

*Videogames and Horror: From Amnesia to Zombies, Run!*

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‘Don’t play videogames too long, they’ll rot your brain’, is a phrase most adolescents hear after spending a multitude of hours staring at the TV screen. Dawn Stobbart’s *Videogames and Horror* (2019) reverses that stereotype, elevating the videogame to a medium worthy of academic attention and analysis. As Stobbart herself notes, prior to this book there was ‘no substantive single work on the horror genre in videogames’ (2019:189). This book sets to accomplishing such a task and enlightening academia as to an evolving medium in the gothic horror genre. Stobbart connects the chapters together to produce an end that crosses concepts, choosing a macro look on gothic horror represented in the videogame medium as opposed to a singular aspect or text. Thus, *Videogames and Horror* is a fascinating and original addition to literary and game studies, broadening critical horizons, and expanding the potential for academic attention across mediums.

Stobbart’s introduction addresses the ever-growing video gaming industry. Spanning across the arcade era to modern-day home consoles, Stobbart discusses the evolution of the gaming industry and the role of horror and different genres that are incorporated throughout the videogame medium. Stobbart prepares us for the upcoming chapters by introducing the gothic genre as applied to the videogame medium. Chapter two, ‘Dissecting the Videogame: Genres in the Medium’, battles the lack of a ‘canonical system of genre classification that covers all media’ to define the subgenres of horror and how the gothic genre translates (24).

Providing multiple examples throughout the genre, Stobbart elaborates on five sub-genres: Survival, Lovecraftian, Splatter, Slasher, and Science Fiction.

The third chapter, 'Transgressing Boundaries: Adaptations, Intertextuality and Transmedia', crosses into new territories, referencing how text to film adaptations are typically inferior. Stobbart argues that, conversely, videogames only improve the Gothic/Horror genre by 'reducing the distance between the player and the events taking place on screen', placing you up close and personal with the monsters and gore upon the screen and allowing the player to interact with the events happening on screen (53). The highlight of the chapter is using the First-Person Shooter (FPS), *Spec Ops: The Line*, as an example of a Gothic videogame (GVG hereafter). Interacting with the horrors of war and makes the player question their participation with Stobbart noting that the player can stop at any moment but continues with horrific acts of violence and brutality upon the landscape (71). Thus, Stobbart posits GVG's as another example of the genre's notorious ability to evolve, in this case, into an immersive Gothic experience that sometimes includes acting monstrously.

In Chapter four, 'Play Me a Story: Storytelling in Horror Videogames', Stobbart states that 'both storytelling and gameplay are dependent upon each other for narrative completion and gaming success. Videogames thus require both play and narrative theories to understand them', highlighting the relevance of literary engagement with the medium (p.90). Additionally, Stobbart claims the transference of the videogame to text is impossible without losing a significant aspect of the text, that aspect being choice. Though she claims the medium has semblance, such as the Choose Your Own Adventure stories, Stobbart contends that videogames, traditionally, 'are frequently structured to offer a traditional Aristotelian ending...', offering a sense of accomplishment and catharsis that the experience has ended (90). However, I do disagree with moments in this section, especially with what is included and omitted in game narrative. Claims such as 'the audience often is placed in the position of

having knowledge that the characters do not ... whilst this is true for film and most other media, video games do not often facilitate this', suggest dramatic irony cannot be incorporated properly throughout the game's narrative (93). But there are video games that have incorporated this tool. The original *Resident Evil* game incorporates this literary device into several cut scenes. One scene features playable character Jill Valentine-communicating with a non-playable character (NPC) when we the audience see a shadowy figure peer around the corner. We know that someone is listening in to Jill Valentine's conversation, but she is unaware until the NPC is executed by the shadowy character. However, the author does state that it was difficult to choose the games that were mentioned and restricted to those she has played (189). This explains why *Resident Evil* was not considered but *The Last of Us* is a literary example that uses this narrative tool to expand on the story. During the winter, Ellie, the new playable character is captured by cannibals, while an injured Joel, the other playable character, wakes up to find Ellie missing. The player knows what has happened to Ellie, but Joel only knows that something is amiss. Additionally, the analysis of *Fallout 3* (Bethesda 2008) as being a horror/gothic game is debatable. However, Stobbart has a convincing argument for creatures that inhabit *Fallout 3*'s post-apocalyptic landscape, including mention of Deathclaw's, a challenging monster to that pops up throughout the game, as indicative of atypical horror tropes, is a good start. The argument could be strengthened by including the Feral Ghouls, not to be mistaken for regular Ghouls, which embody the zombie trope and Centaurs which resemble the creature in the movie *The Thing* (1982). Mention of these monsters and how the super mutants are part of the typical mad scientist trope in Gothic fiction would have bolstered the argument. Although I do not agree with the author completely, the way Stobbart portrays her argument and theories are thought-provoking. Regardless, the book is a great start that highlights there is much ground untouched within this emerging medium.

Chapter five, 'Who Am I? Identity and Perspective', remarks on the ability to identify more with videogame protagonists than in other forms of media. The bond is more profound as the player is directly interacting with a character, unlike other forms of media (115-116). In movies a jump scare can elicit a reaction, but the participant has a moment to recover, giving a sense of relief. In GVG's, when a scare occurs, the player must react with the character, only allowing relief when the danger is vanquished by 'being able to take positive action in a horrific situation that is based in reality' (117). Stobbart suggests this creates a sense of catharsis, though we do not really experience these actions, the defeat of a monster can translate to our lives where monsters in disguise interact with the player every day (119). This combination of reaction and catharsis helps create a bond between character and player sharing similar emotions throughout the narrative. While the bond is one aspect of identity, the perspective of the camera contributes to the gameplay as well. In *Resident Evil*, the camera angle is fixed, only adjusting as the player progresses through the mansion, leaving the player on edge as they nudge the joystick carefully as not to run into an enemy. This perspective adds to the gameplay and creepiness of the atmosphere, providing relief with every empty corridor.

The penultimate chapter, 'The Undead Invade: Monster in Videogames', illustrates the transition of monsters from folklore to the movie screen, to staggering into the videogame world. Focusing on the modern Zombie, which has only helped popularize the shambling creatures in pop culture, Stobbart suggests 'monsters are ubiquitous in videogames, having been found in all genres of the medium since its inception' (p.142). However, Stobbart warns us that most videogame monsters are not for social commentary, stating 'most games feature a series of monsters that are simply a means for the player to play' (143). Indeed, 'the monster's presence in these early games established their status as the enemy and as an obstacle that needed to be overcome to ensure progression', presenting the player with an

obstacle to overcome (142). This applies to the Zombie, ‘an omnipresent figure, blurring the divide between horror and non-horror games in a way that does not occur with most other monsters’ appearing in fitness apps to military shooters to create the perfect enemy (150). Zombies reflect a fear of an unstoppable force that shows a grotesque life after death while ridding us of the guilt of mowing down waves of these enemies. But what the player does not consider, is that while they try to survive the zombies, they become the monster in the process, murdering creatures that used to be human. For Stobbart, ‘the player is not only implicitly considering what it is to be human but is also investigating what sort of human the player (or the protagonist is)’, causing us to question the ethical reasoning for killing these creatures and ‘going beyond the capacity of other media in its ability to do this’ (pp.152-153). With the transition from film to videogames, the zombie has evolved, creating new forms including fungal parasites, alien possession, and even retaining their humanity through the transformation. As highlighted in *The Last of Us*, the *Dead Space* Series, and *Days Gone*, the zombie has overrun yet another medium.

Chapter seven, ‘Death and the End: The Final Chapter?’ details the ways death is represented throughout the videogame narrative. When videogames first came into popularity in arcades, perma-death, was economical. If a player permanently died in the game, they would have to pay to continue playing. As gaming moved into the home, perma-death was no longer required, thus, checkpoints and the ability to save playthroughs makes death more of an inconvenience. Death in gaming transitioned from the punishment of playing poorly to a minor inconvenience. Thus, modern games have incorporated the idea of death into videogames, creating more of a significance and impacting the player further. Stobbart explains that games such as *Bloodborne* and *Dark Souls* use death as part of the narrative. The player is supposed to perish to learn how to defeat an enemy with a slight punishment of losing blood or souls, though the player’s character can be recovered by returning to where

you died before dying again (182). Another way death has buried itself within videogames is with the protagonist's death. Traditionally, the game climaxes with the catharsis that your playable character has survived the experience, but in *Outlast Miles*, the protagonist that the player has desperately tried to keep alive is gunned down at the end, shocking the player. It creates an emotional response for the player destroying preconceived notions of what death represents in a videogame and reaffirming the concept of an immersive Gothic experience.

Overall, Stobart simultaneously provides both a valuable study of the Gothic horror genre and Videogame Studies, delivering an invigorating insight into the evolution of the genre via a new, emerging literary medium. The book glides effortlessly through the various aspects of horror videogames, diving into digital genres that exemplify gothic tropes and ideas to produce an entertaining and timely study. By incorporating a familiar genre within an emerging medium, *Videogames and Horror* thus provides an easy transition for academics unfamiliar with Gothic videogames and provides a thought-provoking experience for all who happen to pick it up.