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SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

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Women in Horror Video Games: Agency and the Complication of Monstrosity

PAIGE HARRIS
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Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Christian P. Haines
Associate Professor of English
Thesis Supervisor

Matt Tierney
Associate Professor of English
Honors Adviser

* Electronic approvals are on file.

ABSTRACT

Modern horror games such as *Resident Evil 7: Biohazard* and *Outlast 2* include female antagonists whose monstrous behaviors and appearances reflect fears stemming from patriarchal ideologies. In this thesis, I examine how and why femininity is depicted as monstrous in horror games as well as the role that agency plays from both a narrative and mechanical perspective in upholding or subverting inequitable gendered power dynamics. I analyze the methods by which misogyny is perpetuated or challenged through the characterization of women within these games, and how the player's sense of agency or lack thereof in their gameplay interacts with the perspectives that the games' narratives reinforce. I argue that while the complication of feminine monstrosity challenges certain conventions of the patriarchy such as the devaluation of women, disempowering female characters to create sympathetic monsters ultimately reifies existing social hierarchies by failing to subvert the social and power relations central to patriarchy's maintenance.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Horror as a genre has, in many ways, evolved with the times, preying on the fears that press upon the collective consciousness. The time-tested horror aesthetics and tropes that remain relevant generation after generation often reflect the root of said fears, such as the establishment of a threat that cannot quite be fully understood. The expression of the genre through video games is handled in a manner that is unique to the medium, even as it pulls from established horror aesthetics popularized by cinema and other forms of media. Video games themselves are a medium based in action – the machine needs an operator in order for the process of the game to play out (Galloway). As a result, the relationship that players have to games is an intimate one requiring active engagement. Horror games are rich with unique opportunities to exploit this relationship in order to effectively induce fear and anxiety.

Many horror game creators consider the cultural zeitgeist in order to cater the horror that they portray to their immediate audience – this means that they aren't immune to reflecting the complicated and varied implications of society's fears and anxieties, nor are they immune to projecting their own social and political messaging – some getting their intended points across better than others. Some of this messaging reflects the alienating nature of these anxieties, particularly when geared toward audiences largely composed of socially dominant demographics. For instance, since the fear of the unknown is relatively universal, how does that translate in narratives about people who look different, or have different cultural practices? Where portrayals of gender are concerned, women have such a long history of being victimized

or vilified purely by the terms of their femininity or lack thereof that they have, more often than not, been utilized as vehicles for horror rather than treated as human subjects with some reasonable capacity for self-determination. Anyone with some marginal level of exposure to traditional gender roles could likely outline the most common tropes for female characters without having familiarity with the genre. If women are "supposed" to be weak and in need of protection, they make perfect helpless victims. If women shirk their traditional gender roles and deviate too far from socially accepted standards, they become monsters in need of subjugation. While gender norms have certainly been challenged in the past several decades, patriarchal power relations are continually reinforced by men and women alike – the illusion of a post-feminist modern society ironically plays a role in perpetuating the dismissal of ongoing structural and social inequity while framing struggles against misogyny as an issue for the individual victim (Fairchild 453). When Roe v. Wade was overturned in 2022, the threat to womens' right to bodily autonomy became particularly clear –for many, the post-feminist illusion lost its luster. The sociopolitical environment and accompanying social anxieties as they are reflected by modern media serve as a temperature-check on how people are reacting to the issues of our time and as an influence upon the reactions of consumers.

The changes in portrayals of gender roles and associated messaging in the media is an ongoing evolution and not a flip-of-the-switch reversal of hundreds of years of patriarchal societal domination. The continued reinforcement of gender norms and stereotypes is not necessarily negative, depending on narrative framing. It would be absurd to expect all horror media to subvert the traditionally misogynistic management of female characters because the utilization of these themes in of themselves can act as a self-critique or as an effective horror device. This is all highly dependent on the effect upon the player, which developers can guide

but cannot fully control. Video games are processes as well as objects, and they don't truly exist without the player at the helm. The ideologies that games convey to players and the modes by which they facilitate action (through both diegetic and non-diegetic elements) become personal and consequential. They shape us, and we shape the world.

Chapter 2

Women as the Monstrous Other

Monsters are a horror staple – they are the object upon which fear latches, and they manifest in many forms, some more fear-inducing than others. The cast of characters from *Yo Gabba Gabba!* and Jeffrey Dahmer may both be categorized as monsters, depending on who you're asking, but for the purposes of this analysis, we're going to be sticking to the fictive monsters that are intended to generate fear through their transgressiveness in some manner.

So, how does one make a monster? How strictly do we define its limits? In his insights article "Player vs. Monster: The Making and Breaking of Video Game Monstrosity", named for his book of the same title, Jaroslav Švelch emphasizes the nature of video game monsters as a representation of "the fears and anxieties of individuals and society." If a horror game were a paper, its monster might be its thesis, its foundational reason for being, around which all other details circulate. When women and their bodies are the monsters, what are the fears and anxieties that are being exploited? What is the thesis? When the player's subjugation and destruction of a feminine monstrosity is framed as morally justified, what is the narrative that is being reinforced about the expendability of the female body? What are players going to take away from their experience? Women are the Other, playing second fiddle to men, because patriarchal societies have decreed it so. At the highest social strata, there's a long way to fall if the established order is upended. Thus, women granted power may register as a threat, because it implies the same loss of power for men that women have experienced all along and jeopardizes the status quo that men have long benefited from. For instance, female bodies are associated with creational power, the ability to gestate and give birth, and those bodies are time and time again warped to become horror itself granted physical form, the essence of corruption. Sometimes this is under the

woman's control, but sometimes it is outside of it, echoing the fear that women have been conditioned to possess towards their own bodies. If undesirability alone makes a woman an Other, a female monster that has been specifically designed to be grotesque has that effect exponentially intensified. When women are objectified and their social value is based on their desirability, we are made to believe that the worst thing a woman can be is disgusting – they are devalued, trivialized, and cast aside. In "Playing with Fear: The Aesthetics of Horror in Recent Indie Games", horror is addressed by Noel Carroll as being a response that isn't limited to fear but rather "requires evaluation both in terms of threat and disgust" (qtd. in Thon 199). For a woman, to be seen as disgusting is to be deeply transgressive. Not only is it contradictory to her role in a patriarchal society, but it is contrary to social acceptability and the established order.

When women internalize messaging about femininity and womanhood being negative and/or limiting, it is extremely damaging to both themselves and their relationships with other women. In "Internalized Misogyny as a Moderator of the Link between Sexist Events and Women's Psychological Distress", it was found that internalized misogyny intensifies the connection between external sexism and psychological distress, and self-objectification alone as one facet of internalized misogyny has been positively correlated with mental health issues such as depression and disordered eating (Szymanski et al.). Misogyny is not an individual issue. It is a cultural practice which works to maintain the status quo in which women are subordinate. Women themselves might "reinforce the central male culture of devaluing women through acts of horizontal oppression and omission" (Szymanski et al.) when they have internalized misogyny. In "Feminism is Now: Fighting Modern Misogyny and the Myth of the Post-Feminist Era", Kimberly Fairchild identifies the insidious nature of modern misogyny in that "it discourages collective action" (453) – it's a problem for the individual. Misogyny only maintains

itself through a collective societal perpetuation, while collective action in opposition is discouraged and framed as unnecessary. The power relations at the core of the issue are thrown into sharp relief. The weaponization of femininity in depicting women as monstrous reinforces their social status as not only lesser, but as disposable outcasts existing on the fringes – a message that is so often perpetuated that some women begin to believe and accept it. In Jeffrey Cohen's "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)", he asserts that the monster's body is a cultural body – like misogyny itself, the monster is "pure culture", existing as both "a construct and a projection" (4). He also labels the monster as "the dialectical Other" (7), the ultimate embodiment of difference, which women embody as well simply by the virtue of not being men. The link between womanhood and monstrosity endures as patriarchal power relations do. Only by collectively deconstructing the idea of difference as a threat can this connection be loosened or severed.

In *Resident Evil 7: Biohazard* (Capcom 2017), Marguerite Baker, the matriarch of the Baker family, embodies the grotesque. The Bakers are the primary antagonists of the game – the player's character, Ethan Winters, must fight them to rescue his missing wife, Mia, who disappeared years ago and became a part of the family thanks to the influence of a sentient bioweapon named Eveline. While her entire family is physically mutated and mentally altered under the control of Eveline, who initially takes the form of a little girl, Marguerite's mutations are the most off-putting in the sense that she eventually deviates significantly from human form, gaining unnaturally elongated limbs and a hive of insects distending her lower abdomen/crotch. She crawls around on the ceiling and discharges swarms of insects from this hive to attack the player. In the game, the player must target the hive with their arsenal of weapons in order to defeat Marguerite. Marguerite's body functioning as a breeding ground, brimming with life,

evokes Barbara Creed's analysis of the "Monstrous Womb" in *The Monstrous Feminine*. Women represent nature in opposition to the symbolic order – their wombs tie them to an animal world, an unclean, filthy world (47-48). Marguerite's hive acts as a womb – one that is more on the outside of her body than in. This is a literal breaking of boundaries – something that is meant to be internal and hidden is being exposed. A major element of her monstrousness relates to her capacity to "reproduce". She repeatedly reinforces her capacity for reproduction by referring to the insects as her "babies" and spawning additional hives around the house, a perverse distortion of her role as a mother and interesting fodder for analysis as to whom this transgression is really meant to horrify and in what ways. Marguerite's insects are emblematic of her deviance because they are so often interlopers, crawling into human spaces and infesting them. They don't read as animals in the ways that people can relate to – exterminating mass quantities of insects is routine, not generally a moralistic dilemma. Humans may be the dominant species, but insects constantly challenge us. They are too numerous to eliminate entirely, too small to properly defend against. Insects occupy spaces of filth and deterioration, evoking disgust and contempt not only by their own virtue, but by what their presence implies. In a *Washington Post* review of the game, Christopher Byrd deems her "a manifestation of what it means to be a pariah who has fallen outside the bounds of human society" and notes that the Baker family's class status and rural way of living further alienate them. Marguerite's fecundity not only renders her barely human, but barely legible as a living being with any sentience to speak of.

Death, the great equalizer, is associated with the breaking of boundaries – including the bodily ones implicated in a state of pregnancy. Life gives way to death, as the body gives way to the production of more life. As Creed notes, "Fear of losing oneself and one's boundaries is made more acute in a society which values boundaries over continuity, and separateness over

sameness."(30). In some ways, the end to Marguerite's life functions in continuity with what she has come to symbolize. What's another boundary broken for her at this juncture? Even in death, she is not afforded any real sense of humanity – upon her defeat at the hands of the player, her disfigured body calcifies before crumbling to dust, leaving no trace of anything akin to a person behind. She is the only member of her family to canonically die within the events of the main game. However much empathy the player might potentially have for her alongside the rest of the family, they must subjugate her by means of violence to progress, therefore becoming complicit in the complete and gratuitous brutalization of her body. The nature of a boss fight is that it is almost always a more difficult fight than those with standard opponents, often requiring strategy and the ability to recognize patterns of attack. In this particular instance, players have a considerable arsenal of weapons to use at length against Marguerite, and depending on their inventory and personal preference, they can wield the likes of a flamethrower, a grenade launcher, a shotgun, and more. The damage inflicted upon Marguerite's body is not visually represented as particularly gory in the game. Shooting her with bullets results in a blood spatter effect, and the visible physical damage from such vanishes between her appearances as she repeatedly crawls away to regroup before launching another attack upon the player. However, the excessive nature of the barrage that she endures before dying paints an ugly picture of the player's forced complicity in the destruction of another one of Eveline's victims with extreme prejudice. While Jack Baker, the patriarch of the family, must be dealt with in multiple boss fights as well, becoming increasingly mutilated in the process as he takes damage and regenerates, there is a long-running tradition in horror of female bodies "[centered] as the object of the depraved, exposed to a variety of tortures and destructions" (Stopenski) that Marguerite's execution troublingly evokes. As she dies, the boss fight music crescendos before sharply cutting

out, leaving only the sound of her body crumbling amidst the sudden silence. The soundtrack of the game is a non-diegetic element, meaning that it does not exist within the world of the game, but serves as an element of the player's experience – the end of the music is, in a sense, a return to the character's reality. Where the designated part of the soundtrack plays during the fight to create more tension and a heightened sense of peril, its sudden absence gives the moment additional weight. In a game where the main enemies can't seem to stay dead, Marguerite's death is afforded an emphatic sense of permanence.

In some cases, it is the subversion of traditional ideas of physical and behavioral femininity that frames women as threatening and monstrous, rather the reinforcement of femininity in perverted excess. Creed refers to "the female castrator" at various points in *The Monstrous Feminine*, often describing her role as either "slasher or heroine" (135). There are many ways that this role can be expressed, but it is linked to the Freudian theory that women are inherently castrated and therefore have penis envy – they are lacking and they want to tear men with penises down to their level, so to speak. The manifestation of this as a horror device – the fear of being "castrated" by a woman – is geared more toward a male audience. In "Exploring Mutilation: Women, Affect, and the Body Horror Genre"*,* Carina Stopenski defines the female mutilator, who "objectifies as opposed to being objectified." A female enactor of violence complicates gendered biases – since women's bodies are so often subject to destruction, to flip that trope on its head might evoke some level of sympathy for female enactors of violence in a manner that male enactors of violence are less often afforded, whether warranted or not. On the other hand, the enactment of physical violence is seen as a more typically masculine action, which may be damning for the female character who has shirked her traditional role. *Outlast 2*'s Marta falls handily under the "slasher" category as a literal female castrator – player death

animations dealt by her hand always involve the player character, Blake Langermann, having his groin graphically slashed or stabbed. Perhaps a touch too gratuitous, but that's the name of the game when it comes to the *Outlast* series, which doesn't shy away from the extremes even by the standards of the horror genre.

While *Outlast 2* (Red Barrels 2017) certainly has the polish to be mistaken for a Triple-A game, it's actually a part of an indie series, as it's made by a small studio. Triple-A is the highest video game classification denoting widely marketed games produced by larger, better-known publishers with high development budgets. On the other hand, indie is short for independent, referring to games created by smaller development teams, or even an individual. Indie horror games are often lauded for their capacity to embrace unique and experimental concepts without concern of alienating a mainstream audience (Stuart). The *Outlast* games notably depict extremely graphic gore and violence, and unlike in many other first-person survival horror games, the player doesn't have the option to fight in *Outlast 2*. Instead, they are dropped into an extraordinarily hostile environment with no weapons to wield as the character Blake Langermann, a cameraman, who is trying to rescue his wife, Lynn, after they survive a helicopter crash in the middle of nowhere. Lynn, an investigative journalist, is taken by an isolated religious cult who have their own plans for the outsider. This initial premise shares clear similarities with that of *Resident Evil 7*. The player character is a man whose goal is to rescue his wife, the damsel in distress, from a formidable group of mentally unstable foes, all while complicating factors to his plan arise. In *Outlast 2*, the player must run and hide, aided only by a handheld camcorder with a night vision setting – so long as they can keep finding batteries to power it. The energy the player must invest into an ability as seemingly trivial as being able to see their surroundings underscores their utter powerlessness and limited control over their ability to react to imminent

threats, as does the limited sprint mechanic. Limiting the ability to sprint forces the player's hand in that they cannot fully rely on either natural reaction to a threat – without fight or flight, they have to manage their reactions to threatening situations and remain level-headed and adaptable. Indie games generally tend to be more comfortable with providing the experience of disempowerment and vulnerability, and *Outlast 2* takes full advantage of the efficacy of this type of game design (Stuart).

Marta's role as both a woman and as one of the most physically formidable enemies in the context of a game franchise which disempowers the male player character is a refreshing subversion of gendered power dynamics. In some ways, Marta's character echoes the otheredness and inhumanity that contributes to Marguerite's monstrousness. In contrast to Marguerite's out-of-control femininity, Marta's subversion of traditional femininity is a primary element of what makes her monstrous. Marta strikes an imposing figure – she is extraordinarily tall, making the average male character model look like a child by comparison. With that height seemingly comes her strength – in a scene where she confronts Ethan, a man responsible for helping Blake against the wishes of her cult, she kills him with ease, skewering him with her pickaxe and holding his body aloft with the tip of her weapon as though he weighs nothing. Her robes are ragged, her skin pale, her feet bare. Her voice is a raspy growl. There's certainly an animalistic slant to how she is presented, as there is with Marguerite Baker. Marta is placed on the fringes of humanity by pressing up against the limits of realistic physical possibility. She is placed on the fringes of her own community by her fellow cultists who fear her. An enforcer for the Testament of New Ezekiel under its leader, Father Knoth, she has the authority to kill sinners and suspected Heretics (members of a satanic splinter group) and does so with devastating efficiency. Of Cohen's theses of "Monster Culture", the fifth designates the monster as policing

the borders of the possible (12). She exists to be prohibitive to where characters can go and what they can believe. Her physicality straddles the border of the biologically possible. Yet, in spite of everything, Marta is only human. At one point, she manages to grab Blake in a scripted event as he is climbing over a gate to get away from her, and he is able to kick her in the face to make her let go. She's far from infallible, which does serve to humanize her in a minor way – something that very few players would likely stop to appreciate, considering her role as such a merciless and dangerous enemy within the game (and the fact that she's a part of a cult that kills so many newborns that they have a pit to put their bodies in). Of course, Marta isn't only frightening on the basis of her gender and how it is presented – if everything except her gender was the same, and she was a male monster, she would still be a considerable threat – the character's physical strength relative to the player's helplessness already evokes that sense of fear, and her anomalous physical presentation supplements this and by evoking the element of the unknown, the familiar twisted into the unfamiliar. The lack of direct weaponization of her femininity makes Marta a monster that doesn't overtly reinforce existing gendered social structures. She is neither particularly ugly nor sexualized. There is no passing allusion to her capacity to reproduce, or of her capacity for motherhood. In many ways, she's an uncomplicated yet effective sort of monster in a game full of some seriously disturbing and disgusting visuals. At least, this is the case on a surface level – there is more to her story, as I will elaborate upon in the next chapter.

Horror is an effective genre through which to explore social issues. In indie horror games in particular, it's common to see very personal, dark, and traumatic narratives that intend to expose and better understand these issues (Stuart). In *Outlast 2*, there is a secondary narrative running in some ways parallel to the one that is happening with Blake and Lynn at the remote settlement of Temple Gate. While the player, as Blake, is running and hiding from warring sects

of cultists and trying to rescue Lynn, they experience several episodes in which Blake is transported to darkened halls of the Catholic school of his childhood and sporadically pursued by a demonic figure. As the player explores the school, they uncover Blake's memories surrounding a source of childhood trauma. Across these flashbacks, the grim story is slowly revealed. Blake is haunted by visions of his childhood friend, Jessica Gray, hanging from a noose. The game even opens on a scene where Blake is awoken on the helicopter by Lynn, who asks him about calling out Jessica's name in his sleep, which makes it clear from the beginning that this trauma is in some ways central to his character in that it has followed him into adulthood. It is eventually revealed that the demon that continually pursues him within the school sections of the game is a twisted version of Father Loutermilch, one of their teachers. In her attempt to escape from Loutermilch's sexual abuse after being repeatedly targeted and victimized, Jessica was killed when he pushed her down the stairs and her neck snapped. Loutermilch proceeded to make her death out to be a suicide in order to get away with the crime, and Blake, as the sole witness, was manipulated to question his own understanding of the situation. It is implied that Blake had repressed his knowledge of the truth in order to cope, and had accepted Loutermilch's version of events. The demon itself isn't meant to be real, because Blake is hallucinating these returns to his old school, but it serves as a manifestation of his guilt and trauma. It's a disturbing story, and one that echoes the real-life child sexual abuse that occurs in situations where religion may be weaponized to silence victims and cover up the crimes. This narrative reflects our fears and anxieties in a very direct manner – the fear of monsters among us, hidden in plain sight, preying upon the innocent and defenseless, or of being the one preyed upon. For Jessica, who finds various aspects of her life increasingly manipulated by Loutermilch, his conduct is not only a horrific and terrifying violation, but his control over her life leaves her with little personal

agency – she can't even seek help from an outside source. The threat of sexual assault and sexual violence is such a constant source of anxiety for many women (Gustafsod 807), and while men are of course going to sympathize with the victim in this situation, the subject matter tends to strike a more personal chord with women, targeting their fears more acutely. However, the victimization of this girl isn't included for the sake of horrifying us by the mere virtue of a girl being victimized (although yes, it is inherently horrifying) – it's pertinent in how it relates to prevailing social issues and associated traumas. In Blake's past as well as his present, religious power is wielded against the women in his life by male figures for their own devious purposes, serving as a representation of the broader issue of paternalistic culture and patriarchal authority being utilized to subjugate women while simultaneously harming men as well.

The demon version of Loutermilch that haunts Blake in his visions of his old school, while intended to be male, invokes certain conventions that bring to mind the monstrous feminine. A distinctive element of Demon Loutermilch's design is the abundance of writhing arms that protrude from all over its body. There is no symmetry to the arm placement – perhaps reminiscent of nature overtaking order and mutating into its own antithesis – and the arms themselves are grotesque in their abundance and defiance of the physical confines of the body. They move at their own will, seemingly independent from the body itself, like the demon is a sort of progenitor to countless offspring. Blood springs up all over the school as Blake is pursued at different points. Barbara Creed repeatedly references blood as an ejected excrement that evokes maternity, filth, menstruation (14). Of course, blood in horror media is not inherently linked to the feminine, but the way that it gushes forth from showers, toilets, the sprinkler system, and even oozes from the walls all lend themselves to associations with ejected excrement in particular, as well as menstruation. This is particularly emphasized as Jessica screams in the

background of an environment that is so often the backdrop for puberty. Blood is also streaked

all over the demon's body without any clear source, leaning into the aspect of filth. I would be

remiss in failing to note the other distinctive element of the character design – Demon

Loutermilch's gaping jaw and extremely long tongue. In reference to Freudian theories of oral

fixation, Creed links the mouth to the female genitals, or the "facial mouth and her genital

mouth" (122). All of these aspects of Demon Loutermilch's character design and the related

environmental storytelling prove that a female monster doesn't need to be present in order for the

concept of the feminine monstrous Other to be reaffirmed, even while gendered power dynamics

are explicitly acknowledged and critiqued.

A blend of narrative and mechanical elements within horror games perpetuates the idea

that monstrous women are monstrous because of both their femininity and lack thereof. If they

transgress gender norms, they are a threat to the social order. If they don't, they are still othered

purely by virtue of not being men and are thus devalued in order to reify longstanding patriarchal

power structures. As cultural artifacts, video games are inherently political. In the current

political environment in which the relevance of misogyny as an ongoing societal issue is debated

even while women's bodily autonomy is under threat, the implicit and explicit ideologies

involving gender presented within horror games exist in conversation with real life, influencing

players' perspectives and mirroring the fears and anxieties that stem from both threatening and

reinforcing the hierarchies at play. If monsters represent the parts of ourselves and of society that

we reject, their reason for being is just as important as the monsters themselves. The utilization

of feminine monstrosity as a form of empowerment through marginalization complicates the

weaponization of difference by manipulating the subject at the core of the continued perpetuation

of patriarchy and misogyny: power relations.

Chapter 3

The Problem with Agency (or the Lack Thereof)

Among some ludologists there exists the idea of a certain dichotomy between active engagement in the consumption of horror video games and passive reception in the consumption of other horror media, such as cinema (Christopher & Leuszler). This dichotomy perpetuates an assumption that horror games must be more effective at inducing horror than other horror media, because if a player is actively engaging in a horror game, they identify more with their character and therefore their experience is intensified. Christopher and Leuszler's "Horror Video Games and the 'Active-Passive' Debate" challenges this by adding nuance to the distinction between active and passive engagement and makes an interesting assertion about the nature of intended emotional effect in horror. While distinguishing between fear and horror, anxiety (as opposed to fear) is left on the back burner as a lesser reaction to horror because it is more generalized and isn't evoked exclusively by horror. The article points out that without support from horror aesthetics, anxiety stemming from loss of agency alone does not generate fear. Agency is important because it is related to the "horror of participation", the idea that the player's character being under threat and potentially dying due to their own actions and failures is so evocative an experience that it enhances both active engagement and the horror experience as a whole. Therefore, the postulation that the anxiety associated with agential capacity isn't a pertinent effect for horror games to evoke is dubious.

Anxiety and the horror of participation are, in reality, profoundly relevant in elevating horror experiences in video games, especially when manipulated in a gendered manner to both challenge and reinforce women's position in society. Women are far more prone to experiencing anxiety than men for various reasons related to social circumstances as well as biological

predisposition (Bahrami & Yousefi). From the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, *"...the mental state term fear be used to describe feelings that occur when the source of harm, the threat, is either immediate or imminent, and anxiety be used to describe feelings that occur when the source of harm is uncertain or is distal in space or time"* (Ledoux). The evocation of anxiety as a baseline emotion within a horror experience is fundamental in establishing an atmosphere consistent with the genre. Anxiety itself is not necessarily passive, but rather active in the sense that the player feels compelled to react but is unable to do so in a manner that would neatly resolve the emotion.

For the many women in patriarchal societies who are threatened by loss of agency and therefore the loss of meaningful power over their lives, there is an evocation of anxiety *and* outright fear at the threats that said loss of agency entails – threats that don't involve any kind of monster or otherwise uncanny experience. Fictive experiences and situations are not the ultimate dictators of what qualifies as horror – if horror as a genre didn't examine subjects that are relevant in real life, there wouldn't be as much interest in it as there is. People want to see some element of the human condition reflected back at them in their media so that they can connect with it. In the United States in particular, with abortion access on the line all over the country, being powerless over one's body, and in conjunction, one's sense of self, manifests as an ongoing source of anxiety for millions of women. Loss of agency is an enormously relevant source of fear and anxiety across many societies and cultures, for some more than others, but nonetheless broadly applicable enough that creators who work in the horror genre are naturally going to exploit it. Its pertinence in our culture also makes it inherently political. Agency is therefore relevant not only as a narrative device, but as an element of in-game mechanics, evoking both anxiety and fear to enhance horror experiences. Applying this to the way that

female characters are handled and how the player interacts with the game reveals more about gender roles being reinforced and exploited within horror games, and to what effect. Of course, most agency on the player's side of things is highly illusory. Even games with different narrative paths and overall outcomes attributed to players' choices are just that – predetermined paths and outcomes without real variability. Where the player does have agency is on a more reflexive level, in the way that they interpret and choose to engage with the game, as well as the associated community (Stang). This makes the player's reaction to the game and the perceived agency (or lack thereof) that both the player and in-game characters experience all the more relevant, regardless of the lack of true mechanical agency permitted in the gameplay.

Survival horror games, separated by Andrei Nae's *Immersion, Narrative, and Gender Crisis in Survival Horror Video Games* into the categories of classical survival horror and postclassical survival horror, tend to handle immersion and the player's sense of agency in different ways. Nae claims that "the rhetorical purpose of mainstream action-adventure games is to convince the player that her actions… are the result of her own agency" (34) rather than being largely determined by elements such as game architecture. Generally, these games might maximize immersion to perpetuate the illusion of player agency, which involves immersion within the biases and worldviews present within the game. In this sense, the player is encouraged to adopt a perspective that meshes with the game's perspective, which can involve reifying unbalanced power relations and casting some identities as more acceptable than others. For instance, Nae argues that a game might naturalize masculine superiority through gender performative hyperviolence (35).

Classical survival horror games of the mid 1990s to mid 2000s began to utilize a different immersion strategy, opting to overemphasize narrativity instead of immediacy or interactivity

(Nae 41). This alternative immersion strategy created opportunities for narratives that challenged hegemonic masculinity by embracing vulnerability and the simulation of helplessness. It is the player's perceived limitation of agency built into these games that makes them different and allows them to confront patriarchal ideologies rather than reinforce them. Postclassical survival horror games, on the other hand, deviated from politically subversive themes and immersion strategies and made a shift towards conventional action game design (43). Certain mechanics, such as those of first-person shooters, tempered the helplessness of the often-male playable character – the effect is clear in the vulnerability experienced in playing *Outlast 2*'s Blake Langermann as opposed to *Resident Evil 7*'s Ethan Winters. While the player as Ethan can stand and fight (albeit with limited resources) in a more traditionally heroic role, Blake better typifies a protagonist of a classical survival horror game. He cannot and does not defeat his enemies – he can only evade them. Game design incorporating both conventional and subversive approaches has lead to postclassical survival horror games serving as a "mixed bag" in terms of their messaging – they are just as likely to naturalize male supremacy as they are to critique it.

Returning to *Resident Evil 7: Biohazard*, we can begin with the understanding that Marguerite is essentially possessed by Eveline. She has no agency, and her body has been invaded in more ways than one – various boundaries are being violated synchronously. Eveline is functionally a sort of psychic mold, capable of mind-controlling and mutating those around her. Both bodily autonomy and mental agency are rendered moot. To empathize with Marguerite, who has been transformed into a murderous, cannibalistic, abusive, grotesque creature against her own will, requires looking beyond everything that has made her into an Other and comprehending the horror of her own experience and what has been done to her. It requires a reconciliation of disgust with sympathy and an acceptance of that which has been cast out and

rejected by society. This reconciliation is not an easy one to make. The narrative of the game is not particularly conducive to generating this sort of empathy towards Marguerite from those who aren't already predisposed. One can hardly be blamed for not feeling particularly generous with their empathy for a character who has been sporadically chasing them and trying to kill them for hours. In a scene near the end of the game, Ethan has a vision of Jack Baker. In this vision, Jack is restored to his regular self, and is shown to be remorseful for what Eveline has forced his family to do. His daughter, Zoe, is silently present, but his wife, Marguerite, is not. Players have no frame of reference for Marguerite as her true self in this game (excluding later DLC content). She has no voice, no opportunity to make a case for her own personhood. When the player must kill her, they know that she is beyond saving, but have some level of understanding that she is not undeserving of being saved – a difficult truth that lingers in the back of one's mind. You become complicit in the things you fear. You perpetuate the cycle of violence. Are we meant to be afraid of what she represents, or of *becoming* like her, as ultimately powerless and abject as she is? For women, the answer is both; seeing a woman's bodily autonomy being violated while also confronting what the body is capable of is as jarring as it is haunting.

Mia, Ethan's long-missing wife and unwilling addition to the Baker family, is also possessed by Eveline, although she does not undergo the extensive physical transformation that Marguerite does. It can be safely assumed that if she did, she would not be so easily welcomed back into the fold as Ethan's wife and the eventual mother of his child after the events of the game. She flips between her regular self and the possessed, monstrous version of herself throughout the game – a monstrous version with green-tinted skin, darkened sclera, and bared teeth, evoking the image of a hag or witch. With Mia, it is made very clear to the player from the get-go that Mia herself is not responsible for all that she does while Eveline is in control, as she

has dialogue explicitly in reference to being possessed. After tossing Ethan bodily up the stairs with her enhanced strength and stabbing him repeatedly, she breaks free of Eveline's control. Her appearance instantly returns to normal, and she says, "I can feel her clawing her way back inside of me." As Barbara Creed puts it, "Possession becomes the excuse for legitimizing a display of aberrant feminine behaviour which is depicted as depraved, monstrous, abject –and perversely appealing" (31). When Mia uses a chainsaw to cut Ethan's arm off and proceeds to chase him around with it ("it" being the chainsaw), she may be terrifying, but her own moral and behavioral integrity is still intact. Is the only point of this to emphasize that she can be saved, or is there something more at play here? Hers is a rebellious female body bucking social convention, unpredictable, untrustworthy, and wholly out-of-control. At one point early in the game, as Mia is attacking the player, they need to pick up an axe to defend themselves and end up burying it into her neck to temporarily defeat her. Ethan himself doesn't seem to have many qualms about doing so despite the risk of harming his wife, but since his own life is at stake, a drastic split-second decision is understandable. As soon as the axe hits its mark, Mia's face returns to normal and she has an expression of shock and pain, reaching out to Ethan as she collapses backwards in what appears to be her death. The player sees Ethan reach for her in response from a first-person perspective, just barely missing her hand as she falls. In the jarring stillness that ensues, blood blooms on the floor beneath her body. It's a combat sequence that takes such a sharp and dramatic turn for the tragic. Mia has been forced to attack her husband through no fault of her own, the player "kills" her, and she regains consciousness just long enough to register what has happened to her. Here, the issue of agency arises as both a narrative thread and as an in-game mechanic – Ethan is forced to functionally kill Mia because she has no control over her actions, but the player becomes culpable in the "killing" because they are the

ones who have no choice but to subdue her. They are the ones controlling those axe strikes until the final one triggers the scripted event previously described. It's clearly not supposed to be a scene that induces outright fear, but the idea of being killed by a loved one or being forced to kill a loved one is horrifying all the same. Loss of agency serves as the primary trigger used to evoke a reaction in this situation, and the outcome is a man nearly killing his wife. There isn't the same sense of triumph for the player as there might be for defeating a run-of-the-mill monster. It's a hollow victory, if it can be labeled as a victory at all.

There are plenty of horror games that contain narratives driven by the players' decisions – choices that are presented for them to make which change how future events play out. For the vast majority of *Resident Evil 7*, this is not a mechanic, which is why bringing the player to this kind of crossroads late in the game for only one instance is a particularly interesting decision on the developers' part. Essentially, Ethan obtains cures for both Mia and Zoe which would hypothetically free them from Eveline's influence, but he is forced to use one of the serums to defeat Jack, leaving only one to use on either Mia (the player character's wife) or Zoe Baker (the daughter of the Baker family with no real personal connection to the player character). The women stand there in vague distress, dutifully awaiting their fate as the player decides which of them gets the cure. They are never more devoid of personality than they are in this moment, fully at the mercy of the player. Whoever the player chooses is injected without a word from Ethan, while the other character reacts with appropriate horror and anger at essentially being left to die. This illusion of choice is disingenuous. If you choose Zoe, it becomes almost immediately clear that the serum isn't a fully effective cure, because Zoe is calcified and killed by Eveline, and the only other difference in overall outcome is that Mia saves Ethan before succumbing to Eveline's control, forcing him to kill her permanently. If you choose Mia, Mia is able to fight off Eveline's

control for long enough that she survives until the end of the game and is rescued alongside

Ethan. In later downloadable content, Zoe ends up surviving in this latter version of events.

There is a clear "good" ending and "bad" ending here, and the player can easily stumble into the

more negative outcome that they couldn't have possibly anticipated. The version of events in

which the player gives Zoe the serum holds far less weight, anyways, as the canonical ending is

the version of events in which Mia is given the serum, which is proven through the next game in

the series, *Resident Evil Village*, and the DLC "End of Zoe". Based on the mechanics of the

game up until this point, throughout which the player has not had any opportunities to make

decisions directly impacting the narrative, it would make much more sense for there to be a

cutscene in which there is a singular outcome. Instead, the female characters are fully stripped of

agency and placed in opposition to each other – there isn't a single line of dialogue in which they

get to advocate for their own lives. It's a perturbing scene that portrays a male character as

having executive power over whether female characters live or die, and female characters as

being so weak and indecisive that they submit to his decision without any ability to resist. The

male character survives regardless of the choice, and the female characters are left to suffer the

consequences. The player, forced to suddenly make an unexpected choice to condemn a

character who doesn't deserve to be condemned, is likely going to be so preoccupied with

thinking through this moral dilemma that they might not even notice the troubling social

dynamic being reinforced here. It becomes unconsciously acceptable, especially if their decision

comes with unforeseeable consequences that cause frustration with the choice itself rather than

the nature of its presentation. Agency functions simultaneously as a narrative and mechanical

device in this part of the game as well – to what intended ends cannot be definitively estimated,

but the reaffirmation of the gendered social order is clear. The only female protagonists in the

game are objectified and trivialized for the sake of causing the player momentary distress from having to make a "hard" choice, which realistically might not even cause a moment's hesitation, depending on their subjective perceptions of Mia and Zoe. No matter who they give the serum to, the player is made complicit in this objectification by being forced to make a choice in which they weigh the value of one woman's life against another's.

Through examination of *Outlast 2*, it becomes clear that many elements of the overall narrative of the game are contingent on the player finding and reading hidden documents scattered throughout the environments they find themselves in. The collection of these documents is not necessary for progression in the game, so a person could very well complete the game while missing out on the many tidbits of information that help contribute to an understanding of what exactly is happening in the town of Temple Gate. Contributing to an understanding may even be an understatement – without the applicable lore that can only be found in some of these documents, the player will undoubtedly be extremely confused about what is going on, especially without some of the foundational knowledge from the previous games in the series. Some of these documents are letters from Knoth to Marta, and contain details that do a lot of heavy lifting in framing her as more of a rounded character and less of a killing machine with no internal life beyond religious fervor. In one in-game letter, he addresses her as "My best beloved, most trusted, my intimate companion since your childhood." Father Knoth is on the elderly side, and Marta is roughly middle-aged, perhaps on the older side but certainly not as old as Knoth is. Based on his actions that we learn of over the course of the game, including his sexual assault of a teen girl, he would have no qualms about preying upon Marta in her youth. This raises the serious question as to whether Marta has been groomed by Knoth and taken advantage of for the majority of her life. He certainly wields her like a tool

rather than treating her as a person – in another letter addressed to her, he calls her "... my hound, my avenging angel." Comparing her to a dog hardly reinforces the idea that he has any genuine respect for her outside of what she can do for him. It seems that ultimately, behind the potentially empowering image of a female enactor of violence who has influence and control over herself and those around her, Marta is a woman castrated. It is even revealed in Knoth's communications with her that she doesn't enjoy killing at all and sees murder as a sin, but Knoth urges her to keep killing, essentially telling her that God wants her to do the work that she does and that she would actually be a sinner for enabling sinners instead of exterminating them. Ironically, the same body that gives her so much physical (and therefore some degree of social) power also makes her a tool to be weaponized, objectified despite all that she is capable of. Marta is an enactor of extraordinary violence, yet she is subjugated beneath the heel of a man she could tear limb from limb, manipulated and groomed since her childhood. The decision to humanize Marta simultaneously turned her into a victim – she is not a self-made monster, but a monster to a man's ends. She is animalistic and all-too-human in simultaneity, her character becomes nuanced and complex. Does this make her less frightening? Is her victimization meant to assuage the player's fears? Perhaps the invitation for the player to sympathize with Marta is a challenge to their empathy – to identify with a monster in some tiny yet meaningful way. In the realm of horror scholarship, there exists a theory that "the repressed is dramatized in the form of the monstrous Other" (Tudor 447). It's possible that players might recognize something of themselves and the ways in which society shaped them in Marta and her plight. Whether they process this connection by rejecting it or embracing it is up to them. Marta's relationship to Father Knoth begs the question – if a woman as powerful as Marta can be forced to dedicate her life to doing something she morally objects to, all the while thinking that she is making an

informed choice, what chance do all other female characters have? The issue of agency is so deeply embedded in the horror genre that it seems almost impossible for characters– frequently female characters– to see their stories to completion without losing control over themselves or the ability to meaningfully affect the world around them through their decisions. At the very least, Marta dies by what she lived for – a cross blown free from the storm skewers her in what can ironically be considered an act of God.

The overarching *Outlast* storyline, as mentioned, gets confusing at times, especially because there are still pieces of the puzzle that remain nebulous – not the most grievous offense, considering that there is at least one more planned installment to the series that has the potential to iron out the wrinkles. Lynn Langermann is targeted by Father Knoth's group because they believe that she is pregnant with the Antichrist. They generally believe that any pregnancy will result in the Antichrist, so she isn't exceptionally unique in this regard. The strange part is that Lynn wasn't pregnant in the first place, despite her rapidly swelling abdomen which implies the contrary. Father Knoth's flock and the offshoot Heretics fight for control over Lynn and her pregnancy, and Lynn only briefly reunites with Blake before graphically giving birth, saying "there's nothing there", and dying. Their baby doesn't have a shadow, nor was there any sign of an umbilical cord. Lynn's experience is left to be interpreted as a phantom pregnancy.

Long story short, the Murkoff Corporation, known for mind control tech, used the town as a testing site for experimentation and ended up driving its inhabitants insane, causing them to hallucinate and behave violently. Women are often uniquely affected by exposure to the radio towers broadcasting the effects of technology called the morphogenic engine, resulting in phantom pregnancies. This in-universe lore differentiating the impacts of this exposure between the sexes is interesting in that women's bodies in particular are physically affected while

psychological destabilization is the more collective effect. The concept of women's bodies being collectively impacted in this manner harkens back to the idea of the mutability of the female body, and how they are of the natural world and defy order. Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" explains that there are dualisms "systemic to the logics and practices of domination" (143) such as culture versus nature, civilized versus primitive, active versus passive, and male versus female. The removal of women's bodily agency in this situation has a clear connection to the ongoing political discourse regarding exactly that, especially in the exploration of a reduction of women's bodies to the strictly utilitarian purpose of reproduction. More broadly, it speaks to the limitations cast upon women under the patriarchy, including the internalization of the belief in their inferiority.

Similarly troubling is the reasonable doubt cast upon the responsibility of everyone in the entire town for all of the horrible acts that were committed over the course of the game. Every character being a victim of the Murkoff Corporation definitely complicates our perspective on the enemies encountered within the game. After seeing the rampant murder, rape, and general perversity gripping Temple Gate, it is naturally difficult for players to reconcile this violent and degenerate behavior with victimhood. All of Father Knoth's people ultimately commit mass suicide via cyanide in response to the "apocalypse" being unleashed – the apocalypse being the birth of Lynn and Blake's nonexistent baby. Importantly, everything the player experiences (via the character) throughout the game in order to achieve Blake's objectives, including hours of evading terrifying, murderous cultists, is ultimately for naught. Blake fails to save Lynn and has no child to rescue. Blake doesn't even escape unscathed – the final burst of light with the explosion of the radio towers at the end of the game leaves his final fate unknown, but the outlook is grim. Not a single character gets a happy ending. The player might beat the game, but

that doesn't mean they're going to necessarily feel like a winner. Ultimately, the sheer powerlessness of protagonists and antagonists alike emphasizes both the danger and tragedy involved in a loss of agency. Players are primed to empathize with the characters' experience of helplessness via the aforementioned game mechanics that maximize their own sense of vulnerability.

The matter of agency can make or break a monster. It can also complicate her or simplify her. Without the ability to make decisions for themselves, how thoroughly can someone be held accountable for actions influenced or dictated by an outside source? The idea of monstrosity being a product of society as well as that of the individual might encourage us to examine our own roles in the identification and rejection of the monstrous Other. On the other side of the coin, agential monstrousness, or monstrousness that comes as a choice, can also operate as a denouncement of imbalanced power relations by shaking up the status quo and representing the destruction of the established hierarchy. Agency or the lack thereof from does not necessarily cement nor negate monstrosity, but it contextualizes the monster's reason for existing and why it operates as it does from a narrative standpoint. Its role in the narrative allows for the conveyance of ideological messaging that interacts with the beliefs of the player. Power facilitates agency, so the ability to operate as an agent is directly connected to power dynamics, namely the imbalance ones associated with gender. Mechanically, the manipulation of agency impacts the player's overall sense of immersion and of vulnerability, which makes emphasizing its loss a frequently utilized and effective strategy for horror game developers.

Chapter 4

The Future of Women as Agents in Horror Games

In horror games, players are often made complicit (or at least bystanders) in the enactment of many of the same social issues that thematically punctuate the narratives of these games, such as abuse and gender inequity. These games allow space for us to interact with representations of society's interrelated fears and flaws given physical form – fears and flaws that we also grapple with on an individual level. In a patriarchal culture that sustains itself by perpetuating the devaluation and marginalization of women, monstrous women in particular exist to either reinforce or undermine the validity of fundamentally misogynistic ideologies.

Horror games can dramatize harmful tropes in order to emphasize their harmfulness as well as outright subvert them. If horror is really a genre defined by transgression and deliberately evokes reactions that aren't necessarily positive, it is not inherently misogynistic to depict stereotypical power dynamics. Where developers need to tread carefully is in how these depictions of women are contextualized. If the perspectives that are fostered and legitimized within horror games uncritically perpetuate misogynistic ideals such as masculine supremacy, the developers contribute to a culture of domination and exploitation that causes harm in the real world, whether they intend to or not.

If monstrous women appear to have agency and choose to be transgressive on their own terms, is it disempowering to suddenly strip them of agential power in order draw them back into the realm of tangential social acceptability? If victimization is framed as a justification for subversive behavior or otherwise alleviates the severity of social transgression, the social order is ultimately upheld. While the choice to use the loss of agency to humanize these women challenges their status as devalued and cast aside by making them sympathetic to the player, it

does not challenge the true reasons for why their transgressive natures are labeled as such. In this choice, there is lost potential to radically subvert gendered power dynamics.

Complicating the monstrosity of women in horror games by manipulating agency mechanics might challenge certain conventions of patriarchal ideology, but it does not push the envelope far enough to mark revelatory change against the backdrop of a medium and genre that have long reinforced inequitable gendered power dynamics.

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