IMMERSION, NARRATIVE, AND GENDER CRISIS IN SURVIVAL HORROR VIDEO GAMES

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In a world full of opportunities to spend free time, one can choose among activities or objects and fully immerse oneself into interaction, and if the activity or object does not possess enough trigger points of satisfaction, one can simply start doing a different activity or interact with a different object. When it comes to video games, this does not need to be the case as Andrei Nae successfully demonstrates. In his book *Immersion, Narrative and Gender Crisis in Survival Horror Video Games*, he offers a probe into the immersion occurring even when video games fail to provide players with functioning core mechanics, movement controls, combat or interactive elements.

The author discusses immersion based on the example of eight survival horror video games, and categorizes them into two groups: classical survival horror games and post-classical survival horror games. The author of the monograph provides in-depth analysis of eight of the most representative and successful survival horror games: *Resident Evil*[1], *Silent Hill 2*[2], *Fatal Frame*[3], *Forbidden Siren*[4], *Resident Evil 4*[5], *Condemned: Criminal Origins*[6], *Alien: Isolation*[7], and *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*[8], looking at the immersive strategies employed in them.

The monograph consists of ten chapters divided into three parts, with each chapter being supported by rich bibliography and notes. The first part of the book elaborates on immersion and gender in action games considered as the genre to which survival horror video games belong. A. Nae introduces the reader into the issue of immersion as well as to the common ground for immersion analysed in further chapters: immediacy, interactivity and narrativity. While specifying degrees and criteria for achieving ideal immersion, the author offers a complex view of how a video game functions and how its functioning results in higher or lower degrees of immersion. Narrativity is also discussed. The author depicts three parts that contribute to its strong bond with immersion according to D. Herman: *sequentiality*, *world-making/world-distrupting* and *experientiality*.[9] Highlighting suspense as another factor contributing to obtaining a certain level of immersion as well as storytelling, debating ludic and narrative pleasures, the reader obtains a complex methodology subsequently present and followed in the next chapters.

1   CAPCOM: *Resident Evil*. [digital game]. Osaka : Capcom, 1996.
2   TEAM SILENT: *Silent Hill 2*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Konami, 2001.
3   TECMO: *Fatal Frame*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Tecmo, 2001.
4   PROJECT SIREN: *Forbidden Siren*. [digital game]. Tokyo, San Mateo, CA : Sony Computer Entertainment 2003.
5   CAPCOM PRODUCTION STUDIO 4: *Resident Evil 4*. [digital game]. Osaka : Capcom, 2005.
6   MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS: *Condemned: Criminal Origins*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Sega, 2005.
7   CREATIVE ASSEM-BLY: *Alien: Isolation*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Sega, 2014.
8   NINJA THEORY: *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*. [digital game]. Cambridge : Ninja Theory, 2017.
9   For more information, see: HERMAN, D.: *Basic Elements of Narrative*. Chichester : Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

In terms of gender, the author elaborates on storyworlds adopting established certain ideological positions concerning gender. Emerging from the premise that action games are strongly linked to patriarchy and boyhood, the author lays the ground for the analysis of gender present in the further researched video games, while he also observes the stereotype of white dominant male as a strong character saving a damsel-in-distress, and female passive characters being vulnerable, usually in need of rescue and serving as the subject of male gaze. Arguing that video games establish which social identities are acceptable and which are not, the author points out how researched video games grasped gender ideology within their narratives and whether they strive for more diverse approaches towards gender, continue supporting the adopted idea of hypermasculinity, promote masculinity as a standard, masculinize female characters, or opt for different and more culturally diverse approaches towards these stereotypes.

The following parts of the book provide in-depth analysis of classical and postclassical survival horror video games. In the second part of the book, the author analyses Resident Evil, Silent Hill 2, Fatal Frame and Forbidden Siren, representative classical survival horror video games. Each chapter not only provides exploration of the given video games from the viewpoint of immersion, but also discusses cultural backgrounds behind the given genres represented in the narratives of the chosen video games. Each chapter contains an interdisciplinary context behind the given narrative. A reader obtains theoretical frameworks from film and literary studies (filmic irony and heteroglossia, Japanese horror cinema), or history and sociology (Japanese Edo period and *ie* ideology). The second part of the book points out how classical survival horror games engender a hypermedial gameplay buttressed by cumbersome mechanics, controls difficult to learn and use or a fragmentary representation of game space resulting in the vulnerability of a character, while despite these shortcomings they are able to immerse players in storyworlds challenging the gender status quo supported by white male supremacy and its videogame champion, the hypermale playable character. The author concludes by stating that classical survival horror games command disbelief in normative gender constructs.

The third part of the book analyses the postclassical survival horror games Resident Evil 4, Condemned: Criminal Origins, Alien: Isolation, and Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice. The author again provides rich interdisciplinary context from film studies (noir films), colonial studies (English colonialism) or psychology (psychosis). The third part of the book points out how postclassical survival horror games offer a more player-friendly experience, while the characters are not as vulnerable as their predecessors in classical survival horror games, yet they oscillate between vulnerability and hypermasculinity, while aided by conventional immersion strategies, they vacillate between contestation and confirmation of the gender status quo.

A. Nae's monograph demonstrates the immersion strategies present in survival horror video games, in which rather cumbersome controls or fragmentary gameplay should supposedly discourage players from continuing in their gaming experience. These action games ostensibly fulfilling ludic purposes contain narratives that compensates for their shortcomings. From the example of eight representative survival horror video games, A. Nae shows the narrative aspect of video games as an important strategy not just to engender immersion, but also to challenge gender ideology, namely patriarchy set as a standard in action genre where the researched games belong. It is an important ludonarrative probe into the world of the survival horror genre and a must-read for every video game researcher, since it not just provides interesting video games worth playing and studying, but also broadens one's horizons on an interdisciplinary level.

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