

## INTRODUCTION

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It has been an honour and a fascinating quest to be the guest-editor of this special issue for *Brumal*. A brilliant group of scholars has grabbed the chance to join two branches of scholarship that don't necessarily know each other well and have managed to produce original and inspiring work. You, dear reader, might also belong to one of the two groups and not know much about the other. You might either be an expert of the fantastic, intrigued by the spectacular medium of videogames, or a game scholar, wary of approaches that feel "too literary". I will therefore take a step back and introduce you to each other, briefly sketching the meeting point where the two fields cross each other productively and which formed the basis for our call for papers.

The fantastic is as an aesthetic category, manifested across multiple media like literature, film, television, or games. In David Roas definition, the fantastic is: "a problematic confrontation between the real and the impossible. That what «cannot be, but is» (2011: 14) As such, the fantastic dwells in the doubt it generates, both amongst the fictional characters and the readers/viewers who witness their troubles in the unstable fictional world. The characters reality is suddenly interrupted by an impossible occurrence and both they and the reader, tremble. Poe, Maupassant, Lovecraft... are all authors that have molded the essence of the fantastic into recognizable shapes that question the comfortable solidity of what we innocently call «reality».

The fantastic does thus *not* equal «fantasy», even though the terms are close, since the latter deals with *other* realities, *other* worlds, and is also associated with science fiction. In fantasy, there is no conflict between these other

realities and our own; the other realities are presented as coherent worlds of their own that might include things that are impossible in ours, like magic, talking dragons or planets with two suns inhabited by humans. Many videogames belong thematically to this genre, but this is not our focus here; a necessary clarification as many thought this is what they would find in this special issue.

Back to our topic, the breach of reality in fantastic fictions is always disquieting, and it fills characters with anxiety. Sometimes reality fractures are perceived as uncanny, others, as decidedly terrifying. Fantastic tales break the seams that hold our world together, lift veils that shouldn't be lifted, and open doors that were made to be kept shut. The fantastic is the realm of monsters, doppelgangers, ghosts and demons, not understood as gimmicks to tell a heroic story (as in much supernatural mainstream fiction) but as sources of what Roas has called "metaphysical fear" (2011: 95), the stuff of nightmares and madness. This fear is perhaps best exemplified by the Lovecraftian characters that lose their sanity when confronted with the "cosmic horror" of the great ones.

Let us then venture into our second path of enquiry: games, the entertainment form of the digital era. According to Juul, a game is «a rule-based formal system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable» (Juul, 2003). As it is clear from this definition, a game is as separated from "reality" as the fine arts, but it is not a representational work. It is rather a rule system intended to engage players in pleasurable conflict or problem solving, where the goal is to win (in many games at least). A videogame is simply a game run by a computer, a procedural machine (Bogost, 2007). Algorithms don't allow for any doubt; if there is indeterminacy, the machine collapses. That is, rules can only be unequivocal because the computer needs to decide if we succeeded in our jump or can go on to the next level.

Apart from this procedural/ludic level, videogames very often also have a narrative level, where stories are told. Many videogame stories tend to follow a sort of systemic logic and are often reduced to manichaeian drama in which players know exactly what they have to do, who the bad guys are and where to find the ammunition. Moreover, most videogames are not set in the real world as we know it; it is too boring, too predictable to allow for spectacular action. Favourite settings are either fantasy worlds or exaggerated ver-

sions of our own, like a brutal mafia city where all cars can be stolen and all people shot down, like in the *Grand Theft Auto* series. Other games do not even aspire to photorealism, and instead create multicoloured dreams of surreal action, such as the shape shifting madness of *Candy Crush*.

This is no doubt a too quick and superficial look at the medium of videogames. The purpose of exaggerating here is to illustrate that doubt and uncertainty, the essence of the fantastic, seem at a first glance counterproductive elements from the perspective of a designer of videogames, closer to «bugs» guaranteed to ruin the experience of the player.

Fortunately, this apprehension soon proves to be false. The contributors to this special issue have all managed to find some cracks in the concrete bunker of videogames, mostly taking their stand in the realm of horror, as they have built upon the work of authors like Kryzwinska (2002), Tosca (2003, 2013), Perron (2009, 2011) or Anyó (2013) who have in different ways argued that ambiguity can also be aesthetically productive in relation to videogames.

The key to videogames engagement with the fantastic is not a question of diegesis but of the emotional response that gameplay (the ludus) elicits in the player. In other words, it is not only about the fictional characters becoming anxious; it is also about us, the players, momentarily losing grip on what we thought were the established conventions of videogame interaction. In this way, the “marriage” of the fantastic and videogames suddenly appears more interesting, adding a ludic dimension to the fantastic that we could call, in Aarseth’s famous words, the ergodic dimension (1997). The interesting point here is that both the narrative and the ludic levels are susceptible of interpretation, or rather, they are always experienced at the same time (Tosca, 2003), so that the ludic interaction with the game and its hermeneutic dimension coalesce into a unique kind of aesthetic experience.

If this seems cryptic, I recommend that the reader plunges into the different articles of this special issue, where these questions are unfolded at length. There are eight contributions, seven in Spanish and one in English, that together demonstrate that a fantastic approach can also be fruitful for the study of videogames, and viceversa, that videogames constitute a unique kind of fantastic experience.

The first article, «Nicole is dead: ciencia ficción, terror y fantástico en *Dead Space*», by Silviano Carrasco, sets the theoretical framework for the issue, making a necessary distinction between the fantastic and the marvelous, and also serving as a lucid introduction to how fantastic themes have been applied

to different game genres. It then focuses on the analysis of the game *Dead Space*, which, interestingly, unfolds in a science fiction setting that is “disturbed” by the presence of the fantastic, where the player is left to decide about the ontological solidity of the fictional world.

This focus on the player is also crucial to «La construcción de la soledad a través del gameplay en *Silent Hill: Homecoming*», by Laksmy Irigoyen, who examines the anxiety and fear inherent in the very act of playing when the game is difficult and the interface unstable. The game becomes an obsession that also spills out into the real time/life of the player. She conceptualizes the theme of loneliness as a powerful trope that drives gameplay in many games of the investigative kind, and is also a feature of much fantastic storytelling.

*Silent Hill* is also the object of study of Alejandro Lozano Muñoz, who in his «Jugar el horror. Construcción de lo fantástico en el videojuego. El caso de *Silent Hill 4: The Room*» defines the uncanny in relation to the body and the home, with an in-depth case study of *Silent Hill 4*. Usually, videogames present players with unknown spaces to be explored as a site for the uncanny (old castles, dark forests, etc.). In this game, however, it is the home of the main character that becomes progressively stranger, creating a very real anxiety for the player, that loses her *safe* space, which is also her *save* space, where progress in the game has to be saved from time to time. The breach with this mechanic is deeply unsettling and is proof of the maturity of a medium that can so elegantly twist one of its most established conventions.

This same interest for the “meta” plan is at the center of Nieves Rosendo’s «Lo fantástico en *Alan Wake*: remediación, intermedialidad, transmedialidad», a brilliant analysis of a game that is so ambiguous (in relation to time, referentiality and the fabric of reality) as to fully qualify as a postmodern artifact. *Alan Wake* is not about winning, with an unusual ending that avoids traditional narrative closure, so that the player has to ultimately decide by herself what happened to the tormented protagonist.

From this article on, we plunge into a more “monstrous” take on the fantastic, inaugurated by «Universos fantásticos de inspiración lovecraftiana en videojuegos survival horror. Un estudio de caso de *P.T (Silent Hill)*», by Marta Fernández and Héctor Puente Bienvenido. It is the study of a game demo where the players conventional gameplay is disturbed to such a degree that she has to rebel against the system, or she will not be able to “win”. This process of estrangement of the player subject has caused considerable upheaval in the player community, as ambiguity gives way to different experiences and strategic recommendations as to how to beat the game. The authors

make a case for *P.T* contributing to a lovecraftian understanding of horror, thus making a direct link to the next article in the issue.

«Fronteras inestables: lo fantástico en *Eternal Darkness*», by Carlos Gerardo Zemeño Vargas further unpacks the lovecraftian themes and universe in relation to videogames. Popular culture has often focused on the monsters, forcing Lovecraft into neatly explained systems of gods and servants, and forgetting that the true essence of his work lies in the chaotic, the unexplainable and that which is totally alien to human understanding. *Eternal Darkness*, however, manages to convey cosmic horror through relatively simple game mechanics, that, again, break the usual rules of ludic interaction, robbing the player of her standing ground and filling her with uncertainty.

The next article deals with baroque monsters that become postmodern, those of *World of Warcraft*, a game that Juan Carlos Cruz Suárez and Daniel Escandell Montiel study in «Del encanto de vivir en Azeroth. Presencias neobarrocas en la lúdica virtual». Avatar identities create a gap between us and our screen selves, a gap that points to a mutable, unstable and fragmented postmodern subject that can be explained in terms of the fantastic.

Psychological instability is also the topic of the last of the articles of the issue (the only one in English) that proposes a psychoanalytic analysis of the fantastic videogame series of Silent Hill. In «Restless Dreams and Shattered Memories: Psychoanalysis and *Silent Hill*», Ewan Kirkland applies the freudian concept of the uncanny to not only the diegetic themes, but also to the different ludic mechanics of horror videogames, so that the issue of control versus lack of control is related to the conscious and the subconscious in a very original approach to conceptualizing the player experience.

I would like to close this introduction with an invitation, because the medium of videogames is a unique opportunity for us to *inhabit* these unstable worlds, to *experience* in our own (virtual) flesh the fantastic displacements of reality, to go from spectators to actors and subjects. To experience first-hand what lies behind. Please do go out and play. Like Paul Prospero in *The Vanishing of Ethan Carter*, to learn that «Large pieces of this country were thrown away, doomed to become, and then remain, the worst versions of themselves. Beneath all that rot, dark things grow». What are you waiting for?

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