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# Agency mechanics: gameplay design in survival horror video games

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## Abstract

This article proposes the notion of 'agency mechanics' as an innovative design element of video games. It begins by exploring the well-documented interactive elements of horror cinema, and goes on to explore how strategies such as the sadistic/masochistic gaze and narrative perspective have been further developed in video games. It then explores work to date on the manipulation of interactivity in video games before closely analysing how agency and control are managed in the survival horror franchise *Dead Space*. It concludes with reflections on further research in the nexus between film and games, and further possibilities for game design through the explicit management of agency mechanics.

Keywords: video games, cinema, horror, agency, *Dead Space*

## 1 Introduction

Horror is a deeply destabilising, decentring form of 'recreational terror' (Pinedo 1997, 11), and both horror cinema and games provide for consumers a 'bounded experience of fear' (38). However, the nature of that experience differs markedly between these media. In the participative context of gaming, the player experiences the story directly through their avatar and, via what we call 'agency mechanics' embedded in the game design, these experiences oscillate between empowerment and disempowerment even more clearly than in film. Engaged by the game design interface, players have their sense of individual autonomy and agency directly challenged by 'videoludic monsters' (Perron 2009, 127). This is an example of a new media form of 'enactive media' and 'second-order spectatorship' heralded by Tikka (2010).

This oscillation can be analysed via the gaze and spectator identification in both film and games. Laura Mulvey (1975) famously articulated the notion of a voyeuristic, sadistic male gaze, while Kaja Silverman has suggested that 'the fascination of the sadistic point of view is merely that it provides the best vantage point from which to watch the masochistic story unfold' (1980, 5). Elizabeth Cowie contends that there are 'multiple points of entry' and multiple gazes at work in film, and spectators are free to oscillate between sadistic


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and masochistic identifications (1997, 135). In contrast, horror gaming reduces the plurality of gazes available, alternating primarily between (and sometimes combining) first- or third-person identification with the avatar. This narrows the variety of empathetic responses available to the gamer, but simultaneously heightens those responses: the gamer's sadistic and masochistic experiences while playing are all filtered through the avatar over which they have agency, and that agency is subject to the grim whims of the horror universe, where stability and security are under constant siege.

While the differences between film and games are obvious and prominent, it is important to also note the continuities between media forms in an era of convergence (Spittle 2011). It is no coincidence that horror survival games have taken strong cues from the highly successful techniques of horror film: they have 'tried to recreate the same visceral revulsion, subtle moods, and other strategies that cinema had achieved' (Therrien 2009, 33). While specific film texts such as *The Thing* (Carpenter 1982), *Alien* (Scott 1979) and *Aliens* (Cameron 1986) and film and/or horror film scholarship by the likes of Silverman (1980), Cowie (1997) and Clover (1992) provide useful scaffolding for the analysis of horror games, we must better articulate and illuminate the experiences and identifications unique to horror gaming through analysis of specific game texts.

The *Dead Space* series—which includes *Dead Space* (2008) and *Dead Space 2* (2011)—uses progressively more sophisticated gameplay mechanics to manage the oscillation between autonomy and control and therefore the gazes that the player experiences. The *Dead Space* franchise is strongly influenced by the tradition of survival horror video games, characterised by seminal franchises such as *Silent Hill* (1999) and *Resident Evil* (1996), and it also draws strongly on the tradition of science fiction horror films.[1] As with all survival horror, the main aim of the game is to simply survive and escape a monstrous threat, often in the form of powerful undead creatures raised through some supernatural means. These zombies are characteristically depicted as abject or interstitial: horrifyingly between normal, accepted states of being, and transgressing the boundaries upon which human subjectivity is based (Pinchbeck 2009; Perron 2009).

The plot of the *Dead Space* series follows the outbreak of massive carnage caused by a mysterious Marker (an object of religious devo-

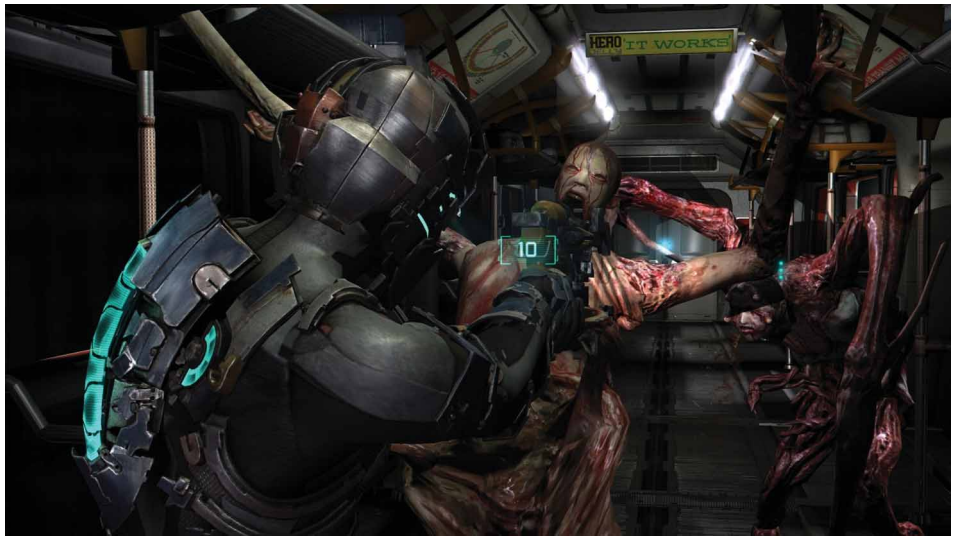


Figure 1. The sense of overwhelming threat from an abjectified zombie horde is strong in the *Dead Space* franchise. *Source*: Electronic Arts, 2012, available at http://press.ea.com/downloads.asp. Reproduced with permission.

tion) of unknown origins. The original *Dead Space* puts the player in the shoes of everyman engineer Isaac Clarke, sent to investigate the mining ship the *Ishimura* after some sort of crisis and communications blackout. Clarke is quickly overwhelmed by menacing zombies and must use his quick wits and modified mining tools to escape. *Dead Space 2* (2011) has the damaged Clarke on the space station Sprawl, several years after his first experience with the Necromorphs, this time also battling human malice and his own psychological deterioration in cinematic cutscenes and quick-time events, as well as the undead threat. Familiar themes from gothic fiction and film recur: supernatural threats; high-level conspiracies; and threats to the borders of nature and human reason. *Dead Space* was very well received by both critics and commentators in 2008, and *Dead Space 2* has followed suit; the franchise also has a substantial transmedia presence, with a novel, graphic novels, animated films and even an online alternate reality game.

Thematic concerns aside, common motifs and mechanics from survival horror (such as lack of health and ammunition, high-pressure puzzles and an intense sense of pressure based on overwhelming odds) immediately set up a control/autonomy oscillation. However, the series also uses signature mechanics to further manage the player's engagement with the avatar and the game world. These mechanics involve the use of the environment, cutscenes, and goal design all combined with techniques borrowed from film. This article explores these gameplay mechanics in both games[2] to illustrate the ways in which the horror game elaborates on and advances the tropes of the horror film, and argues that the explicit management of player autonomy versus control of the game world is crucial to the player's experience of this survival horror series, specifically in terms of the abject and sadistic/masochistic gazes.

## 2 From horror cinema to horror gaming

The influence of horror cinema on horror gaming, in particular survival horror, has been widely noted. Richard J. Hand identifies George Romero's original *Dead* trilogy—*Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and *Day of the Dead* (1985)—as having 'the most formative influence' on the *Resident Evil* series (2004, 117). Steve Spittle cites *Alien* (Scott 1979) as an 'influential intertext for contemporary survival horror' (2011, 315). In addition, numerous horror films and franchises have been developed into games, and Hollywood has in turn adapted horror games to film. *Dead Space* is no exception to this series of intertextual exchanges: in terms of aesthetic design, it is clearly indebted to the likes of *Alien* and *Event Horizon* (Anderson 1997), while its bleak, nihilistic tone echoes that of similarly relentless horror films like *The Thing* (Carpenter 1982) and *The Descent* (Marshall 2005).

It is logical that horror gaming has drawn from this precursor medium. Horror cinema has provided fertile ground for games developers, providing a narrative shorthand for gamers who are also filmgoers (Spittle 2011, 314). Moreover, horror films and games fulfil similar functions. Pinedo defines horror cinema as 'recreational terror', where 'the element of control, the conviction that there is nothing to be afraid of turns stress/arousal (beating heart, dry mouth, panic grip) into a pleasurable sensation. Fear and pleasure commingle' (1997, 38–39). These observations about the horror film-going experience are equally applicable to horror gaming. Both horror cinema and gaming provide for consumers what Pinedo describes as a 'bounded experience of fear' (38), allowing the subject to experience fear, terror, sadism and masochism within a safe setting.

However, the nature of that bounded experience differs between the media. Pinedo argues that the unique experience of recreational terror provided by the horror film is achieved through distinct qualities, including the 'temporally and spatially finite nature of film' and the 'semipublic setting of film exhibition' (1997, 41). However, where these qualities are central to horror film consumption, the more open-ended, expansive narrative trajectories of horror games and (typically) private settings for game consumption distinguish

horror games and gaming experiences from their cinematic counterparts. While not absolute, these distinctions are central to the construction, if not the consumption, of film and game texts: films are typically designed for consumption in a single sitting generally lasting 90–120 minutes, and are tailored for semi-public exhibition, while games are designed for extended, expansive participation and semi-private engagement. These factors add to the already uniquely participative dimension of gaming which is only partially available to film consumers, and contribute, we argue, to a more concentrated and immersive experience of recreational terror. Horror games not only draw upon the raw materials provided by the horror film, but develop and advance the possibilities of experiential horror through its deployment of what we identify as agency mechanics in its game design. In order to elaborate on this concept, it is important to first illustrate the screen–subject relations and identifications unique to the horror film.

In her influential 1975 essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Mulvey articulated her concept of screen spectatorship as a gendered spectatorship, in which the voyeuristic, sadistic male gaze positioned women on film primarily as 'erotic object[s] for the spectator' (1989, 19). This take on screen spectatorship developed currency in discussions of the horror genre, where starlets are frequently subject to the slashing knife of a 'nonspecific male killing force' (Ebert 1981, 56). However, scholars have contested Mulvey's theory. Silverman argues that the sadistic gaze is of secondary importance to the viewer's masochistic identification with the subject occupying the gaze, and that this identification operates regardless of gender. She writes:

> *It is always the victim—the figure who occupies the passive position—who is really the focus of attention, and whose subjugation the subject (whether male or female) experiences in a pleasurable repetition of his/her own history. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that the fascination of the sadistic point of view is merely that it provides the best vantage point from which to watch the masochistic story unfold.* (Silverman 1980, 5)

Clover (1992) applies Silverman's thesis with a specific focus on the 'slasher' films which inundated the genre in the 1980s. For Clover, 'the slasher genre is predicated on spectatorial identification with females' (1992, 52); that is to say, these films are less interested in developing sadistic identification with the slasher killer and more interested in developing masochistic identification with the victims. It is the Final Girl, the survivor of the killer's reign of terror—such as in *Halloween* (Carpenter 1978) or *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Craven 1984)—with whom we most closely identify.

However, Elizabeth Cowie (1997) contends that viewers are ultimately free to oscillate between sadistic and masochistic vantage points while watching films. In creating scenarios in which audiences can 'consume their own emotions' (Maltby 2003, 14), filmmakers inevitably provide multiple entry points, both sadistic and masochistic, into the drama which viewers can choose between. This is precisely the oscillation between agency and control which Krzwynska (2002) identifies in horror games inspired by horror films. The spectator is 'the only place in which all the terms of the fantasy come to rest' (Cowie 1997, 149).

This is where horror gaming builds upon film in the construction of recreational terror. In contrast to the plurality of gazes available to the horror filmgoer, horror gaming typically reduces the plurality of gazes available, focusing on direct first- or third-person identification with the avatar. As Spittle notes:

> *The game apparatus situates us in the game world as an extension of ourselves, locating us as a controller of the action. Importantly, unlike a good deal of film and literature, we are not simply asked to identify with an existing character. Rather, as controller of the action we occupy the dual identity of player-character.* (Spittle 2011, 316)

This intense identification with the avatar streamlines and narrows the variety of empathetic

responses available to the gamer. However, it simultaneously heightens those responses: the gamer's sadistic and masochistic experiences while playing the game are now all channelled through the avatar over which they (usually) have agency. Of course, that agency is subject to the grim whims—or more precisely, the agency mechanics—of the horror universe, where stability and security are under constant siege, thus heightening the masochistic dimension of the gaming experience. The player thus experiences sadism entirely through the avatar, whom they deploy in the annihilation of enemies, and likewise masochism, as they tentatively navigate abandoned buildings, dark and seemingly never-ending corridors, and are attacked and often violently defeated by antagonists.

The singularity of the avatar–player's gaze in the gaming experience of recreational terror is one way in which horror gaming has developed and exceeded its film counterpart. The other key way lies in the game's ability to preserve and maintain this gaze. Filmmaking trends in the last decade (but also arguably since the rise of MTV auteurism in the 1980s) have gravitated towards fast impressionistic editing and rapid camera movement, violating and at times breaking established rules of composition and continuity editing in pursuit of a heightened aesthetic (Stork 2011). While this trend is most noticeable in the action genre, it is also evident in the horror genre.

In this respect, the horror game builds on the design strategies of the horror film. Scenes unfold in continuous takes without interruptions—with the exceptions of cutscenes, pauses to check inventory and maps, etc.—and the player exerts complete control over the camera movement and placement, able to manipulate the image to maximise their sense of geography. This contributes to the sense of immersion as well as agency—authoring the image as well as the avatar—and, by extension, heightens the masochistic experience of loss when control of image and geography are surrendered and the avatar hurriedly flees from an assailant, becomes lost in a dark space or elaborate maze, or is attacked or killed, something that *Dead Space* handles especially well. Silverman notes that 'cinematic activity comprises a constant fluctuation between the imaginary plenitude of the shot, and the loss of that plenitude through the agency of the cut' (1980, 4). In preserving and sustaining the viewer's gaze through continuous and unedited tracking shots, the gaming experience preserves this experience of plenitude, which makes the disruption of that plenitude via attack or death doubly unnerving.[3]

While the horror film thus provides useful intertextual scaffolding for horror game designers to build their fictional worlds, designers ultimately take the tropes and signifiers acquired from this precursor medium and recalibrate them for a less bounded, more experiential form of recreational terror. And while established film scholarship is useful for analysing the spectatorial experiences unique to the horror genre, it is only satisfactory to some degree in articulating the identifications unique to horror gaming. This article will now proceed to illuminate those experiences and identifications, and articulate the notion of agency mechanics which is unique to survival horror gaming and is exceptionally deployed in the *Dead Space* series.

## 3 Autonomy and agency in game design

While Rouse (2009, 20) argues that player empathy for the protagonist is very important for horror games, we need a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between player and player-character. Lankoski argues that a 'comprehensive investigation on the role of a player-character in the player experience is still lacking' (2011, 292), and cites film studies as one area that has developed a better understanding of this kind of relationship. Just as Pinedo (1997, 38) finds the element of control crucial to the 'bounded experience of fear' that horror cinema offers, Perron argues that agency is an essential characteristic of the experiential aspect of video games (2009, 138). Agency has been influentially defined by Janet Murray as 'the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the result of our decisions and choices' (1988, 126). Indeed, some go so far as to say that infringements on player agency and control are not only essential to the experience of a game like *Silent*

*Hill*, but jeopardise interactivity as an essential generic convention (Kirkland 2009, 64). It is more likely that the reduction of direct control over narrative space signifies a shift towards enactive media forms which engages the emotions, rather than a dilution of genre (Tikka 2010).

Ground-breaking work has been done in the area of control and agency in horror games by Tanya Krzywinska (2002). Krzywinska explores 'aspects that can either restrict or promote agency … [the] dynamic between *being in control* and *out of control*' (2002, 208; emphasis added) in specific case studies. She explores the mechanics of control and agency that endow the player with a sense that their sphere of influence is impacted upon by the game world. In fact, it is explicit game design that establishes the agency/control dynamic, and Krzywinska focuses on repeated actions, the continual 'dying' of the avatar, intrusions from the sound field, an explicit cause-and-effect structure, the operations of an 'authored' structure, and cutscenes.

Our work here is strongly influenced by Krzywinska, and we are indebted to her exploration of the design of agency in horror games. She has also emphasised the importance of good design in horror games more recently (Krzywinska 2009). However, we feel that a more extended analysis is necessary, in several respects. Firstly, we wish to more thoroughly explore the links between horror film and survival horror games. Secondly, we would like to present a close analysis of gameplay from the *Dead Space* franchise to explore more thoroughly how player agency is managed through the playing experience, and how the game design has evolved through the franchise to take advantage of the oscillation between player autonomy and the control of the game world to produce a 'bounded experience of fear'. In this way we hope to offer a more nuanced understanding of the role of explicitly designed autonomy structures within games, taking film as a model.

## 4 First/third-person perspectives

We have spoken already of the plurality of gazes and identifications available to the horror filmgoer, and of how the gaming format narrows the plurality of gazes but enhances the intensity of identification. One point warranting further discussion is the difference between first- and third-person perspectives in film and games. In film, events are predominantly shot from the perspective of an invisible third-person party; as viewers we observe events unfolding through the metaphorical fourth wall, and are either privileged with omniscient access to characters, events and knowledge or limited to a particular character's or assortment of characters' immediate experiences. First-person perspective is employed primarily for dramatic effect within predominantly third-person narratives, and most notoriously in the horror genre in sadistic stalk and slash scenes like that which opens John Carpenter's *Halloween* and is parodied to great effect in Brian De Palma's *Blow Out* (1981). Very few films unfold predominantly or entirely from the first person perspective: notable exceptions would be Gaspar Noe's *Enter the Void* (2009), though that also utilises third person, and the 'found footage' film, though there the gaze is explicitly mediated as the cinematic gaze of the inevitably doomed camera operator. The reason for this rationing of first person in film is undoubtedly both the technical challenges it poses and the fact that the aim of film, at least in its classical Hollywood form, is to seamlessly immerse viewers in the fictional universe, and first person composition inevitably draws attention to itself as a cinematic effect.

In contrast, both first and third person are fixtures of gaming and work as agency mechanics, albeit in distinctly different ways; thus, a player's connection with their avatar through first or third person is crucial to a game's 'bounded experience of fear' (Pinedo 1997, 38). It is quite possible that the use of first-person perspective 'facilitates a more benign connection between player and heroic avatar … [whereas] the connection between player and avatar is diminished by use of a third-person perspective' (Krzywinska 2002, 213). This is a fairly standard position; it stands to reason that if the player is seeing 'through the eyes' of the protagonist, they are more likely to identify with their experience and share their terror.

However, this is by no means a universal position: a first-person perspective is no guarantee of identification and immersion. Conventional uses of the gaze in horror gaming are completely subverted by *Siren Blood Curse* (2008), which uses an innovative 'sightjacking' mechanic to allow the player to see through the eyes of the undead. Less radically, Perron argues for the strength of a third-person perspective in the 'extended body genre' of survival horror gaming: put simply, the player is more affected when they see the character being acted upon (2009, 132). This can be likened to the cognitive/emotive coupling or mirroring that enables the player to share the experience of their avatar (Lankoski 2011, 294). Despite his preference for the third-person perspective, Perron (2009) deplores *Dead Space* on the grounds that Isaac Clarke is covered up in his impenetrable engineering suit and detached from the player's experience, and that this reduces player connection to avatar. Not so in *Dead Space 2*: the psychological torment of Clarke's guilt over his lover's death is emphasised, and even sometimes built into the gameplay during quick-time events. More importantly, during narrative cutscenes Clarke now has his helmet retract and he speaks with non-player characters (NPCs), engaging deeply with non-player characters, so his relationship with a character such as Ellie heightens player engagement.

Despite all this, design decisions around first-person versus third-person perspective or the presentation of a protagonist are limited in producing the effect of a survival horror game. Lankoski explains how 'strong allegiance with a PC [player character] is not needed in all cases. The challenges that a game presents can make the playing engaging without a positive evaluation of the PC'. He argues that 'goal related engagement' ultimately trumps empathic engagement, 'so that effects such as pleasure and fear are based on successes and threats' (2011, 304). This means that engagement is also dependent on the challenges, goals and tasks that are set for the player in addition to perspective. Of course, the sadistic and masochistic gazes are still central, but the essential mechanic here is the sense of control and autonomy the player has within the game world, not some abstract identification with the protagonist. The use of perspective, avatar identity and goal-setting operate as crucial aspects of gameplay design to make the player experience oscillate between agency and subjection in order to produce the pleasures of horror gaming.

Understanding *Dead Space* in this respect allows us to follow Aldred and Greenspan in going 'beyond a strictly representational analysis to instead observe the particular control protocols that govern gameplay' (2011, 486). According to Therrien, the Ludicine database undertook a systematic analysis of a broad selection of games to attempt to understand the similarities and differences between them. The project identified what Therrien calls 'figures of interactivity' as a way of describing how game design structures the interactive experiences of players (2009, 36). This then led to an investigation of how horror games appropriated and adapted existing figures of interactivity (from film, especially) and then an exploration of how specific figures came to be associated with the genre. Examples include the importance of flight, the centrality of management (especially inventory management) as a marker of interactivity with a horror game, and the role of the protagonist's sanity in both narrative and gameplay. This exploration of 'figures of interactivity' builds upon and refines Krzywinska's (2002) identification of gameplay mechanics which are crucial to horror games. We would like to go further by exploring what we call 'agency mechanics'—the interactive features of gameplay design that create or impinge upon the player/avatar's control over the game world—and examine these agency mechanics closely in the *Dead Space* franchise. We also discuss how these agency mechanics borrow and elaborate on film conventions and tropes in ways unique to gaming.

## 5 Agency mechanics in *Dead Space* and *Dead Space 2*

While 'agency mechanics' is an effective term to capture a variety of strategies for granting and taking away player autonomy, it is also necessary to identify specific examples in the form of

discrete gameplay mechanics. The removal of player control is very clear in *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (2011), which is a truer inheritor of the tradition of survival horror. Nonetheless, the action gameplay elements of *Dead Space* intensify the agency mechanics which produce a 'bounded experience of fear'.

For the most part, the *Dead Space* franchise allows the player conventional movement within a third-person perspective, by walking and running. Notably, there are no controllable vehicles to allow for faster locomotion through the gameworld, and especially no weaponised vehicles which allow the player to deliver massive firepower. This means that the basic opportunities for movement are limited in the first place, especially in comparison to, say, a first-person military shooter.

However, this fundamental freedom to move is curtailed even more sharply when the player encounters ventilation shafts which must be traversed to proceed between locations. This is reminiscent of films like *Alien* and *The Descent*, where the constricted space generates a strong sense of claustrophobia and threat. In *Dead Space* the ventilation shafts are just a scaled-down version of normal gamespace; enemies are able to attack the player but movement is restricted. Contrary to what we might expect, this actually enhances the player's sense of control in the gameworld, as it makes area-effect weapons such as the flamethrower and force gun much more effective due to the limited space and smaller margin of error. In *Dead Space 2*, ventilation shafts are used solely for moving around, but the avatar's field of view is restricted and it is only possible to turn slightly to look around. Although enemies are not present, this allows a brief respite from action but also builds the tension and anticipation for what awaits just outside the ventilation shaft.

What we see here is a refinement of this particular agency mechanic from *Dead Space* to *Dead Space 2*. The potential for empowerment through more effective use of weapons is negated, allowing more focus on the affective experience of constriction and tension-building. The environment is also used as an agency mechanic when the player is required to navigate zero-gravity sections of the gamespace, sometimes with a timer in the form of depleting oxygen, and sometimes while being attacked by enemies who are

Figure 2. When Clarke is hanging upside-down, immobile, and besieged by enemies, the removal of the player-character's agency is most obvious.
*Source*: Electronic Arts, 2012, available at http://press.ea.com/downloads.asp. Reproduced with permission.

notably unaffected by the lack of oxygen or gravity. This is also the case in set pieces within *Dead Space 2* where the player is either falling through an upended tram or is left hanging upside down and must defeat oncoming enemies, and movement is completely impossible.

Player control and autonomy is also managed through more conventional environmental effects such as lighting. At the beginning of Chapter 10 of *Dead Space 2*, where Clarke returns to the Ishimura (the scene of his trials in the first game), he is ambushed by a large number of enemies in very poor lighting conditions. This of course echoes the use of lighting for horror effects in films, where often dangers are shrouded in the dark from protagonists and viewers. In other cases, threats are not visible to protagonists while viewers are privileged with omniscient knowledge, such as at the conclusion of *The Silence of the Lambs* (Demme 1991) when heroine Clarice Starling stumbles in the dark and we observe her through the night-goggled gaze of serial killer Buffalo Bill. The added effect comes from the use of lighting as an agency mechanic: when it becomes difficult to perceive threats, the player's sense of control over the gameworld is severely curtailed. There are, however, agency mechanics more specific to the *Dead Space* franchise itself which are more effective at managing the player's control over the gameworld.

## 6 Strategic dismemberment and execution cutscenes

The horror film has long fetishised the dismemberment of the body, be it human or ghoul, and the tools employed in that dismemberment, whether they be pre-technological—the slasher killer's arsenal of bodily extensions like 'knives, hammers, axes, ice picks, hypodermic needles, red hot pokers, pitchforks, and the like' (Clover 1992, 31)—or post-technological, like the military hardware wielded in much sci-fi horror. Many of the genre's most striking images—zombies being shot in the head in *Dawn of the Dead* (Romero 1979) or tearing apart their shrieking victims in *Day of the Dead* (Romero 1985); the photojournalist's decapitation by a flying sheet of glass in *The Omen* (Donner 1976); the possessed girl's mutilation of her genitalia with a crucifix in *The Exorcist* (Friedkin 1973)—celebrate the dismemberment of what Kristeva calls the 'clean and proper' body in her study of abjection (1982, 8). *Dead Space* similarly fetishises dismemberment, though here it is tied to rigorous survival procedures.

In the *Dead Space* franchise, enemies are powerful and resistant to normal attacks: blind firing into them is a very inefficient way to kill them, given that weapon ammunition is so scarce and melee combat is very dangerous. This is, of course, key to the survival horror motif of the unkillable undead: they are already dead, and powerful enemies increase the challenge which is central to survival horror. Therefore, the player is required to strategically dismember the enemies. Using specialised weapons adapted from mining tools such as the Plasma Cutter (a laser designed for welding) and the Ripper (a type of buzzsaw), it is necessary to take the Necromorphs apart piece by piece. This has the effect of slowing them down if legs are removed, or disarming them, literally, by removing their razor-sharp appendages. This is a crucial survival horror strategy because it allows for more efficient disposal of enemies, and helps to conserve ammunition in a similar manner to the 'shoot them in the head' motif from zombie films and games. In addition, powerful area-effect weapons (such as explosives) are relatively rare in comparison to many action/shooting games.

However, the requirement to strategically dismember enemies is also an essential agency mechanic in the context of our discussion. It is an additional gameplay constraint upon the player, and a significant one, because it is significantly more difficult to target and strike specific limbs of enemies than to dispatch them conventionally. Granted, disposing of enemies using headshots has always accrued some bragging rights in shooting games, and some games (such as *Bulletstorm* 2011) reward the player with points for 'skillshots', but *Dead Space*'s strategic dismemberment is unique among games of its type. It is a marker of

Perron's 'extended body genre', and is closely linked to his citation of *Dead Space*'s deeply visceral 'stomp attack' (2009, 130). More significant than its role in embodiment, however, is its use as an agency mechanic, which at once places constraints on the player's agency within the game world, but also gives them the opportunity to deploy sharpened skills within a survival horror framework. Again, *Dead Space 2* offers a refinement of an established agency mechanic by allowing the player to decapitate specialised enemies with ranged attacks to reduce the effectiveness of their attacks. It also employs the special enemy the Ubermorph more extensively: this enemy literally cannot be defeated and can only be escaped, which makes it an enemy 'who cannot be dealt with by the limited normal capacity of the avatar' (Pinchbeck 2009, 88).

In addition to strategic dismemberment, extended embodiment is combined with agency mechanics in *Dead Space*'s use of execution cutscenes. Executions are a prominent element of *Gears of War* (2006), especially in some multiplayer modes where players are required to physically approach a downed opponent and press a specific button as the only way of eliminating them before they are revived by a teammate. This happens in *Dead Space*, but in reverse: the player dies, the camera zooms back to a third-person perspective which is not tied to the avatar in order to display a particularly grisly death, typically involving dismemberment or decapitation. This is what Krzywinska refers to as a 'pleasurable death' (2002, 213), a spectacle which enables catharsis and release on the part of the player. It also shifts from the sadistic gaze involving the dismemberment of enemies to the masochistic gaze of viewing one's own death. While both experiences technically occur within a third-person perspective, the latter is distinct because it sharply draws away from identification with the avatar, producing a shocking vision of one's own simulated death.[4]

*Dead Space*'s short, action-filled cutscenes may initially be viewed from the traditional perspective as a weak method of narrative exposition, or a 'jarring immersion breaker' (Rouse 2009, 23). However, it ties directly in with the sophisticated agency mechanics of the game by mechanically removing any player control over the game and forcing them to simply sit and watch the avatar's gory death. It removes all interactivity and forces the player into the position of spectator, temporarily making the game player more like a film viewer, a strategy which arguably highlights the passivity of horror film spectatorship in contrast to the agency of gaming.

## 7 Stasis and kinesis

A key element of the player's interaction with the environment involves stasis and kinesis, abilities which are made possible by the suit (or 'rig') that Isaac Clarke wears. Very early in the game Clarke is able to use stasis, which sends a charge with the ability to slow down time around the target. This is essential for navigating otherwise unnavigable parts of the environment: for example, a doorway which is opening and closing too fast to enter unharmed. Stasis allows the player to slow down the closing of the door and allow them to pass through.

More significantly, stasis can also be used on enemies, especially quick and agile adversaries who rush to close range for devastating melee attacks. This type of enemy puts the player in a very difficult position, as it is easy to get surrounded and lose control of the environment. Stasis allows the player to slow down an enemy or group of enemies in order to focus on other attackers, or to deal with them effectively. It is particularly effective against large and difficult enemies. Notably, the provision of stasis as an agency mechanic is often followed by more difficult enemies.

On the other hand, kinesis allows the player to manipulate the environment directly by picking up, moving, dropping and making projectiles of objects. This allows the player to navigate the environment when doorways are blocked by objects, and to use special items marked with a 'Grip' icon to solve physics-based puzzles and switch triggers. Again, this ability has specific combat applications, as it is possible to throw

objects to dispose of smaller enemies and thus save ammunition. In the first *Dead Space* this ability was limited, but in *Dead Space 2* it becomes possible to use metal rods to impale weaker enemies, or even to grab the razor-sharp limbs of dismembered enemies and use them against themselves. As with other agency mechanics, this represents a significant refinement through the life of the franchise.

These mechanics permitting control of not just the avatar but their immediate environment are well outside the parameters of horror film spectatorship. While home viewing technology allows the viewer to exert control over the screening via pause, slow motion, rewind, etc. (especially great for those who enjoy lingering on the aforementioned spectacles of dismemberment like the photographer's decapitation in *The Omen*), they exert no control over the narrative outcome of scenes or text (not great for those wishing for said photographer's survival and ongoing health). While there are rare cases where viewers can choose between multiple endings or narrative progressions—for instance on DVDs of *The Descent* or, more famously, William Castle's *Mr Sardonicus* (1961), where viewers were polled before the film's resolution to decide the fate of the film's villain (though the poll was rigged, as only one ending was ever screened based on the correct assumption that audiences would demand harsh justice)—these are not so much expansions of narrative possibilities or spectatorial agency as they are instances of opting between set narrative outcomes.

## 8 Conclusion

This article began by exploring both the continuities and differences between horror film and horror gaming. It is important in an era of convergence, where the boundaries between media and genres become increasingly blurry, that a balanced perspective on film and games is maintained. For instance, film is not simply a passive medium whereby viewers absorb images and narratives from an omnipotent auteur/narrator (Tikka 2010). Horror film is an especially good example of the interactivity of spectatorship, and the shifting, multiple gazes that spectators inhabit. Similarly, games often revel in the denial of agency provided to players, and it is precisely the abandonment of control that produces the pleasure of horror gaming's 'bounded experience of fear' (Pinedo 1997, 38).

Nonetheless, the potential for designing specific agency mechanics to oscillate the player's experience between subjection to the game world and autonomy and power over the environment deserves special attention. Agency mechanics produce not only a heightened experience of the game itself, but a heightened experience of survival horror elements, even of action games. This is especially evident in the *Dead Space* franchise, which is an excellent example of the use of agency mechanics to produce horror responses in players.

The implications for game design, particularly in horror games, are significant. In general, more explicit attention to agency mechanics in the design of video games may help to enhance player experience and add another string to the bow of quality game design. Further consideration of agency mechanics may take us beyond the dichotomy of survival and action which seems to pervade the design (and even marketing) of games in the post-*Resident Evil 4* era (Sterling 2012). This may liberate designers from the false dilemma of designing for action or for survival, since it allows for a nuanced focus on player interactivity which is not beholden to either mass-appeal actions games nor independent, niche survival horror games.

Furthermore, there is particular potential for game designers to develop agency mechanics in games which are using innovative forms of interaction such as motion control and touchscreens. Thus far, attempts to do so tend to derive from mechanics in conventionally controlled games: for example, *Dead Space* for iOS has been lauded as a technical achievement, but the agency mechanics discussed here are not particularly easy to use and do not have the same effect as with a standard controller. Alternatively, *Rise of Nightmares* (2011) has been almost universally

berated for its failure to effectively use Kinect motion-sensor controls in a traditional horror milieu. More explicit consideration of agency mechanics in these new tools of interactivity may rescue innovative peripherals from mere novelty or outright irrelevance. We may therefore see game design keep pace with technological developments in gaming to ensure that these developments are not under-utilised, and that they provide genuinely innovative player experiences rather than just the same experience in a new package (or worse).[5]

Further theorisation and understanding of agency mechanics has the potential for heightening the sophistication of gameplay design in not only survival horror games but action and simulation games more broadly. This may have significant effects on commercial success and player enjoyment.

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## Notes

[1] It is perhaps more correct to say that *Dead Space* is an action horror franchise, given the general decline of true survival horror (Sterling 2012). Nonetheless, for the purposes of this article, it is the survival horror elements of *Dead Space* that are most interesting, as they exemplify the agency mechanics in which we are interested. It is arguable that *Dead Space* is perhaps the closest to successful survival horror we have seen save for *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* and *Silent Hill: Downpour* (2012).

[2] *Dead Space: Extraction* (2009) is a prequel, elaborating on the original outbreak on the planet beneath the Ishimura, and can be considered apocryphal to the main series. It is not considered for analysis here.

[3] The closest cinematic approximation of this would be found footage films like *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick and Sanchez 1999), where professional faux-documentary photography surrenders over the course of the film to rougher compositions as filming conditions worsen, and the films will often deliberately end on a premature or dramatically unsatisfying note.

[4] The effect is not dissimilar to a strategy employed by Alfred Hitchcock in *Rear Window* (1954), not a horror film *per se* but a film from which many genre practitioners, notably Brian De Palma and Richard Franklin, inherited their vocabulary. That film is photographed almost entirely inside the apartment of injured photographer and voyeur Jefferies, and alternates between third-person cinematography and first person perspective as Jefferies observes his neighbours going about their business (some of it murderous) from his apartment window. Only once does the film leave the confines of the apartment, when it adopts the perspective of the suspected killer, previously an object of Jefferies' secure voyeuristic gaze, looking back at and objectifying the apartment-bound Jefferies. The effect is jarring, as it is the sole moment when the camera is liberated from the confines of Jefferies' apartment, and its effect is disruptive and crucial.

[5] Most recently, *ZombiU* (Ubisoft, 2012) uses the WiiU's Gamepad with touch controls in combination with particular agency mechanics designed into the game.

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