labor, it subjects women to the imperatives of both capitalism and patriarchy." Sugimoto, *Japanese Society*, 155–156.

47 LeBlanc, "Gender in Japan,"118.
48 Balmain, *Japanese Horror*, 36–37.
49 See Sandra Buckley, "giri and ninjo," in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Japanese Culture*, ed. Sandra Buckley (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 172.
50 Valerie Wee, *Japanese Horror Films and Their American Remakes: Translating Fear, Adapting Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 62. See also Roger J. Davies and Osamu Ikeno, *The Japanese Mind. Understanding Contemporary Japanese Culture* (Tokyo, Rutland and Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 2002), 95–99.
51 Wee, *Japanese Horror Films*, 63.
52 It should be noted that fulfilling one's duty towards the family was itself of service to society as a whole since family was viewed as a microcosm. See Balmain, *Japanese Horror*, 62.
53 Balmain, *Japanese Horror*, 56.
54 *Yūrei* is a concept used in Japanese culture to refer to the ghost of a dead person. Although the term can refer to multiple types of ghosts, the association is usually made with someone who died while feeling intense emotions, or has unfinished business in the realm of the living, i.e. has been fatally wronged and seeks justice. An alternative term for the vengeful *yūrei* is the *onryō*. *Onryō* also refers the vengeful spirit of a dead person, usually of aristocratic heritage. Inherent to the *onryō* is the belief that vengeful spirits can be pacified after death by means of exorcism rituals. In this chapter I will be using the two terms interchangeably. See Michael Dylan Foster, *The Book of Yōkai: Mysterious Creatures of Japanese Folklore* (Oakland, CA: California University Press, 2015), 23–24; Donald H. Shively and William H. McCullough, *The Cambridge History of Japan*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 559–560.
55 Wee, *Japanese Horror Films*, 63.
56 In Edo Japan, the islands were secluded. There was little to no interaction, commercial or of any kind, with any outside ship.
57 Balmain, *Japanese Horror*, 68.
58 Ibid., 51.
59 Ibid.
60 This feeling of melancholy associated with the irrecuparable past is called *mono no aware* in Japanese culture. See Paul Varley, *Japanese Culture*, 4th ed. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000), 60–61; Balmain, *Japanese Horror*, 50–51; Catherine Russell, "'Overcoming Modernity': Gender and the pathos of History in Japanese Film Melodrama," *Camera Obscura* 12, no. 35 (1995): 135, doi: 10.1215/02705346-12-2_35-129.
61 Wee, *Japanese Horror Films*, 40–41.
62 Ibid., 72–73.
63 John Whitney Hall and Marius B. Jansen, *Studies in the Institutional History of Early Modern Japan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 63–64; Louis Michael Cullen, *A History of Japan, 1582–1941: Internal and External Worlds* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 76; Elise K. Tipton, *Modern Japan: A Social and Political History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 21.
64 Dumas, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 146; Walter, "*Silent Hill* and *Fatal Frame*," 91.
65 Walter, "*Silent Hill* and *Fatal Frame*," 101.

66 Ibid.
67 Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).
68 Dumas, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 134.
69 See also Katarzyna Marak, *Japanese and American Horror, a Comparative Study of Film, Fiction, Graphic Novels and Video Games* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014), 50–51.
70 Ibid., 144.
71 In this sense, *Fatal Frame* resembles Edo Gothic in that, while upholding the *ie* family system, it also uses representations of suffering to reveal the underside of the good wife-wise mother ideology. See Balmain, *Japanese Horror*, 59.
72 McRoy, *Nightmare Japan*, 87–88.
73 One of the main tenets of Buddhism, which explains the passivity of many characters, especially female, in Japanese cinema is the idea that happiness consists in adapting to a given social order, not attempting to change it in accordance with one's personal desires. See Gregory Barret, *Archetypes in Japanese Film: The Sociopolitical and Religious Significance of the Principal Heroes and Heroines* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1989; London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1989), 134.
74 Berndt, "Introduction," 5.
75 Kaori Yoshida, "Mediating Otome in the Discourse of War Memory: Complexity of Memory-Making Through Postwar Japanese War Films," in *Shōjo Across Media: Exploring "Girl" Practices in Contemporary Japan*, eds. Jaqueline Berndt, Kazumi Nagaike, and Fusami Ogi (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 160, 165.
76 Tecmo, *Fatal Frame*, Tecmo, 2001.
77 See also Kirilloff, "Subversive Game Mechanics," 214.
78 Dumas, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 156.
79 In postulating the cultural hybridity of *Fatal Frame* I do not imply that cultures can be reified. My assumption is that cultures are always already hybrid and that their boundaries are unstable discursive constructs. See Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," in *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 66–84.
80 Walter, "*Silent Hill* and *Fatal Frame*," 95.
81 Barrett, *Archetypes in Japanese Film*, 120, 133.
82 Ibid., 122, 127.
83 Ibid., 130–132.

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6 The crisis of naturalizing gender in *Forbidden Siren*

The year 2003 saw the release of another canonical classical survival horror game targeting the local Japanese gaming community, namely *Forbidden Siren*.[1] In many aspects, *Forbidden Siren* is very similar to *Fatal Frame* (Tecmo, 2001), which was discussed in the previous chapter: its events are set in a fictional Japanese village and are linked to the nation's traumatic past, it features only Japanese characters with different cultural and religious affiliations, and the trajectory of and conflicts between these characters can be read as a comment on the effects that globalization has had on the Japanese nation as a result of the country's defeat in the Second World War. To reveal the enduring effects of Japan's defeat and the subsequent American Occupation, the game focuses on the decay of traditional family values, while retaining the ideological syncretism of *Fatal Frame*.

In order to convey its own version of this syncretism, the game offers players multiple points of view onto its storyworld by simulating the traumatic experience of ten different survivors. The different (sub)cultural affiliations of these characters ensure that the game accommodates conflicting views on modernity and tradition, thus achieving a balance between the two opposing cultures. But while in *Fatal Frame* this balance consists in bringing together modern progressive and local conservative gender politics, *Forbidden Siren* seems to embrace conservative notions of male supremacy common to both Western and Japanese conservative worldviews.[2] The events represented and simulated in the storyworld adhere to conventional damsel-in-distress plots and issue a critique of feminine agency when outside the ambit of patriarchal authority. The game goes on to try to naturalize patriarchal gender power relations by attempting to narrativize the clunky controls and mechanics characteristic of classical survival horror games. However, what is interesting about *Forbidden Siren* is that the process of narrativization is incomplete and undermined by a series of core mechanics. Much like *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996), *Forbidden Siren*'s gameplay and linear means of representation undermine the realism of its representation and simulation of gender, thus generating a crisis of gender naturalization. The overtly anti-mimetic nature of the gameplay experience eventually renders the gender roles embodied by the ten survivors artificial, which subverts the claim to verisimilitude of the gender power relations present in the storyworld.

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In order to show this, my argument will go through the following steps. I first investigate the game's storyworld with a focus on the cultural identities of some of the ten playable characters and the way they interactively perform their gender identities in the game's narrative. I show that, although all the playable characters are simulated as being extremely vulnerable, male playable characters benefit from privileged access to means of violence which give them superior chances of survival. This enables them to perform traditional gender roles such as that of the male protector, while female playable characters perform the roles of final girl or damsel in distress. What is more, the extent to which these characters respect or defy traditional gender roles of patriarchy is relevant for their chances of survival or for the way the game morally frames their demise. When female playable characters assume a type of agency that defies patriarchal norms, the scripted narrative will eventually castigate their transgression by representing their final gruesome demise in what can be seen as a cautionary tale against female emancipation.

After investigating the ideological implications of the game's storyworld, I move on to examine the means used by the game to immerse the player in its storyworld. My analysis of immersion in *Forbidden Siren* reveals that its moderate level of narrativity and the storyworld's inability to offer diegetic explanations for many of the game's core mechanics generate a naturalization crisis. Because of the repeated slippages of narrativization and naturalization, *Forbidden Siren* lays bare the instability of its gender constructs and eventually dismantles its own reactionary rhetoric, thereby conforming to the ideological norms of classical survival horror video games.

Weak male protectors, even weaker damsels in distress

The gameplay provided by *Forbidden Siren* puts its playable characters in a position of vulnerability that surpasses previous survival horror games such as the ones discussed in this book so far. Yet, despite this extreme vulnerability, the storyworld nonetheless asserts male supremacy by representing and simulating two damsel-in-distress plots by means of two-character couples: Kyoya Suda/Miyako Kajiro and Tamon Takeuchi/Yoriko Anno In order to understand how the two damsel-in-distress plots unfold, an account of the game's plot is necessary.

Forbidden Siren simulates the traumatic experience of ten playable characters in 2003 in the mountainside village of Hanuda after a failed ceremony whose purpose was to revitalize the corpse of a local deity called Datatsushi. The characters most influential to the unfolding of the plot are Kyoya Suda, a 16-year-old male student with an interest in folklore and urban legends, Miyako Kajiro, a 14-year-old blind local girl destined to be sacrificed in the ceremony, and Hisao Yukon, the spiritual leader of the local cult worshiping Datatsushi. The world-disrupting event is represented by Miyako Kajiro's refusal to accept her role as a sacrificial girl. The first cutscene of the game features Miyako crushing the head of Datatsushi's corpse with a stone in order to prevent its revival. Because the headless corpse can be only partially resurrected, Datatsushi throws

the village in another dimension and surrounds it with red water. Upon its siren call, the villagers appear to deliberately dive into the red water so as to turn into *shibito*, literally 'corpse people,' who, unlike Western zombies, retain many of their former intellectual human traits.[3] The events of 2003 are linked to another resurrection ritual which occurred in 1976 and also failed because the then sacrificial girl also escaped.

The events described above seem to be in tune with the rhetoric of Japanese horror cinema discussed in the previous chapter.[4] Miyako's rebellion and the consequences it has on the entire community are yet another instantiation of a wrong resolution of a *giri* vs *ninjo* conflict determined by the character's inability to privilege her sense of duty over that of personal interest as a result of Western cultural influence.[5] However, a closer look at the manner in which the storyworld frames Miyako's deeds reveals a departure from the ethical dimension of postoccupation Japanese horror. Although Hanuda's transformation into an infernal parallel reality is caused by Miako's rejection of her social duty, the game stresses that from her subjective perspective the disavowal of duty is justified.

Because it is more difficult for visual media to provide players with access to the minds of the characters and offer a direct account of their subjective experience of the events they are enmeshed in,[6] *Forbidden Siren* uses more indirect means. Through cinematic cutscenes and remediated print or analog media, the game implies that in the Kajiro family Miyako was regarded as a marginal member and may even have been the victim of domestic violence. Indicative of her marginalization is, for instance, the fact that, despite being born into the Kajiro family, she is not registered in the *koseki* (family register). In Japan, the *koseki* is an official document containing the exact data of each family member's "gender, birthplace, date of birth, parents' names, position among siblings, marriage, and divorce."[7] Intimately tied to the *koseki* is

> the notion of seki, the view that, unless one is formally registered as belonging to an organization or institution, one has no proper station in society. As seki pervades Japanese life fundamentally, most Japanese are greatly concerned about which koseki they are registered in and the form their entry takes. Nyu¯seki (entry into a register) and joseki (exit from a register) are cause for anxiety.[8]

Given the importance of belonging to a *koseki*, Miyako's absence from her family registry suggests that her membership is contested by her relatives, or that her status as a family member is a reason for public shame.[9] Another argument in favour of Miyajo's marginal status is provided by the cutscenes where Miyako interacts with her brother and sister and where she is treated with indifference by the former and with violence by the latter. Moreover, in the only cutscene when Miyako and her sister Ayako exchange a dialogue, Ayako ends up thrusting a scythe at her which misses Miyako's head by little. By using the means of linear narrative media to evoke Miyako's relationship with the other members of her family, *Forbidden Siren* cues players to show empathy toward Miyako[10]

and approve of her rejection of *giri*. Therefore, Miyako's fate can be read as an endorsement of modern individualism which enables her to escape the tragic fate determined by, as we shall see later, a corrupt *ie* system. However, her rejection of Japanese *ie* ideology cannot be considered a thorough emancipation from patriarchy since throughout the game she acts like a conventional damsel in distress: a helpless character incapable of defending herself whose survival fully depends on the heroic actions of a male protector. Serving as the protector is the game's main character, the 16-year-old high school student Kyoya Suda.

The male protector/damsel-in-distress roles fulfilled by the two characters are well inscribed within the game's simulation. While Miyako enjoys a position of absolute weakness (she has no weapon and, because she is partially blind, she cannot even move unless the player directs Kyoya's sight in her direction), Kyoya can use his special abilities and multiple weapons to defeat the *shibito*. Unfortunately for Miyako, despite a number of missions when Kyoya succeeds in keeping her safe, she is eventually caught and sacrificed in the ritual that will resurrect Datatsushi. Yet his failure to adequately perform the protector gender role does not lead to a masculinity crisis as it is the same Kyoya who re-establishes equilibrium in the storyworld by defeating the reborn Datatsushi.

In fact, a consideration of Kyoya Suda's evolution as a character will reveal that the game simulates his gradual maturing from non-phallic to phallic masculinity, in particular the hypermasculinity typical of action video games. The first mission simulates a version of Kyoya Suda in which the playable character has to run away from a police officer. Like the male final girls of classical survival horror games,[11] he is extremely vulnerable as he has no means to defend himself other than using stealth to avoid the policeman. Moreover, as the final section explains at greater length, the mechanics and control generate a fragmented and encumbering gameplay that further augments the playable character's vulnerability. Finally, once the player succeeds in evading the officer, in the cutscene played at the end of the mission, the policeman, who has in the meantime turned into a *shibito*, shoots Kyoya in the heart. Luckily for Kyoya, he drops into a pool of red water and engulfs just enough for him to heal, but not turn into a *shibito*. Having now mixed his blood with red water, Kyoya gains new strengths and abilities which set the tone for a journey whose end will be his maturing out of non-phallic masculinity.

Kyoya's successful transformation from a male final girl to a hypermale is made evident by the final cutscene of the game. After amassing an impressive arsenal comprising of modern, traditional, and mythical weapons and defeating Datatsushi, Kyoya is shown blasting off all the shibito of Hanoda while listening to loud heavy metal in his headphones. The action spectacle of the final cutscene is in stark antithesis to the clunky and fragmented simulation of combat characteristic of gameplay, which implies that Kyoya has grown out of his masculinity crisis. *Forbidden Siren* suggests that regaining balance in the storyworld after a world-disrupting event is contingent on Kyoya's resolving his masculinity crisis, and vice versa.

It is worth noting that the version of masculinity which Kyoya has to mature into before he can perform the required heroic acts is a Western one, but that the instruments to his success are traditional and/or mythical. Resembling *Fatal Frame*, where the modern young Japanese girl can solve the trauma of the past only with the instruments of the past (the camera obscura), in *Forbidden Siren* the intervention of the modern young Japanese male protagonist in Hanuda's troubled past can succeed only after he has attained two traditional/mythical weapons: the Homuranagi, a sword used during the Edo period by the locals to withstand the shogunate's attempt to burn the village down, and the Uryen, an ancient artefact whose fire can defeat the *shibito*. The manner in which Kyoya eventually prevails in the storyworld is indicative of patriarchy's ability to transcend and coalesce Japanese tradition and Western modernity in *Forbidden Siren*.

Kyayo Suda and Miyako Kajiro is not the only character couple whose relationship can be subsumed to the damsel-in-distress plot. A similar gender economy can be found in the relationship between Tamon Takeuchi and Yoriko Anno. The former is a university professor of folklore who was born in Hanuda and lost his parents at the age of seven in the 1976 earthquake determined by the then failed ritual to resurrect Datatsushi. The latter is one of Tamon Takeuchi's female students who is secretly in love with him. She joins Tamon on his journey to Hanuda where he hopes to unravel the mystery behind the earthquake and the death of his parents.

Both the scripted and the emergent narrative of *Forbidden Siren* assign the two characters the gender specific roles of the conventional damsel-in-distress plot, rendering the playable character Tamon Takeuchi the protector and the non-playable character Yoriko Anno the damsel in distress. In the cutscenes, the player sees either Tamon giving orders to Yoriko Anno, or complaining that she does not follow his commands accordingly. Procedurally, it is once again the male character that is empowered by his access to weapons, which reinforces his superiority. Nevertheless, towards the end of the game, the power relations between the two characters are turned upside down as Tamon Takeuchi gradually slips into a masculinity crisis as a result of his unresolved grief over the loss of his parents.

Tomon's journey in Hanuda eventually leads him to his former residence. When he enters his former home, he encounters his parents who look just as he remembers them from before the earthquake. Unbeknownst to Tamon is the fact that his parents are, in fact, failed *shibito*[12] whose decayed bodies he cannot see because he, too, has in the meantime been infected with red water. It is now Yoriko's turn to assume the role of protector and save Tamon from the passive state determined by his inability to overcome the death of his parents. In one of the game's final cutscenes, the player sees Yoriko enter Tamon's home, beat his *shibito* parents with a bat and take the professor away from them. However, because such an outcome has the potential to reverse the politics of the damsel-in-distress plot, *Forbidden Siren* attempts to gender Yoriko's agency masculine.

During one mission midway in the game, Yoriko is shot by a sniper and Tamon is forced to find the sniper and eliminate him. While Tamon is in pursuit of the sniper, Shiro Miyata, the physician and owner of the Miyata Clinic, brings Yoriko to his clinic where he manages to keep her alive by transfusing some of Kyoya's blood which, having partially been contaminated with red water, has powerful healing properties similar to the ones of the *shibito*. Kyoya's half-human, half-shibito blood not only heals, but also empowers Yoriko who can now transcend her damsel-in-distress gender role. By causally linking Yoriko's agency to Kyoya's unnatural blood, the game implies that feminine agency is not a natural condition and that it can only be condoned if it is in the service of patriarchy. As the next section show, other feminine agentive characters do not benefit from a similar positive ethical valuation.

Corrupt Western feminine agency vs. Japanese final girls

The previous section has shown that Miyako Kajiro and Yoriko Anno illustrate two forms of feminine agency which are acceptable from a patriarchal ideological point of view. The former acts to escape a corrupt *ie* system (as the next section will show) and, once out, becomes submissive to a more conventional patriarchal figure embodied by Kyoya Soda. The latter's acceptability resides in the fact that Yoriko Anno becomes agentive only after she has been masculinized. In this section, I move my attention to instances of feminine agency which exceed the normative boundaries established by patriarchy and show how, in the cases of two other survivors, Naoko Mihama and Tomoko Maeda, *Forbidden Siren*'s procedural rhetoric mobilizes local patriarchal anxieties concerning the influence of Western modernity.

Naoko Mihama is a former resident of Hanuda who early in her youth leaves for Tokyo to fulfil her dream of becoming a celebrity. She manages to obtain a leading role in a popular TV series, but as she ages, she becomes less popular and ends up becoming the reporter in a documentary on the supernatural. The second failed resurrection ritual finds her in Hanuda documenting the religious life of the village. Like all female playable characters in the game, Naoko starts her first mission unarmed, but she eventually finds a revolver which aids her in defeating the *shibito*. As she progresses from one mission to the other, she complains about her waning beauty and expresses her wish for eternal youth. After the player has successfully guided Naoko to her final objective, in the subsequent cutscene she immerses herself into red water hoping to rejuvenate herself and remain eternally young. From this point onward, Naoko Mihama can no longer be played and is seen as a shibito threatening other playable characters until she is eventually defeated by Tamon Takeuchi.

Naoko's trajectory in the storyworld of *Forbidden Siren* pays tribute to a critique of modernity common to postoccupation Japanese visual media which is based on the idea that, under the influence of Western modernity, women have become individualistic, selfish, and narcissistic.[13] Naoko's diegetic profile, which is constructed with the help of the cutscenes and remediated newspaper and

magazine articles scattered around Hanuda, adheres to this negative stereotype concerning young women. The game conveys that she has deliberately rejected the *ie* gender role of a good wife, wise mother (*ryōsaikenbo*), and embraced Western modernity in its shallowest form, which is celebrity culture. Her repudiation of traditional gender roles is emphasized in one of the first cutscenes featuring Naoko where she discards the protection of Akira Shimura, a local villager, and instead, sets out to search for the possibility of regaining her youth with the help of red water. Her determination to survive on her own by using the means of violence which patriarchy restricts only to men is framed as a transgression, which associates Naoko with a form of corrupt feminine agency, as demonstrated by the character's outcome. While weapons aid male characters in surviving and protecting damsels in distress, in the case of Naoko, her gun does not enhance her chances of survival, but rather makes sure that she will not prevail. Being obsessed with youth and beauty, the result of her agency is the loss of all her humanity. By the end of the game, she will have become a dog *shibito*.

If in Miyako's case, her victimhood is likely to trigger feelings of empathy, Naoko's subjective experience of the storyworld deters players from empathizing with her. The cutscenes and newspaper clippings that construct her diegetic profile and lend us indirect access to her consciousness stress the main character's vanity which is linked to her embracing of Western cultural values. Therefore, Naoko's story functions as a cautionary tale revealing the negative effects that modernity can have on young women.

A similar reactionary critique of Western modernity is conveyed by the story of Tomoko Maeda. Tomoko is a 14-year-old teenager with bad results in school. Concerned with her educational performance, the parents decide to read her diary to understand the cause of her underperformance. Once Tomoko finds out about this, she writes a hate note to her parents claiming she never wants to see them again and runs away from home. The failed ritual finds her on the streets of Hanuda crying and trying to return to her parents. With the help of Kei Miyata, the local Mana cult priest, Tomoko, who during gameplay lacks access to any means of self-defence, reaches the local church where the parents have been waiting for her. However, the moment she reaches the church she turns into a *shibito* and infects her parents, as well. They return to their home as shibito where they resume their now corrupt family life.

Although Tomoko's repentance cues players to empathize with her distress, her rebellion against the family and her ensuing fate reflects Japanese social anxieties concerning feminine adolescence which, under the influence of Western individualism, rejects paternal, i.e. patriarchal, authority. Inherent to this anxiety is the more general concern of the dissolution of the *ie* family system which can no longer regulate young femininity.[14] The tragic outcome of the Maeda family reinforces the traditional Japanese family as the norm and acts as a cautionary tale regarding the tragic effect that adolescent disobedience can have not only on the individual but on the family and society as a whole, too.[15]

In order to underscore the transgressive behaviour of Naoko and Tomoko, *Forbidden Siren* draws an antithesis between them and two passive playable

female characters who this time abide by the norms of *ie* ideology. The first such character is Risa Onda, a 21-year-old former Hanuda resident who at one point decides to move to Tokyo in order to study and experience modern life. Unlike Naoko Mihama, she cannot adapt to the alienating city life and decides to return to her home village to live with her twin sister, Mina Onda. When the ritual fails and Hanuda is thrown into another dimension, Risa is in the village on the way to her sister. Fortunately for her, she comes across Shiro Miyata, medic and lover of Mina Onda, who escorts Risa to the clinic where he and Mina work. When they finally reach their destination, Risa starts looking for her sister, unaware that she has been killed by her lover. At this moment, the player assumes control of her.

As a playable character, Risa Onda is a typical final girl[16] who has no weapon to defend herself with the exception of an umbrella which she obtains later on in the game. Consequently, when she finally discovers her sister, who is now a *shibito*, she must return to safety without directly confronting her. After the player has successfully managed to use stealth and diversion to return to Shiro Miyata, it is the latter who delivers the blow that knocks out *shibito* Mina and allows Risa to reach safety. However, when Shiro leaves Risa to go find and kill shibito Mina, the latter infiltrates the room where Risa is hiding, turns her into a shibito, and reveals to her the truth about her death. From this moment onwards, Risa becomes violent and attacks Shiro alongside her twin sister.

Her obedience to Shiro Miyata, her rejection of modern city life, and her concern for her sister make Risa Onda a model of traditional femininity. Contingent on her cultural identity is her simulation as a helpless young woman who lacks access to the masculine means of violence and the agency their offer. The fact that she adopts such an agency only after she is no longer human again reinforces traditional gender roles suggesting that this kind of feminine agency is unnatural, but lacks the negative moral undertones found in Naoko's story. Both Risa and Mina Onda are embodiments of the *onryō* (vengeful ghost of a wronged woman) trope characteristic of Edo Gothic films. Although their agency is monstrous, it is morally justified as long as its exertion brings about justice and re-establishes order.[17] The nobility of Risa Onda's revenge is the reason why, after becoming a shibito, she maintains her human body shape, unlike Naoko who turns into a dog *shibito*.

Even closer to the feminine ideal of *ie* ideology is Reiko Takato, an elementary school teacher who throughout the game must protect one of her students, Harumi Yomoda, as they try to leave Hanuda together. Reiko's diegetic profile reconstructed from newspaper clippings attests to her sense of duty towards the community (*giri*). Before the events of Hanuda, she was involved in another tragic event on a beach that was hit by an unexpectedly huge wave which swept away many children. In an act of self-renunciation, she puts herself in danger and manages to rescue some of the children, but she unfortunately cannot save her own daughter. While acting as her pupil's protector, she is just as ready to sacrifice herself for the well-being of Harumi. When the *shibito* are on the verge of discovering Harumi's hiding spot, Reiko Takato makes a loud noise which draws

the shibito to her. When they are close enough, she throws a lit lighter in the fuel tank of a nearby car. The explosion numbs the shibito and allows Harumi to escape, but also kills Reiko.

Reiko Takato's motherly conduct with respect to Harumi aligns with the good wife, wise mother role model hailed by *ie* ideology.[18] Her submission to traditional gender roles implies that, in a manner similar to Risa Onda, her access to weapons is restricted. Consequently, when playing as Reiko, the player must once again enact the final girl trope with implies the use of stealth and improvisation. Mirroring the evolution of Risa Onda, after her demise Reiko Takato turns into a *shibito*, which greatly enhances her agency and, paradoxically, allows her to perform the gender role of good wife, wise mother in the afterlife. To quote Rachel Dumas,

> [t]his character thus materializes at once as an exemplary model of maternal sacrifice, and as a powerful allusion to the imminent dissolution of appropriate maternity in Japan, where the institutions of family and education have unraveled owing to the countervailing pressures of contemporary life.[19]

The examination of the female playable characters leads to the conclusion that the representation and simulation of femininity in *Forbidden Siren* is tributary to the turn of the millennium ideals and anxieties concerning Japanese femininity. Although not rejecting modernity altogether, as Miyako's story implies, in counterpointing models to antimodels of femininity, the game stresses the latent perils of adopting Western modernity. However, as the next section shows, tradition, too, can lead to corruption if left outside the scope of patriarchal authority.

Hisako Yao's monstrous femininity

In *Forbidden Siren* the role of the villain is fulfilled by Hisako Yao. As her name suggests, in constructing the character the developers drew inspiration from the legend of Bikuni Yao, a young girl who eats the flesh of a siren (*ningyo*) and ends up living 800 years. Because she devotes herself to spreading the teachings of Buddha across Japan, she is viewed as a model of religious devotion.[20] Hisako Yao's biography is similar to that of Bikuni Yao, but her religious allegiance to Datatsushi converts her into a symbol of corrupt religious devotion. The story of Hisako Yao takes us back to the year 680 AD when the villages stumble upon what appears to be a beached siren on the shore of Hanuda. Because they are experiencing a terrible drought, the villagers begin eating the flesh of the siren-like creature. As it turns out, the creature is, in fact, Datatsushi who, before dying, kills all the villagers save for one young girl, the pregnant Hisako Yao. Instead of killing her, Datatsushi grants her immortality and commands her to devote her life to its resurrection. Heeding the command, Hisako Yao founds the Mana cult whose doctrine centres on worshiping and bringing the dead siren back to life.

As in *Fatal Frame*, temporality in *Forbidden Siren* is layered across multiple historical planes which link together a mythical culturally pure feudal Japan, to

the decades of the Japanese economic miracle of 1970s and 1980s, and finally to the lost decades consisting of the 1990s and early 2000s when the game was released. The events of 2003 triggered by Miyako's refusal to be sacrificed are related to another failed ritual in 1976. This previous failure is caused by the very actions of Hisako Yao who, because of her age, forgets her duty towards Datatsushi and contrives to save the sacrificial girl along with her male lover. Forgetfulness of one's duty and past is a crucial aspect of the game's storyworld as it links the game to the moral norms supported by Japanese postoccupation horror cinema. The world-disrupting event of 1976 is caused by Hisako Yao's wrongful resolution of the conflict between *giri*, the social responsibility of ensuring that the ritual be properly consumed, and *ninjo*, her compassion towards the sacrificial girl and her male lover. As a result of the unsuccessful ritual, the village is hit by an earthquake which partially throws the village into another dimension and leads to the loss of many villagers' lives. Because 1976 designates a time when the influence of Western modernity and capitalism was at its height, the implication is that Japan's openness to Western culture is the cause of Hisako Yao's oblivion of her ancient duty. What ensues is the recurring idea of postoccupation J-horror according to which Western modernity determines the Japanese national body, especially its women, to forget their traditional responsibilities and privilege individual satisfaction.

However, it must be noted that the ethical dimension of Hisako Yao's *giri-ninjo* conflict is not as clear and straightforward as in the case of Naoko and Tomoko. On the contrary, one can observe an ambivalence that is characteristic of the game's cinematic sources.[21] On the one hand, from Hisako Yao's standpoint, *Forbidden Siren*'s rhetoric renders *giri* the wrong ethical response to the sacrificial ritual. The game cues players to endorse Hisako Yao's decision due to the empathy the embedded narrative generates for the sacrificial girl and her lover whose situation mirrors that of Miyako Kajiro. On the other hand, her actions also cause the death of many villagers, including the parents of another diegetically relevant playable character, Tamon Takeuchi. Players are also likely to empathize with Takeuchi's tragedy, thus rendering Hisako Yao's interference in the ritual blameable and suggesting that, from the vantage point of Takeuchi, submission to *giri* would have been the right conduct for Hisako Yao to follow. By balancing the two opposing moral positions, the game mitigates the critique of modernity and relativizes the culpability of Hisako Yao's oblivion.[22]

Given the moral ambivalence of her past actions, the game goes on to disambiguate her status as the villain by falling back on patriarchal anxieties common both to *ie* ideology and Western patriarchy. As Raechel Dumas observes, Hisako Yao is modelled on the Western cinematic trope of the monstrous-feminine but imbued with local cultural anxieties derived from the Shinto religion and Buddhism. Shintoism construes the female body as inherently problematic due to its propensity for defilement "with menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth representing sources of ritual impurity (*kegare*),"[23] while in Buddhism, feminine leakage is treated as a sign of psychological excess.[24] Hisako Yao's religious conduct

is riddled with impurity, thus implying a corruption of religion. The founding religious act of consuming the body of Datatsushi is a case of ritual defilement[25] and the blood lineage between her and the other members of the Kajiro family renders her an archaic mother presiding over a matriarchal power structure. Her impure religious rituals result in the flooding of the village with crimson water, a clear reference to the Blood Pool Hell which in Buddhism is reserved exclusively for women,[26] but which in *Forbidden Siren* affects all the villagers by transforming them into *shibito*.

Hisako Yao's evilness is constructed in stark patriarchal terms that abide by the ideological norms of the monstrous-feminine discussed by Barbara Creed in her book *The Monstrous-Feminine* where she argues that, in the final analysis, what causes women to be monstrous is the inexistence or inability of patriarchy to regulate femininity. Monstrous femininity is, therefore, strictly linked to the crisis of patriarchy which can no longer bridle feminine excess. The game suggests that the members of the Mana cult are all hereditarily related to Hisako Yao who serves as the matriarch in a matriarchal power structure which is a corrupt version of the *ie* system. The game's rhetoric implies that such a power structure is inherently corrupt and that, when operating, it can only produce pollution in the form of excessive femininity. In this context, Miyako's rebellion against her family is further justified.

Hypermedial mechanics, moderate narrativity, and incomplete narrative compensation

The previous sections have shown that the representation and simulation of gender in *Forbidden Siren* are consistent with traditional patriarchal norms in the sense that the game's narrative relies on multiple reiterations of the damsel-in-distress plot in which agentive men with privileged access to violence and mobility protect passive, weak, and vulnerable damsels-in-distress from monstrous entities produced by an over-productive, unbridled archaic mother. The imbalance between masculinity and femininity is also conspicuous if we consider the role played by gender in the ethical valuation of the characters' cultural affiliations. The game discriminates between male and female playable characters on the grounds of their affiliation with Western modernity. On the one hand, Kyoya Suda's cultural identity as an urban Japanese teenager suggests, in a manner similar to *Fatal Frame*, that it is by means of Western modernity's intervention that the troubled past can be resolved. On the other hand, with female characters, the game resorts to the traditional critique mounted by Japanese horror visual products against the allegedly negative influence of modernity on Japanese women. Those female characters who embrace modernity, and the agency it brings, typically serve as cautionary tales that reinforce traditional femininity as the norm and warn against the dire social consequences caused by women's unwillingness to conform to the gender roles of *ie* ideology. Feminine agency is accepted only if it serves patriarchy. In this section, I focus on the means used to represent and simulate gender and argue that the traditional gender constructs of *Forbidden*

Siren evince a high degree of instability determined by the storyworld's inability to comprehensibly narrativize its core mechanics.

Chapters 4 and 5 have shown that the otherwise hypermedial gameplay of *Silent Hill 2* (Team Silent, 2001) and *Fatal Frame* does not break immersion since it is recuperated by the storyworld of the games and assigned a narrative meaning consistent with the diegetic profiles of the vulnerable playable characters, thus producing modal consonance. Chapter 3, on the other hand, has documented a different approach to immersion. *Resident Evil* does not narrativize its core mechanics, but rather stresses the dissonance between its visual mode and its procedural mode in order to engender a productive form of modal irony which undermines the verisimilitude of its phallocentric representation and simulation of gender. *Forbidden Siren* sits on the border of the two-game design philosophies since the manner in which mechanics relate to narrative constantly slips between consonance and dissonance.

On the one hand, the playable characters are average persons who do not have any obvious training in combat, especially as far as the use of firearms is concerned. Their Japanese national identity further underscores their inexperience with guns seeing how since World War II the gun ownership rate in Japan has been very low.[27] The diegetic profile of the characters is reflected in the way the game simulates aiming and shooting. When wielding revolvers, the camera moves to a standard over-the-shoulder angle and allows the player to manually aim in the direction of the threat. Although the player has a good angle for aiming, the absence of crosshairs makes it difficult for the player to target his foe. Moreover, even if the player has managed to aim correctly, the shooting mechanic is so clunky that the shots, which are delivered at a very slow rate, sometimes fail to connect, which leads to the loss of precious ammunition. In the case of rifles, aiming requires that players use a sniper scope. While this should offer players an advantage in combat, the aiming mechanic once again prevents the efficient use of the gun. Players must manually direct the left analog stick to aim in the direction desired, but, once the crosshairs are in the right position, the player must not lift the finger off the analog stick, lest the aim should return to its default position. This unconventional aiming mechanic makes the use of rifles more cumbersome than that of revolvers, thus compensating for the superior fire power.

Unlike the combat mechanics, movement and stealth are rather conventional, which affords a, to a certain extent, seamless gameplay experience. The game uses a more traditional third-person view that is only rarely interspersed with fixed disorienting camera angles such as the ones so often found in *Resident Evil*. The player sees the playable character from behind at an angle that does not conceal what lies ahead and the control of movement is to a large extent symbiotic. This does not mean that movement is not impaired, but, unlike the more hypermedial *Resident Evil* which uses discursive blind space,[28] *Forbidden Siren* makes sure that the playable characters are surrounded by diegetic blind space by engulfing the characters in fog and darkness.[29] This way, like *Silent Hill* 2, the game manages to engender a feeling of helplessness without using hypermedial mechanics.

The use of diegetic blind space also plays a role in the way the game simulates stealth. Once again, the mechanics are rather conventional: players must avoid making noise or entering the *shibito's* field of vision in order to remain undetected. However, the fog and darkness surrounding the playable character complicate this task as it is difficult for the player to spot his adversaries.

The storyworld of *Forbidden Siren* seems to be able to diegetically explain the combat, movement, and stealth mechanics and it is only in the case of the former that a process of narrative compensation is required since the latter two can be considered immersive in light of the dominant game design norms discussed in the first part. Yet, while these mechanics should lead to the immersion of the player and, consequently, to the naturalization of the patriarchal power relations embedded in the game, other mechanics which play a similarly important role in gameplay resist narrativization, affect the game's level of narrativity, and flaunt the artificiality of the game.

The first such mechanic that resists narrativization is the so-called sightjacking ability. The purpose of this mechanic is to aid the player in avoiding the *shibito*, which is especially useful when one controls female characters who are unarmed. At any time during the game, the player can literally jack into the shibito's sight and see the world of the game from their first-person perspective. Although the game tries to implement the mechanic in its storyworld by framing it as a supernatural ability gained by Kyoya after drinking red water,[30] its activation and visual simulation highlight its artificiality. As Ewan Kirkland points out, the use of sightjacking is a remediation of television tuning. After the player has activated sightjacking, he must rotate the left analog stick until the different first-person points of view of the *shibito* are detected. Kinaesthetically, the game mimics the TV rotary tuners.[31] The remediation of television also has visual support since, before the player has successfully jacked into a *shibito's* sight, the screen renders TV static accompanied by static noise in a manner similar to the TV screen with no signal.[32] Because neither the storyworld, nor the player's knowledge of the real world, nor the horror genre's history manages to provide a suitable diegetic explanation for the simulation of this indeed supernatural ability, the artificiality of the playable characters is revealed.

The hypermedial implementation of the sightjacking mechanic also serves a series of functions that recuperate some of the traditional traits of classical survival horror games as far as the simulation of movement is concerned. As already discussed, games like *Resident Evil* afford a highly fragmented gameplay experience that implies often and sudden cuts and change of fixed camera angles, which disorients the player and encumbers movement. By means of sightjacking, *Forbidden Siren* recuperates this fragmentariness since the player must repeatedly switch from the playable character's third-person view to the various first-person views of the *shibito*. This "interactive montage"[33] complicates the mental reconstruction of game space[34] and, therefore, annuls the advantages offered by the conventional third-person view employed when controlling the playable character. By frustrating the mastering of game space[35] and obliging the player

to repeatedly break the aural and visual continuity of the simulation, the game further highlights its artificiality.

Besides sightjacking, another mechanic that resists narrativization and, more importantly, affects narrativity is the database manipulation. As explained in the first part, one of the four prototypical traits of any narrative is that of sequentiality, i.e. the fact the storyworld contains a series of events which are causally and logically linked. Action video games attain high degrees of narrativity also by scripting the succession of events which are revealed to the player in such an order that it is easy for the player to mentally reconstruct the storyworld. The storyworld of *Forbidden Siren* also features a complex sequence of events, yet the manner in which they are conveyed to the player makes the mental construction of the storyworld difficult. In a manner similar to high modernist novels, the events are filtered through the experience of ten different playable characters between whose perspectives the game constantly shifts. To make reception even more cumbersome, the order of the events does not respect a progressive chronology, which conceals their causal links. To compensate for this, the game employs a database format containing a different slot in a table for each mission. In this database, the links between missions are visually represented before the beginning of each new mission. However, the size of the database, the number of missions, and the limited time the player has to follow the visual link from one slot to the other prevent the database mechanic from facilitating the understanding of the causal relations between events. If players cannot reconstruct the series of events, sequentiality and its implicit 'what' and 'how/who' forms of suspense are undermined and narrativity decreases. In this context, the process of narrative compensation is affected and, along with it, player immersion.[36]

In terms of experientiality, the game once again evinces moderate levels. Many of the characters can be played in only two levels and, with the notable exception of Kyoya Suda, Miyako Kajiro, Tamon Takeuchi, and Hisako Yao, have a unidimensional psychological profile that foregrounds one moral trait as it can be deducted from this chapter's section on corrupt feminine agency. In addition to this, the game's level of experientiality is also affected by the unrealistic representations of subjectivity. Commenting on the visual aesthetics of the game, McCrea observes that

> [u]nusually, *Siren*'s character models exist as plain surface models with photo-mapped faces, the resultant characters appearing rigid and still. Rather than synchronized lip movement, the faces fade from one image to another—from open mouth to closed or closed mouth to stern, furrowed brow.[37]

This leads to a "deeply uncanny sensation [when] watching Siren characters speak."[38] Because the visual representation of the characters borders the automaton,[39] the existence of a subjectivity which consciously experiences the traumatic events of Hanuda is questioned.[40] This affects the game's level of experientiality which, in turn, decreases the game's level of narrativity.

While sequentiality and experientiality are moderate, the worldmaking/world-disrupting feature is represented in high degrees. The game highlights the traumatic experience of the ten characters' attempt to survive the disastrous effects of the failed resurrection ritual. The choice to offer so many perspectives onto the post-disaster village attests to the social dimension of individual duty in Japanese horror. The multitude of individual traumas that form the storyworld pertaining to (former) Hanuda residents amount to a representation of a collective trauma which underscores the social perils of femininity when unchecked by patriarchal authority.

Although *Forbidden Siren*'s level of narrativity does not place it at the margins of the 'narrative' category, its degree is lower than that of other classical survival horror video games.[41] Corroborated with the storyworld's inability to diegetically frame many of the game's core mechanics, it follows that the storyworld fails to attain a level of immersion capable of fully naturalizing its gender constructs. What ensues is a tension between naturalization and denaturalization of gender which reveals the instability of gender constructs.

Conclusion

Forbidden Siren is survival horror game that, like *Fatal Frame*, attempts to reconcile Western culture and Japanese tradition. What is interesting about *Forbidden Siren* is the fact that this reconciliation consists in stressing a potential consensus between both cultures on male supremacy. The game's representation and simulation of gender rely on stock characters and scenarios that establish masculinity as the gender norm and highlight the dire societal consequences that can be begotten by women's attempt to adopt male agency. In a manner contrary to the norms of classical survival horror games, the game uses the immersive strategy of games such as *Silent Hill 2* and *Fatal Frame*, namely to narrativize gameplay, so as to naturalize its reactionary gender constructs. However, due to the hypermediacy of some of its core mechanics and the storyworld's moderate level of narrativity, the game's rhetoric ends up having a deconstructive effect whereby the storyworld and the gender power relations it entails are revealed as artificial. All in all, the game's rhetoric can be construed as expressing a crisis of gender naturalization which, albeit unorthodox in the context of the classical survival horror genre, does eventually command disbelief in patriarchy.

Notes

1 It was initially released in Japan under the name *Siren* and later in 2004 in North American and Europe under the name *Forbidden Siren*.

2 For an overview of the similarities between Japanese and Western, i.e. American, patriarchal gender representations in horror cinema, see Valerie Wee, *Japanese Horror Films and Their American Remakes: Translating Fear, Adapting Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 68–76.

3 Madelon Hoedt, "Through the Eyes of the Other: The Relationship between Man and Monster in *Siren: Blood Curse*," in *The Playful Undead and Video Games: Critical Analyses of Zombies and Gameplay*, eds. Stephen J. Webley and Peter Zackariasson (New York and London: Routledge, 2020), 182. See also Katarzyna Marak, *Japanese and American Horror, A Comparative Study of Film, Fiction, Graphic Novels and Video Games* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014), 159.
4 Generally, Japanese horror films criticize the faltering of traditional gender roles and, subsequently, the loss of the sense of social duty. See Colette Balmain, *Introduction to Japanese Horror Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 82; Jay McRoy, *Nightmare Japan*: *Contemporary Horror Cinema* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2008), 76, 81.
5 For an account of *giri* and *ninjo* see Roger J. Davies and Osamu Ikeno, eds., *The Japanese Mind: Understanding Contemporary Japanese Culture* (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2002), 95–99 and Sandra Buckley, "giri and ninjo," in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Japanese Culture*, ed. Sandra Buckley (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 172. For an overview of horror cinema's approach to the *giri vs. ninjo* conflict, see Balmain, *Japanese Horror Film*, 36–37 and Wee, *Japanese Horror Films*, 62–65.
6 See Linda Hutcheon's discussion of modes of engagement in Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 23–27.
7 Yoshio Sugimoto, *An Introduction to Japanese Society*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 146.
8 Ibid., 152.
9 Ibid., 149.
10 In claiming that the game cues players to empathize with Miyako, I draw on Lankoski's theory of player emotional involvement. In the case of Miyako and other positive playable characters, their status as victim of the tragic events, the fact that the player's knowledge of the game world is filtered through their experience, and that the game frames their actions as morally viable, encourage players to develop feelings of empathy with respect to them. See Petri Lankoski, "Player Character Engagement in Computer Games," *Games and Culture* 6, no. 4 (2011): 291–311, doi: 10.1177/1555412010391088.
11 Ewan Kirkland, "Masculinity in Video Games: The Gendered Gameplay of *Silent Hill*," *Camera Obscura* 24, no. 2(71) (2009): 169, 172, doi: 10.1215/02705346-2009-006. Ewan Kirkland, "Remediation, Analogue Corruption and the Signification of Evil in Digital Games," *At the Interface/Probing the Boundaries* 63 (2011): 232, doi: 10.1163/9789042029408_014.
12 Failed *shibito* are the villagers who turned after the 1976 earthquake, but refused to dive in red water so as to complete their transformation.
13 Raechel Dumas, *The Monstrous-Feminine in Contemporary Japanese Popular Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 153.
14 Ibid., 154.
15 Dumas, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 159–150; McRoy, *Nightmare Japan*, 77.
16 The final girl is a cinematic stock character who is usually the protagonist of slasher films. She embodies a reactionary understanding of femininity which does not permit the character to directly confront her stalker and must instead use indirect, improvised means in order to survive. See Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992, repr., Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015).
17 For the moral justification of the *onryō*'s revenge, see Wee, *Japanese Horror Films*, 61.
18 Dumas, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 153.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., 151.

21 Wee notices that postoccupation Japanese horror films show the traumatic effects of modernization, while at the same time deploring the supression of femininity in *ie* ideology, hence the genre's ambivalent political rhetoric. Wee, *Japanese Horror Films*, 42.
22 As Wee points out, in Japanese horror the conflict does not lead to the triumph of one of the opposing sides, but rather to their reconciliation. She links this to the Japanese worldview that stresses the need for structure and balance. See Wee, *Japanese Horror Films*, 59.
23 Dumas, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, 145.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 151.
26 Hank Glassman, "At the Crossroads of Birth and Death: The Blood Pool Hell and Postmortem Fetal Extraction," in *Death and the Afterlife in Japanese Buddhism*, eds. Jacqueline I. Stone and Mariko Namba Walter (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 177.
27 In 2007, there were 0.6 guns per 100 people. (Vox https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2015/12/4/9850572/gun-control-us-japan-switzerland-uk-canada)
28 Bernard Perron, *The World of Scary Video Games* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 121.
29 This game design choice is not surprising if we consider the fact the game design team responsible for *Forbidden Siren* is to a large extent the same one that created *Silent Hill* (Team Silent, 1999).
30 It should be noted that apart from Kyoya, no other playable character drinks red water, which means that in their case the ability to sightjack is not consistent with the storyworld.
31 Christian McCrea, "Gaming's Hauntology: Dead Media in *Dead Rising*, *Siren* and *Michigan: Report from Hell*," in *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, ed. Bernard Perron (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2009), 226.
32 This remediation of television is accompanied by its strategies of othering. While in video games the first-person view is restricted to the protagonist who embodies the social norm, in film the subjective shot is conventionally utilized in order to signify otherness. In keeping with the cinematic envy of classical survival horror games and the overall rejection of the dominant game design norms of the action genre, *Forbidden Siren* superimposes cinematic visual language onto ludic visual grammar by using the first-person view as a sign of otherness. By putting the player in the villain's shoes, the game questions the manicheist hierarchies of conventional zombie games and humanizes the allegedly inhuman other. This challenges the privileged position enjoyed by its playable character and extends its subversion of power relations beyond the gender binary. See Daniel, Black. "Why Can I See My Avatar? Embodied Visual Engagement in the Third-Person Video Game," *Games and Culture* 12, no. 2 (March 2017): 179–199, doi: 10.1177/1555412015589175; Hoedt, "Through the Eyes of the Other," 192.
33 Michael Nitsche, "Games, Montage, and the First Person Point of View," *DiGRA '05 – Proceedings of the 2005 DiGRA International Conference: Changing Views: Worlds in Play* 3 (2005): 3, http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/06276.11074.pdf.
34 Ibid., 4.
35 See the comments on the survival horror's subversion of the colonial mastery of space in Ewan Kirkland, "Survival Horrality: Analysis of a Videogame Genre," *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* 10 (October 2011): 26, https://research.brighton.ac.uk/en/publications/survival-horrality-analysis-of-a-videogame-genre.

36 It should be noted that the game's embedded narrative could in principle aid players in making sense of the represented and simulated events. However, the remediated documents which form the embedded narrative are very difficult to find, thus preventing players who are not highly experienced in action video games from obtaining sufficient diegetic information so as to mentally construct a coherent storyworld.
37 McCrea, "Gaming's Hauntology," 225.
38 Ibid.
39 See Creed's comments on the automaton as uncanny in Barbara Creed, *Phallic Panic: Film, Horror and the Primal Uncanny* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2005), 10.
40 Experientiality, a core feature of narrativity, is predicated on the existence of a human subjectivity that can filter the exterior events. If the existence of a subjectivity is challenged, experientiality itself become debased.
41 Because all survival horror games discussed in Chapters 4–10 can be regarded as evincing similar levels of situatedness, see the comments on situatedness in Chapters 1, 3, and 4.

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Part III

Postclassical survival horror games

7 *Resident Evil 4*
Reinventing the survival horror

By the year 2005, developers had started to lose interest in the classical survival horror formula patented by *Alone in the Dark* (Infogrames, 1992) and brought to fruition by *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996). Even as early as 2004 one could sense a tendency to experiment with the established conventions and open up the survival horror to the influence of more traditional/mainstream genres, as evinced by games such as *Forbidden Siren* (SCE Japan Studio, 2004) or *Silent Hill 4: The Room* (Team Silent, 2004) that experimented with the first person view. After almost a decade of orthodoxy, it was the same *Resident Evil* franchise that would breathe a new life into the survival horror with the release of the highly popular and critically acclaimed *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom, 2005). Without the classical approach to survival horror being totally discarded,[1] the gameplay of *Resident Evil*'s fourth instalment would become a hallmark of what in this book I call postclassical survival horror.[2]

In terms of plot, the events of the game do not stand out as being very different from other survival horror plots. *Resident Evil 4* simulates the adventures of Leon S. Kennedy, the protagonist of the series' second instalment, who is on a mission in the Spanish countryside to save Ashley Graham, the president's daughter who has been kidnapped by a religious cult called *los Illuminados* (the Enlightened). Serving the religious cult is a population of local villagers who have been infested with a mind-controlling parasite, *las Plagas* (the plague), that turns them into *los ganados* (Spanish for "livestock").[3] On his journey to find and save Ashley, Leon is temporarily reunited with Ada Wong, a double agent for whom he has a love interest and who aids him during crucial moments of the plot. Her mission seems to be that of retrieving a sample of *las Plagas* for a secret organization that had contracted her services.

However, what is particular to *Resident Evil 4* in the context of its generic forerunners is the manner in which it manages to recuperate some of the traits of mainstream action games discussed in the first part of this book. While classical survival horror games use immersion via narrative compensation in order to persuasively simulate the helplessness of their playable characters, *Resident Evil 4* embraces to a large extent immersion via maximization so as to simulate an approximate version of hypermasculinity that privileges fight over flight. Although *Resident Evil 4* does not fully embrace the hyperpotency simulated

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by conventional first-person and third-person shooters, its new approach to gameplay significantly moderates the deconstructive, subversive, and anti-establishment undertones of the classical era and leans toward more conservative gender politics buttressed by white male supremacy. In order to show this, the present chapter goes through the following steps.

I first investigate the game mechanics and compare the gameplay they engender to that of classical survival horror games, especially the first *Resident Evil* game. I argue that the version of masculinity simulated in *Resident Evil 4* is to an important extent tributary to the gender construct of hypermasculinity. Having analyzed gameplay, I move my attention to the damsel-in-distress plot that the game represents and reveal that the version of hypermasculinity embodied by Leon S. Kennedy is consonant with the conventional saviour role reserved for male protagonists in such scenarios. Finally, I investigate whether the means of representation and simulation of the game share the deconstructive impulses of *Resident Evil*. The conclusion is that, although some of the anti-realist traits of the first *Resident Evil* are conserved in *Resident Evil 4*, their effect is not so encompassing as in the 1996 release and they fail to deconstruct the male protagonist's hypermasculinity.

Recuperating hypermasculine gameplay

As the first part of this book points out, classical survival horror games use fixed camera angles, many cuts, limited inventories, tank controls, and schematic aiming systems in order foster a fragmented, hypermedial, and encumbering gameplay that undermines conventional simulations of hypermasculinity. This is no longer the case with *Resident Evil 4*, which adopts multiple traits of the dominant game design norms of the action genre so as to steer away from the vulnerable, non-phallic versions of masculinity which Ewan Kirkland calls the male final girl.[4]

If games like *Resident Evil* are sometimes borderline unplayable, *Resident Evil 4* conforms to dominant norms of playability. To begin with, movement is more functional and intuitive. The discursive and diegetic blindness[5] which characterized the games of the previous era are no longer present since *Resident Evil 4* now uses a third-person perspective with the tracking camera following the playable character at a steady angle from behind. Although *Resident Evil 4* also employs tank controls, their activation during gameplay is far more intuitive since now the direction of movement matches the direction in which the analog stick is pushed (or the directions indicated by the keys that have to be pressed when playing the PC version).

The third-person view also enhances the simulation of shooting. When pressing the aiming button, the camera zooms over the shoulder of Leon and gives the player a clearer sight of what lies ahead. In addition to this, the game also affords a symbiotic control of the aim (via the right analog stick of the PlayStation controller or PC mouse) which is now marked with a red dot on the screen, thus increasing the player's sense of extended embodiment.[6] This mechanic greatly

facilitates shooting by bringing the game closer to the first-person shooter. Because the game favours fight over flight, it offers players ample ammunition and a significant number of weapons so that players may repeatedly enjoy the new shooting mechanics, unlike previous games where ammunition was scarce and fighting had to be avoided.

Another mechanic that added to the fragmentariness of classical survival horror games was the very limited inventory which coerced players to discard many useful items or backtrack through the maze-like corridors of zombie-infested mansions or cities to safe rooms with unlimited stocking capabilities. *Resident Evil 4*'s new inventory, which is now dubbed attaché case, addresses this issue and gives players the possibility to upgrade the case's capacity so that by the end of the game the player will have amassed a sizeable amount of weapons and items.

The way *Resident Evil 4* simulates movement and shooting is tributary to what in Chapter 1 I call immersion via maximization. By significantly increasing its levels of immediacy and interactivity, the game manages to simulate a version of Leon S. Kennedy which is clearly more empowered than his *Resident Evil 2* incarnation. Notwithstanding all this, Leon has yet to meet the full hyperpotency of iconic action game protagonists such as 'the doom guy'. While straying from the norms of classical survival horror, the game does features a series of disempowering mechanics whose aim is to reach a reconciliation between the vulnerability typical of conventional survival horror protagonists and the hyperpotency of action game playable characters.

Although aiming and firing are more efficient than in the previous era, they also make the protagonist vulnerable. To compensate for the empowering symbiotic control of the aim, the game does not allow the player to move Leon while shooting and also affords a slow firing rate for most guns. As a result, the player has to correctly appreciate the required distance for the right number of shots to be delivered before the opponent is down. If the distance taken will not do, then the player has to turn around, lose sight of his opponents, retrace his steps, turn around once more, and finally begin shooting anew. Since the camera angle behind the playable character cannot be changed, the two 360 degrees movements can disorient the player, thus encumbering gameplay and mitigating the male protagonist's hyperpotency.[7]

Leon's vulnerability is further increased by the fact that the mutants in *Resident Evil 4* attack in a circle. While in *Resident Evil* it was seldom the case that the player should face more than two opponents at the same time (which to a certain degree balanced the inefficient combat mechanics), Leon S. Kennedy's superior firepower in *Resident Evil 4* is balanced with the greater number of opponents assaulting at the same time. While the player is stuck aiming in the direction of one mutant, it is often the case that an off-screen assailant manages to flank the playable character and get close enough to strike. Consequently, the player has to make sure he is far enough from his foes so as to have time not only to gun them down but also to interrupt the firing in order to look around to make sure nothing is attacking from an off-screen position. This further reminds

the player of the manner in which classical survival horror games simulated male protagonists who were always at risk and far from the triumphant hypermasculine playable characters of conventional action games. Luckily for the player of *Resident Evil 4*, its melee combat mechanics surpass in easiness of use and efficiency those of the of previous instalments. Instead of the manual use of the knife, which put the playable character at great risk of being bitten and dealt very little damage, the player can perform a roundhouse kick by means of a quicktime event which hits multiple foes and pushes them back to a position from where they can no longer harm the playable character.

Taking all this into account, it is safe to claim that the emergent narrative resulting from gameplay simulates a version of masculinity that is neither as vulnerable as the male final girls of classical survival horror games nor as strong and confident as hypermasculinity, albeit favouring the latter. The ideological ambivalence of the emergent narrative is reflected in the game's scripted narrative which, as we shall see in the next section, lacks the subversive undertones of previous survival horror games, but, at the same time, does not yet represent a fully fledged version of hypermasculinity.

"Leon, help me!" A damsel-in-distress plot almost gone right

As the first part of this book has shown, the damsel-in-distress plot is a narrative formula often encountered in classical survival horror video games. Yet, unlike its traditional incarnations in visual media, especially in the narrative cinema of the twentieth century, the games discussed in the previous part appropriate the damsel-in-distress plot in order to pursue a more anti-establishment rhetoric and challenge the patriarchal assumptions that inform it. To achieve this, classical survival horror games exempt female characters from normative gender roles such as passive victim or reward or/and feature male protagonists who fail to live up to the heroic expectations of patriarchy. While not fully reinforcing patriarchy, *Resident Evil 4*'s rhetoric lacks the subversive undertones of its earlier generic peers and attempts to bring back the survival horror genre within the ambit of patriarchy.

The game's ideological realignment is most evident in the manner in which it constructs the relationship between Leon and Ashley. As the previous section has shown, the simulation of the male protagonist is to a large extent consistent with the hypermasculinity characteristic of action heroes. Reinforcing Leon's hypermasculinity and in keeping with the norms of the damsel-in-distress plot is the representation and simulation of Ashley who fully embodies the gender role of the damsel in distress. The linear moments of visual representation highlight her helplessness as she is unable to defend herself and has no other choice but to let herself be manipulated either by the mutant villagers (*los ganados*) or the protagonist. This is further stressed during gameplay when, as a non-playable character, she either fully obeys Leon's commands (which are broadly limited to "Follow!" and "Hide!"),[8] or, when caught, is incapable to escape the clutches

of her captors and can only resort to the repeated cry of "Leon, help me!"[9] Moreover, her visual representation is overeroticized as her bodily proportions conform to the unnatural feminine beauty standards of mature women. In accordance with the damsel-in-distress gender role, she also functions as an erotic reward for the white heterosexual male protagonist.

For the brief moments when Ashley does become active as a playable character, her agency is simulated in accordance with the final girl trope. In a video game where weapons and ammunition are scattered around game space in defiance of conventional knowledge of narrative coherence and realism, the moment the player assumes control of Ashley, the game space suddenly becomes a dearth of weapons and ammunition, thus confining her to evasive tactics, rather than direct confrontation. In a manner similar to *Forbidden Siren*, violence is rendered a masculine privilege that cannot be assigned to Ashley, despite the game's affiliation to the action genre.

While the relation between Leon and Ashely, which is characterized by the latter's submission to the former, seems to reinforce patriarchy by supporting Leon's claim to hypermasculinity, his relation to Ada Wong works against this goal. Ada Wong first appears in *Resident Evil 2* as a mysterious double agent with a hidden agenda who sometimes aids Leon, while at other times subverting his mission. Jenny Platz links Ada Wong to the femme fatale trope of noir (and neo-noir) films: like the femmes fatales of films such as *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944) or *Out of the Past* (Tourneur, 1947), Ada Wong is an enigmatic woman who uses her heightened sexuality in order to manipulate men, in our case Leon, into doing her bidding.[10] Her enigmatic character is suggested from her first appearance which is rendered by means of cinematic close shots of her body dressed in a slit dress. The camera avoids showing her face so as not to reveal her identity and, instead, focuses on various body parts in a typical male gaze montage.[11] Yet after teasing the playable character (and the implied male player), Ada quickly slips away before she can be caught. To this end, she is equipped with a hook gun[12] that allows her to swiftly flee any area.

Although Ada Wong seems to share all the relevant traits of a traditional femme fatale, her diegetic trajectory and the evolution of her relationship with Leon undermine the patriarchal undertones that characterize the femme fatale of noir cinema. Typically, noir films represent the process whereby male protagonists eventually see through the femme fatale's seduction and reveal her hidden agenda, which is usually related to egotistic, materialistic goals.[13] "Her true face" having been revealed, the femme fatale drops her act and shows her monstrous self.[14] Her deviance from patriarchy is summarily resolved either by punishment (she die or is jailed) or by being married to the film's male protagonist.[15] Leon Kennedy, however, fails to contain Ada Wong's unchecked femininity as he is unable to subdue her: despite Leon's repeated attempts, she continues to elude his grip, her agenda remains a mystery for the entirety of Leon's scenario and, most importantly, she does not require Leon's protection.[16] On the contrary, it is she who offers Leon providential aid in crucial moments of the game. During the final boss fight, it is Ada who provides Leon with the rocket launcher that

deals the final blow to Saddler (the game's main antagonist) and the keys to a jet-ski so that he and Ashley may escape the sinking island. However, she also steals the *las plagas* sample that Leon had struggled to obtain.

While femmes fatales fall back on seduction in order to temporarily and vicariously enjoy the privileges of masculine agency (until they are eventually subdued by patriarchy), Ada Wong is agentive as a result of her own abilities. She is a trained fighter in armed and non-armed combat, has physical strength comparable to that of the other male characters, and can, therefore, survive the horror of *Resident Evil 4* without the protection of a male character.[17] Ada's self-reliance, enduring mystery, and uncontained femininity underscore the fact that Leon, albeit far from the male final girls of classical survival horror games, does not fully live up to the expectations of hypermasculinity.

To compensate for the male protagonist's incomplete hypermasculinity, the game uses its medium-specific means to reinscribe Ada Wong within patriarchy. As a reward for successfully beating the game, the player can play *Resident Evil 4* with Ada Wong as a playable character. By playing this scenario, the player finally gains knowledge of her agenda, who she works for, and what her goals in the game are. After each chapter, the player has access to a script where Ada provides details with respect to her mission. In *Resident Evil 4* she works as a double agent, pretending to serve Albert Wesker, the villain of the first *Resident Evil* who is trying to revive the defunct Umbrella Corporation, while in reality, she is working for an entity enigmatically called "the Organization." After successfully retrieving the *las plagas* sample from Leon, she expresses her intention to send the actual sample to the organization that employed her and a fake one to Wesker. Considering that action video games are designed with an implied male player in mind, turning Ada into a playable character for the implied player to control[18] and revealing all her secrets can be read as a game-specific way in which her unchecked femme fatale femininity is eventually contained.

The failed deconstruction of gender

In my analysis of *Resident Evil* in Chapter 3, I show that the patriarchal gender roles represented and simulated by the storyworld are deconstructed by means of modal dissonance, filmic irony, and the game's inability to accommodate its agglomeration of genres which Bakhtin refers to as heteroglossia.[19] In order to remain immersive and, consequently, insure its rhetorical effectiveness, the game engenders what Marie-Laure Ryan calls metasuspense, i.e. the interest not in the unfolding of the events, but in the very artificial means used by the game to represent the indeed predictable series of events. This unconventional approach to immersion and storytelling is to a large extent maintained in the game's two sequels, but with *Resident Evil 4*, the representation and simulation of the storyworld embrace more traditional notions of immersion, realism, and storytelling. Besides maximizing immediacy and interactivity, in keeping with the post-2000 mainstream action game trend, *Resident Evil 4* also attempts to reach high degrees of narrativity, not as compensation for the former two, but as surplus.

In order to achieve this, *Resident Evil 4* attains three of the four features of narrativity (situatedness, sequentiality, world-making/world-disrupting, and experientiality) and engenders all three types of suspense discussed in Chapter 1: 'what,' 'how/who,' and metasuspense.[20]

Resident Evil 4's level of experientiality is rather low. The reason for this is that the game's main characters are not psychologically complex and the game does not emphasize their subjective experience of the events they are enmeshed in. The other prototypical features of narrativity are nevertheless well represented.[21]While in *Resident Evil* the outcome of the events, as well as the cause for the zombie infestation, becomes foreseeable early on in the game, thus annulling 'what' and 'how/who' suspense, in *Resident Evil 4* this is no longer the case. Despite a series of clichés (some of which have been discussed in the previous section), the world-disrupting event consisting in Ashley's kidnapping, triggers the unfolding of a succession of events that make it difficult for the player to anticipate whether Leon will eventually save Ashley and, most importantly, how he will be able to do this. Because it had been the norm in survival horror games for the male protagonist not to rescue the damsel in distress, survival horror fans who played the game upon its release would not have been sure whether Leon would be successful in his mission. The uncertainty regarding the game's denouement raises the player's interest in the final outcome and generates 'what' suspense.

The game is just as enigmatic when it comes to the cause as to why the villagers of *Resident Evil 4* are possessed mutants. While the biohazard element in the zombie narrative of the 1996 instalment is formulaic, the *las Plagas* parasite was a relatively novel narrative element for action games in 2005, which made it more difficult for the player to account for the events prior to the beginning of the game. A similar source of 'how/who' suspense is begotten by Ada Wong who, as explained at greater length in the previous section, is a mystery to Leon and the player. These two enigmas invest gameplay with narrative incentive in the sense that the player is motivated to progress in the game not only to see how the game ends but also in order to reveal the cause of the mutation and Ada Wong's true intentions.

In an atypical fashion for the action genre across multiple media, *Resident Evil 4* also engenders metasuspense. Although far from the artificiality of the 1996 release, *Resident Evil 4* does maintain some of the series' original anti-realistic, anti-mimetic aesthetics. As explained in Chapter 1, in synch with Western notions of realism, action video games are set in familiar spatial and temporal contexts so that the game's storyworld may be construed as a non-factual possible world.[22] *Resident Evil 4*, however, seems to go in the opposite direction as the temporal and spatial dimensions of its storyworld defy the player's knowledge of the real world, thus encumbering the process of virtual recentering that buttresses world-making.

All the events are set in Spain in the early twenty-first century, but the three locations featured are inconsistent with the storyworld's overarching spatial and temporal coordinates. At first, Leon is in a police car being driven to a village

where Ashley is presumed to be held captive. After accessing the village, the player soon notices that the location's material culture (e.g. houses, furniture, attire, and tools), as well as the villagers' lifestyle, resembles popular knowledge of the nineteenth century rather than twenty-first century rural life. Moreover, Spanish-speaking players are likely to notice that the villagers speak a combination of Peninsular and Mexican Spanish. After exiting the village and its surroundings, the player ends up in the second location, namely a medieval castle, populated with cultists, which plunges the player into a new spatiotemporal dimension. The castle's interior, the cultists' garments, and the weapons they use all adhere to the popular Western memory of the Middle Ages. After successfully evading the castle, Leon's final destination is a military research island where the register now shifts to science-fiction: the medieval cultists are now replaced with genetically engineered monsters and military mutants wielding futuristic weapons.

The spatial and temporal diegetic inconsistency of the game is reflected in its locations, but also in the ways many of the non-playable characters are constructed, as well. For example, the ruler of the medieval castle is Ramon Salazar, a 20-year-old person of short stature who wears eighteenth century upper-class attire, in opposition to the medieval appearance of his castle and his subordinates. Another non-playable character, Luis Sera, who is represented as a stereotypical nineteenth century Mexican from twentieth century American Western movies, is both a police officer from Madrid and an expert biologist. In addition to these two, as discussed in the previous section, there is Ada Wong's femme fatale attire which is dissonant with the kind of actions that she is engaged in.

While it is not uncommon for fictional worlds to often feature shifts in their spatial and temporal dimensions,[23] *Resident Evil 4* makes no effort to narrativize these breaks of time and space and bring a sense of consistency to its storyworld. Consequently, the storyworld comes off as an artifice, as an incoherent assemblage of narrative parts that, once put together, cannot construct a possible world.

The anti-mimetic spatiotemporal dimension of *Resident Evil 4* is also related to the issue of heteroglossia[24] where, once again, the game mirrors the approach found in the series' first instalment. As discussed in Chapter 3, one of the reasons why *Resident Evil* prompts metasuspense is its inability to accommodate a multitude of genres. The same applies to *Resident Evil 4* whose multiple genetic affiliations pertaining to each chronotope are not connected in a diegetically coherent manner. Making sense of the storyworld requires putting together tropes, stereotypes, and clichés from transmedia genres such as action, zombie horror, noir, science fiction, and gothic.[25] Like the game's spatiotemporal dimension, the multitude of narrative generic discourses is not homogenized and, consequently, together forms a hypermedial, anti-mimetic, unnatural narrative whole.

Taking into account *Resident Evil 4*'s rejection of realism, is it then not the case, as with *Resident Evil*, that the blatant artificiality of the storyworld deconstructs the patriarchal representations and simulations of gender? Unfortunately, the answer is no. Despite the above-mentioned similarities with the 1996

release, *Resident Evil 4* lacks its predecessor's deconstructive thrust. There are two reasons for this: first, *Resident Evil*'s anti-mimetic aesthetics was buttressed not only by heteroglossia, but also by two forms of irony such as filmic irony, which was engendered by the remediated B-series horror film aesthetics, and modal irony, which resulted from the productive use of modal dissonance,[26] i.e. the representation of the playable characters as phallic action heroes/heroines contradicts their simulation as helpless (male) final girls. None of these features are present in *Resident Evil 4* where, in fact, the anti-mimetic elements fall in the background. *Resident Evil 4*'s metasuspense, which cues the player to adopt a self-reflexive and critical stance, is subsidiary to the two other types of suspense, 'what' and 'how/who,' that engross rather than distance the player from the storyworld and work in favour of making the player discard the narrative's anti-mimetic elements. Coupled with the modal consonance entertained by Leon's representation and simulation and the high quality of the remediated means of representation, it is safe to conclude that the game fails to deconstruct gender.

Ironically, the anti-mimetic elements might even reinforce and naturalize the game's patriarchal gender constructs, notwithstanding Leon's incapacity to fully meet the expectations of hypermasculinity (see the former two sections). As the first part of this book has shown, there is a correspondence between the way action games achieve player immersion and their gender politics. Most action games try to maximize their levels of immediacy, interactivity, and narrativity in order to immerse the player into an interactive storyworld where the playable character represents the white heterosexual masculine norm. On the other hand, classical survival horror games achieve player immersion differently, namely by means of narrative compensation. They impose limits on immediacy and interactivity in order to simulate a version of white heterosexual masculinity that is non-normative and features high levels of narrativity in order to compensate for the low level of the former two components. In doing so, they maintain player immersion and the games rhetorically command disbelief in normative gender constructs, especially phallic masculinity.

Although metasuspense is usually in synch with immersion via narrative compensation, in *Resident Evil 4* it paradoxically contributes to maximizing immersion on all its three levels. While in *Resident Evil* metasuspense replaces 'what' and 'how/who' suspense, in the series' fourth instalment it accompanies the two and adds another layer of narrative engagement to a video game that already features significantly enhanced levels of immediacy and interactivity in comparison to its survival horror predecessors. The result of this game design is the concealment of gender ideology, i.e. the opposite of the subversive rhetorical effect of the series' first three games where the hypermediacy of gameplay and the metasuspense they engendered flaunted the gender ideology of the action genre.

What is more, should the game's patriarchal ideology become too evident in some moments of the game,[27] then the anti-mimetic nature of the storyworld comes to reassure the player that the game is purely fictional and, therefore, that its sexism is acceptable. This is a reinstantiation of the rhetorical strategy used by many normative games to legitimize their reactionary ideologies, a strategy

referred to by Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter as to "have your cake and eat it, too."[28] The authors claim that

> the games industry, like the rest of popular culture, has learned that irony is a no-lose gambit, a "have your cake and eat it too" strategy whose simultaneous affirmation/negation structure can give the appearance of social critique and retract it in the same moment – thereby letting everything stay just as it is while allowing practitioners to feel safely above it all even as they sink more deeply in.[29]

In keeping with the general tendency observed by the authors of *Digital Play* only a few years before the release of *Resident Evil 4*, the game harnesses the potential for a critique of anti-mimesis in order to prevent designers and players, too, from questioning the game's ethical standards. In doing so, it gives the semblance of denying its own sexism, while, at the same time, reinforcing it by means of gameplay and narrative.

Conclusion

Despite being hailed as a survival horror video game, *Resident 4* breaks away from the conventions established by its generic predecessors to provide players with a gameplay experience that no longer fosters a high degree of hypermediacy. Instead of creating immersion via narrative compensation, the game takes inspiration from mainstream action games and wants to immerse the player by maximizing its immediacy, interactivity, and narrativity. The result is the simulation of a version of masculinity that is far-flung from the male final girl of classical survival horror games but is yet to fully meet the standards of hypermasculinity.

The not-yet hypermasculinity of Leon S. Kennedy is also reflected in the game's scripted narrative whose approach to gender is indebted to noir cinema. The game's two main female characters, Ashley Graham and Ada Wong correspond to the submissive woman-femme fatale character couple. While Leon's authority over Ashley is never contested as she obeys him throughout the entire game, Ada Wong is the femme fatale whose disobedience of patriarchy demands regulation. However, contrary to the conventions of noir cinema and in synch with Leon S. Kennedy's incomplete hypermasculinity, Ada remains outside the ambit of the male protagonist's authority.

Notwithstanding this, *Resident Evil 4* fails to convey a critique of patriarchy similar to that of the series' original instalment. With the exception of Leon's relation to Ada Wong, his progress in the game reinforces the notion of white male supremacy which is at work in mainstream action games. The anti-mimetic aesthetics, which was so prevalent in the first three *Resident Evil* games, is to be found only to a significantly lesser extent in *Resident Evil 4* in the form of disruptions in the storyworlds' spatiotemporal dimension and unaccommodated heteroglossia. Although such anti-mimetic elements would normally deconstruct the

game's realism, their marginality within the game's design leads to the ironic effect of them actually reinforcing *Resident Evil 4*'s patriarchal ideology. By offering the impression of the game as being unrealistic, a repudiation of the game on ethical grounds due to its sexism is precluded, thus allowing the game's normative gender politics to work in the background uninterrogated.

Resident Evil 4's departure from the norms of classical survival horror also brings along a new approach to gender and marks the start of a new era in the genre's history which in this book I call postclassical survival horror. As the next chapters will show, postclassical survival horror games are much more heterogeneous in terms of game design, but less diverse in terms of gender politics, as most of them try to recuperate the hypermasculinity characteristic of mainstream games and accommodate it to the norms of survival horror that are buttressed by the playable character's vulnerability.

Notes

1 In the same year, Capcom released the classical survival horror game, *Haunting Grounds*.
2 Some of the games that follow in *Resident Evil 4*'s footsteps include *The Evil Within* (Tango Gameworks, 2014), *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013), to name but a few popular postclassical survival horror titles.
3 Although *los ganados* are not literal zombies, i.e. they are not reanimated corpses, they are nevertheless strongly related to the zombie trope. Diane Carr observes that all locations populated by *los ganados* are places of work. Since their toil is not the result of their free will, but that of the mastermind controlling them via *las plagas*, they can be considered slave workers. This links *los ganados* to one of the first, if not the first representation of zombies in *White Zombie* (Halperin, 1932), where they are used as a vehicle for the expression of dominant anxieties concerning the potential uprising of slaves. See Diane Carr, "Interpretation, Representation and Methodology: Issue in Computer Game Analysis," in *Visual Communication*, ed. David Machin (Berlin and Boston, MA: de Gruyter, 2014), 513. See also Hans-Joachim Backe et al., "Ludic Zombies: An Examination of Zombieism in Games," in *Proceedings of DiGRA 2013: DeFragging Game Studies* 7 (2014): 4–5, http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/paper_405.pdf.
4 Ewan Kirkland, "Masculinity in Video Games: The Gendered Gameplay of *Silent Hill*," *Camera Obscura* 24, no. 2(71) (2009): 169, 172, doi: 10.1215/02705346-2009-006; Ewan Kirkland, "Remediation, Analogue Corruption and the Signification of Evil in Digital Games," *At the Interface / Probing the Boundaries* 63 (2011): 232, doi: 10.1163/9789042029408_014.
5 Bernard Perron, *The World of Scary Video Games* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 120–121.
6 Gregersen et al., "Embodiment and Interface," in *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*, eds. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), 67; Christina Fawcett et al., "Resident Evil and Infectious Fear," in *The Playful Undead and Video Games: Critical Analyses of Zombies and Gameplay*, eds. Stephen J. Webley and Peter Zackariasson (New York and London: Routledge, 2020), 143.
7 Because position in game space is vital to gameplay, Simon Niedenthal calls *Resident Evil 4* a game of positioning. See Simon Niedenthal, "Patterns of Obscurity: Gothic Setting and Light in *Resident Evil 4* and *Silent Hill 2*," in *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, ed. Bernard Perron (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009), 174.

8 As we shall see further, Ashley's submissiveness forms an antithesis with Ada Wong's disobedience, thus forming a female character couple typical of noir cinema.
9 Voice plays an important role in rendering Ashley's subsidiarity to Leon. The game falls back on cinematic conventions concerning the voicing of female characters where "[w]omen's voices are invariably tied to bodily spectacle, presented as 'thick with body' – for example, crying, panting, or screaming—and insistently held to the rule of synchronization, which marries the voice with the image. […] While women may scream, cry, prattle, or murmur sweetly in the course of any film, they have little or no authoritative voice in the narrative." Shohini Chaudhuri, *Feminist Film Theorists* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 45. See also Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988). See also Milena Droumeva, "From Sirens to Cyborgs: The Media Politics of the Female Voice in Games and Game Culture," in *Feminism in Play*, eds. Kishonna L. Gray, Gerald Voorhees, and Emma Vossen (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 51–67.
10 See Jenny Platz, "The Woman in the Red Dress: Sexuality, Femmes Fatales, the Gaze and Ada Wong," in *Unraveling* Resident Evil. *Essays on the Complex Universe of the Games and Films*, ed. Nadine Farghaly (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2014), 149–169. See also Yvonne Tasker, "'New Hollywood', New *Film Noir* and the *Femme Fatale*," in *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 115–136.
11 Given Ada Wong's identity as a Chinese-American, her accentuated sexuality as a femme fatale also taps into the orientalist cliché of East-Asian erotic femininity. This stands out as a case of self-orientalization, a trend that characterizes Japanese survival horror games in general. See Martin Picard, "Haunting Backgrounds Transnationality and Intermediality in Japanese Survival Horror Video Games," in *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, ed. Bernard Perron (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009), 102.
12 It is a gun that shoots a hook with a rope tied to it. Once the hook connects to a surface, Ada can use the gun to retract the rope and thereby escape when she is cornered.
13 Platz, "The Woman in the Red Dress," 150.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., 151, 161.
16 Ibid., 150, 160.
17 Ibid., 158.
18 Ibid., 167.
19 See Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 262–264.
20 See Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 143–145.
21 Because all survival horror games discussed in Chapters 4–10 can be regarded as evincing similar levels of situatedness, see the comments on situatedness in Chapters 1, 3, and 4.
22 See Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 99–110.
23 The showcase example of how the lack of chronology can still remain diegetically coherent is the stream-of-consciousness technique employed in modernist novels. In such novels, the events do not follow any law of causality or sequentiality, yet their incoherence is framed as an authentic reflection of the character-narrator's subjective experience of external reality which, according to the modernist creed, follows an internal temporality that defies the chronology of physical time. Consequently, such novels narrativize breaks in the narrative in the non-factual storyworld as the protagonist's subjective impression of the respective storyworld.

24 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 262–264.
25 In making a distinction between zombie horror in the vein of Romero and gothic, I do not imply that horror cannot be subsumed to a wider gothic tradition. In drawing this distinction, I wish to highlight that in *Resident Evil 4* the conventions of the traditional gothic of the eighteenth century are not consistent with those of the zombie horror of the twentieth century from the point of view of verisimilitude and realism.
26 See Jason Hawreliak, *Multimodal Semiotics and Rhetoric in Videogames* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 136.
27 For example, Ashley's simulation contains a rule that governs the overemphasized movement of her oversized breasts when she is walking or running. This mechanic comes off as sexist because other parts of her body or appearance which are expected to be more liable to inertia barely move or remain static irrespective of how sudden or intense the character's movement is.
28 Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter. *Digital Play. Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 277.
29 Ibid.

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8 Survival horror's normative backlash in *Condemned: Criminal Origins*

With *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom, 2005), the survival horror genre enters a new era in which the design of survival horror video games becomes more diverse while ideologically the games veer towards more normative gender politics. As shown in the previous chapter, in its straying from the classical formula, *Resident Evil 4* adopts a novel game design that simulates a version of masculinity which aims for hypermasculinity, but it is yet to fully embrace it. Unlike *Resident Evil 4*, *Condemned: Criminal Origins* (Monolith Productions, 2005) opts to return to more established game design norms and appropriates the first-person shooter formula. This chapter discusses how the game negotiates between survival horror's preference for the simulation of vulnerability and the first-person shooter's propensity to simulate realistic hypermasculinity and shows how the result of this negotiation is, once again, a male protagonist who, albeit weaker than his hero counterparts, is still capable of reinforcing white middle-class patriarchy as the norm.

The protagonist of *Condemned: Criminal Origins* is Ethan Thomas, an FBI agent investigating a series of murders committed during an inexplicable crime wave perpetrated by lower-class people unfolding in the fictional American city of Metro. The game begins with the player controlling Ethan who, along with his partner, is investigating a crime scene. Upon smelling cigarette smoke, the two split up to see whether the culprit might be nearby. Soon after, Ethan Thomas is immobilized by the game's villain, who will be referred to in the game as Serial Killer X. With Ethan's gun, Serial Killer X kills Ethan's partner, knocks the protagonist out and escapes. Ethan Thomas wakes up in his apartment with Malcolm Vanhorn, a friend of his father, by his side. He is informed that he is wanted for the interrogation of the murder and that he has to find the perpetrator in order to clear his name. The now psychologically distressed protagonist flees his apartment before he can be apprehended and with the help of his assistant, Rosa Angel he begins to look for the villain. As the player progresses, he learns that the main antagonist is killing the suspects that Thomas has been investigating. After eventually tracking Serial Killer X to an apple orchard, Ethan Thomas is prevented from killing him by Malcolm Vanhorn who reveals to the protagonist that Serial Killer X is, in fact, his nephew, Leland Vanhorn. He further explains that Leland and the other lower-class people of the city have been driven to

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madness by a supernatural creature called the Hate whom the player must eliminate in order to restore order in Metro City.

In order to show how in simulating these events the game endorses white middle-class masculine supremacy, the present chapter will be structured as follows. First I investigate the game design of *Condemned: Criminal Origins* and shed light upon its particular approach to the first-person shooter genre. My next step is to investigate how the appropriation of the first-person shooter formula dramatically alters the procedural rhetoric of survival horror video games in terms of the levels of agency and empowerment experienced by the male protagonist. Finally, I look at the means employed to achieve player immersion and the manner in which immersion commands belief in the game's ideology.

A survival horror first-person shooter?

Today, using a first person view in a survival horror video game is no longer seen as a strange game design choice, but this was not the case in November 2005, the release year of *Condemned*, when survival horror was defined by the rigid third-person view of the *Alone in the Dark* (Infogrames et al., 1992–2008), *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996–2021), *Fatal Frame* (Tecmo, 2001–2014) or *Silent Hill* series (Team Silent et al, 1999–2014) or by the more flexible, action-oriented third-person view afforded by *Resident Evil 4*, which had been released only a few months earlier. Despite the fact that the first-person view had been generally restricted to shooter games that simulated hypermasculinity, *Condemned: Criminal Origins* attempted to use the formal traits of the first-person shooter in order to provide a survival horror gameplay experience.

To begin with, the game fully embraces the core mechanics of the first-person shooters. The player sees the world of the game through the eyes of the playable character in what may be regarded as remediation of the subjective shot from cinema. But, while in cinema the viewer has no control over the camera, in *Condemned: Criminal Origins* the player can move the first-person view into any direction he pleases. Moreover, the control of the camera is symbiotic, which means that the movements of the mouse, or analog stick in the case of console controllers, are mapped directly onto the movement of the screen,[1] thus achieving a sense of extended embodiment[2] stronger than the one afforded by *Resident Evil 4*.

The issue of authorial control over the camera plays a vital role in survival horror games.[3] As Chapter 3 has argued, 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[4] 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.[5]

It has to be acknowledged that *Resident Evil* is one of the few games to exclusively rely on discursive blind space. As shown in the other chapters of this

book, games like *Silent Hill 2* manage to employ diegetic blind space, as well,[6] with the same effect of disempowerment.[7] Conversely, *Condemned: Criminal Origins* was also singular upon its release in terms of how it created blind space since, as a result of its conventional first-person view, it had to rely almost entirely on diegetic blind space. This means that, instead of using predetermined camera angles for concealment and jump scares, now the game relies on elements present within the storyworld of the game, such as darkness or bulky objects that obscure sight.

While this can make the discovery of relevant ludic and diegetic items more difficult, the result is far from the disempowerment simulated by classical survival horror games. The first-person view also affords a simulation of movement which is considerably more functional and seamless than it is in classical survival horror games. If the tank controls of the previous era made intuiting the controls relative to the always-changing camera angle highly unpredictable, now the player can symbiotically choose the direction of movement and press the forward button subsequently. What is more, the sidesteps characteristic of first-person shooters grants the player safe visual access to the space behind corners or sight-obstructing objects, which eliminates one source of jump scares.

The core mechanics of *Condemned: Criminal Origins* make the game optimal for shooting, but, contrary to the expectations of players of action games in the year 2005, shooting is rarely an option. Resembling the classical survival horror games of the previous era, the locations where the action takes place offer the player little ammunition. As a result, before engaging an enemy, the player must beforehand evaluate the potential level of difficulty and decide whether using the ammunition at his disposal is a tactically correct choice. However, it is here that the gameplay of *Condemned: Criminal Origins* primarily departs from its predecessors. In classical survival horror games, the player has to choose between fight and flight, with the games usually favouring the latter. In *Condemned*, on the other hand, the player is coerced to fight most, if not all of his opponents. Given the rarity of guns and dearth of ammunition, combat relies on melee combat. The player can use improvised weapons (planks or pipes), or more conventional melee weapons such as the bat or the axe in order to defeat the assailants in close combat.

Should the player decide to use the little ammunition at his disposal, the game once again follows the suit of previous survival horror games in that it does not use crosshairs (or any other overlaid graphic symbol) to show the exact direction in which the player is aiming. Since the first-person view no longer affords the automatic aiming of classical survival horror games, the simulation of shooting becomes very hazardous. In order to minimize the risk of missing the target, the player still has to get close to his adversary, thus cancelling the safe distance that firearms offer in first-person shooters.

It should, nevertheless, be stressed that in simulating the visceral encounter with the player's foes, the game is well balanced and optimized for melee combat. The available weaponry is proportional to the threat faced and the combat mechanics are efficient enough to give players a fair chance at beating the game.

Instead of the frustration engendered by the unbalanced game design of classical survival horror games where underpowered protagonists face unsurmountable enemies, players of *Condemned* find themselves in a state of flow,[8] i.e. the state where the controls, mechanics, and smoothly rising level of difficulty facilitate the process of learning inherent to gameplay, make the interaction with the gaming platform implicit, and offer a sense of progression. In other words, as the final section of this chapter argues at greater length, combat encourages player immersion.

As the first part of this book has shown, survival horror games belong to the broader action-adventure genre because they combine combat with exploration and puzzle solving. *Condemned: Criminal Origins* retains the dual nature of survival horror and, besides melee combat, beating the game requires that the player investigate crime scenes and find clues with respect to the culprit and his whereabouts. This typically implies using forensic gear and the aid of Rosa Angel who provides the protagonists with analyses of the usually visual samples recovered from the crime scenes. To collect these samples, the player must engage in a minute investigation of the corpses of the main antagonist's victims.

Condemned: Criminal Origins' approach to exploration is very different from that of classical survival horror games. It lacks the intricate and labyrinthic level design of games such as the first *Resident Evil* games which not only made progression complicated[9] but also purposefully poorly highlighted the game-relevant objects present in the environment. As a result of this latter trait, playing classical survival horror games often requires that the player repeatedly press the interaction button when close to almost any object since it is difficult for one to foretell what can be picked up and what is simply part of the non-interactive 2D background. *Condemned* is significantly more player friendly than previous games as it restricts the area of exploration to the corpse of the victim. Moreover, the game highlights the ludically and diegetically relevant parts of the corpse so that the player does not have to minutely explore each pixel of the body. This increase in the efficiency of exploration enables quick progress to new challenges.

In this section I have shown how *Condemned: Criminal Origins* attempts to merge the game design of first-person shooters with the gameplay principles of classical survival horror games. The question that must be raised now is how this refashioning of survival horror alters the genre's anti-normative politics prevalent in the years preceding the release of *Resident Evil 4*.

Negotiating the cultural politics of the first-person shooter

Throughout their history, the core mechanics of the first person shooters have been associated with the rampant ideology of white masculine superiority. In reinforcing their ideology, first-person shooters practice what I elsewhere call a politics of cultural eugenics.[10] While the standard protagonist of such a game is a white middle-class heterosexual male, his target non-playable characters pay tribute to stereotypical representations of multiple forms of otherness predicated on

race, gender, class, sexuality, class, nationality, religion, subcultural affiliation, and so on. It would then seem that the interaction between the playable character and the non-playable ones is the equivalent of a cross-cultural encounter simulated in accordance with the theory of civilizational conflict which maintains that cultures are fixed entities that cannot coexist but can only suppress one another in conflict.[11] Subsequently, by simulating the triumph of the white male protagonist over the forms of otherness, first-person shooters establish white masculinity as the norm.[12]

The previous section has shown that, although many of the prototypical features of the first-person shooter are present in the game design of *Condemned: Criminal Origins*, the game offers a gameplay experience different from the one offered by games such as the *Doom* (id Software, 1993–2020), *Quake* (id Sotfware et al., 1996–2018) or *Call of Duty* series (Infinity Ward, 2003–2020). This section provides a cultural reading of the specific first-person gameplay experience afforded by *Condemned* and assesses the extent to which the subversive procedural rhetoric of classical survival horror games is compatible with the game's action-oriented game design.

In conducting my investigation I follow in Dan Pinchbeck's suit who draws a distinction between (survival) horror games and horror-themed video games.[13] His assumption is that not all action games where the enemy is a stock horror cinema monster can count as (survival) horror. What differentiates between the two is the game situation, i.e. the manner in which the game designer orchestrates the player's conflict with the monstrous entities. To illustrate this, a comparison with the first-person shooter *F.E.A.R.* (Monolith Productions, 2005) is relevant. Released only a few months before *Condemned*, *F.E.A.R.* was created by the same developer, Monolith Inc., using the same game engine, namely the Liltech Jupiter EX.[14] Although both games claim a strong bond to the horror genre, the different manners in which the horror elements are orchestrated place the two games into different categories: horror-themed and survival horror. Because the procedural rhetoric of *F.E.A.R.* abides by the above-mentioned ideological standards of the first-person shooter, this section uses it as a yardstick to measure the extent to which *Condemned*'s appropriation of the first-person shooter formula reshapes the genre's strong normative undertones.

Both *F.E.A.R.* and *Condemned* simulate the confrontation between white male protagonists and various forms of otherness. The former falls back on the trope of monstrous femininity embodied by the game's archvillain, Alma,[15] who in the game takes the shape of a vengeful child ghost reminiscent of antagonists of films such as *Ringu* (Nakata, 1998),[16] while in the latter otherness is constructed in accordance with classism. Ethan Thomas's assailants are all people of very low income and/or homeless people who embody the negative stereotypes concerning the lower classes: violence, lack of cleanliness, infection, addiction, and laziness, but also the fear of revolt against the economic status quo. This latter cultural anxiety is represented in the game's storyworld by the Hate, a supernatural entity that causes the outbreak of violence amongst the lower classes.[17] What is played out in the video game is an allegory of class struggle where the

lower classes no longer accept the social hierarchy and challenge the position of the middle class. The storyworld renders this struggle illegitimate by associating it with class animosity and violence. Moreover, to highlight how unnatural the overturning of economic-social hierarchies is, the agency behind the uprising is attributed to an unnatural, monstrous entity which corrupts the otherwise submissive lower classes. The implied message is that the lower classes would wilfully accept their social status, if not for the unnatural hateful entity that manipulates their minds.[18]

Although the representational level of both games is structured by two normative ideologies, gameplay in the two games does not entertain the same level of normativity. As others have already pointed out,[19] the extent to which a video game manages to embody the aesthetics and affect of horror hinges on its ability to structure game space in such a way so as to threaten both the bodily integrity and the cultural identity of the white male playable character. In this respect, horror-themed first-person shooters like *F.E.A.R.* and survival horror games such as *Condemned: Criminal Origins* have different approaches. In accordance with the transmedial conventions of horror, the fear of abject/monstrous femininity is, among others, undergirded by the fear of pollution/contagion.[20] This anxiety is at work in *F.E.A.R.* (and even more so in the sequel *F.E.A.R. 2: Project Origin* [Monolith Productions, 2009]) where the player must avoid being touched by Alma who repeatedly and suddenly appears in the vicinity during gameplay and starts for the protagonist. Alma's touch is so dangerous that the player succumbs immediately thereafter. To ensure the playable character's safety, the player must efficiently use the optimized firing mechanics to shoot the elusive Alma before she reaches the playable character. Alma's abject femininity is indeed a threat to the white male playable character,[21] but *F.E.A.R.* lends the player the means to adequately keep the threat at a safe distance.[22]

F.E.A.R. is by no means singular in simulating this clean, distant disposal of the other(ed) threat. On the contrary, it epitomizes an entire tradition that can be traced back to the early days of *Doom* (id Software, 1993) and *Wolfenstein 3D* (id Software, 1992). Because the 'safe' gameplay engendered by such first-person shooters does not challenge the identity of the white male protagonist and the supremacist ideology embedded in the games' procedural rhetoric, it is incompatible with survival horror's challenging of dominant power structures.[23] This is not the case with *Condemned: Criminal Origins*, which uses the first-person view for the opposite purpose, namely that of bringing the other(ed) threat as close as possible to the playable character and the player.[24]

As mentioned earlier, in *Condemned: Criminal Origins* otherness is no longer based on gender, but on class alterity, which leads to a foregrounding of the aforementioned cultural anxieties concerning lower classes to the detriment of the fear of feminine abjection. More importantly, however, unlike *F.E.A.R.* and other horror-themed first-person shooters, the game no longer affords a clean, distant disposal of the cultural other. Now, players have to eliminate the threat in a hazardous close-quarters combat that requires physical contact. This means that the player of *Condemned: Criminal Origins* has no other choice but to engage in

an almost intimate combat with otherness and assume the risk of infection that other games procedurally preclude. When not in combat, players are not exempt from this close contact with otherness which now takes the form of abjection embodied by the corpse.[25] The simulation of forensic investigation requires players to get close to the corpses of victims so that they may be examined for clues.

Given its atypical approach (relative to the norms of the first-person shooter) to the structuring of space in gameplay, to what extent can *Condemned: Criminal Origins* be considered a prototypical survival horror video game? And, more importantly, to what extent does the game embrace the subversive procedural rhetoric of classical survival horror games?

As the second part of this book has revealed, gameplay in classical survival horror games is also predicated on the inevitable physical contact with the cultural other as a result of the little ammunition available. This contact is taken to the extreme in games like *Forbidden Siren* that blurs the line between self and other. As discussed in Chapter 6, by means of the sightjack mechanic, players also adopt the first-person view of the non-playable *shibito*, thus placing the monsters' perspective onto the game world on an equal footing with that of the playable characters. In doing so, the game challenges the rigid hierarchies of zombie narratives that function as cultural allegories that call for the constant reinstantiation of the status quo.[26] This is also supported by the game's scripted and embedded narratives that generically feature the failure of white middle-class masculinity to bridle and regulate the forms of cultural otherness that populate the games' storyworld.

Although in *Condemned: Criminal Origins* white middle-class masculinity is challenged, the game provides the player with the means to eventually stave off the assaulting forms of otherness. Ethan Thomas is not the male final girl of classical survival horror games, on the contrary,[27] he has the procedural resources to defeat all his adversaries without having to resort to stealth or improvisation. In addition to this, by the end of the game, the playable character will have defeated all his assailants, including the archenemy called "The Hate," the source of the inexplicably violent behaviour of the lower classes. In addition to this, the examination of the corpses is, in fact, a process of rationalizing the abject, one of removing the corpse from the repressed real and bringing it into the ambit of the symbolic order.[28]

Consequently, in combining the first-person shooter with the survival horror formula, *Condemned: Criminal Origins* seems to give precedence to the former. Albeit in a manner not as clean, spectacular, and thorough as expected (as shown in greater detail in the next section), Ethan Thomas behaves like a standard action game protagonist who not only has the abilities but also succeeds in defeating the forms of class alterity. If the horror films discussed by Barbara Creed represent the protagonist's plunge into the abject so that abjection may be erased and the symbolic order reconfirmed, then by the same token *Condemned: Criminal Origins* simulates a dive into class alterity and abjection only with the purpose of re-establishing white middle-class masculinity as the norm.

Commanding belief in white middle-class male supremacy

While classical survival horror video games simulate the vulnerability of the playable character in order to command disbelief in patriarchy, *Condemned: Criminal Origins* appropriates the game design norms of survival horror in order to achieve the opposite rhetorical effect, namely that of naturalizing white middle-class male supremacy. In full accordance with the aesthetics, rhetoric, and ideology of the action games of the late 1990s and early 2000s, *Condemned* attempts to achieve immersion by maximizing its levels of immediacy, interactivity, and narrativity. This way, the game's procedural rhetoric is efficient and commands belief in its artificial social hierarchies.

The fact that *Condemned* employs the game design of first-person shooters already assures a high degree of immediacy. As explained in Chapter 1, the first-person view is an attempt to imitate natural eyesight in the same manner as virtual reality would. Moreover, in order to facilitate the simulation of shooting, such games employ a complex overlay consisting of crosshairs that visually indicate the aim and a heads-up display showing all relevant ludic information: weapons available, ammunition, armour, and health points, and other relevant information.

While *Condemned*'s first-person view is a conventional one, its heads-up display defies the norms of shooters. Under the influence of classical survival horror video games that, in an attempt to remediate cinema, featured no overlaid ludic information, the heads-up display of *Condemned* is minimal. It does not display the firearms in the playable character's possession and, when the player unholsters his gun, it offers no information with respect to ammunition while the screen does not display crosshairs to aid the player's aim. Although such game design choices hinder gameplay, thus reminding the player of classical survival horror games, they also help the game attain a level of immediacy higher than that of more conventional first-person shooters. The screen rendered by the game engine functions as a transparent window to the storyworld which is not burdened with overlaid ludic information.

In terms of interactivity, the game not only features the high level of interactivity characteristic of first-person shooters discussed in Chapter 1, but also takes full advantage of the affordance of the LithTech Jupiter EX game engine. First, as pointed out in this chapter's first section, the game is optimized for melee combat in the sense that there are multiple ways in which players can wield melee weapons in combat. By doing so, *Condemned* provides an answer to the sometimes frustrating simplicity of melee combat in first-person shooters where, despite the wide array of firearms, players can use only one melee attack.[29] Of similar importance to the game's level of interactivity are the interactive environments. Instead of the standard pre-rendered 2-D backgrounds of classical survival horror games, *Condemned* features interactive environments with advanced physics. In other words, while in games such as *Resident Evil* the player's actions could not affect the represented backgrounds, *Condemned: Criminal Origins*

simulates its environments, which allows them to be affected by the player. For instance, as the player moves through the rooms stuffed with objects, they may often accidentally stumble upon the objects lying around causing them to tumble over or fall. Or, they can improvise weapons by removing pipes or planks from the walls.

The hypermedial gameplay of classical survival horror games is present only during some moments of combat. The weapons used by the playable character break after some time and the player must always find new ones.[30] If this happens during intense combat, the player may experience a form of aporia. According to Jeff Rush, aporia in video games refers to the temporal inability to progress in the game[31] as a result of the player's inability to ludically read the visual representation provided by the game engine.[32] If we take into consideration the fact that it is customary for video games to feature easily learnable and intuitive controls which are supposed to make players unaware of the mediated nature of the gameplay experience, then it comes as no surprise that aporia should produce the opposite effect. In moments of aporia, players once again become fully aware that they are not present in the game world, but rather that their interaction is mediated by a technologically and algorithmically constrained avatar.[33] The above-mentioned case in *Condemned: Criminal Origins* can function as an aporia since, in the context of visceral combat, is it difficult for the players to concentrate on their surroundings and discern those visually represented objects which can be used as weapons from the game's backgrounds. Despite these recurrent moments of aporia, it is farfetched to claim that they recuperate the hypermediacy of classical survival horror games. On the contrary, if we go back to Jeff Rush's study, we will notice that in *Condemned: Criminal Origins* the frequency of aporias is similar to that prototypical action video games such as *Doom*. Overall, interactivity works in favour of naturalizing gameplay, not defamiliarizing it.

Finally, the game evinces high levels of narrativity as all four prototypical features are met by the game.[34] To begin with, the storyworld of *Condemned: Criminal Origins* is shaken by two ideologically laden world-disrupting events: an implicit and an explicit one. The implicit world-disrupting event is the unknown cause that triggers the outbreak of violence among the city's lower classes, while the explicit one is that Ethan Thomas is being framed as the murderer of his partner.[35] The two events engender 'how/who' suspense and 'what,' respectively, as they stir player's interest both in the reason behind the outbreak of violence and in whether Ethan Thomas will manage to find the real murderer, clear his name, and, ideally, put an end to the social turmoil.

As it unfolds, the game delivers on both levels of expectation. On the one hand, the succession of events follows a progressive temporal trajectory that brings the player closer to Serial Killer X. With each new victim found, the player obtains new clues that reveal more about the main antagonist and his whereabouts. On the other hand, the scripted series of events also implies a plunge into the backstory. Later in the game, the player learns that the person responsible for the crime wave in the city, including the murders perpetrated by Serial Killer X,

is, in fact, the supernatural being referred to as the Hate, whose allegorical and ideological dimension has been examined in the previous section.

It is worth noting that, although procedurally Ethan Thomas is powerful enough to defeat his assailants culminating with his victory over the Hate in direct confrontation, the final cutscene does attempt to mitigate his triumph and, indirectly, that of white middle-class masculinity. From Ethan Thomas's final dialogue with his assistant, the player can deduct that the protagonist has not recovered his job and that he is still considered a suspect. Contrary to conventional horror narratives, the protagonist's victory over otherness seems not to have led to him regaining his middle-class position. Additionally, in the very final moments of the game in the same cutscene when Ethan Thomas enters the bathroom and looks into the mirror, we see a flash of the Hate being reflected in the looking glass. The game suggests that the evil entity has not been conclusively defeated and, more importantly, that the protagonist might have been infected by the Hate. This diegetic information sets the tone for the sequel *Condemned 2: Bloodshot* (Monolith Publications, 2008) which confirms Ethan Thomas's relapse from the middle-class to the lower class with the difference that in the next game his identity would resemble the stereotypes concerning lower-class people to a greater extent than in *Condemned: Criminal Origins*.

In terms of experientiality, the player's experience of the storyworld is filtered through the subjectivity of Ethan Thomas who fulfils the role of an intradiegetic narrator.[36] Moreover, the first-person view employed by the game generates a form of homodiegesis similar to the one documented by Gerard Genette in his study of narration in novels. Homodiegesis refers to those cases when the protagonist of a novel is also the narrator, meaning that the reader has direct access to the main character's subjective experience of the storyworld. At the same time, by conflating the perspective of the narrator with that of the protagonist, the reader's knowledge of the storyworld is limited to that of the main character.[37] The communication of diegetic information in *Condemned: Criminal Origins* is enacted within similar confines.[38] The first-person view ensures that the player has access only to the playable character's subjective perception of the storyworld. In a manner similar to *F.E.A.R.*, this perception is rendered not only via his voice, but also visually by means of several overlays which signify the character's both physical and mental state. For example, when the playable character is hit, he not only grunts but the screen is momentarily covered with red and a blood stain overlays the image. With the exception of a few cutscenes, the game is consistent in limiting the player's knowledge of the storyworld to that of the playable character. The minimal heads-up display is once again instrumental in this respect since even obtaining basic ludic knowledge, such as the number of bullets left in the ammunition magazine, relies on the mimetic representation afforded by the first-person view (the player has to literally look into the mag and count the bullets).

Because there is no source of diegetic information placed above the diegesis in which Ethan Thomas is enmeshed, the validity of truth of the playable character's perception of the storyworld is questionable. Often during gameplay, Ethan Thomas observes a series of supernatural phenomena beginning to occur and

then stopping suddenly. Given the playable character's distressed psychological state and the uncertainty concerning the supernatural dimension of the storyworld, which is confirmed only late in the game, the player cannot tell whether what the playable character sees is actually occurring in the storyworld, i.e. it is part of the text actual world,[39] or whether he is experiencing hallucinations. This ambiguity further stresses the experientiality of Ethan Thomas's struggle in *Condemned: Criminal Origins*.

Although *Condemned: Criminal Origins* tries to bring together two very different action genres, the first-person shooter and the survival horror, the former's immersive strategy, and its implicit ideological working remain largely unchanged. Instead of achieving immersion by means of narrative compensation, as was the case with classical survival horror games, *Condemned: Criminal Origins* immerses the player by maximizing its immediacy, interactivity, and narrativity. The game strives to present its storyworld as a possible world in which white middle-class masculinity is the norm.

Conclusion

Condemned: Criminal Origins' attempt to provide a survival horror experience with the core mechanics of first-person shooters is indicative of the aesthetic heterogeneity which characterizes postclassical survival horror. The orthodoxy of the classical era, when interventions to the *Alone in the Dark/Resident Evil* formula were minimal, is no longer a hallmark of post-2005 releases when *Resident Evil 4*, albeit a huge commercial success and very influential, was no longer able to impose its new game design as the dominant approach to survival horror. Games such as *Condemned: Criminal Origins* alongside others made a bold claim for the use of the first-person view as a viable alternative to the traditional and over-the-shoulder versions of the third-person view epitomized by the first and fourth instalments of the *Resident Evil* franchise.

The differences in terms of game design notwithstanding, politically *Condemned: Criminal Origins* and *Resident Evil 4* yield similar ideological results as both Leon S. Kennedy and Ethan Thomas are almost hypermasculine. Unlike the male final girls of the previous era, both protagonists are empowered to defeat all their opponents in direct combat and reassert themselves as white middle-class males. Their hypermasculinity is, however, incomplete because both of them cannot fully contain gender and class otherness, respectively. As the previous chapter has shown, Leon Kennedy fails to bring Ada Wong within the ambit of patriarchal control, while this chapter has shown that Ethan Thomas's triumph over the lower classes is not final.

But whereas *Resident Evil 4* retained some of the deconstructive impulses of the series' first instalment, *Condemned: Criminal Origins* is fully committed to the dominant notion of immersion supported by the action genre and employs the first-person shooter formula in order to naturalize the incomplete hypermasculinity embodied by Ethan Thomas and, in doing so, command belief in the white middle-class male supremacy.

Notes

1 For a discussion of schematic vs. symbiotic control, see Gordon Calleja, "Kinesthetic Involvement," in *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), 55–71.
2 Andreas Gregersen and Torben Grodal, "Embodiment and Interface," in *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*, eds. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), 67.
3 See Tanya Krzywinska, "Hands-On Horror," in *ScreenPlay: Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces*, eds. Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2002), 206–223.
4 Bernard Perron, *The World of Scary Video Games* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 121.
5 Ewan Kirkland, "Survival Horrality: Analysis of a Videogame Genre," *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* 10 (October 2011): 26.
6 Perron, *The World of Scary Video Games*, 120.
7 Richard Rouse III, "Match Made in Hell," in *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, ed. Bernard Perron (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Inc., 2009), 19.
8 For an account of flow in gameplay, see Katherine Isbister, *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016), 4.
9 For a discussion of how survival horror games frustrate progress, see Andrei Nae and Alexandra Ileana Bacalu. "Toward a Reconsideration of Hypermediacy: Immersion in Survival Horror Games and Eighteenth-Century Novels," in *Playing the Field. Video Games and American Studies*, ed. Sascha Pöhlmann (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 141.
10 Andrei Nae, *Horror Video Games as Procedural Narratives: Extreme Colonial Encounters in the Digital Heart of Darkness* (Bucharest: Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti, 2019), 175–176.
11 George Ritzer, *Globalization. The Essentials* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 155.
12 For a more general overview of the link between first-person shooters and politics, see Alexander Galloway, *Gaming. Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 75–83.
13 See Dan Pinchbeck, "Shock, Horror: First-Person Gaming, Horror, and the Art of Ludic Manipulation," in *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, ed. Bernard Perron (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Inc., 2009), 79–82.
14 *F.E.A.R.* also features complex melee combat mechanics, which was one of the innovations and main selling points of the game upon its release.
15 For an analysis of Alma's association with the monstrous feminine trope, see Nae, *Horror Video Games as Procedural Narratives*, 181–192.
16 Arguably, besides feminine abjection, the game also employs representations/simulations of uncanniness in the form of the army of clones who are psychologically controlled by Paxton Fettel, one of the game's antagonists. See Steve Spittle, "'Did This Game Scare You? Because It Sure as Hell Scared Me!' F.E.A.R., the Abject and the Uncanny," *Games and Culture* 6, no. 4 (2011): 6, doi: 10.1177/1555412010391091. For an account of uncanniness in horror visual culture, see Barbara Creed, *Phallic Panic: Film, Horror and the Primal Uncanny* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2005), 10.
17 A comparison between *Resident Evil 4* and *Condemned: Criminal Origins* as far their enemy non-playable characters are concerned is required. As Diane Carr remarks, *los ganados* of *Resident Evil 4* are always seen toiling, which suggests their affiliation with the working class. In order to stress the fact that the assailants of *Condemned* are of a social class lower than the working class, when the playable character comes across them, they are always caught being idle. The game taps into the dominant neoliberal stereotype of lower class people whose social status, according to this stereotypical knowledge, is determined by their laziness. Diane Carr, "Interpretation,

Representation and Methodology: Issue in Computer Game Analysis," in *Visual Communication*, ed. David Machin (Berlin and Boston, MA: de Gruyter, 2014), 513.

18 To make a step further in the analysis, one may go as far as to claim that the events of *Condemned: Criminal Origins* are a conservative right-wing allegory with respect to the dangers of radical left-wing propaganda. In the context of the action genre's cultural rooting in the red scare in the second half of the twentieth century, the supernatural/horror elements seem to be structured on the rhetorical strategies of vilifying communism so often found in American popular culture during the Cold War.

19 See Matthew Wiese, "The Rules of Horror: Procedural Adaptation in *Clock Tower*, *Resident Evil*, and *Dead Rising*," in *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, ed. Bernard Perron (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009); 238–266. Bernard Perron. "The Pace and Reach of Video Game Zombies," in *The Playful Undead and Video Games: Critical Analyses of Zombies and Gameplay*, eds. Stephen J. Webley and Peter Zackariasson (New York and London: Routledge, 2020), 308–333. Simon Niedenthal, "Patterns of Obscurity: Gothic Setting and Light in *Resident Evil 4* and *Silent Hill 2*," in *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, ed. Bernard Perron, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009).

20 For an overview of abjection in horror see Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

21 Spittle claims that the need to keep Alma away is indicative of the late modern condition of fragmented subjectivity. By defeating Alma and the abject/uncanny creatures she parthenogenetically gives birth to, the player brings an illusion of unity to the modern subject. See Spittle, "'Did This Game Scare You? Because It Sure as Hell Scared Me!'" 7.

22 Nae, *Horror Video Games as Procedural Narratives*, 184–185.

23 Laurie N. Taylor, "Gothic Bloodlines in Survival Horror Gaming," in *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, ed. Bernard Perron (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009), 49.

24 Perron, *The World of Scary Video Games*, 294.

25 Julia Kristeva. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3.

26 Madelon Hoedt, "Through the Eyes of the Other," in *The Playful Undead and Video Games: Critical Analyses of Zombies and Gameplay*, eds. Stephen J. Webley and Peter Zackariasson (New York and London: Routledge, 2020), 192.

27 Ewan Kirkland, "Masculinity in Video Games: The Gendered Gameplay of *Silent Hill*," *Camera Obscura* 24, no. 2(71) (2009): 169, 172, doi: 10.1215/02705346-2009-006. Ewan Kirkland, "Remediation, Analogue Corruption and the Signification of Evil in Digital Games," *At the Interface/Probing the Boundaries* 63 (2011): 232, doi: 10.1163/9789042029408_014.

28 The forensic gear used by the playable character functions like an instrument of patriarchy. It produces knowledge of the body in the form of schematic representations of the corpse which imposes symbolic meaning onto it, i.e. it includes the corpse into the patriarchal somatophobic symbolic order. It is interesting that a key role in the patriarchal recuperation of the corpse is played by Rosa, the playable character's female assistant who, like many female characters in visual media representing masculinity in crisis, upholds patriarchy until the male protagonist reassumes his central phallic role. See Dan Pinchbeck, "An Analysis of Persistent Non-Player Characters in the First-Person Gaming genre 1998-2007: a case for the fusion of mechanics and diegetics," *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture* 3, no. 2 (2009): 271, https://www.eludamos.org/index.php/eludamos/article/view/vol3no2-9. For a discussion of the corpse as a form of abjection and its inclusion into the Symbolic order via representation, see the comments on the encephalograph in Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 3.

29 There is, of course, the notable exception of *F.E.A.R.* which used the same engine and featured a set of spectacular melee combat mechanics.
30 Perron, *The World of Scary Video Games*, 229.
31 Jeff Rush, "Embodied Metaphors. Exposing Informatic Control through First-Person Shooters," in *Games and* Culture 6, no. 3 (2011): 246, doi: 10.1177/1555412010364977.
32 Ibid., 249.
33 Ibid., 251–252.
34 Because all survival horror games discussed in Chapters 4–10 can be regarded as evincing similar levels of situatedness, see the comments on situatedness in Chapters 1, 3, and 4.
35 See also Dominic Arsenault, and Bernard Perron, "In the Frame of the Magic Circle: The Circle(s) of Gamepay," in *The Video Games Theory Reader 2*, eds. Bernard Perron and Mark J. P. Wolf (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), 127.
36 For an overview of forms of narration in video games, see Jan-Noël Thon, *Transmedia Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 207–220.
37 Gerard Genette, *Figures* III (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972), 206–211.
38 Adam Crowley, "Why They Keep Coming Back. The Allure of Incongruity," in *Unraveling* Resident Evil *Essays on the Complex Universe of the Games and Films*, ed. Nadine Farghaly (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014), 59.
39 Marie-Laure Ryan, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 119–120.

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9 Amanda Ripley

From final girl to action girl in *Alien: Isolation*

Alien: Isolation is a survival horror game released in 2014 by Creative Assembly which, as the title suggests, is part of the *Alien* transmedia storyworld. Diegetically, the game functions as a sequel to Ridley Scott's 1979 *Alien*. It ignores all the sequels to the first *Alien* film and sets its actions 15 years after Ellen Ripley manages to survive her encounter with the xenomorph by blowing up her ship and escaping on a shuttle. In *Alien: Isolation*, the player assumes the role of Amanda Ripley, daughter of Ellen Ripley, who sets out to a space station called Sevastopol to retrieve the flight recorder of the Nostromo. Once on board Sevastopol, Amanda Ripley notices the station's derelict condition caused by a xenomorph running loose and randomly killing the crew. Amanda eventually succeeds in disposing of the xenomorph, but immediately thereafter, Sevastopol's androids start killing the remaining crew members. In order to elucidate the cause of the killings, Amanda proceeds to Sevastopol's central computer, APOLLO, and learns that, in fact, the space station hosts a nest of xenomorphs. The protagonist is further made aware that, upon being informed of the xenomorph's presence on board Sevastopol, the Weyland-Yutani Corporation, the corporate antagonist of the first *Alien* film, has bought the station and ordered the androids to kill all human presence for fear that they should harm the xenomorphs. Facing the danger of the xenomorphs ending up in the hands of Weyland-Yutani Corporation, Amanda Ripley tries to destroy Sevastopol and flee on board the Torrens, the space ship that brought her to Sevastopol in the first place. However, once inside the Torrens, she comes across a xenomorph that had managed to lurk in. She tries to evade it, but is eventually corned into an airlock. Having her space suit still on, she jettisons both of them into outer space, thus escaping the xenomorph, but remaining floating in the cosmos.

Despite the diegetic continuation of *Alien: Isolation* in relation to *Alien*, its gameplay is an attempt to provide players with a simulation of the events represented in *Alien* and, later in the game, *Aliens* (Cameron, 1986). The game employs a first-person view, a game design choice which, thanks to games such as *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (Frictional Games, 2010), *Outlast* (Red Barrels, 2013), or *Silent Hills P.T.* (Kojima Productions, 2014), to name but a few, by 2014 had come to be recognized not only as a formula for action but also a suitable one for horror. What is striking about *Alien: Isolation* is that, throughout its

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20-odd hours of gameplay, *Alien: Isolation* uses its first-person view to simulate both the struggle to survive characteristic of horror films and the specific combat of first-person shooters, thus determining Amanda Ripley to shift from the role of final girl to that of action heroine. This chapter looks into the transition between the two gender roles experienced by Amanda Ripley and investigates the manner in which the game's approach to femininity negotiates the deconstructive impulses of classical survival horror.

The analysis conducted in this chapter will go through the following steps. I first examine the first two *Alien* films and discuss the representation of femininity with a focus on the female protagonist, Ellen Ripley. Drawing on the rich body of literature discussing the *Alien* franchise, I review the debate on whether the representation of femininity in the first *Alien* films has the potential to serve a feminist agenda and undermine patriarchy. With the main points of that debate in mind, in the next section, I argue that the inconclusiveness of the films' feminist rhetoric is disambiguated by *Alien: Isolation* where Amanda Ripley's diegetic profile flaunts the artificiality of gender roles. Finally, I show that, in order to lend persuasiveness to its procedural rhetoric, the game falls back on immersion via maximization, but retains the hypermediacy of classical survival horror games by embedding the hypermedial interfaces the player interacts with into the storyworld. In doing so, the game commands belief in the artificiality of normative gender roles.

Ellen Ripley in *Alien* and *Aliens*–between figurative male and post-woman

The release of Ridley Scott's canonic sci-fi horror film, *Alien*, in 1979 occurred in a cinematic milieu in which women were assigned passive roles in stark opposition to the narrative agency enjoyed by men.[1] The film marks a break from this tradition by placing Ellen Ripley in a leading role in a narrative that shows the failure of the male figures of authority and conveys a critique of corporate capitalism. At its onset, the power relations between the crew members abide by normative gender, race, and class hierarchies. Dallas, the white male captain of the ship, is shown from early on exercising his authority by dismissing the complaints expressed by two lower-ranking crew members concerning the percentage of their bonuses for the payload the ship was carrying.[2] Dallas will continue until his demise to have the final word in every important action conducted by the crew including here the investigation of the SOS beacon coming from planet LV-426, the bringing of Thomas Kane, a crew member with a facehugger attached to his face, on board, and the multiple attempts to kill the xenomorph. It is only after Dallas, the patriarch of the film, has failed to live up to his protector role, that Ellen Ripley can assume authority and lead the remaining crew members in their struggle against the alien. As the officer in command, she decides that the crew should programme the Nostromo to self-destruct with the alien on board and that they should leave the space ship on the shuttle, a plan which, despite several shortcomings, eventually leads to the disposal of the xenomorph.

In *Aliens*, the gender power relations between the characters follow a similar trajectory. Ripley's agency and authority are inversely proportional to the level of authority enjoyed by the male figure who happens to be leading the survivors at various moments during the film. Like in the previous film, Ripley starts to exercise her agency only after the male figures of authority have been incapacitated. She starts asserting herself after Lieutenant Gorman, having proven his incompetence, loses his consciousness, and acts with full independence only after Hicks, the final male survivor of the Marine Corps, is incapacitated by a xenomorph. At that point Ripley decides on her own to gear herself up and go to the aliens' nest to save Newt, a young girl found alive on the human colony on planet LV-426.

Despite the agency enjoyed by Ripley in the latter parts of both films, the extent to which she actually challenges patriarchy has been subject to debate in academia. Although Ripley is a heterosexual cisgender woman, feminist critics have pointed out that the gender role she enacts is that of a masculinized female. In her canonic work, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, Carol J. Clover regards the Ripley of the first two *Alien* films as a final girl, a horror film stock character of which she maintains that

> The Final Girl is boyish, in a word. Just as the killer is not fully masculine, she is not fully feminine—not, in any case, feminine in the ways of her friends. Her smartness, gravity, competence in mechanical and other practical matters, and sexual reluctance set her apart from the other girls and ally her, ironically, with the very boys she fears or rejects, not to speak of the killer himself. Lest we miss the point, it is spelled out in her name: Stevie, Marti, Terry, Laurie, Stretch, Will, Joey, Max. Not only the conception of the hero in Alien and Aliens but also the surname by which she is called, Ripley, owes a clear debt to slasher tradition.[3]

Ellen Ripley, a prototypical final girl in Clover's view, is a woman whose conduct defies conventional norms of femininity. Ripley's behaviour resembles that of conventional masculinity to such an extent that Clover argues that

> Figuratively seen, the Final Girl is a male surrogate in things oedipal, a homoerotic stand-in, the audience incorporate. […] The discourse is wholly masculine, and females figure in it only insofar as they "read" some aspect of male experience. To applaud the Final Girl as a feminist development, as some reviews of Aliens have done with Ripley, is, in light of her figurative meaning, a particularly grotesque expression of wishful thinking. She is simply an agreed-upon fiction and the male viewer's use of her as a vehicle for his own sadomasochistic fantasies an act of perhaps timeless dishonesty.[4]

Clover's scepticism with respect to the feminist potential of Ellen Ripley dovetails with Yvonne Tasker's reading of Ripley as a tomboy. Like the final girl, the tomboy is ambivalent as far as her gender identity and sexual orientation are concerned:[5] she is sexually reluctant, although overtly heterosexual, evinces

traits of masculine physical strength, although being overtly feminine, and she uses her physical and cognitive skills to confront the monstrous threat motivated by her motherly concerns. Tasker's assumption is that gender otherness can enjoy a leading position in mainstream narrative cinema only if the film manages to compensate for the female character's otherness by bringing the character closer to normative masculinity. In the case of Ellen Ripley, Tasker contends that her tomboyishness serves the function of mitigating her femininity and making her presence in the leading role less transgressive.[6]

Besides these above-mentioned similarities between the final girl and tomboy, Tasker identifies two additional politically relevant traits of the tomboy. First, she argues that, in addition to assuaging gender otherness, the tomboy also reinforces Hollywood's populist rhetoric. Mainstream cinema typically represents non-material labour as dull and alienating and the women that partake in it as personally unfulfilled power-dressers. It is only when embracing material labour and its characteristic working-class attire that the agency of female characters becomes diegetically relevant.[7] Secondly, the figure of the tomboy implies that the female character assuming this identity is in a transitory state towards normative femininity.[8] Rather than celebrating a rebellion against gender normativity and heterosexuality, tomboys necessarily reinforce the two as the norm. This is most obvious in *Alien* when, having boarded the shuttle and presumably escaped the alien, Ripley is filmed removing her masculine attire and preparing for hypersleep in a series of typical male gaze shots.[9] The implication is that her role of figurative male is only a temporary and unnatural one called for by the extraordinary circumstances, i.e. the indestructible xenomorph preying on the crew. Consequently, once the threat has apparently been eliminated,[10] the status quo can be reinstated, hence Ripley turns from figurative male into female and, consequently, becomes the object of the male gaze.[11]

The final scenes of *Aliens* featuring the direct confrontation between Ripley and the alien queen, which have earned Ripley the "Rambolina" nickname, are undergirded by a similar strategy of compensation. As Ripley descends on an elevator to the alien Nest where Newt has been cocooned, she arms herself with multiple weapons in a manner resembling the signature shots of *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (Cosmatos, 1985).[12] Unlike the frightened final girl who avoids direct confrontation with the xenomorph at all costs, Ripley is now a full-fledged action girl who attacks the aliens on their home turf and faces the most dangerous alien of them all, namely the queen. This radical transgression of the gender status quo is mitigated by the diegetic motivation foregrounded by the film. By performing the role of a female Rambo, Ripley in fact fulfils her duty towards Newt, the girl with whom she develops a mother-daughter relationship.[13] (The film repeatedly stresses Ripley's maternal affection for Newt in order to make Ripley's transgression of gender roles as acceptable and plausible as possible).[14]

The critique of Ripley's status as a final girl and/or tomboy and her complicity with patriarchy has not only benefitted from strong circulation and approval in academia but has also been contested due to its methodological shortcomings

and its ideological assumptions. Elizabeth Hills and Jeffrey Brown refute the scepticism of their predecessors by highlighting that the canonic feminist critique's psychoanalytic approach confines the investigation of gender representation in cinema to gender binarism and to an understanding of femininity defined as lack (as postulated by Lacanian psychoanalysis).[15] Such an approach, maintain Hills and Brown, fails to consider the destabilizing potential of action heroines whose identities transcend gender binarism.[16] Hills proposes that feminist film criticism move away from psychoanalysis and rely on Deleuze's concept of becoming in order to fully account for the gender identity performed by action heroines such as Ellen Ripley.[17] In light of Ripley's ability to act within the liminal space of gender binarism and engage in a series of assemblages with the technologies surrounding her, Hills further claims that, instead of regarding Ripley as a figurative male, she should be seen as a post-Woman.[18]

The debate surrounding Ripley's, and by extension action heroines', status within mainstream cinema is indeed a complex one and it is beyond the scope of this chapter to establish which position is most justified.[19] There are, however, two aspects that both approaches fail to stress and which are relevant for the simulation of femininity in *Alien: Isolation*. To begin with, the status of Ellen Ripley as a female heroine differs in the two films. In the first film, Ripley is a conventional final girl who, albeit masculinized in the form of a tomboy, avoids confronting the xenomorph in direct combat as male protagonists usually do. (As already mentioned, Captain Dallas does confront the xenomorph head-on, but stands no chance against it and dies.) This is no longer the case in *Aliens* where Ripley is no longer a final girl, but an action girl who voluntarily assaults the xenomorph mother in order to rescue Newt, the young girl towards whom she develops motherly affection. Secondly, irrespective of whether we regard Ripley as either a figurative male, and therefore a character whose actions reinforce patriarchy, or as a post-Woman who challenges gender binarism, in both cases, in order for them to be ideologically persuasive, the films have to represent Ellen Ripley's gender identity in such a way so that they seem natural. To refer back to Kaja Silverman, they have to be vraisemblant.[20] This condition is well met by the two films as both abide by the aesthetics of realism of their historical periods.

As we shall see in the next section, in *Alien: Isolation* this is no longer the case with Amanda Ripley whose transition from final girl to action girl lacks the films' vraisemblance. In other words, whereas the films attempt to conceal the artificiality of the two feminine gender roles, the game flaunts their constructedness.

Ripley in *Alien: Isolation*: the final girl/action girl dissonance

The second part of this book has shown that the hypermedial gameplay of classical survival horror games is narrativized by the diegetic profile of the protagonist who is usually a male final girl. Because the playable character is underpowered in comparison to the threats facing him, the player has no other choice but to avoid direct confrontation and fight back only when recourse to any other means

to make progress in the game is unavailable. To a significant extent, *Alien: Isolation* succeeds in recreating the experience of classical survival horror games by providing players during its first half with a gameplay which simulates the actions of the conventional final girls of horror films, especially those belonging to the slasher subgenre. Like Ellen Ripley in Ridley Scott's 1979 *Alien*, Amanda Ripley faces an overly powerful xenomorph in the unhospitable technological environment offered by the derelict space station Sevastopol.[21]

The alien's superior strengths match those of its cinematic counterpart: it is practically invulnerable to conventional weapons, has highly sensitive senses, enjoys physical strength, agility, and speed superior to humans, its members are efficient slashers, and bleeds acid for blood. Besides these attributes, the xenomorph's ability to kill is further augmented by its in-game simulation. As Jaroslav Švelch notes,[22] the xenomorph is operated by two artificial intelligence modules. The first module, called foreground AI, is responsible for the xenomorph's stalking of the station and the use of its senses in order to identify potential victims. In addition to this, there is a second module, called background AI, which gives the first module information about the whereabouts of the protagonist, information which would otherwise be inaccessible to the senses simulated by the foreground AI.[23] As a result of the collaboration between the two AI modules, it is difficult for players to predict the alien's behaviour and to run away from it. The result is a heightened sense of vulnerability and multiple deaths, two emblematic traits of classical survival horror games.

Because direct confrontation with the alien can only lead to death, the player must enact the final girl role and constantly avoid being sensed by the xenomorph, which implies keeping out of its sight by hiding behind or under an object or in closets and making as little noise as possible. (At one moment in the game, the player obtains a motion tracker, a replica of the one featured in the film *Aliens*, which can aid the player in inferring the xenomorphs' position inside the air ducts. However, the motion tracker makes a beeping noise that can alert the alien of the player's presence.) The player must also remember to alter his strategy since the alien can learn the player's behavioural pattern. Due to the xenomorph's acute hearing, the player must also avoid conflict with the groups of survivors and the Working Joe androids populating Sevastopol, although in their case the balance of power is more equal. If progress demands that the player eliminate the survivors encountered, then the safest way to do so is to set traps that make enough noise to alert the xenomorph, which will then kill the survivors who have triggered the traps.

Amanda Ripley's reliance on stealth and improvisation in her attempt to survive the encounter with the alien aligns her with the final girl trope embodied by Ellen Ripley in *Alien*. However, midway through the game, the gameplay style undergoes a drastic change. In the latter part of the game, not only do the synthetics become hostile, but Amanda Ripley must also face more than one xenomorph as she explores and eventually destroys their nest at the core of Sevastopol. In order to balance the player's chances, Amanda Ripley obtains a shotgun, a flamethrower, and a bolt gun, besides the revolver which the player discovers earlier

in the game. As a result, the reactive and indirect approach favoured by the former part of the game is replaced with a more conventional first-person shooter gameplay. Rather than evading, hiding, and improvising, now Amanda Ripley can assault her enemies head-on. Even the xenomorphs are less threatening since the flamethrower, albeit not able to kill them, can effectively scare them away.

While the former part of *Alien: Isolation* is a procedural adaptation[24] of the film *Alien,* considering the series of events and the shift in gameplay style, the game's latter part can be construed as a procedural adaptation of James Cameron's 1986 *Aliens*, the direct sequel to Ridley Scott's 1979 release. If initially, the game requires that players use their cognitive skills in order to figure out what the most silent way is to avoid or surpass a threat, from approximately its midpoint onwards *Alien: Isolation* encourages a shoot-to-kill gameplay that hinges on good sensorimotor skills.[25] The fearful final girl of the game's early stages is now a confident action girl similar to Ripley in the final scenes of *Aliens.*

Although the shift from one gameplay mode to another is motivated by the need to balance the game in the context of the second half's increased difficulty, the ludic transition is not diegetically accounted for by the storyworld. As already pointed out, the psychological profile of a final girl is different from that of an action girl and an evolution from one status to the other does not ineluctably entail.[26] In *Aliens*, for instance, Ripley does evolve from final girl to action girl, but this unexpected diegetic trajectory is supported by the series of events that occur, especially the motherly care which Ripley develops for Newt.[27] Because *Alien: Isolation* does not provide a narrative grounding for the new diegetic profile of the Amanda Ripley procedurally represented by the new gameplay approach, what ensues is a ludo-narrative dissonance, i.e. the action girl profile engendered by the game's procedural mode is not supported by the game's other modes that remain consistent with the final girl trope. As a result of these contradictory meanings, the simulation of the female protagonist comes off as artificial and the game's vraisemblance is undermined.

Simulating material labour through hypermedial gameplay: Amanda Ripley, the working-class heroine

If Amanda Ripley's level and form of agency in the game are inconsistent, as made evident by her abrupt transition from final girl to action girl, her working-class identity is simulated coherently for the entirety of the game, thus confirming the populist rhetoric of the representation of heroines in the action genre. Since video games are associated with immaterial labour,[28] the idea of using a video game to simulate manual/material labour may seem an objective difficult to achieve. While this may be true for most video game genres, survival horror stands out as a genre which proposes a defamiliarizing gameplay experience that stresses the materiality of the medium instead of trying to conceal it.

In *Alien: Isolation* the hypermediacy of the gameplay experience is not only the result of the unnatural evolution of the character but also hinges on the playable character's interaction with the environment, especially the multiple devices

present on Sevastopol. As Robin Sloan observes, the design of *Alien: Isolation* is a nostalgic recreation of the locations present in *Alien*, while the devices which the player must use throughout the game are all tributary to the assets employed in *Alien*.[29] Sloan goes on to argue that, taking into account the fidelity with which the video game adapts the storyworld of *Alien*, the creative process of *Alien: Isolation* is motivated by a compulsive need to repeat the experience of watching the film in the medium of the video game.[30]

As pointed out in the second part of this book, classical survival horror shares a preference for the remediation of physical and analog media, rather than digital technologies since the physicality of these media compensates for the digital nature of video games and lends the latter a sense of realness which galvanizes their procedural rhetoric. Because many of the remediated technologies of *Alien: Isolation* are already digital, the game is coerced to find alternative ways to convey the sense of physical materiality to the gameplay experience.

In adapting the setting of the first film, *Alien: Isolation* borrows its techno-totalitarianism.[31] Like in the film, the technology used by Amanda Ripley is heavy, difficult to use, and glitchy, thus rendering their use a form of material labour. The gameplay experience stresses how the player, instead of being the agentive user, is in fact subjected to the limits imposed by the technologies employed in the game.[32] For example, in order to progress in the game, the player must often use a computer terminal inspired by the home computers available in the late 1970s. These computers have a very schematic interface (similar to the one of Mother, the central computer in *Alien*), are very slow, and have many corrupted files which retain important information from the player. Furthermore, when the player interacts with the computer terminals, the engine does not pause game time. Because operating a computer terminal implies that the screen of the gaming platform shows only the screen of the monitor, the player finds himself in a position of heightened vulnerability as he is out in the open and can easily fall prey to the alien or a hostile working Joe, but cannot see them.

Another often-used device that renders the players highly vulnerable is the game saving mechanic which is simulated as using a punch card console similar to the one used by Captain Dallas and Ripley to access Mother's central computer in *Alien*. Once the interaction button has been pressed and the card inserted into the machine, the player is immobilized for a few moments before progress is saved, but again without game time being paused. In the interval between the insertion of the card and its removal after saving, the player is a helpless victim for the xenomorph roaming the station or the patrolling working Joes.

The raw design and the dysfunctionality of the futuristic technologies remediated in *Alien: Isolation* defy the celebratory rhetoric of scientific progress[33] epitomized by technologies of total immersion such as *Star Trek*'s holodeck and stand out as hypermedial, making the player always aware of their materiality. Yet besides their inherent qualities, what further stresses the hypermediacy of their use is the omnipresent threat of the xenomorph and of the working Joes which causes the player to always be self-aware and not let himself be immersed in the device he uses in the game world of *Alien: Isolation*.

Another more direct way in which the game attempts to simulate material labour is the requirement that the player collect and use a series of tools throughout the game. For instance, accessing certain areas requires that the player use a maintenance jack or a plasma torch. The former is used for specific locks on doors, while the latter can be used to cut metal, thus offering the player access to areas sealed off. While in classical survival horror games, the employment of specific tools was used automatically once the respective tools had been selected in the inventory, now the use of the tools requires that the player perform a sequence of p-actions embedded within a more or less symbiotic control scheme. In other words, when using the maintenance jack and the plasma torch, the player's movement of the analog stick or mouse and pressing of buttons resemble the playable character's manipulation of the respective tool.

This section has shown that gameplay in *Alien: Isolation* is to a large extent contingent on the interaction with various tools and devices imported from the first two *Alien* films. The game remediates digital technologies with hypermedial interfaces and makes sure that, when using them, the player has a heightened sense of self-awareness. Furthermore, the player must symbiotically use several physical tools in the game world in order to progress. By means of hypermediacy and materiality of the technologies remediated and the symbiotic control of the tools, *Alien: Isolation* attempts to provide the immaterial labour of gameplay with the semblance of 'real' material labour. What ensues is modal consonance between Ripley's diegetic profile as an engineer and the material labour activities simulated by the game. The question that, at this point, necessarily arises is how can the game's stress on materiality be compatible with its immersive goal?

Immersion in *Alien: Isolation*: towards an aesthetics of immaterial materiality?

The previous chapters have shown that classical survival horror evince high levels of narrativity to compensate for the hypermediacy of the gameplay experience in order to immerse players into storyworlds that command disbelief in normative gender identities. On the other hand, the postclassical survival horror games examined thus far, namely *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom, 2005) and *Condemned: Criminal Origins* (Monolith Productions, 2005) foster an immersive gameplay that hinges on the attempt to attain high degrees of immediacy, interactivity, and narrativity in order to reinforce conventional notions of heterosexual masculinity and femininity as the norm. *Alien: Isolation*'s use of the first-person shooter design ensures that it follows in the suit of its postclassical survival horror forerunners as far as player immersion is concerned, but, as the previous sections have demonstrated, also tries to accommodate the hypermedial gameplay specific to classical survival horror games which plays a vital role in simulating the vulnerability of the playable character.

Immediacy in *Alien: Isolation* rests largely on the first-person view which, as a remediation of virtual reality, attempts to imitate eyesight. However, there are also unnatural elements that the game uses in order to attain immediacy,

elements which have been generified by the game's audience. Daniel Schäbler observes that representation in *Alien: Isolation* is replete with photographic and cinematic visual effects which do not imitate natural eyesight and which are expected to raise the player's awareness with respect to the artificiality of the gameplay experience: lens flare, motion blur, and static grizzle.[34] However, because these effects are so common in cinema, players no longer regard them as artificial, but rather they function as proof of authenticity.[35] By remediating the properties of cinema and photography, two media invested with a strong belief in their representational capabilities, *Alien: Isolation* borrows their credibility[36] and thereby increases the persuasiveness of its procedural rhetoric, besides lending the game the aura of retrofuturism of the first two *Alien* films.

In addition to this, *Alien: Isolation* attains immediacy by embedding its hypermedial remediations within the game's text-actual world. This game design choice, which was popularized by *Dead Space* (EA Redwood Shores, 2008),[37] presupposes that the remediated interfaces of the technologies present in the films be present as objects in the game's storyworld proper. Unlike the visual effects that find themselves above the diegetic level of the storyworld, the remediated technologies are on the same diegetic plane as the playable character. Consequently, the heavy, malfunctional, user-unfriendly devices described in the previous sections are mimetic remediation of the hypermedial technologies present in the *Alien* films.

Interactivity in *Alien: Isolation* is strongly related to the manner in which the game attains immediacy. In addition to the symbiotic control schemes afforded by the first-person view described in the previous section, the game's mimetic remediation of hypermedial technologies is supported by the possibility to interact with them in a manner similar to the way human interaction with the respective interfaces is represented in the first two *Alien* films. In doing so, the game confirms the player's horizon of expectations set by the films concerning the possibilities of action in the *Alien* storyworld. However, in interacting with these retrofuturistic machines, player agency is constantly frustrated by their limitative interfaces and difficult use, which contradicts the push towards maximizing interactivity typical of AAA action games and reminds one of the confining gameplay of classical survival horror games. In order to mitigate the potential of such interactions to thwart immersion, the game frames these limitations as a faithful simulation of the haphazard, confining human-machine interaction of the films.

Finally, player immersion and the persuasiveness of the game's procedural rhetoric also hinge on the game's high level of narrativity. Even before gameplay commences, *Alien: Isolation* triggers strong narrative expectations as it openly announces its belonging to the *Alien* storyworld. These expectations are confirmed by the game which, as both sequel to and procedural adaptation of the first *Alien* film, evinces all four prototypical traits of narrativity proposed by David Herman: situatedness,[38] sequentiality, world-making/world-disrupting, and experientiality.

The game's visual, aural, and kinaesthetic input cue the player to mentally construct a storyworld that is an extension of the one featured in Ridley Scott's 1979 film. Early on in the game, the equilibrium of the storyworld is disturbed

by the finding of the Nostromo's flight recorder which is said to contain information with respect to Ellen Ripley. This event determines Amanda Ripley, Ellen's daughter, to travel to Sevastopol, the space station where the recording is located. The ensuing events leading to the destruction of Sevastopol and the elimination of the xenomorphs on board are causally and temporally linked in such a way so as to trigger what Marie-Laure Ryan calls 'what' suspense.[39] Gameplay in *Alien: Isolation* is diegetically motivated by the player's interest in finding out how Amanda Ripley's confrontation with the xenomorph will end.

In addition to 'what' suspense, usually horror narratives also engender 'how/who' suspense begotten by the interpreter's desire to learn what the cause of the unnatural disturbance, in our case the xenomorph, is.[40] However, in the case of *Alien: Isolation*, the player who is familiar with the films is already aware of the xenomorph's origin, which means that, instead of 'how/who' suspense, the game fosters metasuspense.[41] As a result, such players are interested in finding out by what means the game will reveal the already familiar diegetic information concerning the source of the alien. As it turns out, rather than using linear cinematic means to represent the events on planet LV-426, the game uses simulation in first-person in order to offer players a faithful procedural adaptation of the events featured in *Alien*. The player assumes control of Henry Marlow, the captain of a ship which receives the same distress signal that the Nostromo picks up in *Alien*. Marlow, along with the bulk of his crew, including his wife, ventures out to explore the source of the signal and arrives at the familiar alien ship populated with dormant facehuggers in alien eggs. When approaching the eggs, the game cuts to a cutscene in which we see a facehugger spring onto the face of Marlow's wife. Desperate, the captain takes her on board, puts her into hypersleep, and travels to Sevastopol where he docks his ship.[42]

Alien: Isolation's high level of narrativity also depends on experientiality, i.e. the game's ability to represent the way in which the subjectivity of the characters filters the traumatic events on Sevastopol. Throughout gameplay, the player sees the world through the eyes of Amanda Ripley, which means that to a large extent of the game the player has access to the playable character's subjective experience of the events she is enmeshed in. In addition to seeing only what the playable character can see, the player also has privileged access to Amanda Ripley's monologues and emotional reactions, as well as bodily and mental states which are conventionally rendered via visual effects that alter the image on the screen depending on the playable character's well-being. For example, when a synthetic tries to kill the playable character via strangulation, the image on the screen turns blurry, which suggests the playable character's suffocation.

Besides Amanda Ripley, the game also uses heteromedial means to represent other characters' subjective experiences of the events occurring in the game. An illustrative example of contending subjectivities is the two log series "Tomorrow, Together: Seegson's Journey into Colonial Space" held by Sebastian Sieg, CEO of Seegson (the company owning Sevastopol) and "An Outpost of Progress?" held by Julia Jones, a journalist documenting life on Sevastopol. As I argue at greater length elsewhere,[43] the two log series are an adaptation of the

dialogue entertained by the narrator of the frame narrative and Marlow at the beginning of *Heart of Darkness* on the topic of English colonialism. Like the former, Sebastian Sieg praises the achievements of space colonization and regards Sevastopol as an example of his company's successful colonial enterprise. On the other hand, Julia Jones, like Marlow, disavows the optimism of Sieg's account and gives the player a bleak perspective on space colonization. For Julia Jones, Sevastopol is a dystopian place:

> The space station that nobody needed, run by a company we all forgot. Sevastopol is now a backwater. The population is a tenth of the station's optimal capacity. Docking bays are empty and the shutters are down on local stores and businesses. The orders for Seegson's cheaply manufactured androids have long since dried up, and the antiquated APOLLO governing AI system frequently malfunctions. How did we get here and, more importantly, where have billions of dollars of investment gone?

Sebastian Sieg's and Julia Jones's contradictory views on Sevastopol imply two different experiences of space colonization, leaving the player to rely on his gameplay experience in order to establish which version is closer to the fictional truth of the game. The existence of these multiple subjective points of view ensures that *Alien: Isolation* features a high level of experientiality, which further buttresses the game's narrativity.

The manner in which *Alien: Isolation* achieves player immersion is indicative of tensions that undergird postclassical survival horror games that have to negotiate between the anti-mimetic, hypermedial, and deconstructive impulses of classical survival horror games, on the one hand, and the push to conform to the norms of mainstream action games, on the other. The game features high levels of immediacy, interactivity, and narrativity, but at the same time manages to recuperate the hypermediacy of classical survival horror games by means of a symbiotic use of material tools and by embedding the hypermedial technologies in the game's text-actual-world. This way, the materiality of the interaction with objects and devices is diegetically framed as material labour within the immaterial labour of gameplay, thus engendering an immaterial materiality.

Conclusion

Unlike classical survival horror games, the postclassical ones evince a high level of heterogeneity both in terms of game design and of how gender is represented/simulated. While games such as *Condemned: Criminal Origins* and *Resident Evil 4* veer towards more conventional understandings of gender, *Alien: Isolation* retains the scepticism of earlier survival horror games with respect to normative gender constructs, in this case, femininity. In its attempt to provide players with a simulation of Amanda Ripley as a procedural adaptation of Ellen Ripley in *Alien* and *Aliens*, the game consistently represents and simulates her identity as an engineer, but abruptly and unnaturally shifts from the simulation of

one cinematic stock character, the final girl, to another, namely the action girl, thus engendering a form of ludo-diegetic dissonance which reveals the artificiality of the feminine gender construct. In order to make its approach to gender believable, the game immerses the player in its game world by maximizing its immediacy, interactivity, and narrativity, but, at the same time, recuperates the hypermediacy of classical survival horror games by remediating the hypermedial technologies and material tools of the *Alien* storyworld. In doing so, the game commands belief in the artificiality of femininity as a gender construct.

Notes

1 See Alexander Christian, "Is Ellen Ripley a Feminist?" in *Alien and Philosophy: I Infest, Therefore I am*, eds. Jeffrey Ewing and Kevin S. Decker (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 166; Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 67.

2 The film starts abruptly with the crew awaking from hypersleep and subsequently discussing the issue of bonuses. Brett and Parker, two lower rank, working-class crew members complain about the inequity of their shares which, as the viewers later find out, are only a half in comparison to the ones received by the other crew members. The critique of capitalism is further developed in the film's plot twist when, after Dallas's death, Ripley gains access to Mother, the central A.I. of the space ship. While seeking aid from Mother as to how to dispose of the alien, Ripley discovers that Mother has been ordered by the company to do everything in its power to ensure that the alien is safely brought back for study even if this should entail the death of the crew. Although hyperbolic in its negative depiction of the Weyland-Yutani corporation, the company owning the Nostromo, the film criticizes corporate capitalism's tendency to increase profit at the expense of the well-being and welfare of the employees and stakeholders.

3 Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992, repr., Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), 40.

4 Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*, 53. See also Ximena Gallardo-C. and C. Jason Smith, *Alien Woman: The Making of Lt. Ellen Ripley* (New York and London. Continuum, 2004), 21.

5 Tasker, *Working Girls*, 81.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., 80.

8 Ibid., 81.

9 See also Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 15.

10 I use the word 'apparently' because, in a twist of events, it turns out that the xenomorph had also boarded Ripley shuttle before the Nostromo self-destructed.

11 See Gallardo-C. et al., *Alien Woman*, 54–57.

12 For an account of the rapport between *Aliens* and *Rambo* films in the context of Ronald Reagan's administration and 1980s conservatorism in the US, see Gallardo-C. et al., *Alien Woman*, 62–67.

13 See Andrea Zanin, "Ellen Ripley: The Rise of the Matriarch," in *Alien and Philosophy: I Infest, Therefore I am*, eds. Jeffrey Ewing and Kevin S. Decker (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), 155.

14 The implication of my argument is not that fulfilling the mother role is a priori a form of submitting to patriarchy. By relying on the distinction between substantive autonomy and procedural autonomy, I follow the latter in claiming that the film does not render Ripley's assuming the maternal role a self-reflexive conscious decision,

but rather a natural inclination of her feminine character, which pays tribute to an essentialist understanding of femininity. See Lois McNay, "Agency," in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, eds. Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 42–43.

15 See Jeffrey A. Brown, *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 46; Elizabeth Hills, "From 'Figurative Males' to Action Heroines: Further Thoughts on Active Women in the Cinema," *Screen* 8, no. 1 (1999): 39, doi: 10.1093/screen/40.1.38.

16 Jeffrey A. Brown, *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 46; Hills, "From 'Figurative Males' to Action Heroines," 40.

17 Hills, "From 'Figurative Males' to Action Heroines," 44–45.

18 Ibid., 46.

19 At the same time, I must admit that, although I concede that the binarism of psychoanalysis cannot account for the multitude and liquidity of gender identities and sexualities, psychoanalysis does have the merit of localizing the debate on female agency in the embodied condition of humans. The concept of post-woman, on the other hand, seems to align itself with the post-identity/post-human position which calls for a rethinking of agency outside gender identity and, furthermore, for an extension of the concept's ambit so as to include multiple forms of existence, not only human. The main shortcoming of this attempt to relegate the anthropocentric premise of agency is that it discards subjectivity, responsibility, and intentionality altogether and glosses over the issue of power. These aspects, claims Lois McNay, make the post-identity/post-human views on agency incapable of bringing about a more egalitarian society. See McNay, "Agency," 50–55.

20 See Kaja Silverman's comments of vraisemblance in Kaja Silverman, "The Dominant Fiction," in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 15–52.

21 Brendan Keogh and Darshana Jayemanne, "'Game Over, Man. Game Over': Looking at the Alien in Film and Videogames," *Arts* 7, no. 43 (2018): 10, doi. 10.3390/arts7030043.

22 Jaroslav Švelch, "Should the Monster Play Fair? Reception of Artificial Intelligence in *Alien: Isolation*," *Game Studies* 20, no. 2 (2020), http://gamestudies.org/2002/articles/jaroslav_svelch.

23 This is the reason why some players and reviewers claim that *Alien: Isolation* is unfair.

24 For an explanation of what a procedural adaptation is, see Matthew Wiese, "The Rules of Horror: Procedural Adaptation in *Clock Tower*, *Resident Evil*, and *Dead Rising*," in *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, ed. Bernard Perron (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2009), 238–240.

25 For an overview of the skills required of various video game genres, see Bernard Perron et al. "Methodological questions in 'interactive film studies'," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 6, no. 3 (2008): 233–252.

26 Terminator example: evolution of Sarah Connor.

27 See Zanin, "Ellen Ripley: The Rise of the Matriarch," 155.

28 According to Maurizio Lazzarato, beginning with the 1960s and 1970s, there occurs a shift in work culture from the material labour characteristic of the Fordist organization of work (which required a working class specialized in operating specific segments of the assembly line) to the immaterial labour of post-Fordism. Immaterial labour refers to a type of work which produces the informational and cultural content of a commodity and implies a series of activities traditionally not seen as work whose purpose is that of defining norms, tastes, and consumer habits. What immaterial labour produces is primarily a social relation which interpellates consumer subjects. Workers involved in this form of labour enjoy a higher degree of autonomy, which nevertheless comes with a higher responsibility. Their skills are primarily

managerial and communicational, as they are usually flexible workers who have to navigate networks of contractors and consumers in order to get employed. Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter claim that video games are inextricably linked to immaterial labour in the sense that they function as incubators teaching players the skills required to perform the immaterial labour of neoliberal global capitalism. See Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labour," *Radical Thought in Italy. A Potential Politics*, eds. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, trans. Maurizia Boscagli, Cesare Casarino, Paul Colilli, Ed Emory, Michael Hardt, and Michael Turits (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 133–150; Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, "Introduction: Games in the Age of Empire," in *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xiii–xxxv.

29 Robin Sloan, "Homesick for the unheimlich: Back to the Uncanny Future in *Alien: Isolation*," *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds* 8, no. 3 (2016): 217, doi: 10.1386/jgvw.8.3.211_1.

30 Sloan, "Homesick for the unheimlich," 218.

31 Keogh et al., "'Game Over, Man. Game Over'," 9.

32 This dovetails with Tanya Krzwynska's observation that survival horror games typically highlight the manner in which the player is objected to Other(ed) forces. See Tanya Krzywinska, "Hands-On Horror," in *Screen Play: Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces*, eds. Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2002), 207–208. See also Keogh et al., "'Game Over, Man. Game Over'," 9.

33 See also Martin Seller, "Horrific Things: *Alien Isolation* and the Queer Materiality of Gender, Desire and Being," in *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Comics, Games and Transmedia*, eds. Steven Gerrard, Samantha Holland, and Robert Shail (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2019), 49.

34 Daniel Schäbler, "Unnatural Games? Innovation and Generification of Natural and Unnatural Visual Effects in *Dead Space* and *Alien: Isolation*," *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 7, no. 1 (2015): 31, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/588698/summary.

35 Schäbler, "Unnatural Games?" 23.

36 Ibid., 33.

37 Ibid., 28.

38 Because all survival horror games discussed in Chapters 4–10 can be regarded as evincing similar levels of situatedness, see the comments on situatedness in Chapters 1, 3, and 4.

39 See Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 143.

40 See Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 144.

41 Ibid., 145.

42 See also Sloan's discussion of the recreation of the derelict ship on LV-426 as a case of reflective nostalgia in Sloan, "Homesick for the Unheimlich," 246.

43 For an analysis of the game's critique of colonialism by means of its intertextual/intermedial relation to *Heart of Darkness*, see Andrei Nae, "The Failure of Space Colonization: Adapting *Heart of Darkness* in *Alien: Isolation*," in *Horror Video Games as Procedural Narratives: Extreme Colonial Encounters in the Digital Heart of Darkness* (Bucharest: Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti, 2019), 211–233.

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10 Marginalization and intersectionality in *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*

The postclassical survival horror games discussed so far have evinced the genre's heterogeneity both in terms of game design and in terms of ideology. These games struggle to negotiate the push toward an empowering seamless gameplay experience characteristic of action games and the core trait of survival horror, which is that of simulating vulnerability by hypermedial means. The negotiation yields different results for different games with some ending up closer to the action genre, while others position themselves closer to the norms of classical survival horror. This heterogeneity notwithstanding, one common feature that cuts across postclassical survival horror games is their overall propensity to adopt action games' immersive strategy, namely immersion via maximization. In this final chapter, I investigate a postclassical survival horror game that surprisingly recuperates the immersive strategy of classical survival horror games, namely immersion via narrative compensation.

The game explored in this chapter is *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* developed by Ninja Theory and published in 2017. *Hellblade* takes its inspiration from Boudica, the female Celtic warrior who led a rebellion against the Romans in the seventh century[1], and the myth of Senuna, a recently discovered Celtic goddess who was worshipped in Roman Britain in the early centuries of the first millennium.[2] Senuna was regarded as a correspondent to the Roman goddess Minerva and was assumed to have similar powers related to warfare.[3] In the game, the player assumes the role of Senua, a young female Pict suffering from psychosis,[4] and later in the game PTSD,[5] who lives in the eighth century in a village on the Orkney Islands. Because of her condition, she is banished from her community lest the other villagers should be affected by her "darkness."[6] Upon returning to the community as a result of what Senua regards as a bettering of her condition, she finds the village in flames and her lover, Dillion, blood-eagled.[7] Senua refuses to accept her lover's traumatic death and decides to venture to Helheim[8] in order to bring him back from the dead.

In simulating the story of Senua, the game mounts a critique against the negative effects that the intersection of patriarchy and sanism has on women with mental health conditions. In order to procedurally express this critique, *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* falls back on some of the salient game design choices found in classical survival horror games. This chapter investigates the manner

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in which these design choices are implemented in the game and correlated with the game's storyworld. The analysis is conducted along the following steps. I initially explain the game's core mechanics and the controls with a focus on the game's relation to survival horror and the need to simulate vulnerability. My next step is to show that, in a manner similar to classical survival horror games, *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* narrativizes its cumbersome gameplay as a procedural representation of the playable characters' psychological condition. After focusing on gameplay, I then move on to the game's linear storytelling means and reveal how they too contribute to the game's critique of patriarchy and sanism. Finally, I reveal that narrativization is crucial for the immersion of the player and for the persuasiveness of the game's procedural rhetoric as *Hellblade* is not supported by immersion via maximization, but narrative compensation, instead.

A hack and slash survival horror game?

Judging by the actions it simulates, *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* would normally fall under the category of hack and slash, a subgenre of action games with a gameplay revolving around spectacular sword fights against multiple adversaries at the same time.[9] *Hellblade*'s combat system includes conventional hack and slash core mechanics such as a light and a heavy sword attack, and the ability to block and dodge. Some of these commands can be activated in a pre-established sequence so as to perform special combos which are more effective. Like most modern action games, *Hellblade* also features a time-slowing mechanic which is diegetically framed as the playable character's focus. After a number of successfully timed blocks, focus can be activated in order to increase Senua's speed and slow down the AI's movement. Besides the obvious affiliation with the hack and slash subgenre, *Hellblade*'s game design pays tribute to classical survival horror games especially as far as its approach to combat is concerned. The second part of this book has shown that games such as *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996) or *Silent Hill 2* (Team Silent, 2001) are not optimized for either shooting or melee weapon combat due to the unconventional third-person view and the clunky controls and mechanics, among other aspects. By the same token, *Hellblade*'s third-person view and control of the playable character hinder gameplay and simulate Senua as a character more vulnerable than the triumphant standard protagonists of conventional hack and slash games such as Kratos of the *God of War* series (SIE Santa Monica Studio, 2005–2018) or Dante of the *Devil May Cry* series (Capcom, 2001–2019).

Throughout the entire gameplay, the player sees Senua from an over-the-shoulder angle very similar to the one used in *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom, 2005). As discussed in Chapter 7, this game design choice was to a large extent compatible with the specific manner in which *Resident Evil 4* simulated shooting, albeit with the disadvantage of being easily flanked. Because in *Hellblade* combat consists of swordfights, not of shooting, the over-the-shoulder camera proves to be encumbering, rather than helpful. While in *Resident Evil 4* the camera offered the player a generous perspective on the slowly approaching foes, in *Hellblade:*

Senua's Sacrifice this advantage is cancelled by the fact that Senua has to keep her adversaries within the range of her sword. Consequently, when fighting several enemy Vikings, the screen is usually taken up by only one of the foes, while the others are off-screen. This makes it difficult for the player to know where his enemies are and, more importantly, when they will strike.[10] In order to provide the player with this important ludic information, the game uses the hallucinatory voices that Senua hears, a symptom of her psychosis, in order to warn the player of incoming attacks. This warning system is, nevertheless, not very functional.

Under the supervision of several experts[11] and with feedback from people sharing this condition,[12] Ninja Theory, the game's developer, tried to offer players a very realistic simulation of the symptoms of psychosis, one of the most common being voice hearing. In *Hellblade*, the player has direct access to Senua's internal dialogues and can hear the multiple voices that constantly address her during gameplay. The lines delivered by these voices are played back by the game engine depending not only on the game's general script but also on how the player interacts with the game world. The many voices often speak simultaneously and communicate contradictory messages that serve ludic or diegetic purposes, while sometimes breaking the fourth wall by directly addressing the player.[13] To add to the player's confusion, the game design team used binaural 3D microphones in order to "produce an experience of directional auditory hallucinations that Dr Charles Fernyhough, a professor of psychology investigating auditory hallucinations, argues is one of the best representations of these experiences he has ever used."[14] Given the chaotic verbal discourses that accompany gameplay, it is difficult for the player to discern the messages that warn the player against incoming attacks from off-screen enemy non-playable characters.

Senua's vulnerability is engendered not only by the over-the-shoulder camera borrowed from *Resident Evil 4* but also by the weakness she evinces during battle. Combat in *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* lacks the spectacular speed and acrobatics expected of hack and slash games where the protagonist singlehandedly defeats entire regiments of enemies at the same time. On the contrary, in *Hellblade* combat is slow, repetitive, and hazardous with Senua barely managing to face two opponents at the same time. If we also consider the fact that in *Hellblade* the player cannot stealthily walk by or run away from his adversaries, what results is a postclassical survival horror game whose procedural rhetoric is very similar to that of classical survival horror: it simulates the confrontation between an underpowered playable character and overly powerful adversaries, it is devoid of the triumphant rhetoric characteristic of the action genre, and, if we remember Soraya Murray's comments on the gender dynamics of action games with female playable characters,[15] it thwarts the implied male player's expected enactment of the protector role.

In addition to combat, the video game lays significant stress on exploration. Yet unlike conventional action-adventure or even survival horror games, Senua does not have to operate twisted contraptions or solve complicated riddles but has to identify in her surroundings visual patterns in the shape of runes watermarked.

This aspect of gameplay, too, can be associated with the game's attempt to simulate the symptoms of psychosis. According to Sky LaRell Anderson,

> In *Hellblade*, the game showcases Senua's mental illness as a gift through procedurality/rules: a regularly occurring puzzle in the game consists of a locked door with the images of several runes indicating which runes Senua must find to unlock the door. However, she must use her unique perspective as a person with psychosis—people with psychosis sometimes report seeing connections, repetitions, and patterns in the world—to find these runes in the shapes of the area.[16]

In order to complete this challenge, the player must carefully inspect game space until the watermarked shape matches the objects seen by Senua. Achieving this is by no means an easy task as the player needs to examine the entire location and look at all its objects from multiple angles until the runic shape is identified. By engaging the player in this monotonous exploration of game space, *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* proposes a simulation that continues the non-spectacular, anti-entertainment approach to the simulation of combat and recuperates the dullness of exploration fostered by classical survival horror games where the player must constantly revisit and backtrack through previous locations dearth of ludic challenges.[17] Returning to *Hellblade*, once the right objects and the corresponding vantage point have been identified, the player can only observe the arbitrariness of the relation between the runes and the objects. This arbitrariness nevertheless obtains diegetic relevance by means of the game's narrativizing the visual association as a symptom of Senua's psychosis, as I explain at greater length in the subsequent section.

Narrativizing gameplay through psychosis

The previous section has highlighted the way in which the gameplay of *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* simulates a vulnerable playable character who, like the protagonists of classical survival horror games, is only barely capable to overpower her foes. In discussing the game design choices that buttress the simulation of Senua I mention that they are motivated by the developer's attempt to offer players a mimetic simulation of the symptoms of psychosis. In this section, I elaborate on the representation and simulation of psychosis in *Hellblade* and the consequences that they have for the game's narrative, especially as far as the diegetic dimension of gameplay is concerned. To be more specific, I argue that Senua's diegetic profile as a character suffering from psychosis narrativizes gameplay.

The process of narrativization unfolding in *Hellblade* is similar to the one in *Silent Hill 2*, the game examined at length in Chapter 4. *Silent Hill 2* stands out with its very clunky control and unreliable core mechanics, as well as the intriguing design of the enemy non-playable characters who represent monstrous versions of femininity. While these game design choices may seem random during the early stages of the game, the more the player learns about the

protagonist's background, the more these design choices seem coherent and diegetically relevant. By the game's midpoint, the game has made it clear to the player that the protagonist James Sunderland cannot overcome the trauma of losing his wife who was suffering from cancer and whom he, in an act of desperation, killed possibly out of mercy.[18] As a consequence of this diegetic information, the cumbersome gameplay of *Silent Hill 2* is no longer seen as arbitrary or the result of bad game design, but rather a procedural representation of the protagonist's dire post-traumatic stress disorder. By the same token, the shape of the monsters James Sunderland has to kill in order to progress in the game is to be construed in connection with James's compulsive repetition of the trauma of killing his wife.

Senua's psychological state in the game is to some extent similar to that of James Sunderland. In Margaret Sheble's view, an analysis of the protagonist's psychosis must take into consideration her post-traumatic stress disorder caused by the Viking invasion, in particular the finding of her lover Dillion blood-eagled. This trauma not only worsens Senua's hallucinatory symptoms but also couples them with those of PTSD.[19] As a result, the gameplay of *Hellblade* consisting of tedious confrontations with monstrous Vikings and identifying runes in the shapes of objects is a procedural representation of her compulsive repetition of the trauma of the Viking conquest. Like in the case of *Silent Hill 2*, the game's cumbersome gameplay is soon revealed to be in a relation of modal consonance with the game's linear means of narrative communication as Senua's diegetic profile constructed by means of cutscenes and her internal monologues match the emergent narrative resulting from gameplay.

Silent Hill 2 and *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* are not the only survival horror games that use mental illness in order to better implement their gameplay in their respective storyworlds. In the case of other classical games such as *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* (Silicon Knights, 2002) and *Silent Hill 4: The Room* (Team Silent, 2004), or postclassical games such as *Manhunt 2* (Rockstar London, 2007), *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (Frictional Games, 2010) and *Layers of Fear* (Bloober Team, 2016), to name but a few, the developers used mental illness either as a plot device or a narrative frame in an attempt to seamlessly blend improbable events or game mechanics into the games' storyworld. Ninja Theory's ludodiegetic use of mental illness is, in this respect, no different. However, in representing and simulating mental illness, many survival horror games fall back on a series of negative stereotypes concerning people suffering from such illnesses. These games

> include harmful, stereotypical depictions of these characters, including murderous patients or abusive caretakers. These troublesome portrayals of individuals experiencing forms of mental illness promote fear and stigma toward people dealing with these issues while perhaps also promoting forms of self-stigmatization, which may inhibit people dealing with mental health concerns from attempting to seek help and support.[20]

Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice departs from this controversial tradition of survival horror games and proposes a video game whose procedural rhetoric, instead of stigmatizing mental illness, mounts a critique against sanism as the next section shows.

The intersection of sexism and sanism

After focusing on gameplay and its diegetic dimension in the previous two sections, it is now time to move our attention to the game's linear means of representation which are essential for the diegetic reception of gameplay. By using mostly cinematic cutscenes, the game creates a scripted narrative that not only frames the game's core mechanics as a procedural representation of psychosis and PTSD, but also conveys a critique of the marginalization to which people suffering from mental illness are subjected. The critique of marginalization factors in Senua's gender identity and reveals how she is doubly discriminated against, both as a person suffering from psychosis and as a female living in a rigid patriarchal society.[21] The game constructs its critique based on what in cultural studies is referred to as intersectionality, a concept coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in order to address the legal invisibility of black women in the US.[22] Intersectionality postulates that marginalized groups are simultaneously subjugated to more than one power structure and that counteracting the issues of discrimination and violence against such groups calls for an interrogation of how these structures interact.[23] Although historically intersectionality has first and foremost focused on race and gender, in time it has included into its purview identity categories such as nationality, sexuality, and disability, alongside others.

The stress laid by the game on intersectionality represents a step forward for the survival horror genre whose classical era is epitomized by games such as *Silent Hill 2* or *Fatal Frame* (Tecmo, 2001) that delivered a critique of patriarchy which nevertheless failed to consider how gender intersects with other identity categories. For instance in *Silent Hill 2*, as well as the other three Japanese-produced instalments, all playable and non-playable characters are Caucasian, while all playable characters are middle-class. Despite being set in a verisimilar version of America and revealing how Western patriarchal gender norms can oppress their subjects, the game fails to include the experience of, for example, non-white working-class Americans. *Silent Hill 2* is a game that whitewashes trauma and in the very process of contesting patriarchy establishes white middle-class identity as the norm. Moving on to the next example, *Fatal Frame*, which is set in the verisimilar Japanese context, limits its representation and simulation of trauma to (usually middle-class) ethnic Japanese characters, while ignoring the specific ways in which patriarchy oppresses people who belong to other subaltern groups. This is no longer the case with *Hellblade* which does not approach gender in isolation from other identitary facets, but at the intersection with sanism.

In conveying its critique of patriarchy and sanism, the game's scripted narrative follows a double temporality characteristic of most survival horror games, including the ones discussed in this book. In these games, the more progress

the player makes, the more cutscenes and plot bottlenecks he experiences, which shed light upon the character's past. This is also the case with *Hellblade: Senua' Sacrifice* whose backstory reveals that Senua's symptoms are only partially caused by her mental illness and that it is the patriarchal regime to which she has been subjected that is to blame for the entire symptomatology.

In the game's storyworld, there are two central figures relevant for Senua's character development: Zynbel, local druid and father to the playable character, and Galena, Zynbel's wife and Senua's mother. The two characters evince radically opposing attitudes with respect to Senua's psychosis. On the one hand, Galena, who herself seems to be suffering from the same mental disorder, encourages Senua to accept herself as she is and to regard her internal voices as a privileged form of communication to the spirits of the underworld. On the other hand, Zynbel is highly sceptical of his wife's and daughter's ability to hear voices and condemns it as being a curse which he calls "the darkness." Because he claims he is afraid the curse would eventually affect the entire village (while in fact fearing his wife's ability undermines his religious authority), Zynbel decides to sacrifice Galena to the Gods in hopes that the sacrifice would also cure Senua of her own darkness. Noticing that after her mother's death, Senua's symptoms did not disappear, but worsen, he secludes her and subjects her to a series of curing rituals. The game's strong implication is that Senua's symptoms were severely aggravated by the trauma of seeing her mother burn alive and by the regime of seclusion to which she had been subjected by Zynbel, the locus of patriarchal authority in the game's storyworld. In conjugation with the gameplay that simulates Senua's symptoms, the game's scripted narrative conveys the message that there is strong social dimension to mental illness, i.e. that in order for something to count as an illness, there has to be a social discourse which construes it as such, and raises awareness with respect to the negative effects that the intersection of sanism and sexism can have on women suffering from mental illness.

The critique of patriarchy which is implied in the game's story is matched by the game's relation to the patriarchal conventions of narrative genres. Like most classical survival horror games, *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* scripted sequence of events is an appropriation of the damsel-in-distress plot which undermines the plot's sexist assumptions. While the action genre across its multiple media thrives on narrative scenarios in which hyperpotent men save passive female victims, *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* inverts the gender roles of the conventional damsel-in-distress plot. The game's main quest is to save Senua's dead lover, Dillion, from Helheim where Senua believes he is held captive by Hela. This quest renders Senua the agentive character who pushes the story forward, while Dillion adopts the role of the passive male victim. In accordance with the expectations raised by the survival horror genre, Senua fails to save Dillion as she is forced to accept that her dead lover cannot be brought back from Helheim and that her belief in Norse mythology had been an attempt to rationalize the trauma of losing her partner. However, by accepting her failure, Senua also rejects the stigma of mental illness that she had interiorized as a subject of patriarchy. She blames Zynbel for killing her mother because her ability to speak with the

underworld undermined his religious authority and for using his authority to convince the villagers that Senua's symptoms were a curse.

Senua's rebuke of patriarchy is not only conveyed by means of the aural mode through scripted, pre-rendered dialogues but also procedurally through gameplay. As already explained in this chapter's first section, one of the mechanics that encumbers combat is the multiple angry voices that the player hears throughout gameplay. When fighting several adversaries, the only way the player can know when an enemy off-screen is about to attack is by paying attention to the multiple voices and discerning the warning expressed by one of them. However, during the final battle, once Senua has accepted the truth about her mother and refuted her father's authority, her symptoms are assuaged in the sense that the voices, which until that point had been relentless, now remain silent and speak only to warn Senua of the incoming attacks. The change undergone by the way voices behave in the game is indicative of the storytelling potential of gameplay. On the one hand, the new voices mount a procedural argument supporting the idea that rigid notions of patriarchy affect women suffering from psychosis. This procedural argument is backed by the synchronicity of the alleviation of Senua's symptoms and of her emancipation from patriarchy. On the other hand, the new voices also serve the ludic function of balancing the game. In the final battle, Senua fights a higher number of opponents and, in order to stand a chance, needs clearer warnings from the voices.

Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice provides players with a critique of patriarchy that is consistently deployed across all its modes, thus attaining what I referred to in the first chapter of this book as modal consonance. What remains to be discussed is the effectiveness of the game's rhetoric. Being a survival horror game which is so indebted to the game design principles of the classical era, what are the means whereby the game immerses the player in order to persuasively convey its message? How does the game command disbelief in patriarchy and sanism?

Recuperating immersion via narrative compensation

Throughout this book, I have argued that one element which marks the transition from the classical survival horror era to the postclassical one is the shift in the way in which the games immerse players. While classical games reject the immersive game design of mainstream action games, the postclassical ones negotiate between the norms of the classical era and those of mainstream action games. The outcome of this negotiation varies from game to game, as some games draw closer to the hypermedial gameplay experience of games like *Resident Evil*, while others opt for a more seamless experience similar to that of conventional action games. In this final section of this chapter, I investigate the specific manner in which *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* negotiates between the two incentives and reveals how, despite being a postclassical survival horror game, it succeeds in recuperating narrative compensation as a means to achieving immersion.

As discussed at length in this book's second part, narrative compensation is the immersion strategy employed by classical survival horror games. Because

these games entertain low levels of immediacy and interactivity, they compensate with a high level of narrativity which not only cues a high level of narrative engagement, but often also narrativizes the games' hypermedial, cumbersome gameplay. *Hellblade*'s game design, too, is characterized by a strategy of compensation, although the game is not as hypermedial as its classical predecessors. One hallmark of classical survival horror games is the extensive use of fixed camera angles which, in combination with the inventory mechanic, engenders a very fragmented visual experience. In *Hellblade* this is no longer the case as it has no inventory mechanic and the over-the-shoulder third-person view borrowed from *Resident Evil 4* affords a continuous visual perspective on game space.[24] Another source of hypermediacy in classical survival horror games was the use of live-action cutscenes and pre-rendered cutscenes sometimes within the same cinematic section of the game. Considering the limited rendering abilities of game engines around the year 2000, the abrupt transition from the photorealism of live action to the schematic 3D models pre-rendered by the game engine emphasized the artificiality of the video game. *Hellblade* also employs two types of cutscenes, namely live action and real time. However, even when used during the same cinematic section of the game, the transition between the two is smooth and they are very well blended with the game's interactive parts.[25] Taking all this into account, it would seem that the game abides by the norms of immediacy upheld by mainstream action games. This however changes when it comes to the game's approach to interactivity.

As already pointed out in the analysis of gameplay, the game's core mechanics are not optimized for the type of combat which *Hellblade* simulates. The over-the-shoulder camera makes the playable character vulnerable to the attacks coming from off-screen enemies and the warning function fulfilled by Senua's voices is inefficient. Furthermore, although to a lesser degree than classical survival horror games, the simulation of combat lacks the spectacularity of conventional hack and slash games and procedurally represents a female warrior devoid of the strength, speed, and agility of more conventional hack and slash game protagonists. Senua's vulnerability and the dull combat moments simulated by the game would normally disengage players and affect immersion. Yet this is not the case due to *Hellblade*'s high level of narrativity which compensates for the cumbersome gameplay.

Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice is a showcase example of the narrative potential of video games as it embodies all the four prototypical features of narrative identified by David Herman: situatedness,[26] sequentiality, world-making/world-disrupting, and experientiality.[27] The state of equilibrium in the game's storyworld is disturbed by the killing of Dillion, which determines Senua to go on a quest to bring her lover back from the dead. Dillion's death, therefore, triggers a series of events that, as discussed in a previous section, have both a prospective and retrospective temporality. These two temporalities are linked to two types of suspense: 'what' suspense and 'how/who' suspense.[28] The former is related to the player's interest in finding out what will happen next, in particular, whether the Norse myth of Hel is real and, if so, whether Dillion

can actually be saved. As far as the latter is concerned, the player is interested in finding out what Senua's backstory is and what the cause for her psychosis is.

In attributing meaning to the events represented and simulated by *Hellblade*, the players more familiar with the survival horror genre can pick up a series of cues that intertextually link the game's narrative to previous games of the genre. This intertextual reading of the game plot is determined early on by the world-disrupting event which is very similar to that of *Silent Hill 2* (James Sunderland is in the town of Silent Hill looking for his deceased wife from whom he has presumably received a letter). The expectations raised by the intertextual link to *Silent Hill 2* are later confirmed by Senua whose quest follows the same narrative scenario as that of James Sunderland. In *Silent Hill 2* it is revealed towards the end of the game that the letter from Mary and the protagonist's belief that she was waiting for him in Silent Hill were nothing but the playable character's rationalization of his wife's death. As it turns out, Mary had been in fact dead throughout the entire series of events featured in the game. By the same token, in *Hellblade* it is revealed that Senua's belief in the existence of Hel and in Dillion's waiting there to be saved is also a rationalization of the trauma of losing her lover. The ending reveals that Hel does not exist and that Dillion cannot be brought back from the dead.

Other intertextual cues that enrich the reception of the game's narrative by establishing intertextual links to other storyworlds are, for example, the gameplay segment when Senua has to run away from a fireball which is a procedural representation of Senua's memory of being banished from the community by the angry villagers and the segment of gameplay when the unarmed Senua has to rely only on sound in order to avoid the monsters lurking in the dark. In the former case, the gameplay segment reminds one of a challenge in *Silent Hill: Downpour* (Vatra Games, 2012) when a similar fiery entity representing the protagonist's guilt chases him through the Otherworld locations of Silent Hill. The latter fragment of gameplay resembles the gameplay of *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* whose simulation of mental disorder is ludically organized as the unarmed playable character's struggle to avoid a monster lurking in the dark.[29]

As far as the issue of world-making is concerned, the game facilitates the mental construction of the game's storyworld by means of its high level of photorealism and an embedded narrative that provides players with a significant amount of information concerning Norse mythology, information which sets up the main diegetic coordinates of the storyworld and provides players with diegetic information concerning Senua's more notable adversaries. In order to better implement the embedded narrative within the storyworld, the game frames it as Senua's memories of Druth, a fellow victim of the Vikings whom Senua meets while in isolation in the wilderness.

Finally, the game maintains a high level of experientiality as the player has direct access to the character's mind. Once again, a parallel with *Silent Hill 2* is warranted. Just as the monsters of *Silent Hill 2* and the town's otherworld are manifestations of the protagonist's repressed trauma, so are the monstrous Vikings encountered in the mythical Scandinavian locations projections of

Senua's mind who cannot accept the loss of Dillion. Consequently, the gameplay of *Hellblade* is not located in the narrative's text-actual-world, but in the impossible world furnished by the character's mind. By being granted direct access to Senua's mind, the player has knowledge of the subjective experiences of her grievance.[30] The symptoms of psychosis simulated by the gameplay have a vital role as the voices that Senua hears constantly comment on the female protagonist's thoughts and emotional states.

To sum up this section, despite the cumbersome simulation of combat and the disengaging simulation of exploration, *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* manages to immerse the players by compensating for its hypermedial interactivity with a high degree of narrativity. Player immersion lends strength to the game's anti-sexist and anti-sanist rhetoric and commands disbelief in normative identity constructs, in particular sane femininity.

Conclusion

In the context of the formal and ideological heterogeneity of the postclassical survival horror genre, *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* is a video game that proves the political potential of postclassical survival horror games and again stresses the ideologically disruptive rhetorical effect of immersion via narrative compensation. While most postclassical survival horror games embrace immersion via maximization and move closer to the ideological norm of the action genre, *Hellblade* manages to remain within a more or less conventional action game paradigm, but also to appropriate narrative compensation in order to convey a procedural critique of sexism and sanism. The game's critique has the merit of approaching gender not from a unilateral position, as it was the case with classical survival horror games, but at the intersection of multiple power structures. Therefore, *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* can be regarded as an example of how action games can maintain ludic and narrative engagement, while at the same time addressing political issues pertaining to video games themselves and society at large.

Notes

1 Caitlin C. Gillespie, preface to *Boudica. Warrior Woman of Roman Britain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), ix.
2 Ninja Theory, "Hellblade: Senua's Psychosis | Mental Health Feature," October 10, 2018, video, 24:01, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31PbCTS4Sq4.
3 Gil Burleigh, "Burials, Ditches and Deities: Defining the Boundaries of Iron Age and Romano-British," in *Archaeology in Hertfordshire: Recent Research*, ed. Kris Lockyear (Hatfield: Hertfordshire Publications, 2015).
4 Sky LaRell Anderson, "Portraying Mental Illness in Video Games: Exploratory Case Studies for Improving Interactive Depictions," *Loading. The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association* 13, no. 21 (2020): 24–27, doi: 10.7202/1071449ar.
5 Margaret Sheble, "'Her Temper Was Still the Same': Women Resisting Colonialism in Modern Viking Narratives," *The Heroic Age. A Journal of Early Medieval Northwestern Europe* 19 (2019), https://www.heroicage.org/issues/19/sheble.php.

6 Darkness is the noun whereby characters in the game refer to Senua's psychosis.
7 The blood eagle is a Viking execution method consisting in tearing apart the victim's ribs and spreading their lungs out in the form of eagle's wings. Although this description of the blood eagle benefits from wide circulation in popular Viking media, its historical accuracy is a source of debate in academia. See Kirsten Wolf and Tristan Mueller-Vollmer, "Vikings Carved the Blood Eagle," in *The Vikings. Facts and Fictions* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2018), 145–154.
8 Helheim is a realm in Norse mythology overseen by the Goddess Hel where warriors who have died of natural causes, i.e. not in battle, end up. See Theresa Bane, "Helheim," in *Encyclopedia of Imaginary and Mythical Places* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014), 77.
9 See, for instance, the video game series *Devil May Cry* (Capcom, 2001–2020), *God of War* (SIE Santa Monica Studio, 2005–2018), *Bayonetta* (PlatinumGames, 2009–2014), or *Prince of Persia* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2003–2010) among others.
10 A brief digression on the topic of camera in hack -and -slash video games is required here. Interestingly, the third-person view with fixed angles used by classical survival horror games was also used in early *God of War* and *Devil May Cry* games. By giving up tank controls and using overhead cameras, fixed camera angles turned to be compatible with the type of combat simulated by these games. As a result, using this third-person view in *Hellblade* would have paradoxically worked against the goal of simulating vulnerability. At the same time, *Hellblade*'s over-the-shoulder camera is not fully incompatible with the hack -and -slash genre. The most recent *God of War* game released in 2018 also uses an over-the-shoulder camera which facilitates long range combat, i.e. Kratos can now throw his axe at his adversaries. But, unlike *Hellblade*, in order to mitigate the problem of not being able to see the many adversaries off-screen, the game uses on-screen arrows that constantly point towards the enemies who are out of sight. Moreover, the arrows turn red and start to glow when an off-screen enemy is ready to attack. This makes the over-the-shoulder third-person view considerably more compatible with melee combat.
11 These experts include Professor Paul Fletcher from the University of Cambridge, and writer and psychologist Professor Charles Fernyhough from the University of Durham.
12 Ninja Theory, "Hellblade: Senua's Psychosis."
13 Fordham and Christopher Ball. "Framing Mental Health within Digital Games: An Exploratory Case Study of *Hellblade*," *JMIR Ment Health* 6, no. 4 (2019): 8, doi: 10.2196/12432.
14 Ibid.
15 Soraya Murray, *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2018), 134–136.
16 SLaRell Anderson, "Portraying Mental Illness in Video Games," 24.
17 See Andrei Nae and Alexandra Ileana Bacalu, "Toward a Reconsideration of Hypermediacy: Immersion in Survival Horror Video Games and Eighteenth-century Novels," in *Playing the Field: Video Games and American Studies*, ed. Sascha Pöhlmann (Boston, MA and Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019), 141.
18 The protagonist's attitude towards his wife and the reason behind the killing are different depending on the ending obtained by the player, as Chapter 4 discusses in detail.
19 Margaret Sheble, "'Her Temper Was Still the Same'."
20 Fordham et al., 2.
21 See Ninja Theory, "Hellblade: Senua's Psychosis."
22 Brittney Cooper, "Intersectionality," in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, eds. Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 385; see also Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of

Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 139–167, http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8.

23 Cooper, "Intersectionality," 390.

24 See also the discusson on visual continuity in Oliver Ruf et al. "Einflüstern – Klangkultur und 3D-Sound-Spielmechanik in ‚Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice'," *Paideia. Zeitschrift für Computerspielforschung* (2019), https://www.paidia.de/einfluestern/.

25 It should be noted that the production of the game involved extensive use of motion capture which is employed for the game engine's visual input, as well. This guarantees the illusion of continuity when the image transitions from rendered, to pre-rendered, to played back moving images. See also the discussion of the game's photorealism in Ruf et al., "Einflüstern."

26 Because all survival horror games discussed in Chapters 4–10 can be regarded as evincing similar levels of situatedness, see the comments on situatedness in Chapters 1, 3, and 4.

27 David Herman, *Basic Elements of Narrative* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

28 Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 143–145.

29 It is worth adding that the gameplay fragment when Senua cannot use her weapons and must use stealth in order to avoid monsters is also a game design choice borrowed from classical survival horror games. Many such games often put the playable character in a position of extreme vulnerability by stripping him/her of weapons and coercing the player into avoiding his adversaries in the absence of any stealth mechanics.

30 From the point of view of narrative communication, Senua's status is similar to that of Ethan Thomas in *Condemned: Criminal Origins* (Monolith Productions, 2005) where the playable character fulfills the role of an intra-diegetic, homodiegetic narrator. See Gerard Genette, *Figures* III (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972), 206–211; Jan-Noël Thon, *Transmedia Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 207–220.

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Concluding remarks

Survival horror for surviving under patriarchy

This book has been an attempt to examine the immersive game design of survival horror games in relation to the issue of gender representation and simulation. I started from the hypothesis that the history of the survival horror genre can be split into two eras: the classical era and the postclassical one. The classical era, which I contend commenced with the release of Capcom's *Resident Evil* in 1996 and ended in 2005 when *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom, 2005) and other action-video games put forth alternative game design formulae, is defined by a high level of orthodoxy both in terms of design and in terms of ideology. Classical survival horror games engender a hypermedial gameplay buttressed by cumbersome mechanics, controls difficult to learn and use, a fragmentary representation of game space, a thwarting of the sense of progress, and a dearth of in-game resources which together put the usually male playable character in a position of heightened vulnerability. Because these design choices can prevent player immersion and, consequently, affect the persuasiveness of the game or even deter the player from playing, classical survival horror games compensate for their hypermediacy by means of a high degree of narrativity. The storyworlds of the games are suspenseful and diegetically complex, and, in some cases, they also narrativize the otherwise hypermedial mechanics and controls. The fact that the player is narratively engaged in the video game lends persuasiveness to the latter's procedural rhetoric. What is special about the procedural rhetoric of classical survival horror games is that it is a critique of the dominant gender norms of the action genre. Either by employing modal irony or by simulating and representing verisimilar alternative gender constructs, these games immerse players in storyworld that challenge the gender status quo supported by white male supremacy and its videogame champion, the hypermale playable character. Classical survival horror games command disbelief in normative gender constructs.

After 2005, game developers lost interest in the classical survival horror formula and attempted to breathe new air into the genre. Games such as *Resident Evil 4* and *Condemned: Criminal Origins* (Monolith Productions, 2005) are only two of the several attempts made to break away from the game design imposed by *Resident Evil*. These games, which I refer to as postclassical survival horror, feature a game design which veers towards the dominant norms of the action genre and, consequently, offer a more player-friendly experience, i.e. functional

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game mechanics, intuitive controls, a gradually rising difficulty curve, a continuous representation of game space, and a level design that provides the player with a gratifying sense of progress. The playable characters are no longer as vulnerable as their predecessors, but they are yet to embody hypermasculinity. The protagonists of postclassical survival horror oscillate between vulnerability and hypermasculinity and, with the help of a more conventional immersion strategy, also vacillate between contestation and confirmation of the gender status quo.

My proposal that we should call the survival horror games released after 2004 postclassical is an attempt to stress the ambivalent relationship that these games entertain with the previous era. In putting forth this classification, I draw on Linda Hutcheon's and Ihab Hassan's comments on the meaning of "post" in postmodernism as far as the concepts relation to modernity is concerned. The two contend that postmodernism's name is indicative of its contradictory relation to the past as, on the one hand, it suggests an overcoming of modernity, while, on the other, it concedes that modernity is not over.[1] By the same token,[2] I use the term postclassical survival horror in order to show that, in their break from the classical era, the new games use their new user-friendly game design in order to recuperate some of the hypermediacy of their predecessors and, in doing so, recover the vulnerability of the playable characters to various degrees depending on each game.

My analysis of the games provided in the chapters comprising Parts II and III has confirmed my hypothesis, but has also shed light upon an interesting aspect, namely the manner in which the critique of patriarchy adapts to local context. Depending on the target market and part of the world where the events of the game are set, survival horror games localize their critique. As Part II shows in detail, the critique of patriarchy conveyed by *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill 2* (Konami, 2001) resonates with Western postmodern thought, i.e. poststructuralism and deconstruction. Moreover, the games' rhetoric is enmeshed within a broader secular Western proclivity for orthodoxy, namely the idea that some sets of cultural values are mutually exclusive, in our case hypermasculinity and non-phallic masculinity. Not the same can be said of *Fatal Frame* (Tecmo, 2001) and *Forbidden Siren* (SCE Studio Japan, 2004) where Buddhist and Shinto understandings of equilibrium and order inflect the critique of *ie* ideology conveyed by the two games. In the final analysis both games advocate the coexistence of both Western notions of gender emancipation and traditional Japanese gender roles.

In the context of the insidious ways in which patriarchy structures media representation of gender and our digital agency, I believe that survival horror games have the great merit of showing a way out of patriarchal hegemony. They are proof of the fact that challenging the status quo does not entail lack of financial success as many of the games discussed in this book have benefitted not only from critical acclaim, but have also registered a significant number of sales. In the context of the multiple voices around the world calling for video games truly invested in diversity that take a step back from and provide critical perspective onto ideologies such as sexism, racism, militarism, etc., game developers have to

acknowledge the subversive potential of the action genre which was brought to fruition by survival horror video games. It is time for the gaming industry to live up to its own overtly expressed commitment to diversity, break away from the military-industrial-entertainment complex, and bring its contribution to a more inclusive world.

Ways forward

An implicit argument of the analysis provided in this book is that gender normativity is only one of the facets of the establishment which survival horror games debunk. An issue which calls for a similar in-depth examination and which often intersects with the representation and simulation of gender is that of colonialism. Especially since 9/11, the norm in mainstream action games has been that of simulating a relation to game space and ethnic, racial, and religious otherness which is deeply indebted to colonial stereotypes.[3] Action games deploy a colonial procedural rhetoric whereby white America establishes order and brings civilization to 'savage' regions of the world, such as the Middle East or Africa. Although survival horror games rarely approach colonialism in an explicit manner, the way they simulate the playable character's interaction with game space denies the former the colonial mastery and control over the latter.[4] The horrific enclosed spaces of survival horror games are indeed hearts of darkness filled with disorder and savagery and it is worth asking whether in the process of completing the game the player manages to bring light and order to game space, or whether the darkness is not white made. Moreover, it would be interesting to see whether the historical classification proposed (classical/postclassical) is relevant for the colonial dimension of survival horror games inasmuch as it is for the examination of gender. Based on my previous research on horror games and colonialism, my assumption is that the colonial/postcolonial divide is reversed by classical/postclassical survival horror games in the sense that I construe classical survival horror games as postcolonial, while postclassical survival horror games tend to be more colonial in terms of ideology.[5]

A future investigation of survival horror games in light of colonialism is further complicated by the imagological dimension of these games. For example, some of the most popular survival horror games whose events are set in the US are developed by non-US, especially Japanese developers. How does the Japanese imagological construct of America shape the representation and simulation of otherness and space? Could the whitewashing of Silent Hill in *Silent Hill 2* be traced back to a local Japanese notion of national sameness? Other games are not set in America but imply an American presence. How do twenty-first-century South Korean notions of self and other play out in the *White Day: A Labyrinth Named School* (Sonnori, 2001) and its 2017 remake whose events are shadowed by the Korean War? In these cases and others, colonial discourse is filtered through locally produced stereotypes, tropes, and clichés of self and others on the basis of national identity.

Another future avenue of research, which has been touched upon in Chapters 8 and 9, is the one proposed by Julian Novitz who, in the abstract to his paper

"Scarcity and Survival Horror: Trade as an Instrument of Terror in *Pathologic*," questions whether "the extent to which the relative scarcity of both gameplay options and in-game resources in survival horror games can be read as a subversion of the metaphorical and idealized capitalist systems that underpin many forms of gameplay."[6] The ensuing paper fully confirms the author's hypothesis and reveals how *Pathologic* (Ice Pick Lodge, 2005) contests the capitalist reward system which is naturalized in its ideal form by action video games. If we agree with Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter's claim that video games are incubators for future workers in neoliberal capitalism,[7] then it is worth looking deeper into the survival horror genre as a whole in order to see how not just *Pathologic*, but the entire genre as a whole relates to capitalism. Additionally, it would be interesting to see how the critique of capitalism, if such a critique is confirmed, plays out across the genre's two eras, namely the classical and the postclassical.

Until then, let us enjoy our digital exodus out of patriarchy by playing survival horror video games.

Notes

1 See Linda Hutcheon, "Beginning to Theorize Postmodernism," in *A Postmodern Reader*, eds. Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 251; Ihab Hassan, "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism," in *A Postmodern Reader*, eds. Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 276.

2 It should be stressed that the parallel between the 'post' in postmodernism and the one in postclassical survival horror does not necessarily entail a recuperation of the past which is always critical, as it is the case with postmodernism's relation to modernism. See Hutcheon, "Beginning to Theorize Postmodernism," 244–245.

3 On the colonial ideology of video games, see Chapters 2 and 3 in Souvik Mukherjee, *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

4 See Ewan Kirkland, "Survival Horrality: Analysis of a Videogame Genre," *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* 10 (October 2011): 26, https://research.brighton.ac.uk/en/publications/survival-horrality-analysis-of-a-videogame-genre.

5 See Chapters 7 and 8 on the postclassical survival horror games *Dead Space* (EA Redwood Shores, 2008) and *Alien: Isolation* (Creative Assembly, 2014), respectively, in Andrei Nae, *Horror Video Games as Procedural Narratives: Extreme Colonial Encounters in the Digital Heart of Darkness* (Bucharest: Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti, 2019).

6 Julian Novitz, "Scarcity and Survival Horror: trade as an Instrument of Terror in Pathologic," *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association* 3, no. 1 (2017): 69, doi: 10.26503/todigra.v3i1.64.

7 Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xxix.

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Index