

Dismembers of the Audience: The Expulsive, Explosive Force of Bodies in Games

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, a conceptual framework is developed for critiquing extreme violence in computer and videogames from an aesthetic perspective. In particular focus is the common play element of 'corpseplay' and the reduction of the physical form into 'gibs', chunks and blood.

What occurs when the player turns enemies into a screaming ballet of slow-motion meat? The mechanics underlying games suggest a release of forces and tensions, so how does it become possible, if at all, to speak in general and specific terms about extreme videogame violence?

Keywords

Materiality, physicality, blood, guts

1. INTRODUCTION

What does it mean for a body to be ready to explode at any minute? If, as DeLilio suggests in his novel *Mao II*, 'every event moves towards its inevitable image', is the exploded body the inevitable image of the game character? [1] In the game development process, great care is taken to give bodies weight and depth, especially at the crucial point of violence. The body has to convincingly melt, drop and fall in ways that refer to the real but more importantly impart a sense of impact. Animation and physics have to work in concert to deliver a sense of reliable but mutable force. For a virtual body to be hard-coded for death means that their entire bodily function centres around an inevitable expulsion of gibs and chunks. We navigate realms filled with living bombs.

2. HORRIFIC SCENARIOS

Tanya Krzywinska's 2002 essay "Hands On Horror" concerns itself with the movements of the moral universe in interactive horror scenarios; observing that the capacity to visit violence upon monsters is reliant on the notion of a visible 'good', a notion imported from film's thirst for clarity. [2] Game enemies – be they monsters or otherwise – are indigenous to violence; they face us and advance, for which violence is a natural course of action. This is not a general statement concerning game design; rather an examination of the clarity of violent acts as presented by mainstream game design. With few exceptions, games present us with provocations for the violence we expel. Krzywinska's redefinition of the moral occult in terms of horror games is also a modal exploration of violence; the introduction of acts which can dismember, execute and disrupt the bodily form automatically causes tensions along genre's border controls.

Bernard Perron's paper at 2005's Aesthetics of Play conference, "Coming to Play at Frightening Yourself: Welcome to the World of Horror Video Games", develops a sort of action semiology by which fear responses, threat management and the overcoming of monstrous figures figure as the foregrounding elements of horror games. [3] For Perron, our activities are more coherently tied to cognitive responses in horror games than in film – fear is no longer palpable, but haptic.

2.1 The Persistence of Corpses

Perron's analysis suggests that motivations for retaliation against monsters are by the formal construction, quite elastic. The importance of this element to the horror game genre is clear; your capabilities must be seemingly overwhelmed by threat, but eventually resolvable through bravery, patience and fear control. Enemies, once defeated, resolve back into the fear system if their bodies remain for any length of time, as the notion of the game corpse is a site of much tension.

From a design and programming point of view, the corpse is inert ornament, a defeated obstacle or step that draws valuable resources away from more pressing engagements, such as undefeated enemies. The use of disappearing, dissolving or exploding bodies, is in part a nod to efficient principles of design which must rationalise the existence of objects at all times. This is especially true in more modern, entirely 3D games, such as *Resident Evil 4*, in which zombies are returned rapidly to the underworld by dissolving into the earth in a cloud of brown and red fog. The game *Oblivion*, touted for its nods to realism and depth of design, allowed players to attack corpses long after death, and in some cases continuing to render them for hours of in-game time. This elasticity opens up the realm of the horrific in games that may otherwise have no horror genre elements. For example, players can electrocute corpses, move them, pose them, attack them in a high-fantasy setting such as *Oblivion*, but not in the grim zombie holocaust of *Resident Evil 4*. It goes without saying that the reasons for this are all technical in nature; but nor can we shy away from describing the aesthetic torsion that occurs when elements that have traditionally been closely tied to horror, and therefore the fear responses that Perron and Krzywinska have identified, have long been available across genres and types.

What becomes available, then, is an address of the horrific outside of its genre confines. There is little sense in generalising about the wide array of third-person action games, first-person shooters, real-time strategy games (to name but three types) that employ death animations and bodily explosions, or even attempting a typology thereof. What is rather more fruitful is an examination of

difference in instances of death to speak about the specificity and located-ness of the bursting corpse. The chunks of meat have been blown beyond horror's confines and come to rest anywhere that violence is a key pleasure of the games' design.

3. PRELIMINARY EXAMPLES

3.1 Wolfenstein 3D

The textual resonance with this notion of embedded violence is naturally dependent on design. In *Wolfenstein 3D*, sprite animations for the regular guards were limited to four frames signifying death; all such guards turned away from you, blood spurting from an unseen mouth, after the killing click. The kineticism of the game's raycasting-based engine was limited, but in the simple design decision to animate guards being turned around as they perish, the sense of bodily contact was amplified.

Part of this impact is the happy accident of technology; the sprites of *Wolfenstein 3D* (and later notable violent first person games *Doom*, *Hexen* and *Witchaven*) would follow your viewpoint. This is an obvious technical quirk of the nature of sprite animation, but has the severest impact on the semiotics of death. All corpses face away from you, their feet impossible to look past. The corpse is dimensionally positioned on two, rather than the three axes the player has the sensation of travelling through.

3.2 Soldier of Fortune II: Double Helix

Another example is 2002's *Soldier of Fortune II: Double Helix*, in which bodies are regulated by a game system called GHOUL; by which body parts sustain damage individually, the body subdivided into 26 zones of potential gore. Heads can explode, limbs can separate, corpseplay (post-death molestation of bodies) is ludically encouraged by the existence and marketing of such a system. Bodies in the world presented to players are unfinished, still able to be acted upon, well after the point of death. Fallen enemies can be taken to with the game's primary weapon, a knife, and sections of digital meat carved away from the bone in close detail.

The setting of *Double Helix* is a admixture of 80s action cinema and more contemporary right-wing military fantasy, where players occupy the persona of the always-justified John Mullins, the titular soldier of fortune. Gore, therefore, is contextually fitting – but to the extent that the providence of the GHOUL body sectioning system allows, different actions are opened up than might otherwise be.

3.3 Saints' Row

More recently, *Saints' Row* of 2006 involved a curiously designed implementation of death. The game allowed players to explore an open city with a gang who were semi-religiously devoted to the elimination of other gangs. Shooting innocent civilians (explicitly forbidden by the story but allowed in gameplay terms) would mean the corpse in question would disappear a full second after death. Eerily, objects obtained from vending machines persist for a full thirty seconds. What occurs here is a disjunctive apparatus

where bodies react in one style, and objects another – players automatically recognise that corpses are given a higher status, whisked away as if by valkyries, than ordinary objects.

4. THEATRICALISED CATHARSIS

A game's positioning of death can change the semiotics entirely; *Saints' Row* refusal to allow corpseplay in the manner of *Grand Theft Auto*, a game series from which it borrows heavily, speaks of a design decision to imbue the moral visibility of the criminal act. It is here that Kryzwinska's rearticulation of the filmic moral occult can permeate beyond the horror genre.

Artist Brody Condon's 2004 video work, *Suicide Solution*, captures the artist committing suicide in over 50 action games, from botched grenade launches to thousand-foot drops. While invested in subverting the usual flow of actions in games, the methodical nature of the deaths is aesthetically muddled – cushioned in one sense by critique, and the kit-world experimental nature of the worlds that lends itself to speedruns, trick videos and music video style 'fan-vids.' His 1999 work, *Adam Killer* abstracts the game engine of *Half-Life* to the point where only glitched visions of one person's slowly repeating death open up in kaleidoscopic regimes. [4] In his thesis "Where Do Virtual Corpses Go?", Condon refers to the juxtaposition of elements from player's lives with those of their games as a 'common intuitive visual gesture', one that is illuminated by his own refraction of violence with elements from his real-life experience with friends or his own body. [5] Condon's work from this period explores the dense layering of signs that occurs when players experience and seek out violent death of themselves or others.

Condon's understanding of game violence is best articulated by this notion of common gesture; some of the psychology of acting upon a corpse is necessarily stripped away in the pursuit of virtuality – curiosity inflected by boredom and exploration as much as morbidity. In all the games mentioned, the falling of a corpse on the ground leads to the possibility of its ornamentation – the corpse as trophy. Precisely in the cases of *Resident Evil 4* and *Saints' Row*, where this act is unavailable, the tensions between horror and other genres twinge and react.

Two essays by writer Philip Brophy, "The Body Horrible" and "The Body Internal" open up a possible avenue for the interpretation of these signs. In "The Body Horrible", Brophy presents a number of principles by which "to extend relations and analogies between technique, image and effect, based on the notion that ... everything can be fused in the one place of physicality." This system is entirely related to film – and its use in relation to games must come with the proviso that what is under consideration is the display of bodies directly after death, for which Brophy's theorising is suited. His system for interpreting the explosive body is entirely tied to the notion of a pneumatic release of symbolic codes. The sub-section 'Explosion' is a declarative method for repurposing the body's final moment:

Explosion is the directing of concerns, fears, frustrations at the image of the body, causing it to splatter under force, impact, intensity and pressure. More so, it is the point of eruption, the instant of

dematerialisation, that serves as the dead-end-centre for the painful yet pleasurable build-up of everything being directed at the body - both material and symbolic. In bluntest terms, the photographic effect of the exploding body or body-part is not unlike a cum shot. The Explosion is thus the theatricalised catharsis of savaging the Self, maligning the Other, and generally terrorizing all those touted symbolic codes.

‘The instant of dematerialisation’ could not be more literal; the decomposition of not only heads, but forces, torrents of symbols, meanings and relevances. At once, things become more densely layered through a violent reframing of the text’s dimensions, yet release all the pneumatic breath of their motions and meanings. The bodies of *Wolfenstein 3D* are not killed; they are released from their living prisons with a final, exhaltant click of the mouse or spacebar.

Brophy’s alignment of bodily explosions with ‘theatricalised catharsis’ is by no means a clear method for the decoding of signs in the chunks and gibs of all action games. In these terms, however, we can contextualise virtual violence in general terms and bear down with the specifics of each game, or even play session. To that end, we can speak of game design opening up the possibilities of corpses, and players exploiting them, to very literally dematerialise the codes and references framed by the game’s setting and presumptions.

5. POETICS OF THE CURB STOMP

Gears of War (2006), a grim futuristic large-scale action game uses similar technology to many other contemporary action games due to its use of the Unreal Engine, a popular ‘middleware’ development suite. However, its inclusion of an extraordinarily violent act, available during certain circumstances, has gone largely unexamined and even exalted. Given the defeat of an enemy, they often enter a pre-death state, awaiting your final blow. One of the methods available to players is to approach the kneeling, bleeding figure and to kill them using a method referred to in production diaries and across the gaming press as ‘curb stomping’. This act is itself a theatricalised catharsis from its origin point, the film *American History X*. In the film, a neo-nazi executes an African-American man in the street outside his house by forcing the latter to bite the curb and then stepping on the back of his head. The game attempts to omit the racial coding of the act, by recasting the scenarios into science-fiction, but the coda of the act is still extreme, forceful death of a already-defeated opponent.

This extraordinary dint of aesthetic design is but a fragment of the possibilities of the flesh in *Gears of War* play, but its specific origin in the depiction of racial violence require specific attention in the mapping of the semiotics of violence. If we consider Brophy’s attribution of exploding bodies as breath-like expulsions of signs, and the tensions of signs, then what can be said of an act of violence so heavily coded?

6. CONCLUSION

While it is impossible to create general statements about the depiction of death in games, a discrete ‘typal range’ almost always exists, to allow abstraction; life, suffering, and death. The states are generally absolutes, to facilitate exciting and balanced play. Martti Lathi’s “As We Become Machines: Corporealized Pleasures in Video Games” connects discrete states as part of the machinic, cyborg logic of bodily transgression in gameplay. Lathi is careful to situate signs as being of equal weight in the relationships between body and technology; the interfaces between states are coded through the manipulation of signs first and foremost. [7]

From the nascent experiments with death animations, such as the seven frames of *Pac-Man*’s dissolution, the six frames of *Galaga*’s exploding starfighter, there has been increasingly complex materiality behind the sequences of death and defeat for both player and game character. The choice of sprite art for the death of soldiers in *Wolfenstein 3D* signifies that every killing bullet forces the dead to turn around as they die; or elsewhere we can note that *Doom*’s demonic guards gorily split open with a direct hit from a rocket; *Unreal Tournament 2003*’s warriors bend and twist with ragdolled effects, or are vomited outward into chunks of balletic, angry meat. The killing blow and the death animation it triggers sound and feel different for players. The usual rules of experience go out the window as we stare through the slowly expanding torso of an enemy.

The grotesque situation of death’s reproduction has consequences for how such games are produced; careful considerations of how bodies will hit the floor is part of any action game’s development. Gamers derive play from experimentation with the situation of death, metaphorically and literally poking at the corpse in the ditch with a stick, seeing what else it will do. What occurs in between these states is a finality of production; every enemy moves towards the image of its own corpse.

7. REFERENCES

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