

“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself”

Horror as a semiotic medium in *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*

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1. Introduction – on narrative, video games and horror

There are some very basic difficulties to consider when it comes to attempting an analysis of a computer game that sets its focus not on technical or socioeconomic issues, but rather on aspects that are usually the domain of semiotics and literary theory. There are, I believe, mainly two reasons for this:

Firstly, the fact that ‘video game studies’ – although a more and more popular field of academic interest – are far from being an accepted scholarly discipline. There are very few opportunities to pursue any research in this area in the comfort of a structured academic environment, indeed very few opportunities to access something like a stable academic peer community – one notable exception being the ‘Center for the Study of Digital Games and Play’ (GAP) of Utrecht University.¹ Secondly though, video games are still in the process of making their way into the entertainment mainstream. While it may be true that not only ‘traditional’ computer and console video gaming gains more and more popularity, and that social network games such as *FarmVille* brought gaming to a demographic that may have never played video games before, it is safe to assume that gaming is far from being a given even in industrialized societies. The stereotype of the antisocial nerd, holed up in his dark apartment and gaming his life away while subsisting on Mountain Dew and Hot Pockets, may not hold any more; still, as a literary theoretician or critic one can safely assume that one’s audience is personally familiar with the practice of reading fiction or watching a movie – the playing of video games is a different story altogether.

All of this notwithstanding, I will attempt a semiotic ‘reading’ of the game *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate the value of heightened awareness towards video games in the area of literary/narrative studies in a society that is only now slowly welcoming this particular form of entertainment. However, in addition to that, I hope to show that in some cases – such as *Amnesia* – video games may be more fitting examples for the structural workings

¹ URL: <http://vkc.library.uu.nl/vkc/gap> (accessed 01/28/2014).

of narrative and receptive processes than literature itself; if one accepts the premise of literature (as well as visual narrative media such as film) being an inherently interactive phenomenon that remains fundamentally deficient without a reader (or, more generally, recipient), then the decidedly interactive practice of gaming may shed some light on very basic narrative structures and functions.²

But not only is *Amnesia* a wonderful example when it comes to describing narrative dynamics; the fact that it is widely considered one of the most effective (i.e. terrifying) horror games on the market makes it a fascinating object in regards to both the concept and the genre of horror as well. In short, in this paper I intend to discuss the structures and functions of narrative, of video gaming, and of horror and its function as a medium.

2. *Amnesia* – “Pure, unadulterated, terror” (Raze 2010)

The game *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* was first published in 2010 for Microsoft Windows. Its release was greeted with intense interest and praise, which it received mostly for doing “[...] what so many games promise to do and then fail miserably at – it terrifies the living daylight out of you.” (ibid.). Ashton Raze of the *Daily Telegraph* continues to compare the quality of fear induced by the game to that of “[...] Cthulhu, Hesselius, the House of Usher.” (ibid.). He also jokingly claims that, had Franklin D. Roosevelt been familiar with the game, he would have included it in his inaugural speech’s remark that ‘the only thing we have to fear is fear itself’. (ibid.). The gaming community reacted similarly, and the game quickly became the source of many Internet memes relating to fear, panic and horror.

The game has the player assume the role and perspective of Daniel, about whom initially no more is known than that he lives in Mayfair, that he (along with the player) has somehow ended up in a 19th-century castle with a decidedly Gothic feel to it, and that he suffers from amnesia. The player then proceeds to steer Daniel through the castle, solving puzzles, learning about his history and running or hiding from quite horrific monsters and other spooky figures. For a game from 2010, it presents surprisingly little new when it comes to innovative gameplay, story, or objectives. On first glance, it’s nothing more than a decent-looking Gothic horror puzzle solving game, of which there certainly were enough on the market at the point of *Amnesia*’s publishing.

²

This interactivity is taken to an even more complex level when one considers (online or offline) multiplayer gaming – for the sake of simplicity and brevity, however, the paper will focus on singleplayer gaming alone, i.e. just one gamer and the game.



Fig. 1: Scene from Amnesia

Since the explanation for *Amnesia's* sudden popularity can't seem to be found in any thematic innovations, it's worth taking a look at the aspects that do distinguish it; one is purely technical: its sound effects are remarkably well done, and while the game's overall graphics quality does not excel beyond the industry's standards, its shadow and light design are exceptionally detailed – the game developers build on this by explicitly urging the player to play the game alone and in a dark room while wearing headphones. Another aspect is the fact that, unlike many other adventure games, the players have no way of arming themselves/Daniel in-game, making combat impossible, which means that he has no choice but to run or hide from anything that may pose a threat to him. And lastly, the game features a 'sanity meter', which represents the status of Daniel's mental well-being. If, for instance, the player moves Daniel into a shadowy area of the castle, Daniel starts to get very nervous indeed, eventually resulting in the sanity meter filling up and causing distorted perception as well as a nauseous shifting of Daniel's field of vision, along with a growing inability to move in a stable manner. Hectic movement also makes the meter fill up, and Daniel's sanity can be restored only by lighting fires or entering lit areas and generally trying to calm down.

I believe that based on those distinguishing factors it is possible to make and illustrate claims about three interesting aspects of the connection between *Amnesia*, horror fiction in general and the overall structure of narrative reception: firstly, about the basic interactivity of narrative processes; secondly, about the specific semiotic structure of horror in narrative fiction; and thirdly, about the mediality of horror in contexts of narration and reception.

3. Cybernetic spooks and scary semiotics

The architect and philosopher Ranulph Glanville has developed a model of perception and cognition that is, in my opinion, highly fit for the description of narrative perception. Said model is

based around the well-known concept of ‘black boxes’. According to Glanville, any perceiver as well as anything they perceive can be viewed as one such black box. Both are, from any outside perspective, impossible to ‘look into’, i.e. their individual properties and modes of operation are never directly accessible. The only thing accessible from the outside are the perceiver’s and perceived’s respective inputs and outputs. In the process of perception, the perceived’s output becomes, to a degree, part of the perceiver’s input, and vice versa. This dynamic eventually results in any knowledge or meaning that can be gained from any individual perceptive situation. The basic point of this model is to demonstrate how knowledge, meaning and information are never to be found in either objective facts or subjective perception, but rather in the interaction itself and the observation thereof. Stable (if strictly historic) knowledge, Glanville goes on to argue, is only obtained by this observation of interaction, the observation of that observation, and so forth. Consequently, individual knowledge can never have access to any given objectivity, since it is always made up from both internal and external dynamics. What this also sums up quite nicely are the basic assumptions and methods of second order cybernetics. (cf. Glanville 1988).

Applied to the situation of narrative perception (reading, watching a movie, etc.), this model would put both any given reader and any given text in the position of a black box, with no way of directly extracting any stable information from one another.³ That would, for instance, render any individual reader’s knowledge about *Moby Dick* exclusively subjective. Any observation of this reader reading the novel would provide information about both reader and novel, if only indirectly via their interaction’s input and output. And finally, any further observation of those observations (for instance broad empiric studies of the novel’s perception) would be able to provide historically stable knowledge such as, for instance, the fact that *Moby Dick* has a lot of stuff about whales in it.

Based on this model, some intriguing assumptions about *Amnesia* can be made; the first would be somewhat banal: *Amnesia*, being a video game, showcases the conflux of perception and interaction in an especially obvious fashion, since any given player necessarily needs to physically interact with it in order to make it produce anything more than a loading screen and some ominous music. The second assumption, however, is decidedly more intricate: all narrative information and development as well as every emotion and feeling that the player gets out of the game are results of their own interaction with the game, not the game itself. An experience that most players of the game have probably made at one point or another may serve as an example for this:

³ This does in fact include the possibility of a text learning something about its reader, a notion that, in my opinion, is highly worth entertaining.

The player (i.e. Daniel) walks through the castle, minding his own business. Suddenly, he hears something – it may be something horrible sneaking up on him, it may be a curtain rustling or a door creaking, it may even be his own footsteps or breathing. The player (as mentioned, possibly sitting in a dark room with his headphones) is startled – he quickly takes a look around and/or tries to run from the noise. This hectic movement makes Daniel’s sanity meter fill up, distorting both his and the player’s hearing and vision, making his surroundings even more ambiguous and scary. The fact that the flight has in all probability positioned Daniel in a dark spot (of which there are considerably more than light ones) does not do his mental health any good at all. Now the player needs to run towards a light source or frantically try to light his tinderbox (of which he has few, which might make him hesitate while standing in the darkness, another bad idea). This, in turn, only makes his insanity worse. The result of this process and many more possible ones is necessarily tension and terror (both in-game and outside) – but it’s not possible to exactly pinpoint any genuine source of the terror, since it is an effect of the player manipulating the game manipulating the player manipulating the game (... and so forth). Plainly put, the terror is based on itself. Cybernetically put, it’s a result of neither/both the player’s actions or/and the game’s properties – it’s a result of their interaction.

I propose that the same holds true for horror fiction in general: a reader picks up a text, which invokes in him a disposition for skepticism, doubt and confusion, which in turn makes any narrative event a possible element of fear, and so on. I shall elaborate on the specifics of horror fiction’s marvelously vicious cycle later in this chapter.

But besides this cybernetic structure of interaction I am interested in the game’s highly intricate semiotic makeup. More specifically, I am interested in something that could be called ‘semiotic proximity’. The semiotician Umberto Eco uses concepts from the discipline of proxemics to describe certain aspects of non-verbal communication, focusing on human senses (cf. Eco 2002). Recalling *Amnesia*’s distinguishing elements, the senses that are of interest here are vision and hearing (the focus on these senses is, again, enhanced if the player chooses to heed the developers’ advice to play in the dark with headphones on).

When it comes to semiotics and apperception, the arguably most fundamental source is C.S. Peirce’ *On a New List of Categories*, in which Peirce first attempts to simplify Kant’s list of metaphysical categories (cf. Peirce 1994a). He ends up with three categories, spread out between the apperceptive horizons of Being and Substance (cf. *ibid.*; as opposed to Kant’s 12 categories, cf. Kant 1995). Peirce’ categories, originally named “Quality”, “Relation” and “Representation” (*ibid.*, 1.555), will appear in later writings simply as ‘Firstness’, ‘Secondness’ and ‘Thirdness’.

Firstness refers to “positive internal characters of the subject in itself” (Peirce 1994b, 5.469), or pure quality; secondness refers to “brute actions of one subject or substance on another” (ibid.) or basic relation; and thirdness refers to “the mental or quasi-mental influence of one subject on another relatively to a third” (ibid.), or established representation. According to Nina Ort, these three categories can be viewed as ‘constituents of reality’ (“Wirklichkeitskonstituenten”, Ort 2007, 212), beyond (or below) which no apperception is possible.

In terms of Peirce’s metaphysical categories, *Amnesia*’s semiotic structure makes every effort to create a context of secondness. By strongly focusing on vision and hearing, the distance between player and game is radically diminished. This is technically reinforced by the game’s minimal handling – the fact that it features only basic, simple keyboard and mouse controls (compared to the majority of other computer games) shifts the focus away from haptic perception, a focus that would necessarily create greater semiotic distance (since it’s impossible to actually physically reach into a computer game). This directness is what Peirce refers to as secondness, or relation, or actuality:

Actuality is something brute. There is no reason in it. I instance putting your shoulder against a door and trying to force it open against an unseen, silent and unknown resistance. [...] I call that Secondness. (Peirce 1994c, 1.24)

At another point, Peirce directly associates secondness with the concept of “shock” (Peirce 1994d, 1.332.). But since my focus lies on the actual sensation of horror, what may be even more fitting to describe this semiotic structure is Peirce’s triad of sensual apperception: what is generated in *Amnesia* by means of game mechanics can be described as ‘altersense’. For Peirce, altersense is directly linked with the category of secondness – he also describes it as “the consciousness of a directly present other or second, withstanding us.” (Peirce 1994e, 7.551). Even more fittingly perhaps, he connects the sensation of altersense with general “otherness” (ibid.).

At any rate, the apperceptive mode or sensation that is created in the game is something beyond a vague solipsistic feeling (which would be firstness or ‘primisense’, cf. ibid), but at the same time something that is not developed enough to be consciously reflected (which would be thirdness or ‘medisense’, cf. ibid.). It’s a bit like registering a sensation of physical and mental shock before consciously realizing that you have walked into a very clean glass window. What *Amnesia* does, semiotically, is make its player susceptible to intense, direct, indeed intimate sensations.

Returning to my earlier argument about horror fiction in general, I now invite you to picture the environmental contexts that are often associated with the genre: the dark movie theater with an audience whose silent expectation is broken only by gasps and nervous jumps; the book read under a blanket with a flashlight; the dimly flickering campfire around which scary stories

are told. All of those situations create a structurally identical semiotic atmosphere – one of shock, intensity and eerie closeness.

And this is the point at which I feel obliged to revisit my arguments about cybernetics and the basic interactive nature of narration and perception. What is interesting here is the sense of vision in particular, the sense that may carry the highest degree of ontological authority.⁴ One previously unmentioned aspect of *Amnesia* is the interesting fact that monsters and other adversaries notice Daniel's presence considerably more quickly if he/the player is looking at them. And since Daniel is permanently unarmed, the player, on encountering something horrible, has very little choice but to huddle in a corner, looking at a wall and hoping that the horrible thing will go away (the corner ideally being dark for this is a further hit to poor Daniel's sanity, of course). In this situation, horror in the form of an evil supernatural creature is, for all intents and purposes, a medium between Daniel and the creature as well as the player and the game, a medium that drives the narrative dynamic. What is feared at this point, to return to Roosevelt, is indeed fear itself. It is, again, notable that this dynamic has no discernible beginning – or rather it begins, in a very real sense, everywhere. Horror is found at every point of this process.



Fig. 2: Whatever you do, don't look!

Like Peirce's 'interminable semiosis' ("unabschließbare Semiose", Ort 2007, 322f.) the interactive narrative structure of horror has no beginning – and consequently, it also has no end. I would like to demonstrate this by means of a concluding observation.

⁴ Edmund Husserl comments on the semantics of the German verb 'wahrnehmen' ('to perceive'), which literally translates to 'taking something for true'. He explicitly focuses on the sense of vision in this context. Cf. HUSSERL, Edmund (2006), *Phantasie und Bildbewusstsein*, Hamburg: Meiner, p. 203.

4. Conclusion – Let’s Play!

For the past few years, an interesting Internet phenomenon has been developing, which in itself would warrant whole treatises. I am referring to what is most commonly called ‘Let’s Play’ videos that are found mostly on YouTube, but also on other video hosting sites. At their core, these videos are game commentaries, with a player talking over screen-captured gameplay footage – but Let’s Plays differ from simple game reviews, tutorials or walkthroughs by focusing on entertainment; the commentators showcase themselves playing the game, having fun (or getting scared).

When *Amnesia* was published, not only was it played and commented on YouTube by everyone and their teenage brother – an astonishing number of ‘Let’s Players’ saw it fitting to add to their gameplay web cam-footage of themselves playing the game, as picture-in-picture videos (cf. fig. 3 below). Some of these video series reached view counts exceeding 2 millions⁵, earning their creators not only Internet fame but also notable ad revenues.



Fig. 3: YouTube user 'TobyGames' playing Amnesia

In other words, viewers take pleasure in interactively watching somebody interactively playing a game and getting scared. In my previous examples, horror in *Amnesia* stood for the interactive dynamics between the game’s narrative mechanics and the players actions and assumptions. It appears that these dynamics need not stop there.

Here – and, as I propose, when it comes to horror in general – it becomes clear that there are interactions upon interactions upon interactions, generating not only specific instances of horror, but a vast discursive field that keeps re-entering all of its constituents, becoming a true – and very scary – medium.

⁵ For instance the playthrough of YouTube user ‘TOBYGAMES’: cf. <http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLBD48A60260ACD502> (accessed 07/13/13).

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Weblinks

- Ashton RAZE'S review of *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (09/13/10):
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