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"IF THE DOG DIES, I QUIT": *BLAIR WITCH* AND THE PROBLEMS OF CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOLOGICAL HORROR GAMES

This paper highlights the manner in which contemporary psychological horror games rely on repetitive storylines and plot twists, resulting in predictability of new titles, and the way in which this negatively affects immersion and players' emotional investment. Through examining the game *Blair Witch* (2019), developed by the Polish studio Bloober Team, and its inclusion of an animal companion, the article demonstrates how shifting the players' affective identification from the avatar to the companion character can cause players to overlook the shortcomings of the game. At the same time, by juxtaposing *Blair Witch* with other similar digital game texts, the paper showcases how linearity and reliance on predictable tropes in a game can be masked by the effective inclusion of an interesting companion with appropriate mechanics.

Keywords: Blair Witch, contemporary psychological horror games, psychological horror games, Digital Games, companion character

INTRODUCTION

The goal of all horror fiction, no matter the medium, consists in scaring the target audience. The emotions of the audience consuming horror texts are supposed to "mirror those of the positive human characters in certain, but not all, respects" (Carroll, 1990, p. 18). Even if the audience knows all too well that monsters are not real, the terrifying creatures portrayed in the text which compel the protagonist to recoil and cry out in terror are expected to elicit responses from the audience which converge with those reactions. This feature is the most significant aspect of the horror genre (Carroll, 1990, p. 18). Digital games are a particularly good medium for the horror genre for a variety of reasons. They can offer unique mechanics and gameplay to express altered realities or supernatural forces (Rouse, 2009, p. 17) and make use of typical horror conventions, including limited and erratic information available to

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the protagonist or locations full of dangerous creatures and inexplicable phenomena (Rouse, 2009, p. 19). The interactive nature of the medium means games can offer the players an actual embodied threat (Perron, 2009, pp. 125–126), which contributes to immersion, insofar that the players' expectations are matched by what the game environment has to offer, thus creating a sensation of direct presence (Kubinski, 2014, pp. 133–134).

Psychological horror games constitute a specific subgenre which places emphasis on the emotional and psychological states of the protagonists to achieve the effect of scaring the players. The narratives of such game texts usually concern the memories, fears or anxieties of the characters, involving events and enemies which are symbolically significant. Consequently, such games rely to a greater extent on their storylines to create immersion. While earlier psychological horror games (such as the first four installments of the *Silent Hill* franchise [1998–2009], *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* [2002], *Sanitarium* [1998], or *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* [2010]) additionally included elements of survival horror games – namely escaping monsters, limited supplies, and the threat of dying – contemporary psychological horror games show an increased tendency to employ a different strategy, settling for slightly varying versions of the same tropes, mechanics, and story development. The majority of the titles published in the last decade labeled as "psychological horror" can be described as walking simulators with elements of puzzles and item collection; they are usually based on a fully linear or predominantly linear story revolving around a character, typically male, harboring dark secrets, and confronting the symbolic manifestations of their past. The result of such consistency is the predictability of new games – the more games use the same story with only very minor differences in every subsequent iteration, the more possible is it for the target audience to become even more familiar with the most characteristic plot points, which they can learn to anticipate. This article aims at examining the game *Blair Witch* (2019) developed by the Polish studio Bloober Team – more specifically, the way in which the game uses an animal companion – with the goal of illustrating the above tendency and its repercussions.

Blair Witch is a first-person psychological horror game published in 2019. Its premise consists in a familiar story of a character (Ellis, a former police officer and war veteran) suffering from repressed trauma and PTSD, traversing a haunting mysterious location (the woods in Burkittsville), being led ever further away from tangible reality by supernatural clues and occurrences, and becoming increasingly lost and helpless. His only point of reference is his emotional support dog, Bullet, and the only way of contacting the outside world is his phone. Of these two, only Bullet is consistently reliable and helpful.

As stated above, contemporary psychological horror games display certain tendencies, and discussing *Blair Witch* as a representative thereof can shed light on the nature of those tendencies and, more importantly, their significance. What makes this particular game worth examining is that it includes an animal companion – a German shepherd – a fact which not only obscures the mediocre aspects of the overall premise of *Blair Witch,* but also makes the game stand out among other titles of the subgenre. Without the presence of the animal companion, *Blair Witch* comes across as an unremarkable adventure, since it relies on a decidedly linear, predictable narrative with only minor variations between the available endings. As a result, the game fails to make the players care about the protagonist, creating, in turn, a situation where *Blair Witch* performs serviceably as a broadly defined horror game, but not

necessarily as a psychological horror game text or even a survival horror game – seeing as it does not employ any survival horror specific mechanics such as an actual threat (which would result in taking damage), limited resources (such as batteries or, in this particular case – dog snacks), or at least proper chase sequences. In other words, it is the presence of the dog that makes *Blair Witch* not only more engaging, but also memorable as a game, if not as a story.

The game begins with Ellis, accompanied by Bullet, entering the cursed forest of Black Hills in order to join the search for Peter, a missing nine-year-old boy. Despite the fact that other search parties have already departed – and the fact that both his ex-wife Jess and his friend Sheriff Lanning advise against this endeavor considering Ellis' childhood trauma, which is related to those woods, and his PTSD stemming from his war experiences – Ellis ventures on alone in hope of finding the boy. Before long, with the help of Bullet, he comes across Peter's baseball cap, and – despite Lanning's clear objections – has Bullet follow the trail immediately, without waiting for the others. The two become briefly separated, which results in Ellis experiencing PTSD-related hallucinations, but he recovers once they are reunited, and presses on deeper into the woods. Eventually, he finds a camcorder and several videotapes which seemingly alter the reality around him, causing a certain object to materialize out of thin air and restore other objects to their former states – both of which Ellis uses to continue his search for Peter as increasingly bizarre events unfold around him.

It must be noted that *Blair Witch* is quite effective in its use of traditional horror themes and motifs. The game makes good use of a fairly commonplace setup wherein the protagonist becomes lost in an unfamiliar, dangerous forest inhabited by monstrous, apparently hostile creatures. The convention of this particular narrative, even if not very unique, is executed properly; the sound design of the wind, with rustling leaves and cracking twigs, creates an atmosphere of uneasiness and ever-present threat, while the woods are aesthetically convincing and provide suitable ambiance, not to mention a believable environment for the players to get lost in as the sun sets slowly and visibility drops. The complete isolation of the protagonist, in terms of both his immediate surroundings and his increasing removal in time and space from other human characters as the story progresses, as well as the increasingly supernatural nature of events, as reflected in the mechanics and the graphical user interface, suit the formula well.

THE CONVENTIONAL: *BLAIR WITCH* AS ELLIS'S STORY

In fact, the problematic aspects of *Blair Witch* all stem from its features as a psychological horror game. While games as a medium are conducive to horror – especially the survival horror subgenre – matters become more complicated in psychological horror texts, where a connection with the protagonist is usually not only anticipated, but also desirable for better understanding of the story and, often, of the gameplay mechanics as well.

Works of art and culture texts in general can draw the attention of the audience to specific aspects of the portrayed characters and their circumstances in order to influence of the emotions of the audience members (Eder et al., 2010, p. 55). Games are no different in this regard. Engagement, specifically affective engagement, is best understood in the context of "the perspective between characters and their audiences" (Eder et al., 2010, p. 55). However,

in the case of digital games the issue is more complicated than just "a simple matter of direct identification" (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003, p. 453); the player "relates to [the] game character through the double-consciousness of play," which allows for an "intense and emotionally immersive" relationship, but also frames the game protagonist as "a tool, a puppet, an object for the player to manipulate" (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003, p. 453).

While the player never loses sight of the instrumental aspect of the character, in certain genres – such as narrative adventure or mystery drama – an emotional investment is required for the game to generate the appropriate experience. Such games tend to draw the player's attention to what is meant to lead to involvement: the characters' body language, expressions, behavior, and interactions with other characters (Eder et al., 2010, p. 55). In contrast to older, previously mentioned psychological horror games – and some newer ones – *Blair Witch*, like many contemporary psychological horror game texts, employs the first-person perspective; this means that unlike protagonists such as James Sunderland in *Silent Hill 2*, Senua in *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (2017), or Daniel Noyer in *Song of Horror* (2020), Ellis is almost never on screen. The player cannot, therefore, see his facial expressions or read his body language, a fact which translates into an inability to discern the emotional state of the character beyond the dialogue originally included in the game. Such determination would be immensely useful in a game revolving around the character's psyche, and it would allow the players to understand their own feelings concerning the protagonist: "feeling for them," ranging from sympathy to antipathy, or "feeling with them" – namely, empathy (Eder et al., 2010, p. 55). The shortcomings of *Blair Witch* in this respect point to one of the most significant formal limitations of the currently most popular formula in contemporary psychological horror games.

Another issue in *Blair Witch* is the question of the suspension of disbelief. While it is not uncommon for horror fiction protagonists to be irresponsible, especially in cinema texts, it would seem that such a set-up is a little less commonplace in games. Usually, the characters set out to battle demons, either real or metaphorical, with a clear, if sometimes misguided, goal in mind: find a wife or a daughter, a friend, sometimes a dog. The horror genre is known for its fantastic scenarios, from the quest to meet with a long-dead wife, like in the aforementioned *Silent Hill 2*, to revisiting a now-abandoned orphanage to find clues about a missing brother (*Palmyra Orphanage*, 2019). In other scenarios, the unsuspecting protagonist might be suddenly threatened by a monster or monsters and must find a way to escape. However, *Blair Witch* combines the convention of the unexpected monster threat with the metaphorical inner journey the protagonist must undertake to face their inner darkness, resulting in quite inconsistent characterization. Ellis is introduced to the player from the start as a character with "health issues" (*Blair Witch*, 2019), and he suffers from hallucinations as early as twenty to thirty minutes into the game; he has joined the search for the missing boy despite being advised not to do so due to his PTSD, but having found the initial clues, he ventures into the woods on his own without waiting for any backup. He accepts the reality-changing videotapes after uttering only one feeble comment, and he proceeds deeper into the forest without ever questioning whether the clues he is following might be hallucinations as well. He disobeys Sheriff Lanning's instructions because he is intent on following objects

that materialize out of nowhere, and apparently sees nothing strange about explaining this thought process to Lanning:

> ELLIS:
> Ellis to base! Peter didn't run away! He was kidnapped! I found a tape! It shows the man who did it! ... [T]hose tapes, they make things appear... There's no time, Lanning! We have to find the kid. He's in serious danger! (*Blair Witch*, 2019)

At the same time, he quickly disregards all the other visions concerning his past in the war, for example, a late comrade-in-arms calling him on the radio, stating firmly "No. You're not real" (*Blair Witch*, 2019)[1]. This unquestioning acceptance of some events and objects and decisive rejection of others signals to the players that some events and items are more important to the story progression than others. As such, *Blair Witch* showcases how clumsy psychological characterization will push the suspension of disbelief to the limits even when the setup and environment strive for utmost realism. This is an issue for a psychological horror game, where narrative flaws have a more lasting emersive effect (Kubinski, 2014, pp. 133–134) on the gameplay experience than any ludic flaws related to graphics or mechanics (Kubinski, 2014, pp. 134–135). If the player does not find Ellis' story compelling, they are unlikely to perceive the whole experience as satisfying.

This is where the character of Bullet comes into play, both literally and figuratively. The dog provides the players with an alternative object of emotional engagement; as the content creator AngryJoe explains:

> The problem is, I just don't like Ellis. I'm not interested in his story. I love his fucking dog, though. The dog, Bullet, he's a good boy! ... And the game does get bonus points, because yes, you can pet [him]! (AngryJoe Show, 2019).

The point made by AngryJoe indicates the twofold effect of Bullet's presence on the way the players experience *Blair Witch* as a horror game text. On the one hand, as a sentient, friendly

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[1] This situation is even more problematic since the narrative includes cut-scenes and scripted events, as well as many minor items, meant to refer specifically to Ellis' PTSD – a mental condition, which is a motif that in and of itself tends to be exploited in horror games (a phenomenon widespread to the point where it justifies the existence of Asylum Jam, a 48-hour-long game jam held between years 2013 and 2017, which aimed at challenging game developers to explore the limits of the horror genre without relying on harmful mental health stereotypes, including setting of a story in psychiatric institutions or basing the horror on the perspective of a protagonist suffering from some mental condition). Narrative-wise, this inclusion serves little to no purpose, given that Ellis is a character who had already experienced some undisclosed childhood trauma in the Black Hills forest and could not face the guilt over having shot an unarmed teenager during his time in the force. Furthermore, neither Ellis' skills nor his inventory reflect his past as a veteran with PTSD, which means that this aspect of his character has little impact on the gameplay experience itself (Lankowski et al., 2003, p. 7). He does become nervous when his emotional support dog wanders off, but apart from a couple of interactive and non-interactive cut-scenes when he initiates contact with Bullet, there is no particular mechanics to call Bullet over for the specific purpose of having him comfort Ellis. All of the above elements point to the significance of trauma while at the same time missing the emotional target, even though the player's emotional investment throughout the game depends on their investment in Ellis' personal drama.

being they can see on the screen he draws more of their attention and emotional investment than Ellis. On the other hand, the player is familiar with the convention, so Ellis' fate does not constitute much of a mystery, which means, in turn, that only Bullet is susceptible to harm, seeing as he is not only a mere companion but also an animal. As a result, it may be inferred that an avatar switch to complete the game (like, for example, in *Song of Horror*, where the player can choose to continue as Etienne if Sophie dies, or René if something happens to Erica) is highly unlikely, if not even impossible. For those reasons. the players might actually show more interest in Bullet's well-being than in Ellis' well-being, growing disconnected from Ellis as a horror protagonist. Players very rarely, if ever, speak of Ellis, but usually almost immediately react to Bullet, saying things ranging from very short, categorical assertions such as "If the dog dies, I quit" (John Wolfe, 2019b) or "If the dog dies, I riot" (8 Bites, 2019), through slightly more dramatic claims like "If you take away Bullet, I'm taking your game away from my hard drive," (8-BitRyan, 2019b) to decidedly emphatic statements: "This dog cannot die. At all cost, this dog must live" (Albert_Fn_Wesker, 2019). In fact, the players seem to care less about Ellis' emotional turmoil and stress, and more about Bullet being upset about a twig figure Ellis encounters early on in the game or his disappearing out of Ellis' sight.

THE CHARMING: BULLET'S PLACE IN *BLAIR WITCH*

Bullet is by no means the only dog in the world of digital games. Players tend to be sympathetic towards animals, especially dogs, in horror games, regardless of whether they are well developed, or only briefly introduced, such as Calliope in *Maid of Sker* (2020) or the dog in *Resident Evil 4* (2005). Bullet plays a much more significant role in *Blair Witch* than those pets; he has his own set of mechanics, complete with a user interface, and an item dedicated just to him – snacks. His appearance is customizable, allowing the player to change the color of his fur, eyes, and reflective collar, which engenders feelings of intimacy with the animal.

The player can interact with Bullet through the use of five commands – they can summon Bullet, order him to seek, stay or stay close, or – most importantly – pet Bullet or reprimand him. The command most integral to both the gameplay and story progression is "Seek," which allows the player to show various items to Bullet, prompting him to guide Ellis to the subsequent locations in the game. The players seem to appreciate such guidance in the gameworld of Blair Witch, as they often comment on the subjective feeling that they get lost without Bullet's help (GamerGirlRegina, 2019).

Bullet is a non-human character, but one that quickly inspires a feeling of familiarity. The dog is programmed with a number of realistic animations, which allow him to spontaneously sit or lie down of his own accord, roll around in the grass and weeds or dig in the ground; occasionally he even runs off into the forest, disappearing from the players' sight, which is a behavior rarely seen in animal or human companions in horror games, regardless of their function or independence – Hewie in *Haunting Ground* (2005), Ellie in *The Last of Us* (2004) or Ashley in *Resident Evil 4* might occasionally lag behind, but will not run off ahead of the protagonist or stop to sniff (in case of an animal companion) at something. Furthermore, the fine animation gives Bullet the expressive body language and face typical of real dogs,

which means that he can both show his own emotions and attitudes as well as react to the emotions (Emmerich et al., 2018, p. 146) and attitudes displayed by Ellis, embodying the qualities of a companion which offers a meaningful emotional relationship that players tend to value (Emmerich et al., 2018, p. 149). These features contribute to the players' perception of Bullet as a realistic animal with his own free will; this is particularly visible in case of letsplayers, who at times will stop speaking to their audience for long periods of time and talk exclusively to Bullet (8-Bit Ryan, 2019a, 2019b), addressing him directly:

> Let's go over here, Bullet. [...] Bullet! Bullet? Whatya barking at? Whatya barking at, boy? What is it? What is it, where are you going? What is it? Something's in there. [...] We've got to get in there. We're gonna get in there, boy, we've just got to figure out the combination (JazzyGuns, 2019).

The manner in which the letsplayer JazzyGuns repeats short, simple questions and uses words of endearment like "boy" resembles the way in which one would address a real animal. The same attitude is reflected in the players' approach to the mechanics of petting and reprimanding Bullet; although the majority of players will eagerly pet him even without a good incentive, the "Reprimand" command seems to make them positively uneasy, prompting them to either reject the possibility of being mean to Bullet altogether, or be torn as to whether or not they should scold the dog in order to prevent him from getting hurt.

Another aspect of Bullet's character that emphasizes the way in which his presence shifts the emotional reception of *Blair Witch* as a psychological horror game consists in the balance of power in the relationship between him and Ellis. In horror games, the relationship between a protagonist and a human companion usually involves both mechanics and narrative design revolving around either assistance or protection. Assisting characters, like Ellie in *The Last of Us* (2005), will aid the protagonist; an escorted character, such as Ashley in *Resident Evil 4* (2005) will usually seek shelter or simply cower in face of danger instead of assisting or attacking. In contrast, the fact that Bullet is a dog – Ellis' dog – puts the two characters in a rather distinct relationship. Ellis is responsible for Bullet insofar that since he expects Bullet to follow his commands, every action he makes Bullet take – which might potentially bring the dog to harm – is Ellis' responsibility. By making players experience the emotional burden of weighing the possible consequences of their command choices, *Blair Witch* finds another way to harness the emotional power of game texts (Isbister, 2016, p. 40). However, this still means that the players' emotional investment lies in the dog companion, and not in the protagonist of the story – for example, when Bullet disappears for the first time, following the scent of Peter's cap, the players' immediate fear is not for Ellis, but for Bullet, as they suspect that inevitably "something dreadful is going to happen to [him]" (CJUgames, 2019).

Although dogs appear as positive characters in numerous horror game texts, in the context of this paper it is worth mentioning at least one more prominent dog companion – Hewie in *Haunting Ground* (2005). Bullet and Hewie share a number of similarities: both are important for the character's emotional well-being (as can be seen in gameplay in *Blair Witch* and in Fiona's "comment" section in *Haunting Ground*) and both come with quite sophisticated mechanics allowing the player to issue commands to the animal. However, their function in the respective stories and gameplay is vastly different. Fiona runs into Hewie by accident,

and he seems to be the only creature she can trust as they both try to escape the castle they are trapped in. Meanwhile, Bullet is brought along by Ellis as his emotional support dog, and his function is supposed to be comforting Ellis.[2] And yet, if the character of Hewie were completely removed, *Haunting Ground* would still function as a game, apart from a couple of inessential puzzles. Bullet, conversely, dominates the game, both in terms of emotional impact and gameplay design, to the point whereupon his removal from *Blair Witch* the game would be reduced to a text almost identical to many other contemporary psychological horror games – a walking simulator with elements of puzzles and item collection.

THE FLAWED:
BLAIR WITCH AS A CONTEMPORARY PSYCHOLOGICAL HORROR GAME

Blair Witch shares its premise (apart from the aforementioned differences) with a substantial number of other games labeled as psychological horror, which can be grouped together according to their specific structure. This type of game revolves around the characters facing their inner darkness and this, more often than not, comes as a revelation to the protagonists themselves and is intended to be received as such by the player as well; this effect can be achieved through the use of a character suffering from amnesia (like Alex in *Silent Hill: Homecoming*, 2008), suppressing a terrible memory (Joe in *Downfall*, 2016), suffering from some sort of mental illness (Jonathan in *Inmates*, 2017) or hallucinating (Dr McClein in *Roots of Insanity*, 2017).[3] Most players tend to associate this particular structure with the 2001 game *Silent Hill 2,* which is admittedly the best-known and most critically acclaimed game employing this structure. Ever since, many games have emulated this premise, with better results (as can be seen in *Detention* (2017), where the symbolic phantoms of Ray's guilt are not woven into the game world as much as they form it, or in *Downfall*, where the revealing of Joe's guilt depends on his acceptance of his role in his wife's death and is based on dialogue with other characters, not on some uncovered evidence), or worse (including

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[2] Unlike Bullet, Hewie can perform attacks and charged attacks to assist Fiona in fights, and he needs to have his stamina and health restored periodically. Bullet, on the other hand, never engages in combat, and does not need healing (it is also worth noting that in contrast to more action-oriented games, such as *Fallout 4* (2015) featuring the dog companion Dogmeat, or *Dead to Rights* (2002), which includes a K-9 partner Shadow, there are no attack options for Bullet, or even options to make him do specific things such as carrying items – although Bullet's proper training allows him to help with the search, which is emphasized in the gameplay). Even the dog snacks seem to have minimal effect on his wellbeing. Instead, as has been mentioned, the player is encouraged to interact with Bullet through emotive actions, including petting, for which there are four different animations, including one belly rub.

[3] The difference between such games and games like *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* or *Layers of Fear* (2016) is that in the latter the avatar's dark past is slowly revealed to the player, the characters themselves consciously and voluntarily undertake their journey to face their demons, for better or worse – Senua sets out to battle her darkness in order to bring her beloved back from the dead, while the Artist rummages through his house in a demented pursuit of perfection. In the former games, the characters are invariably surprised at the revelation concerning either their past actions, or the relevance of their past actions to the current events.

Devotion (2019) or *Someday You'll Return* (2020), where in both cases the protagonist is an obviously neglectful father trying to redeem himself in some otherworldly dimension after having contributed to his daughter's death).

Unfortunately, the situation in which the narrative design and the actual virtual environment are structured around a representation of the disturbed mind of a guilty protagonist instead of around the actual depicted world has become so overused that players have grown overly familiar with the applied themes and strategies; these, in turn, become incorporated into their metagame knowledge. The issue here is not so much the moral alignment of the protagonist as the manner in which the proliferation of similarly structured horror games affects the player's attitude and expectations. When they start playing *Infliction* (2018) or *The Beast Inside* (2019), in the former they immediately suspect that Gary is the one who is responsible for Sarah's death, or in the latter assume that the stranger who kills Emma in the opening scene is actually Adam. Subsequently, some players will become desensitized to the premise of a character coping with guilt or anguish after having hurt someone close to them or having killed someone (John Wolfe, 2019), and perceive the games based on that premise as repetitive "we killed them, as it turns out!' storylines" (John Wolfe, 2018). Others might still be entertained by yet another variation of the same story, but nevertheless notice the predictable pattern, immediately sensing that there is "something wrong with [the] character" (8-BitRyan, 2019).

However, the crucial difference between the contemporary games which try to recreate the effect *Silent Hill 2* had on the players and that very title is the fact that the player had at the very least six hours to get to know James Sunderland, observe him fight, flirt, attempt to reason with other characters, and even try to save them or kill them. In many contemporary games that use this structure (most of which are either independent projects or the so-called high production value games) the players get less time with the protagonist, and the majority of interactions with other characters (if not all of them) tend to be shown in flashbacks, increasing the psychological distance (Cohen, 2001, p. 251) between the player and the story of their avatar.

This situation creates two major problems for a psychological horror narrative, both of which *Blair Witch* illustrates well. First, the knowledge of the player must be processed from the perspective of the protagonist so that it can be transformed into empathic emotions (Cohen, 2001, p. 251); second, in horror especially, the emotional state of the audience should, as previously mentioned, mimic that of the protagonist (Carroll, 1990, p. 18). The fact that the players tend to gravitate towards paying attention to Bullet rather than to the actual protagonist of the game demonstrates that they are not, in fact, processing the story from Ellis' perspective. *Blair Witch*, like other games characterized by this specific problem, starts employing the necessary clues – the dog tags symbolizing Ellis' war experience, psychiatrist's notes pointing to the childhood trauma – rather early on, but the players, lacking familiarity with the character, rely on their metagame knowledge to interpret them instead. In fact, in the case of Blair Witch and other similar games, the players' metagame knowledge of the formula actually allows them to accurately guess or predict the coming events or the "twist" of the story, as well as the meaning behind some items and scripted events. This means that the moment Ellis picks up the dog tags and voices his disbelief regarding

the nature and origin of the tags, the players are already proverbial miles ahead of him and the revelation the game is moving towards. As a result, *Blair Which* exemplifies one of the major problems contemporary psychological horror games struggle with to a greater or lesser degree. If a game is meant to rely on a twist which reveals the protagonist's past to the players in a shocking, dramatic manner, and it sheds light on the events and objects encountered so far, it is beyond doubt a major problem when that twist comes as no surprise to the players. Furthermore, a situation in which the players know more than they are expected to know at a given point, and in many cases more than the character does (Cohen, 2001, p. 251), thus remaining psychologically distanced from that character (Cohen, 2001, p. 251), makes identifying with the character difficult. The perspective of the character is not required, so empathetic emotions (Cohen, 2001, p. 251) are never formed; the events and the meaning of discovered materials and items are instead processed almost exclusively from the players' perspective. In practice, this means that the players go around collecting various clues and interpreting them according to their own logic and metagame knowledge, while Ellis (or any other protagonist of similarly designed games) experiences each potentially emotionally meaningful moment on his own, as the players merely look on, even during the finale of the game. In contrast, those playing *Silent Hill 2* usually experience a mix of complex emotions in key moments of the game, especially towards the end – genuine shock, sadness, and even some sort of vicarious shame or guilt – seeing as until the point when it is revealed that it had been in fact James himself who had murdered Mary, the players have been cheering for and siding with James as the protagonist and (crucially) their avatar.[4]

CONCLUSION

It is safe to assume that the fact that players consider *Blair Witch* to be a flawed but satisfactory horror experience – even if it shares a number of shortcomings with other contemporary psychological horror game texts – is related to the way the players focus on the protagonist's dog so intensely both in terms of emotional attachment and involvement in the story. It is not so much about how a German Shepherd distracts the players from the protagonist, but rather how effectively the employment of a solid, competent inclusion of a dog companion with appropriate mechanics raises a decent but predictable by-the-book game above mediocrity, masking its linearity and its reliance on predictable tropes.

As a character, Bullet offers a proverbial breath of fresh air into a stale formula, introducing stakes and tension. The presence of a cheerful, trusting animal companion affects *Blair Which* as a horror narrative in a twofold manner: first, it dulls the atmosphere of danger and

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[4] As explained by the user blank fairy: "the reason why SH2 had such a huge impact on me was because of all James and I went through together. I got attached to him because we were both just a couple of suckers going through a terrifying time together and utterly and hopelessly confused about it all. [...] So that's why when I finally found out the twist, I felt so shocked it was almost suffocating." https://silenthillforum.com/viewtopic.php?p=393738#p393738 [11.09.2020].

terror, since players not only can but are essentially encouraged to interact with another living being, and actively seek comfort in its presence; since Bullet can express emotions but cannot communicate verbally, his presence does little to fuel Ellis' subjective fears related to his nightmare (like a human character could by asking questions or commenting on sounds or items). As such, he dampens the potential for horror instead of increasing it, as far as convention is concerned – even if he does not offer any help in the form of attacking or at least distracting the enemy, he most definitely lessens the feeling of loneliness (Emmerich et al., 2018, p. 146), being regarded by some players as "simply one of the best parts of the game" that "also kind of takes away a lot of the tension," since they feel "safe with Bullet around" (AngryJoe Show, 2019).

Second, given that the vast majority of players assume that Bullet, unlike Ellis, might die before the end of the game, they become not only attached to Bullet, but also protective of him – and, as a result, their affective identification shifts from the actual protagonist of the game to the companion character. This means that the potentially extensive range of complex emotions the audience of horror fiction conventionally experience becomes lost and is reduced to the intense stress of worrying about Bullet. While the tension itself works in favor of horror game texts (Rouse, 2009, p. 20), and even the emotional investment in Bullet alone facilitates emotional investment in the game as a whole (Russell, 2016, p. 114), there is no real connection with, closeness to, or any particular sense of liking (Bopp et al., 2019, p. 313) that the players might have for Ellis. And while the players of *Blair Witch* might at least become invested in Bullet's fate or admire the interesting mechanics, in other contemporary psychological horror games the lack of identification with the character is a major problem for a horror text. With way too great a reliance on hallucinations, delusions, flashbacks and manifestations, the story might either become too obvious for the players to become engaged in, or too difficult to follow, disrupting the immersive experience. In both cases, the game text will lack one of the essential pleasures a horror text can provide: fascination and curiosity concerning the impossible (Hoedt, 2016, p. 13), one that allows the audience to endure the terror of the content they are consuming so that they can discover the resolution of the story (Carroll, 1990, p. 192). Psychological horror games, which are structured around a specific formula, face an even more difficult task, seeing as they must offer something new and truly shocking in order to leave a lasting impression on their audience (Phillips, 2005, p. 7), and if they fail at doing so, falling back into routine and predictability, they risk disengaging prospective players.

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