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# Playing with Fear: The Aesthetics of Horror in Recent Indie Games

JAN-NOËL THON

During the past decade or so, video game scholars and journalists alike have observed what is sometimes described as the “rise of the indies” that has led to often unusual, innovative, and/or ambitious “games blossom[ing] without the blockbuster budgets and support of major studios and publishers” (Diver 2016, p.8).<sup>1</sup> As, for example, Maria Garda and Paweł Grabarczyk (2016) note, video games can generally be financed independently, published independently, and developed with a high degree of creative independence. They go on to argue that, by the mid-2000s, “indie games became so prominent and so distinct that they started to be easily identifiable via a set of contingent properties—what users have identified as a certain ‘indie look’ or ‘indie feel’” (Garda and Grabarczyk 2016, n.pag.). Thus, the term “indie game” tends to evoke additional expectations such as being developed by a small team, primarily being disseminated via digital distribution, and also employing what Garda and Grabarczyk as well as others describe as a certain “retro style.”<sup>2</sup>

As helpful as Garda and Grabarczyk’s reconstruction of the discourse surrounding the term “indie game” certainly is, though, this focus on nostalgic “retro style” as a core element of indie aesthetics seems quite narrow. Hence, it may be more productive to draw on Jesper Juul’s notion of an “independent style,” which he defines as “a representation of a representation” that “uses contemporary technology to emulate low-tech and usually cheap graphical materials and visual styles, signaling that a game with this style is more immediate, authentic, and honest than are big-budget titles” (Juul 2019, p.38; see also Juul 2014). Evidently, there are indie games that do not employ this kind of “independent style,” but Juul’s concept still allows for a more precise analysis of how some indie games remediate the materiality and mediality not only of older video games but also of primarily analogue media forms such as novels, comics, films, television series, or board games.<sup>3</sup>

That being said, Garda and Grabarczyk as well as Juul seem to primarily foreground the *visual* design of indie games here, which risks glossing over other, no less important aspects of their aesthetics.<sup>4</sup> Instead, I would propose a theoretical framework that more systematically distinguishes between the audiovisual, ludic, and narrative aesthetics of indie games.<sup>5</sup> *Audiovisual aesthetics* here refers to the audiovisual design of an indie game, including not just the spatial perspective(s), visual styles, and pictorial materials used but also its sound design, music, and/or voice acting.<sup>6</sup> *Ludic aesthetics* refers to the possibilities of interaction that an indie game affords its players, its game mechanics, and its game goals as well as the resulting experiential quality or “feel” of the gameplay.<sup>7</sup> *Narrative aesthetics* entails not only the story or stories an indie game tells but also the narrative strategies it employs to tell them, which may include various forms of nonlinearity as well as the use of narrators or mediated “direct access” to characters’ subjectivity.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, this is an analytical distinction of dimensions or aspects of indie aesthetics that are in actual practice often quite closely interrelated. It is, for example, generally the case that visual and auditive signals allow players to orient themselves within the gameplay; that narrative elements such as cut-scenes or scripted events are used to frame the interactive gameplay and to communicate pertinent information about game rules or game goals; and that the audiovisually represented, rule-governed gameplay also contributes to the unfolding story of an indie game at least to some extent. While it will often be productive to analyze the audiovisual, ludic, and narrative aesthetics of an indie game as part of its overall design, then, it is also worth noting that video games not just “are” indie games but rather are positioned and perceived as “indie,” which would suggest that indie aesthetics are best conceptualized as a discursive construct and that an analysis of an indie game as an aesthetic artifact will thus do well to take into account the production and reception discourses surrounding the game in question (see figure 1).<sup>9</sup>

Finally, I would like to emphasize again the importance of acknowledging the diversity of indie aesthetics beyond stereotypical notions of nostalgic pixel graphics and 8-bit sounds. While it would go beyond the scope of a single article to try and reconstruct the broad range of styles, stories, genres, and aesthetic choices that indie games have to offer, the following pages aim to contribute to a better understanding of this diversity by exploring the aesthetics of horror in a selection of indie games from the past decade.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, my focus will be on detailed analyses of the ways in which four notable examples from this corpus—*Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (Frictional Games 2010), *Neverending Nightmares* (Infinitap Games 2014), *Darkwood* (Acid Wizard Studio 2017), and *The Forest* (Endnight Games 2018)—invite their players to “play with fear” in various ways. Before I can analyze these indie games and the rather different experiences they afford in more detail though, some additional remarks on the aesthetics of horror in films or audiovisual media in general and video games in particular seem necessary.

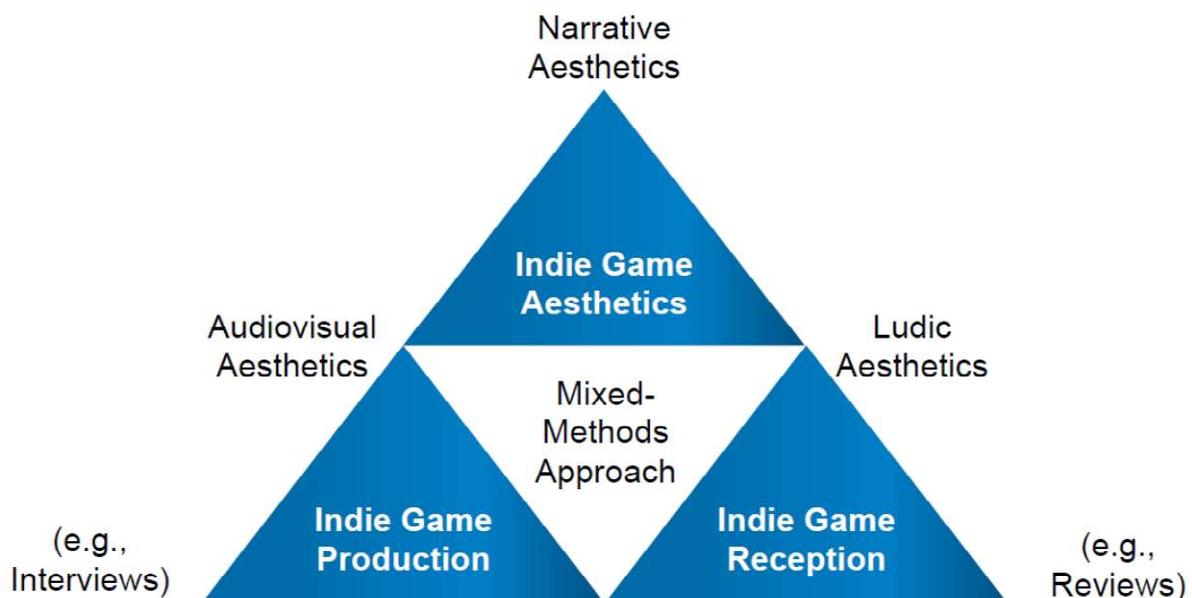


Figure 1: Analyzing the three dimensions of indie aesthetics.

## The Aesthetics of Horror and Player Emotions

At this point, it may go without saying that the emotional experiences afforded by video games differ from those afforded by other audiovisual media forms. While any analysis of indie games' aesthetics of horror will do well to acknowledge the medium specificity of video games that was briefly hinted at in the previous section, it is also clear that these games are part of a much broader tradition of horror as a genre and an aesthetics that can be realized across a range of different media forms, including not just video games but also films, television series, comics, and literary texts.<sup>11</sup> Considering that the emotions that films in general, and horror films in particular, may elicit in their spectators have been analyzed and theorized extensively within film studies and film philosophy, it seems appropriate to begin by exploring some of the similarities between the aesthetics of horror in films and those in video games, before zooming in on how the latter differ from the former.<sup>12</sup>

One of the core issues discussed within film philosophy has been the nature of spectators' emotional response to what most will understand are fictional representations. Following Noël Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror*, which influentially conceptualizes "art-horror" as an emotional response that cannot be limited to fear but rather "requires evaluation both in terms of threat and disgust" (Carroll 1990, p.28),<sup>13</sup> one can distinguish between three "theories" that attempt to explain the apparent paradox that spectators of a horror film seem to feel fear or, indeed, horror when seeing a monster on the screen despite the monster being part of a film and thus evidently not posing a "real threat" (for further discussion of these stances toward the "paradox of fiction," see, e.g., Carroll 1990, pp.60–88; Frome 2006, pp.12–14; Tan 2011, pp.225–248)

First, the "illusion theory of fiction," holds that spectators in this situation genuinely believe that they are in the presence of a monster. Put bluntly, this stance would posit that "it is not the case that well informed viewers do not believe that the relevant fictional entity does not exist" (Carroll 1990, p.63). While this may solve the apparent paradox that the fictional representation of a monster often seems to elicit feelings of fear or horror, it creates a number of other problems, amongst which the lack of an appropriate real-world spectatorial response such as running away, looking for means to defend oneself, or calling for help may be the most obvious. This might also explain why a strong version of the "illusion theory of fiction" does not seem to have many advocates in film philosophy, despite being commonly refuted.

Second, the "pretend theory of fiction," prominently developed by Kendall L. Walton (1978), acknowledges that the spectators of our hypothetical horror film are indeed aware that the monster in question is not real, "but goes on to deny that the audience's emotional responses to fiction are genuine" (Carroll 1990, p.63). In other words, while the "illusion theory of fiction" holds that spectators of a horror film must consider the monster they see to be real in order for them to experience genuine feelings of fear or horror, the "pretend theory of fiction" turns the argument around, suggesting that because spectators of a horror film will not mistake the monster they see for a real monster, the fear or horror they appear to feel cannot be genuine either.

Yet, this attempt to solve the paradox seems to be rather at odds with most spectators actual emotional experiences, as they generally do not consciously

pretend to feel fear or horror when seeing a fictional monster. Hence, Carroll proposes to solve the “paradox of fiction” by moving away from assuming that belief in the existence of a fictional monster (or a stimulus for an emotional response more generally) is a requirement to experience genuine fear or horror (or other emotions appropriate to the stimulus in question). Instead, third, the “thought theory of fiction” that Carroll proposes posits that “actual emotion can be generated by entertaining the thought of something horrible” (Carroll 1990, p.80).

Admittedly, Carroll’s proposal seems to solve the problems stemming from an insistence on belief in the existence of fictional entities as a requirement for the experience of emotions that have these entities as their objects, but he remains largely silent on the difference between our emotional responses to something the existence of which we believe in and something we understand is merely part of a fictional representation. As, for example, Jonathan Frome has pointed out, all of the three “theories” sketched above seem to build on an overly simple conceptualization of spectators’ reactions to filmic stimuli, assuming that their “minds form unified evaluations (whether beliefs or judgments) about the situations portrayed in artworks [such as films] and that these evaluations underlie [their] emotional responses” (Frome 2006, p.14).

Drawing on Torben Grodal’s distinction between global and local appraisals during film reception, and keeping in mind that “[t]he cognitive evaluation of reality-status takes place on a global level as an operation, a labelling of local phenomena” (Grodal 1999, p.33), it seems more convincing to take as a starting point the assumption that spectators of films or, indeed, recipients of other audiovisual media such as video games are not responding to audiovisual stimuli through “one overall judgment” (Frome 2006, p.15), but rather on “different levels of emotion-triggering cognitions (*appraisals*), from automatic reactions of body and brain through the activation of emotional schemata to conscious processes of reflection” (Eder 2008, p.71).

It would yet again go beyond the scope of this exploratory article to unpack the related issues of identification and empathy<sup>14</sup> or to provide a more thorough discussion of why feeling fear or horror while watching a horror film is usually considered a pleasurable experience (see, e.g., Hanich 2011; Hills 2005), but it does indeed seem helpful to be able to acknowledge that not only horror films but also horror video games can invite a range of different and partially inconsistent emotional responses, including the tension between a global appraisal of a monster (or some other emotional stimulus) as fictional and more local appraisals “not distinguish[ing] between reality and representation” (Frome 2006, p.17), but also potentially extending to other forms of at least partially medium-specific combinations of appraisals.

That being said, it is worth stressing that video games in general and horror games in particular further complicate these already fairly complex multi-level appraisal processes. There now exists a sizeable corpus of research on the ways in which video games afford their players various kinds of emotional experiences,<sup>15</sup> but for simplicity’s sake I will here largely follow Bernard Perron’s (2005; 2012; 2016; 2018) repeated proposals to model the emotional response afforded by video games as being not entirely dissimilar to those afforded by films or other audiovisual media, while also being notably distinct from the latter because the former offer their players

a fairly medium-specific kind of emotional experience. Hence, Perron draws on Ed Tan's (2011) influential distinction between fiction emotions and artifact emotions in film reception, but adds the video game-specific concept of gameplay emotions.

According to Tan, film spectators generally "desire to experience emotion as intensively and abundantly as possible, within the safe margins of guided fantasy and closed episode" (Tan 2011, p.65). An important part of the emotional experiences that films afford their spectators is constituted by *fiction emotions* such as "hope and fear, anxiety, sympathy, pity, relief, gratitude, admiration, shame, anger, terror, joy, and sorrow" (Tan 2011, p.82), all of which have (usually anthropomorphic) entities within the storyworld of the film as their objects.<sup>16</sup> However, Tan notes that films also invite their spectators to experience a different kind of emotions, the objects of which are not entities within the storyworld of the film but rather aspects of the film itself as an aesthetic artifact as well as the filmmakers and production processes "behind" it. These *artifact emotions*, may then also form the basis of positive as well as negative aesthetic evaluations (see also Eder 2008; Frome 2006).

According to Perron and others, these two concepts can more or less directly be applied to the emotional experiences afforded by video games as well. On the one hand, artifact emotions that may include not only appreciation but also disapproval have as their object the audiovisual, ludic, and narrative aesthetics of the video game in question, and often also inform the kinds of aesthetic value judgments that are commonly found in video game reviews by professional critics and other players alike.<sup>17</sup> Fiction emotions, on the other hand, relate to various entities within the storyworld of the game in question, for example when a player experiences fear of a monster because it is audiovisually represented and/or narratively framed as a threat to the player-controlled character as a fictional entity within the storyworld of the game.

However, some monsters may be audiovisually represented or narratively framed in a threatening way but not actually pose much of a ludic threat to the player-controlled character and, thus, to the player's ludic interests. This is where Perron's concept of *gameplay emotions* comes into play. As Perron notes, gameplay emotions "rest on notions of control" (Perron 2012, p.98; see also Grodal 2000) and arise from the player's "concerns and actions in the game [...] and the consequent reactions in the game(-world)" (Perron 2018, p.91), but can again take a range of different forms including interest, enjoyment, worry, surprise, shock, anger, frustration, and, indeed, fear (see, e.g., Perron 2005, pp.7–8).

While it may be slightly misleading to talk about the player's actions in the gameworld in this context, as most horror games (and many other video games) only let the player "act" via a player-controlled character (see, e.g., Klevjer 2006; Schröter and Thon 2014; Vella 2015), it is certainly true that a significant part of the emotional experience afforded by these kinds of games is much more directly connected to the player's potential for action, the level of challenge that mastering the game mechanics requires from the player, and the resulting threat that any entities or events within the gameworld may or may not present to the player reaching their game goals.

Put in a nutshell, while fear as a fiction emotion is fear of a monster because it is audiovisually represented and/or narratively framed as a threat (and thus is primarily connected to the audiovisual aesthetics and narrative aesthetics of the video game in question), fear as a gameplay emotion is fear of a monster because it is perceived as a threat to the player reaching the game goals (and thus is primarily connected to the ludic aesthetics of the video game in question). And, again, the ways in which a video game may invite players to experience fear as a fiction emotion and/or fear as a gameplay emotion may in turn become the object of positive or negative aesthetic evaluations (which can refer to the audiovisual, the ludic, or the narrative aesthetics of the video game in question as well as to the interplay of these three dimensions).

Having thus provided an admittedly rough sketch of some of the core terms and concepts that are relevant for the analysis of video games' aesthetics of horror and the different kinds of emotional experiences that they may offer to their players, I would like to use the remainder of this article to analyze four brief case studies of a selection of recent indie horror games—*Amnesia: The Dark Descent*, *Neverending Nightmares*, *Darkwood*, and *The Forest*—in order to illustrate the diversity of audiovisual, ludic, and narrative aesthetics these games may exhibit and the range of emotional experiences they may afford.

### **Frictional Games' *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (2010)**

My first case study, Frictional Games' *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*, has the player take control of Daniel, who awakens in the dark and empty halls of a castle with little to no memory about himself and an intense fear of the dark. The game's largely linear narrative structure focuses on Daniel exploring the castle, evading once human but now barely anthropomorphic monsters that try to hunt him down, collecting fragments of his diary and gradually regaining his memories, and eventually having to pick sides in an ongoing struggle between a supernatural Shadow that Daniel had helped awaken during an archaeological expedition and the castle's otherworldly baron Alexander.

Without summarizing the rather convoluted plot in any more detail here, it is at least worth noting that *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* exhibits a fairly complex narrative aesthetics that switches back and forth between Daniel's current situation, his diary entries (see figure 2), and his recovered memories, which are represented using a series of auditive overlays during segments of gameplay with reduced interactivity, and eventually confronts the player with a rather conventional but still consequential final choice that results in one of three possible narrative endings, with Daniel sacrificing himself to the Shadow to let Alexander return to his home dimension; Daniel letting the Shadow kill Alexander; or Daniel letting the Shadow kill both Alexander and himself.<sup>18</sup>

As relevant as this narrative framing may be, however, large parts of the gameplay are procedurally generated (or simulated) according to the player's rule-based interaction with the game spaces. *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* uses the proprietary 3D graphics engine HPL Engine 2 to represent the game spaces throughout—and while the resulting 3D graphics are perhaps not quite photorealistic, the labyrinthine layout of the castle is still represented in a consistent visual style that emphasizes the

vaguely threatening quality of the setting. No less importantly, the visual design of the heavily mutated monsters (see figure 3) invites players to perceive them “as threatening *and* impure” (Carroll 1990, p.28), thus leading to the combination of fear and disgust that Carroll identifies as essential to the aesthetics of horror.

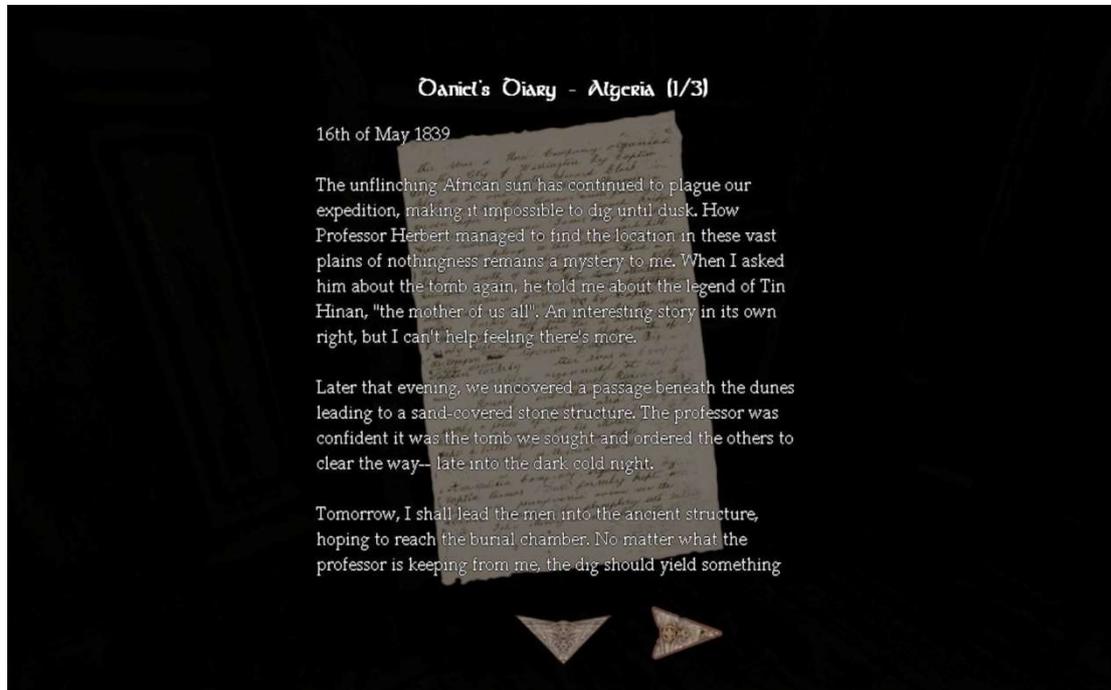


Figure 2: The first diary entry Daniel finds in Amnesia: The Dark Descent.



Figure 3: A monster about to attack Daniel in Amnesia: The Dark Descent.

Moreover, *Amnesia: The Dark Descent's* audiovisual aesthetics are largely defined by the rather distinctive interplay of light and darkness in many parts of the castle that helps generate a generally threatening mood<sup>19</sup> permeating the gameplay even when Daniel is not in the immediate vicinity of a monster (see figure 4). This is further emphasized by the use of ambient sound effects such as creaking, grinding, muffled screams, or moaning that sometimes, but not always, indicate a monster approaching—and generally blend rather well with the minimal musical score that also contributes to a decidedly unsettling overall gameplay experience. But, of course, the fear or, indeed, horror that many players will experience while playing *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* is only partially related to the game's audiovisual design.

Rather, the game mechanics give players every reason to experience fear not only as a fiction emotion but also as a gameplay emotion. As Daniel has no means to defend himself against the various monsters that hunt him, the player has to be very careful to not let Daniel be seen while exploring the castle. While it is dangerous to let Daniel use any light sources, then, Daniel's "sanity meter" depletes if he sits in the dark or if he looks directly at a monster, leading to escalating audiovisual hallucinations and partially impaired controls if the player is unable to replenish the "sanity meter" through further exploration of the castle (see figure 5). Thus, even though *Amnesia: The Dark Descent's* game mechanics may not be particularly complex, they still result in a thoroughly uncanny gameplay experience that offers its players plenty of opportunities to experience fear and horror.

Arguably, a core reason for *Amnesia: The Dark Descent's* critical as well as commercial success as an indie horror game (see, e.g., Goldfarb 2012) is the high integration of its audiovisual, ludic, and narrative aesthetics. The game's narrative frames the gameplay and motivates Daniel's progression through the castle; the audiovisual design emphasizes the potential threats lurking in the dark; and the game mechanics force the player to constantly weigh the goal of not being seen by monsters against the goal of not losing sanity by lingering in the darkness. Perhaps most importantly, though, the threat of the monsters is very real on a gameplay level, leading to players being invited to experience fear not only as a fiction emotion but also as a gameplay emotion during large segments of the game.

Finally, while *Amnesia: The Dark Descent's* overall design may not foreground its status as an aesthetic artifact, even a quick look at the game's reception suggests that the game's effective and recognizable aesthetics of horror have also offered critics and players alike the opportunity to experience a range of positive artifact emotions and, for example, reflect on how "subtle visual and audio effects are seamlessly woven together to create something terrifying on a level [the reviewer has] never experienced before" (Naik 2010, n.pag.), how the audiovisual aesthetics and the "sanity meter" game mechanic evoke "a feeling of isolation and helplessness that adds to the sense of terror" (Onyett 2010, n.pag.), or how Frictional Games have developed "an expertly crafted tale of horror and discovery that uses its interactive nature to enthrall players as deeply as any tale in any medium" (Biessener 2010, n.pag.).



*Figure 4: The interplay of light and darkness in Amnesia: The Dark Descent.*



*Figure 5: Hallucinations induced by low sanity in Amnesia: The Dark Descent.*

## Infinitap Games' *Neverending Nightmares* (2014)

Let me contrast this first case study with a second indie game that likewise emphasizes the experience of fear as a gameplay emotion, but uses rather different audiovisual, ludic, and narrative aesthetics to do so. Infinitap Games' *Neverending Nightmares* reportedly draws on "the real horror" of lead designer Matt Gilgenbach's "battle with obsessive-compulsive disorder and depression" (Gilgenbach 2013, n.pag.), but even without this additional autobiographical reference and whether or not it "has the potential to be a tool for empathy as much as it might elicit late-night scares" (Prell 2014a, n.pag.), *Neverending Nightmares* certainly is worth exploring as an example of the range of different aesthetics of horror that current indie games may offer.

Part of the game's appeal results from its rather unusual narrative aesthetics, as *Neverending Nightmares* represents its player-controlled protagonist Thomas experiencing a seemingly never-ending series of nightmares revolving around Gabriele or Gabby, who is alternatively introduced as Thomas's sister, wife, daughter, and psychiatrist. During these nightmares, which are set in a series of psychoanalytically significant locations including a mansion, a cemetery, an insane asylum, a forest, and a hospital, Thomas will quite often die, hurt himself, or be traumatized in various other ways, only to wake up in either the same or a different nightmare. Moreover, the sequence of nightmares that the game allows the player to co-experience is at least mildly nonlinear, so that player choices may lead to Thomas supposedly waking up in one of three different scenarios that also cast Gabriele/Gabby in different roles (i.e., as Thomas's sister, wife, daughter, and psychiatrist).

Beyond the rather sophisticated structure of its highly subjective forking-path dream-narrative, even a brief look at the gameplay will immediately make it clear that *Neverending Nightmares'* audiovisual aesthetics are very different from that of *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*. Throughout the game, *Neverending Nightmares'* game spaces are represented using a decidedly hand-drawn style of animation within the versatile Unity engine that is heavily influenced by the work of the US-American artist Edward Gorey (see figure 6).<sup>20</sup> While this decidedly "opaque" visual style arguably foregrounds *Neverending Nightmares'* potential to elicit artifact emotions,<sup>21</sup> the drawn pictures also exhibit a rather uncanny quality that is further emphasized by eerie music and sound effects, including Thomas continuously emitting distressed noises.

Perhaps most strikingly, the game's visual style allows for the evocative representation of monsters that draw on well-established horror tropes, including animated dolls (see figure 7), asylum inmates, mutated giant babies (see figure 8), and nightmarish versions of Thomas and Gabby/Gabriele (in addition to the different roles in which both already appear as part of the game's narrative, where Gabby/Gabriele does not pose a ludic threat to Thomas). Despite emphasizing the interplay between light and darkness less strongly (or at least more subtly) than *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*, then, *Neverending Nightmares'* audiovisual aesthetics once more offers plenty of opportunity for players to experience not only fear but also disgust.

Furthermore, while *Neverending Nightmares* is unlikely to elicit the kind of "jump scares" that players will regularly encounter in *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*, it is noteworthy that *Neverending Nightmare's* game mechanics also posit Thomas as a fundamentally defenseless protagonist, with any contact between Thomas and the

various monsters leading to the former waking up in the same or another nightmare yet again. Accordingly, the fear that *Neverending Nightmares* evokes may be less intense in the context of the game's ludic aesthetics than is the case in *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*, but *Neverending Nightmares* certainly also invites its players to experience fear not only as a fiction but also as a gameplay emotion.

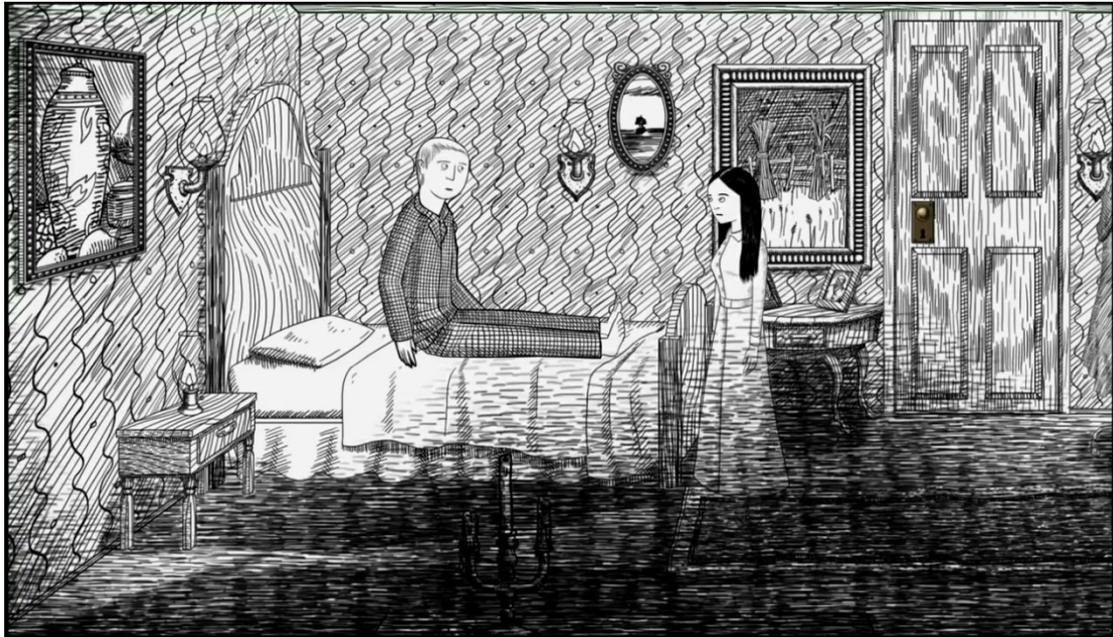


Figure 6: The hand-drawn style of animation in *Neverending Nightmares*.

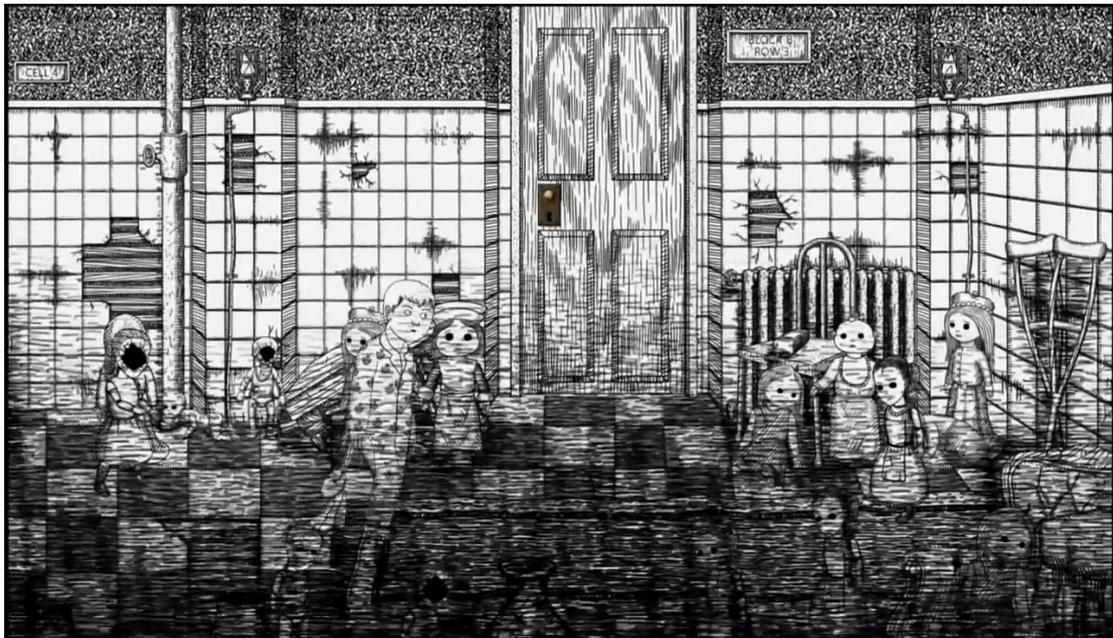


Figure 7: Thomas as a child and animated dolls in *Neverending Nightmares*.

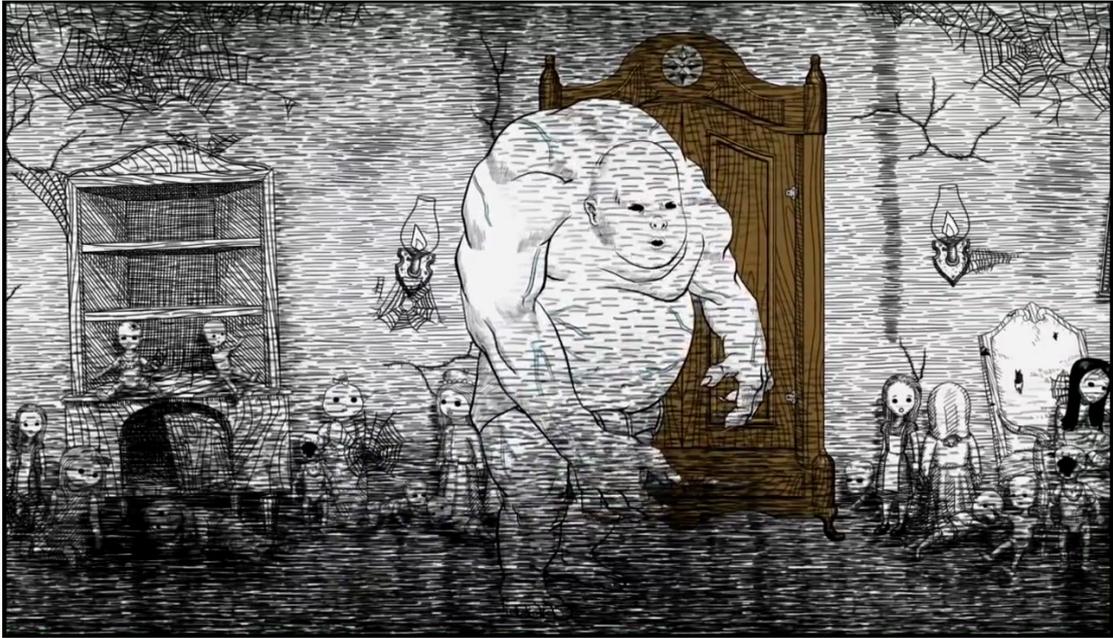


Figure 8: A mutated giant baby sniffing the air in *Neverending Nightmares*.

Indeed, one could argue that while the narrative and audiovisual aesthetics of *Neverending Nightmares* primarily generate a pervasive mood of implied threat and uncanny environments, the game mechanics and level design will often make the player inadvertently lead Thomas into situations from which he cannot escape and thus at least have the potential to evoke fear as primarily a gameplay rather than a fiction emotion. More specifically, it is the narrative framing of *Neverending Nightmares*' dream-narrative that frees the game from always offering a "way out," as Thomas will usually wake up in the same nightmare instead of dying when he comes into contact with one of the monsters, thus allowing the player to learn from past mistakes.

While not giving the player any opportunity to fight back may seem like an effective way to heighten the experience of fear as a gameplay emotion, then, some players have perceived the pacing of the game as creating rather too many "moments of lukewarm emptiness" (Clark 2014, n.pag.) and, of course, not all protagonists of horror video games are as defenseless as Daniel in *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* and Thomas in *Neverending Nightmares*. Accordingly, I would like to look a bit more closely at two additional examples of indie games that allow the player or, rather, the player-controlled character to fight back against the manifold threats of their respective worlds in somewhat unusual ways—namely by combining established game mechanics of the survival horror genre with elements from yet another genre that has been particularly successful in an indie game context, that of crafting games.

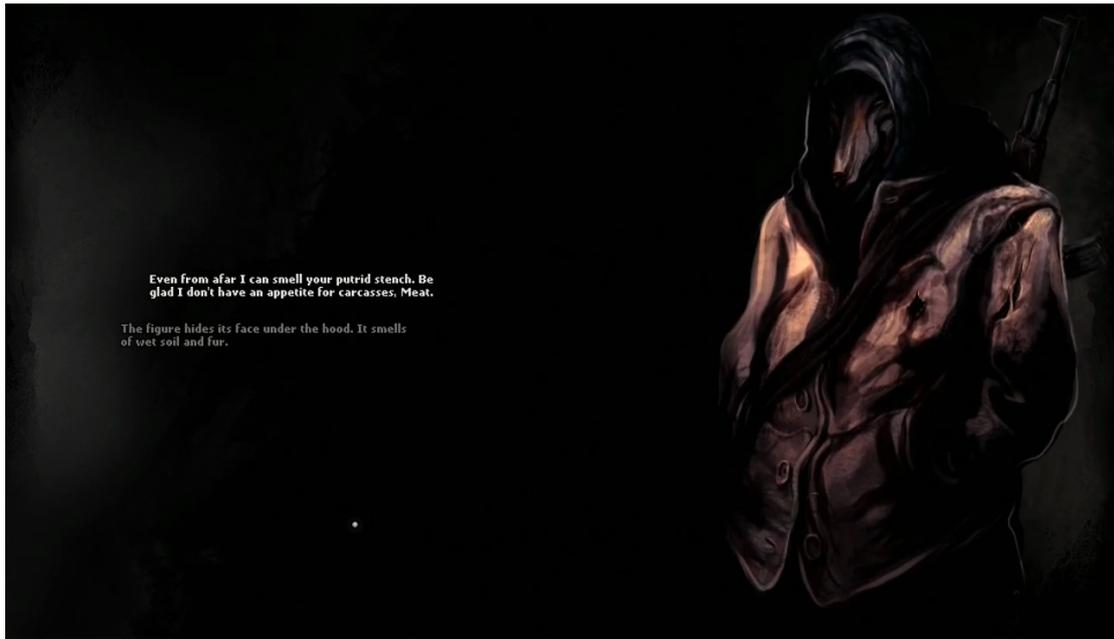
## Acid Wizard Studio's *Darkwood* (2017)

Acid Wizard Studio's *Darkwood* again uses its nonlinear narrative structure surrounding a group of characters that are trapped in a supernaturally infested forest to frame the gameplay and motivate the player's choices. Indeed, *Darkwood* makes occasional use of highly stylized cut-scenes and extended dialogue sequences to set the scene, introduce its various characters, and propel its story forward (see figure 9), but while its narrative aesthetics certainly make an effective contribution to the game's horror theme, their main function still seems to consist in giving the player a reason to make the player-controlled character explore, fight, and survive night after night before ultimately either succumbing to the darkness that dwells at the heart of the forest—or burning the whole forest down.

In contradistinction to both *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* and *Neverending Nightmares*, *Darkwood* uses the Unity engine to represent its gameplay from a top-down perspective (see figure 10), which yet again features a range of different, supposedly horror-inducing monsters, including various (more or less) anthropomorphic mutants, poisonous plants, and ghost-like shadows that stalk the forest at night. While the game's audiovisual aesthetics once more have a decidedly hand-drawn quality to them and thus seem perhaps closer to *Neverending Nightmares* than to *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*, *Darkwood* also makes extensive use of the interplay of light and darkness as both an element of its visual design and its game mechanics (see figure 11).

Just like *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*, *Darkwood* also has quite a bit of “jump scare” potential, but the games crafting mechanics at least partially complicate the relation between fear as a fiction emotion and fear as a gameplay emotion (see figure 12). In fact, *Darkwood's* game mechanics consist of a number of intersecting systems that include not just the player-controlled character's health, inventory, and crafting abilities, but also the day-and-night cycle that is central to the light-based game mechanics, a reputation system that is used for trading with the other characters in the forest, and the option of drug-based skill upgrades that force the player to pick both a positive and a negative trait for the player-controlled character (see figure 13).

Most critics seem to agree that *Darkwood's* audiovisual aesthetics succeed in “creating a haunting atmosphere” (Shive 2017, n.pag.), as the game's combination of cautious exploration during the day and terrifying base-defense gameplay during the night allows it to walk “a fine line between atmospheric world building and tense standoffs” (Porreca 2017, n.pag.). Indeed, since the crafting system is limited by the scarcity of resources, keeping the lights on at night so as not to let the player-controlled character be killed by the various monsters roaming the darkness will be enough of a challenge for many players, but while progressing through the different areas of the forest steadily increases the ludic threat of the monsters that the player-controlled character encounters, the partial configurability of the game spaces and the player-controlled character's inventory can at least potentially lead to some of the hazards that the forest holds turning out to be less challenging than an inexperienced player may have thought they would be.<sup>22</sup>



*Figure 9: Dialogue sequence with the Wolfman in Darkwood.*



*Figure 10: Gameplay represented from a top-down perspective in Darkwood.*



Figure 11: Interplay of light and darkness in Darkwood.

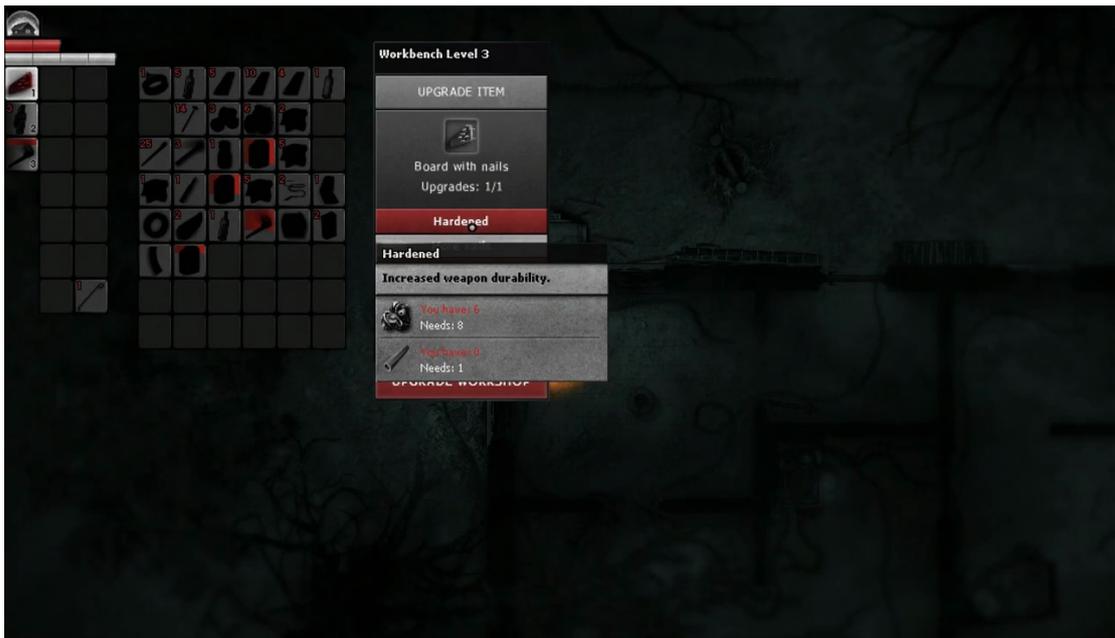


Figure 12: The crafting interface in Darkwood.

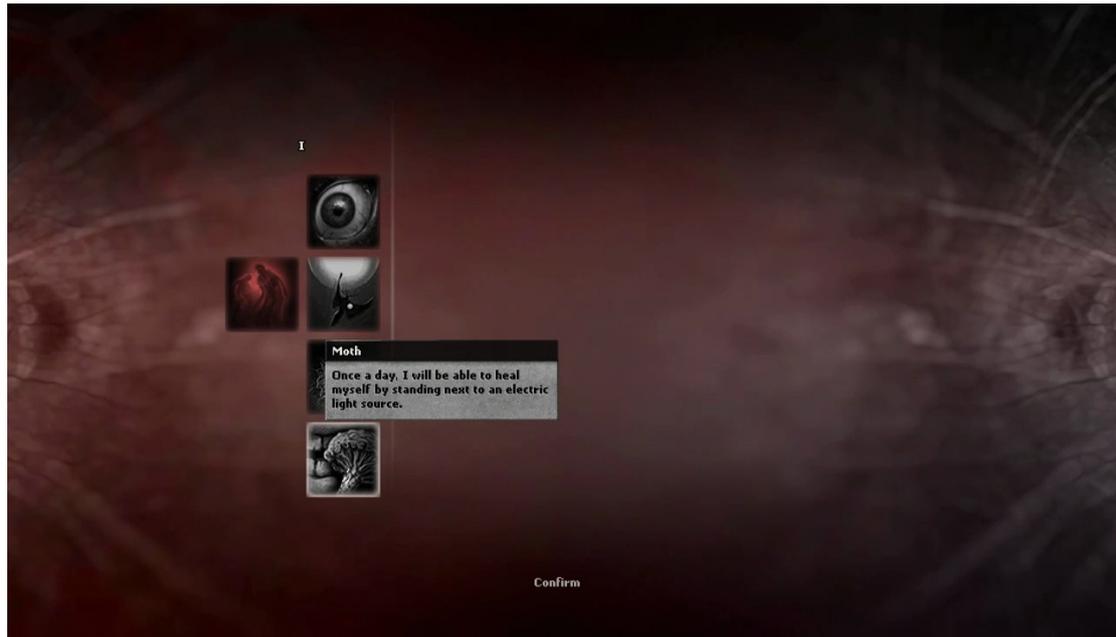


Figure 13: The drug-based skill upgrade system in *Darkwood*.

Clearly, *Darkwood* still invites players to experience fear as both a fiction and a gameplay emotion, but the openness and configurability that the integration of crafting mechanics affords may potentially lead to a disconnect between the audiovisually represented and narratively framed threat of some of the monsters and their ludic threat within the game mechanics. The resulting tension between fear as a fiction emotion and fear as a gameplay emotion would arguably diminish the overall aesthetics of horror, but the degree of control that the crafting mechanics in *Darkwood* afford remains very limited and, leaving aside the option to use mods or cheats (see, e.g., Consalvo 2007; Meades 2015; and the contributions in Champion 2012), the game will be challenging enough for most players to allow for an experience of fear as a gameplay emotion that is sufficiently intense not to subtract too much from the game's audiovisually represented and narratively framed aesthetics of horror.

### Endnight Games' *The Forest* (2018)

Keeping in mind this potential increase in the gap between fear as a fiction emotion and fear as a gameplay emotion, let me contrast the aesthetics of horror that *Darkwood* offers with those of a final recent indie horror game that integrates crafting, building, and survival mechanics to an even greater extent. Endnight Games' *The Forest* has the player take control of Eric Leblanc, who survives a plane crash only to find himself stranded on a remote island inhabited by a broad diversity of wildlife—and rather less diverse cannibalistic mutant tribes, whose dual “Otherness” yet again seems to aim at evoking not just fear but also disgust as part of the game's thus far quite conventional aesthetics of horror (see figure 14).

Again, *The Forest* employs a quest-based narrative structure to frame and motivate the gameplay, tasking Eric with finding his kidnapped son Timmy—but even more so than in the case of *Darkwood*, the focus of *The Forest* is on survival in the form of free exploration, foraging, building, and indeed fighting. The player can choose to pursue the story and have Eric find Timmy's kidnapper, fail to stop him from sacrificing Timmy to revive the kidnapper's daughter, try to sacrifice the revived daughter to revive Timmy without success, use an EMP device to cause another plane crash in order to find another human sacrifice, and apparently be rescued from the island together with the revived—if vaguely dehumanized—Timmy, all of which arguably foregrounds the horror themes of the game's narrative aesthetics.

There is nothing inevitable about this largely linear narrative structure, though, as the player can just as well choose *not* to pursue the predetermined story and continue to have Eric build a life for himself on the island. Admittedly, the escalating nature of the attacks by the cannibalistic mutant tribes may make this option appear as the more challenging way to play (which is further complicated by the addition of a multiplayer mode), but *The Forest's* crafting mechanics—which include not just the option to create various tools and weapons but also a fairly sophisticated building system with complex custom buildings, storage, food generators, furniture, decorations, traps, and other defenses—arguably offer a larger degree of freedom to the player than, for example, the crafting mechanics of *Darkwood* do (see figure 15).

One way or another, *The Forest's* game mechanics and its game spaces are clearly designed to make the player experience fear or horror, with not only the first-person perspective and 3D graphics that are generated via the Unity engine but also the spatial design of the various mutant-infested caves that Eric will need to explore for the player to progress through the story being quite reminiscent of parts of the castle in *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (see figure 16). That being said, it is mainly the initial encounters with the island's cannibalistic mutant tribes that possess the kind of “jump scare” potential characteristic for both *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* and *Darkwood*, as the player's lack of experience and Eric's lack of crafted equipment leads to the kind of convergence between fear as a fiction emotion and fear as a gameplay emotion that at least some players will consider an important foundation for an appealing aesthetics of horror in a gaming context.

The longer the game progresses, however, the more will the crafting and building mechanics allow the player to take control of the game spaces by crafting ever better equipment and establishing ever more elaborate fortifications to guard against raiding bands of mutants (see figure 17). Eric will certainly still encounter particularly powerful mutants such as the Armsy or the Virginia (see figure 18) that pose a substantial ludic threat, but particularly if the player chooses not to pursue the quest structure of the predetermined narrative, the increase in control that the crafting mechanics afford seem to reduce *The Forest's* potential for letting its players experience horror. Once more, if the player knows from previous experience that Eric can easily defeat even the most scary-looking mutants, the resulting disconnect between the audiovisually or narratively represented threat of the mutants and their ludic threat within the game mechanics will prevent at least some players from experiencing either fear as a fiction emotion or fear as a gameplay emotion.



Figure 14: A member of the cannibalistic mutant tribes in The Forest.



Figure 15: Part of the building interface in The Forest.



Figure 16: First-person perspective representation of a cave in The Forest.



Figure 17: Extensive fortifications built by Eric in The Forest.



Figure 18: A rare above-ground sighting of a Virginia in *The Forest*.

At the same time, *The Forest* also demonstrates that it might not always be appropriate to consider the emotional “payload” of the monsters’ diminishing ludic threat in terms of a disconnect between experiencing fear as a fiction emotion and experiencing fear as a gameplay emotion. Rather, *The Forest*’s crafting mechanics allow not only for the player to control the game spaces but also for Eric to control his environment and thus diminish not only the ludic threat of the cannibalistic mutant tribes but arguably also their audiovisually represented and narratively framed threat. But, of course, optimizing Eric’s equipment and building ever more expansive fortifications to test the player’s survival-game skills against the ever-respawning hordes of mutants is only one way to play *The Forest*—and a player who focuses on having Eric find Timmy as swiftly as possible will still likely experience quite a bit of fear along the way, both as a fiction emotion and as a gameplay emotion.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, let me underscore again the need to acknowledge the diversity of indie aesthetics and the complex ways in which video games can be positioned and perceived as “indie.” As helpful as general attempts to develop terms and concepts aimed at the analysis of indie games as aesthetic artifacts may very well be, it is just as important to apply the resulting theoretical framework(s) to a broad selection of different examples. Against this background, the present article aimed to explore the aesthetics of horror that recent indie games offer to their players. Following a general discussion of how the audiovisual, ludic, and narrative aesthetics of indie games relate to the fiction emotions, gameplay emotions, and artifact emotions that these games in general and horror indie games in particular invite their players to experience, the four case studies of *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*, *Neverending Nightmares*, *Darkwood*, and *The Forest* reconstructed the various ways in which these games are designed to evoke uncanny moods and abject horror as well as the subtle interplay between fear as a fiction emotion and fear as a gameplay emotion,

the experience of which may also spark positive or negative artifact emotions that in turn may lead to aesthetic judgments of various kinds. Evidently, there would be more to say on the diversity not just of indie games in general but also of the indie horror games that the present article has primarily focused on—but, hopefully, the theoretical framework that I have at least hinted at in the process will provide a useful foundation for further explorations of the still largely unmapped area of indie game production, aesthetics, and reception.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Noteworthy scholarly contributions range from early programmatic interventions by Eric Zimmerman (2002) and Andreas Jahn-Sudmann (2008) via detailed studies of indie games' production culture(s) by Chase B. Martin and Mark Deuze (2009), Orlando Guevara-Villalobos (2011), Alison Harvey and Stephanie Fisher (2012), or Casey O'Donnell (2014) to recent attempts by Emma Westecott (2012), Nadav Lipkin (2013), Jesper Juul (2014), or Maria Garda and Paweł Grabarczyk (2016) to explore the synchronic as well as diachronic complexity of indie games' aesthetics and politics. Furthermore, there is at least some overlap between studies of indie games and studies that focus on "avantgarde games" (Schrank 2014) or "literary gaming" (Ensslin 2014).
- <sup>2</sup> For additional explorations of "retro style" in the context of indie game design, see, e.g., Garda 2013; Schmidt 2014; Thibault 2016. It is also worth noting here that indie games' use of a readily recognizable "retro style" is part of a significantly broader trend toward media nostalgia that has become quite ubiquitous within current digital culture. For further discussion, see, e.g., Caoduro 2014; Schrey 2014; Schröter 2019.
- <sup>3</sup> Juul certainly acknowledges that not all indie games employ this kind of decidedly "independent style" and also provides a well-informed historical reconstruction of some of the nuances and subdivisions within the latter, but his focus still primarily is on the ways in which indie game design signals "immediacy," "authenticity," and "honesty" as a means to distinguish itself from AAA video game design. If we follow David J. Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999)

in analyzing this particular kind of indie aesthetics as a remediation of the materiality and mediality of both older video games and other media forms, however, it appears somewhat problematic to talk about the result being “more immediate” than the aesthetics of mainstream video games. Again, Juul refers to discourses of authenticity that surround much of current indie game production here, but what he calls “independent style” arguably still tends to adhere to the logic of hypermediacy (as opposed to the logic of immediacy), which “multiplies the signs of mediation” and thus “makes us aware of the medium or media” (Bolter and Grusin 1999, p.34) used. See also endnote 2; as well as, e.g., Ivănescu 2019; Kirkland 2011; Sloan 2015.

- 4 This is obviously not to say that either Garda and Grabarczyk (2016) or Juul (2019) are not aware of the fact that the aesthetics of video games in general and indie games in particular entail more than just their visual design. Indeed, all three discuss what they consider to be indie-typical game mechanics, though without making the connection to this ludic dimension of indie games’ aesthetics particularly explicit, and also without exploring the question of indie games’ narrativity in any detail.
- 5 It would go beyond the scope of this article to develop this theoretical framework and its distinction between the audiovisual, ludic, and narrative aesthetics of indie games in any detail, but I would still like to stress its decidedly heuristic nature. Put in a nutshell, the proposed theoretical framework does not make any particularly specific claims about indie games or indie aesthetics, instead limiting itself to suggesting that these games and their aesthetics (as well as, indeed, *other* video games and *their* aesthetics) can be productively analyzed along these three dimensions. Again, this does not yet say anything about the results of such an analysis (which may turn out to be more or less productive in one, two, or all three of the dimensions), nor does it suggest that there are no other questions worth asking about indie games (which is particularly true in the case of multiplayer games that add quite a bit of aesthetic complexity around social interaction). For a more detailed discussion of the theoretical framework and the three dimensions of indie aesthetics it distinguishes, see Thon 2021.
- 6 When analyzing indie games’ audiovisual aesthetics, one can draw not only on existing explorations of the relation between video games and aesthetic theory, perception, and evaluation in an art context, which usually discuss the (audio)visual in connection with the ludic dimension of video game aesthetics (see, e.g., Kirkpatrick 2011; Sharp 2015), but also on a quite substantial corpus of research that is concerned with the auditive and visual design of video games (see, e.g., Beil 2012; Collins 2008; 2013; Jørgensen 2009; 2013; Tavinor 2009).
- 7 When analyzing indie games’ ludic aesthetics, we can yet again draw on an extensive corpus of ludological theories and concepts that range from primarily formalist approaches such as Juul’s (2005) early look at the relation between video games’ rules and fiction or Markku Eskelinen’s (2012) detailed and diligent expansion of Espen Aarseth’s (1997) groundbreaking study of “cybertexts” via more philosophically inclined works such as Ian Bogost’s (2006)

reflection on a method for video game analysis around the concept of “unit operations” or Miguel Sicart’s (2014) exploration of diverse practices of play to recent approaches such as those by Gordon Calleja (2011) or Brendan Keogh (2018) that emphasize the various forms of engagement and the embodied nature of the gameplay experiences that video games afford. See also, for example, the more general accounts of the aesthetics of interaction by Katja Kwastek (2013) and the aesthetics of play by Brian Upton (2015).

- <sup>8</sup> As is well documented (see Frasca 2003; as well as, e.g., Aarseth 2012; Eskelinen 2012; Thon 2015), game studies took some time to become comfortable with the narrative qualities of video games. That being said, there is now a broad consensus among video game scholars that *some* video games tell interesting stories in interesting ways and the analysis of indie games’ narrative aesthetics can thus yet again draw on a sizeable corpus of research on video games’ narrativity from game studies (see, e.g., Backe 2008; 2012; Domsch 2013; Engels 2014; Fernández-Vara 2011; Jenkins 2004; Neitzel 2014) and transmedial narratology (see, e.g., Ryan 2006; 2009; Thon 2016; 2017).
- <sup>9</sup> Evidently, there are different ways in which one can reconstruct an indie games’ production and reception discourses. Indeed, this does not just refer to the methodological distinction between quantitative content analysis and qualitative critical discourse analysis but also to the role that the results of such a reconstruction play in the broader analysis. While complementing a qualitative critical discourse analysis with a more quantitative content analysis will lead to the most comprehensive results, the focus of this article is slightly more narrow and I will thus largely limit myself to hinting at some of the ways in which my four case studies of recent indie horror games could be expanded by this kind of mixed-methods approach.
- <sup>10</sup> Horror can be understood as one of the defining genres of the current indie game landscape (see Diver 2016, pp.53–63, from the perspective of gaming journalism), with independent developers having created a wide range of horror games in recent years. No less importantly, horror is a well-established and complex video game genre in mainstream production as well (see, e.g., Habel and Kooyman 2013; Krzywinska 2015; Perron 2012; 2018; the contributions in Perron 2014; and the more general but still highly relevant discussion of the evolution of video game genres in Arsenault 2009) and any distinction between AAA horror games and indie horror games should not be taken to imply a single, unified aesthetics of horror that could be attributed to indie horror games and indie horror games alone (see the remarks on indie aesthetics as a discursive construct that is determined as much by how certain video games are positioned and perceived as “indie” as it is by any particular design choice). It is still worth noting, however, that many aesthetically ambitious and critically acclaimed horror video games of recent years are indeed indie games, including not just *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*, *Neverending Nightmares*, *Darkwood*, and *The Forest* but also, for example, the third-person action-adventure games *Through the Woods* (Antagonist 2016) and *Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory 2017), the first-person shooter games *Arizona*

*Sunshine* (Vertigo Games 2016) and *Devil Daggers* (Sorath2016), or the turn-based role-playing games *Dead State* (DoubleBear Productions 2014) and *Darkest Dungeon* (Red Hook Studios 2016). For further discussion of this generic range, see also the blog of the SFN-funded research project “Horror – Games – Politics” at <http://hgp.hypotheses.org/> [Accessed: 30 April 2019].

- 11 See, again, Perron 2012; 2018; and the contributions in Perron 2014 on video games; as well as, e.g., Carroll 1990; Hanich 2011; Hills 2005 on horror films; Jowett and Abbott 2013; Thompson 2009; and the contributions in Belau and Jackson 2018 on television; Round 2014; Schoell 2014; Wandtke 2018 on comics; Geary 1992; Halberstam 1995; and the contributions in Mulvey-Roberts 1998 on literary texts.
- 12 See, e.g., Eder 2016; Grodal 1999; 2009; Plantinga 2009; Singh 2014; Smith 2003; Tan 2011 on the emotional experiences afforded by films. While this article draws on cognitive theory to some extent, it should also be noted that, just like Carroll, “I have not done any audience research” (Carroll 1990, p.30) beyond looking at some of the relevant reception discourses and, indeed, my argument here is largely about the ways in which horror indie games are designed to evoke an emotional response, about how they “extend an invitation to feel in particular ways” (Smith 2003, p.12). While this is not the same as using empirical methods from media psychology in order to explore the emotional response of *actual* players of indie horror games such as *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*, *Neverending Nightmares*, *Darkwood*, and *The Forest*, then, I would still maintain that analyzing my four case studies from the perspective of cognitive game studies is not just “the next best thing,” but will in fact allow me to highlight complexities in these indie horror games’ aesthetics and the emotional responses they are designed to elicit that psychological experiments often struggle to acknowledge. See also, e.g., Calleja 2011; Frome 2006; Perron 2005; Schröter 2016; Schröter and Thon 2014; Thon 2016 for a selection of similar approaches from game studies and beyond that draw on cognitive theory without doing specific empirical research.
- 13 As Carroll goes on to note, “[i]f the monster were only evaluated as potentially threatening, the emotion would be fear; if only potentially impure, the emotion would be disgust” (Carroll 1996, p.28). As will become clear later on, this is a particularly important point with regard to indie games’ (or, indeed, AAA video games’) aesthetics of horror, as fear may be evoked as both a fiction and a gameplay emotion, while disgust seems to be primarily a fiction emotion. This, in turn, means that indie horror games (as well as AAA horror games) very much rely on the audiovisual representation and narrative framing of monsters in order to evoke not just fear (as both a fiction and a gameplay emotion) but also disgust (as primarily a fiction emotion). See also, e.g., Krzywinska 2008; Perron 2018; Švelch 2013 for additional remarks on video game monsters; and Menninghaus 2003 for a comprehensive study of disgust.
- 14 It is doubtlessly plausible that many films invite their spectators to experience “complex pattern[s] of imaginative closeness and distance” (Eder 2008, p.73) to the films’ characters and *their* emotional experiences, and concepts such as

empathy or, to a lesser degree, identification can be helpful in analyzing those patterns (see also, e.g., the contributions in Hagener and Vendrell Ferran 2017), but it remains important to keep in mind here that “identification and empathy are not all-encompassing phenomena focused on a single figure, but are always partial, gradual, and distributed across several different characters” (Eder 2008, p.71). That being said, while Perron’s claim that “it is certainly not the avatar that is meant to be scared or have emotions, but rather the gamer” (Perron 2005, p.7) may be overly simplistic, the ludic frame that video games employ tends to deemphasize empathy (see, e.g., Ryan 2009) and the kind of identification they may afford differs rather substantially from the kind of identification afforded by films (see, e.g., Klimmt et al. 2009).

- 15 Indeed, the range of available research is quite broad already, including not just Torben Grodal’s (2003) or Perron’s (2005; 2012) cognitivist models and Marie-Laure Ryan’s (2001) or Frome’s (2006) transmedial approaches (on which the present article primarily draws) but also Aki Järvinen’s (2009) or Katherine Isbister’s (2016) more design-centered frameworks and Gordon Calleja’s (2011) systematic exploration of players’ “emotional engagement” or Aubrey Anable’s (2018) proposal to conceptualize video game as “affective systems.” There is also a growing corpus of research on player emotions in media psychology (see, once more, Klimmt et al. 2009 for an early example).
- 16 Tan talks about the “fictional world” (Tan 2011, p.54) of the film here, but it is worth noting that the term “storyworld” I use above is agnostic with regard to the fictional/nonfictional distinction (see the overview in Thon 2016, pp.66–69; as well as the discussion of referential multimodality in Thon 2019). It seems that there are good reasons not to limit a general theory of emotional response across media to fictional representations, then, and Tan (2000) has since also used the term “R-emotions” (short for “representation emotions”), emphasizing the similarities between the emotions that fictional representations and nonfictional representations invite their recipients to experience. However, considering that most if not all indie horror games can safely be considered “fictional” and that, moreover, “fiction emotions” seems to be more established than “representation emotions” in the field of game studies (in large part due to Perron’s influential expansion of the distinction between “fiction emotions” and “artifact emotions”), I will continue to use the former term in the present article.
- 17 Incidentally, this further reinforces the necessity to take not only the overall design of the audiovisual, ludic, and narrative aesthetics but also the surrounding production and reception discourses into account when analyzing how video games are positioned and perceived as “indie.” As I hope this article will already demonstrate, this does not always require a full-fledged qualitative critical discourse analysis or quantitative content analysis, but it does require at least some engagement with additional material (including, e.g., developer interviews or video game reviews).
- 18 For a more detailed discussion of *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*’s use of strategies of subjective representation (including both auditive and visual

representations of Daniel's hallucinations and memories) as a part of its narrative as well as ludic aesthetics, see also Thon 2016, pp.311–313.

- 19 Without unpacking the different and at least partially contradictory ways in which the three terms “emotion,” “affect,” and “mood” can be understood to relate to each other, it might still be worth noting that I here follow Greg M. Smith in distinguishing between emotions as being determined by “an action tendency, an orientation toward objects, and a goal orientation” (Smith 1999, p.104) and moods as being “less clearly object-, goal-, and action-oriented” (Smith 1999, p.105).
- 20 See also Gilgenbach 2013; as well as Theroux 2010. As has already been hinted at in the introductory discussion of indie aesthetics, it is not uncommon for indie games to imitate (or pay homage to) specific artists or artworks in their attempt to remediate the aesthetics of older video games or other art forms (see also, once more, Juul 2014; 2019). Still, the extent to which *Neverending Nightmares* is positioned and perceived as remediating the visual style of Edward Gorey's art seems noteworthy.
- 21 For an influential early (albeit controversial) account of photographic pictures as “transparent” (and, thus, not “opaque”), see Walton 1984. Another option would be to refer to the concept of hypermediacy (see endnote 3), as the materiality and mediality of the visual representation is foregrounded. While *Neverending Nightmares* was not successful commercially and also had only limited critical success (see Matulef 2015), its unusual visual style tends to be perceived favorably by critics and players alike (see, e.g., Orion 2017; Prell 2014b; Rowen 2014).
- 22 While the comparatively well-balanced intersecting game mechanics of *Darkwood* may leave this largely in the realm of the hypothetical (see, e.g., Porreca 2017; Shive 2017; Smith 2017), it is also worth stressing again here that video games in general and horror games in particular are not just “machine[s] for the production of variety of expression” (Aarseth 1997, p.3) but also afford a range of different emotional experiences located between “the two poles [...] that demarcate the experience of a newcomer from one who has mastered a game” (Perron 2012, p.3). Any analysis of indie games' aesthetics of horror will need to keep these differences in mind even if it focuses on reconstructing the emotional experiences that such games offer to their first-time players.
- 23 See, e.g., Barbosa 2018; Hafer 2018; Walker 2018 for a range of critics' takes on the ludic challenges and resulting aesthetics of horror that *The Forest* offers. Incidentally, it is worth stressing again here that *The Forest* also includes a multiplayer co-op game mode that allows up to eight players to simultaneously play the game, which may lead to a marked shift in players' emotional experiences, from fear and horror to artifact emotions as well as emotions such as happiness and trust that emerge within social interaction. For an example of the kind of humorous banter that even the multiplayer mode in the early access version of *The Forest* already affords, see, e.g., VanossGaming 2014.