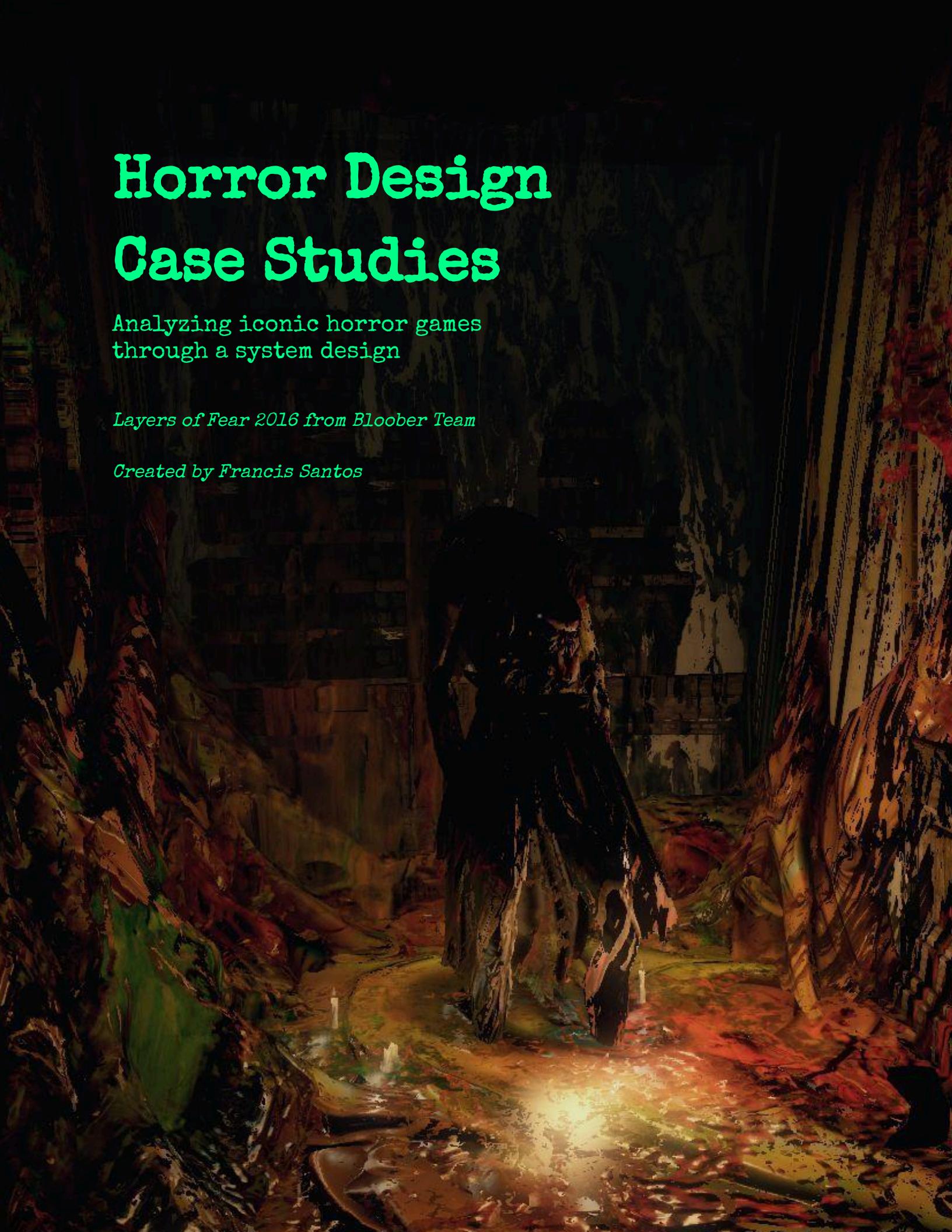


Horror Design Case Studies

Analyzing iconic horror games
through a system design

Layers of Fear 2016 from Bloober Team

Created by Francis Santos



Layers of Fear 2016 from Bloober Team Breakdown

PLAYER CONTROL WINDOW

Layers of Fear 2016 uses zero combat but maximum designer control

Designers use light, sound cues, and objects to guide the player.

Forced Camera Moments

It really gives the illusion of choice, giving control and predicting camera movement even before the player can decide.

I noticed a lot of these particular events of design choice:

- Locking camera rotation during scripted events
- Designing events to trigger *only when the player looks away*
- Making doors open behind the player, forcing a turn



Examples:

- The long hallway that becomes a brick wall once you turn back
- Changing paintings when your back is turned
- In the kitchen, fruit was falling from the painting every time the player wasn't looking

- just to name a few...

By controlling the camera triggers, Bloober ensures the scares land exactly where intended, preserving cinematic timing.



Movement Control

I noticed that in the game, it is designed to walk slowly to a sense of building tension, but also it's also to prevent players from outrunning scripted events and to create anticipation. In a way that the player will have more time to explore the surroundings of the several spaces of the house, and having only a point of entry and exit to give a sense of dread, knowing there are detours to ease the progression of the game.

When traveling from area to area, the player is forced to travel through narrow halls that restrict movement but also maximize camera control since the player has only 1 axis to turn.

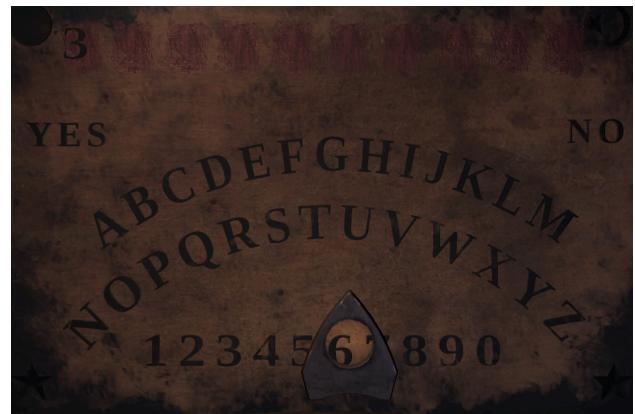
Interaction Control

One of the core mechanics in Layers of Fear is where the player can interact with doors and drawers, pictures, and anywhere in between.

Some of these interactions are the gates to reveal great parts of the story.

Puzzles are simplistic to a fault, not disturbing the tension building.

For example, the ouja board or the music box, where you had to make/ find solutions for the puzzles.



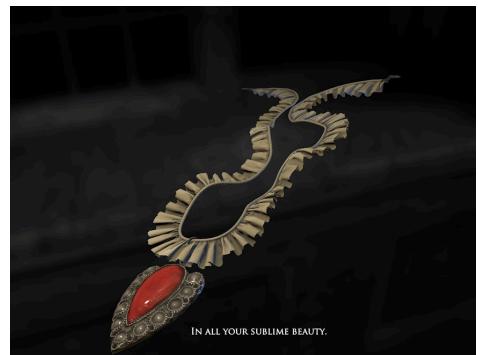
TENSION RELEASE POINTS

Safe rooms serve as temporary relief, but also as psychological traps. Players lower their guard, making the next scare more effective. I noticed that there were several release points where the player is allowed to breathe before the next scare or puzzle.

It's smart that necessary means a place for the player to take a breather, moments where the player has the opportunity to go to another room or just take a moment to open drawers to look what's inside, are moments where the tension can go down just for a moment.

But these safe zones are not safe for long because when you interact by viewing a painting or trigger a flashback, it takes you back to the tension. By doing this, the safe zones can give a cooldown until the player's curiosity takes the better of them to see something by their curiosity.

Next was one of the one the most well-done features related to tension release points, Loop Rooms. Rooms that change only when you exit, these act as "reset spaces". As per example, the room with the baby crib after the distortion corridor is a tension release point, quiet audio, no immediate scare.



PUNISHMENT & REWARD (Psychological System)

In layers of fear, it has no mechanical failure, so all punishment is emotional or narrative-based.

Punishment takes the form of environmental betrayal, doors disappearing, rooms changing shape, or visual distortions. Rewards take the form of narrative clarity and new ritual materials, creating a loop where fear is balanced with curiosity.”



Reference

A shout-out for [SHN Survival Horror Network](#), so I could appreciate the game systems without jumping out of my seat every minute:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dc_ZKrlsnO0&t=3121s

Conclusion

Layers of Fear controls the player through a combination of camera manipulation, environmental betrayal, and predictable pacing resets. The systems work together to create a cinematic horror experience where the player's perception is constantly undermined.

