

Patterns of obscurity: Gothic setting and light in *Resident Evil 4* and *Silent Hill 2*

by Simon Niedenthal

Obeying an urgent summons contained in a mysterious letter, the narrator approaches his destination on a “dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens” (Poe, 2003: 90). Although this opening is taken from Poe’s *Fall of the House of Usher*, it also applies in an almost literal way to the first cut scenes and misty environments of the survival horror digital game *Silent Hill 2* (Konami, 2001). Echoes of the themes, settings and ambience of Gothic literature are so frequent in games from the *Silent Hill* (Konami, 1999-2008) and *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996-2009) series that it is possible to argue that survival horror games constitute a new form of the Gothic, one in which player activity drives the unfolding of the action. The emotions resulting from enforced player vulnerability – a hallmark of the survival horror genre – as experienced within the narrative themes, player tasks and virtual architecture of the game worlds, offer a new venue for exploring the depths of fear, terror, and the sublime that were first plumbed by writers such as Anne Radcliffe, Edgar Allen Poe, Matthew Lewis and H.P. Lovecraft. Supplementing historical texts with contemporary eyetracking technologies and emotion research demonstrates that these games depend as much upon architectural setting and ambience as they do upon traditional narrative concerns or game balance for the unique power of the emotions they elicit. Patterns of obscurity set the groundwork for the player’s ability to appraise and act upon challenges in their environment, as they move through the castles, caverns and labyrinths of this gruesomely satisfying gothic new media genre.

Survival horror games and Gothic fiction

Broad correspondances between Gothic fiction and survival horror games immediately become apparent when one compares literary definitions of Gothic fiction and emerging attitudes towards the survival horror game genre:

Gothic novel: “The locale was often a gloomy castle furnished with dungeons, subterranean passages, and sliding panels . . . and made bountiful use of ghosts, mysterious disappearances, and other sensational and supernatural occurrences . . . The principal aim of such novels was to evoke chilling terror by exploiting mystery and a variety of horrors” (Abrams, 1999: 111).

Survival horror: “Survival horror is a prominent video game genre in which the player has to survive an onslaught of opponents, often undead or otherwise supernatural, typically in claustrophobic environments in a third-person perspective” (www.Wikipedia.org, accessed 13 Dec. 2006).

These entries suggest an intersection of shared concerns around supernatural themes, haunted and claustrophobic settings, and specific effects upon the reader or player. Deeper resemblances can also be traced, and I will argue that an understanding of the Gothic genre, and more particularly the sense qualities of Gothic settings, such as illumination and atmosphere, can enrich our understanding of the experience of survival horror video games. But first, we need to look more closely at the ways in which our experiences of fiction and other non-interactive media, such as film, differ from that of interactive media.

The psychological effect upon the reader or player – whether described as fear, terror, or horror – is central to both the gothic and survival horror genres. Both genres are vehicles for exploring emotional extremes. To return our definition of Gothic fiction:

The term ‘Gothic’ has also been extended to a type of fiction which lacks the exotic setting of the earlier romances, but develops a brooding atmosphere of gloom and terror, represents events that are uncanny or macabre or melodramatically violent, and often deals with aberrant psychological states (Abrams, 1999: 111).

But it must be noted that the emotional experience of reading fiction and playing a game are very different. Perron (2005a) has drawn upon the film psychology work of Tan, and emotion research of Fridja, to sketch a framework for understanding the emotional impact of interactive media. Fridja argues that emotions are not just passive experiences, but orient us towards action. Initial appraisals of situations are conducted to determine the relevance to one’s interests and well-being, and are followed by an evaluation of what can be done, actions that can be taken. Perron further quotes Grodal (2003: 150) as an example of how this process can work in the case of video games:

It is the player’s evaluation of his own coping potential that determines whether [a] confrontation with a monster will be experienced as fear (if the evaluation of his coping potential is moderate), despair (if he feels that he has no coping potentials), or triumphant aggression (if he feels that he is amply equipped for the challenge). This entails that the emotional experience will vary over time, due to the learning processes leading to a change in coping potentials (Grodal, 2003: 150).

It is thus the capacity to act that differentiates interactive media, such as games, from fiction and film, and the emotional experience of interactive media emerges from the intertwined processes of evaluation and action.

One key way in which survival horror games create their emotional effect is by maintaining a state of player vulnerability. The Wikipedia entry emphasizes the way in which this is achieved through game balance and resources: in comparison to shooter games, for example, “the player is made to feel underpowered, generally fighting alone for the bulk of the game, with limited supplies”. This is of course inherent in the paired terms in “survival horror”: the first – survival – indicates a player goal, while the second – horror – refers to an emotional state as well as an existing film and literary genre. The word “survival” indicates that we are in a world of diminished expectation; it isn’t called victory horror. One primary activity is self-defense. The player is never free enough to go on the offensive, as in a strategy game, but is maintained in a reactive posture. We begin with simple weapons like blunt sticks. We play alone, but are also often responsible for characters who cannot fully defend themselves (such as Ashley in *Resident Evil 4* or Maria in *Silent Hill 2*), and we face tough bosses such as Pyramid Head in *Silent Hill 2*, who cannot be defeated, only survived. These features of survival horror games underscore the limited powers of the player, and the fact that our tendency must be to evaluate our resources as limited.

Defensive struggle is not the only hallmark activity of survival horror games; drawing from earlier adventure games, there is a fair component of puzzle solving. The player is also suspended in a state of incomplete knowledge. This establishes a varied pace in which moments of feverish activity are leavened with moments of cognitive

challenge. It should be noted that puzzle-solving is an important theme in Gothic literature as well, whether explicit, as in the cryptographic challenges of Poe's *The Gold Bug* (1843), or implicit, as in *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1842), in which the narrator has to solve the problem of how to escape a torture device that threatens to vivisect him.

It is not only game resources and cognitive challenges that contribute to the psychological effect of survival horror games. A sense of vulnerability is also produced through the perceptual conditions of the game worlds. I have replayed *Silent Hill 2* and chapters 3 and 4 of *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom, 2005) with knowledge of how to solve the puzzles, as well as armories of weapons bolstered by previous trips through the games. My in-game resources and cognitive preparation were tiptop, yet the games still produced goosebumps. As in my first time through the games, I was compelled forward to the conclusion, almost against my will. And even in the first time through, I wasn't particularly compelled by the narrative framework for either game. In *Silent Hill 2*, we are introduced to James Sunderland and his quest to understand a mysterious letter from his dead wife, while narrative drive is supplied in *Resident Evil 4* by the kidnapping of Ashley, the president's daughter, and subsequent search for her by the intrepid Leon Kennedy. Understanding goosebumps, our physical and psychological response to these compelling games, directs us to look beyond game resources and narrative, to a deeper consideration of the conditions which lead to the emotions of fear, terror, and awe.

Gothic and the Sublime

Much has been written on the distinctions between fear, terror and horror; these distinctions are relevant to our understanding of the survival horror experience. Perron

notes that horror is an emotion that is overwhelming and annihilating in character, and that our experience of games such as *Silent Hill* has little to do with it. Fear is the relevant emotion; in survival horror games, as well as non-interactive media, we seek a “bounded experience of fear” (Perron, 2005b). Writers of gothic fiction were also very interested in the nuances of this particular emotional range. In her essay *On the Supernatural in Poetry*, the Gothic novelist Anne Radcliffe distinguished between terror and horror, arguing the literary value of the former, as well as outlining a poetics of how terror emerges from imagery:

Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a higher degree of life; the other contracts, freezes and nearly annihilates them. . . . and where lies the great difference between horror and terror, but in . . . uncertainty and obscurity (Radcliffe, 1826: 6).

Obscurity in this sense enhances a sense of vulnerability (uncertainty) and is thrilling because it makes the object of terror indistinct. It should be noted that the opposite of obscurity is not light, but clarity; thus obscurity can be produced by anything that thwarts clear perception: darkness, atmospheric phenomena, or occlusion. Radcliffe compares the experience of reading to that of real life, anticipating the greater range of action possible in survival horror games: “Now, if obscurity has so much affect on fiction, what must it have in real life, when to ascertain the object of our terror, is frequently to acquire the means of escaping it?” (p. 6)

Radcliffe’s discussion of obscurity owes a debt to the discourse on the nature of the sublime, which established many of the emotional and aesthetic terms underpinning the Gothic. “Sublime” is a term which has continued relevance in the discussion of how

one designs the psychological effect of fictional worlds in which terror is the desired end. Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) contributed the most to the association of obscurity with terror. In this book, Burke attempts to describe the emotion that corresponds to the sublime, which he defines "the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (Burke, 1998 [1757]: 86), and explores the aesthetic means and perceptual conditions by which it can be encouraged. Burke's discussion of the sublime object or setting focuses upon issues of scale and qualities of description; vastness is the favored scale, and obscurity is the favored mode of representation: "To make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes" (p. 102). Burke goes on to look at the ways in which light, color, and other visual phenomena contribute to these particular effects, with attention to the way in which contrasts can be created:

I think then, that all edifices calculated to produce an idea of the sublime, ought rather to be dark and gloomy, and this for two reasons; the first is, that darkness itself on other occasions is known by experience to have a greater effect on the passions than light. The second is, that to make an object very striking, we should make it as different as possible from the objects with which we have been immediately conversant (p. 122).

The relationship between indistinctness of representation and that particular emotional response associated with the sublime, first explored by Burke, has been further elaborated in current game studies literature. Grodal (2003) points to a class of video games in which "associative processing of perceptual input is just as important as the motor

output.” These games are experienced as a “mismatch between grandiose input and blocked output” that was, as Grodal notes, called “‘sublime feelings’ by the preromantic and romantic poets” (2003: 151).

Burke’s emphasis upon scale, vastness and grandeur, coupled with indistinctness of representation, is echoed in contemporary research on an emotion associated with the sublime: the experience of awe. In “Approaching Awe, a Moral, Spiritual, and Aesthetic Emotion”, Keltner and Haidt outline a prototypical description of the emotion, with reference to two key features: vastness and accommodation.

Vastness refers to anything that is experienced as being much larger than the subject, or the subject’s ordinary level of experience or frame of reference. . . .

Accommodation refers to the Piagetian process of adjusting mental structures that cannot assimilate a new experience The concept of accommodation brings together many insights about awe, including that it involves confusion (St. Paul) and obscurity (Burke), and that it is heightened in times of crisis, when extant traditions and knowledge structures do not suffice (Weber). We propose that prototypical awe involves a challenge to or negation of mental structures when they fail to make sense of an experience of something vast. . . . We stress that awe involves a *need* for accommodation, which may or may not be successfully accomplished. The success of one’s attempts at accommodation may partially explain why awe can be both terrifying (when one fails to understand) and enlightening (when one succeeds) (Keltner and Haidt, 2003: 306, authors’ emphasis).

There are a number of features of survival horror games that also challenge existing mental structures. The theme of the supernatural, for instance (receiving a letter from one's dead wife, or being confronted by zombie monks), requires a thematic accommodation by the player, while the visual qualities of survival horror game worlds require a perceptual accommodation, as we seek to penetrate fog and darkness and make our way in the world. The dual nature of awe – which can lend itself to both terror and enlightenment – helps us better understand the peculiar power of the survival horror genre. Keltner and Haidt also note that the physical marker of awe is piloerection, or goose bumps. Awe and terror are, as Burke originally noted, two sides of the same emotional coin.

At their best, survival horror games create a compelling play experience because they suspend the player in a state of awe and terror. To return to Frijda's terms, obscurity is one means by which the appraisal period is extended, and the player is frozen in a state of uncertainty, in which action is considered but not yet possible (this is one difference between survival horror and first-person shooter games, which are much more about reflex action). Often this is accomplished through strategies of visual obscurity related to darkness, atmosphere, and spatial occlusion.

Positioned in the Labyrinth: Spatial Occlusion and Obscurity

The player begins Chapter 3-1 of *Resident Evil 4* in the empty entrance courtyard of a castle, silent except for the chirp of crickets and the sound of wind. Night and stillness predominate; the gray stone walls are washed with a silvery blue moonlight. Going through a doorway (and waiting for a new scene to load), he works around a

curved terrace to the left, and then triggers a cutscene that functions almost like a helicopter shot: moving straight up and panning to the side, revealing an enormous castle complex, in which the evening blue is punctuated by warm flickering torchlight. The overall tone is strikingly similar to Emily's first view of of Radcliffe's castle of Udolpho:

the gothic greatness of its features, and its mouldering walls of dark grey stone, rendered it a gloomy and sublime object. As she gazed, the light died away on its walls, leaving a melancholy purple tint, which spread deeper and deeper, as the thin vapour crept up the mountain, while the battlements above were still tipped with splendour. . . . Silent, lonely, and sublime, it seemed to stand the sovereign of the scene, and to frown defiance on all, who dared to invade its solitary reign. As the twilight deepened, its features became more awful in obscurity . . .

(Radcliffe, 1794).

The effect of the cutscene is complex. It occurs as the player moves into a new segment of the game, after leaving the muted daylight of a village and its surrounding countryside. As an introduction to a new game environment, the cutscene grants the player a foretaste of the qualities of the space to come, but at the same time avoids giving away any information about the adversaries that will be immediately encountered upon moving forward. As the player moves forward after the cutscene, one hears a low, unintelligible chanting, sound without a visible source. Moving around a corner, he spies sentry monks patrolling on a parapet, circulating perpendicularly to the player. A few sniper shots, or a carefully lobbed grenade, and then it is up the stairs, to where the fiery catapults await.

Resident Evil 4 could be described as a game of positioning. It is not possible to both run and shoot at the same time, depriving the player of the strafing capabilities of a

first-person shooter. Like Kevin VanOrd has noted in his review of the Nintendo Wii of the game: “Once you’ve drawn your weapon, you can’t walk, but you can aim. It all feels very deliberate, but it’s perfectly countered by the measured speed at which your enemies approach you” (VanOrd, 2007). The player moves, assesses the environment and its threats, takes a position, and acts. Flight and fight are both good options, but he can’t do both, one must make a decision. The importance of the avatar’s relationship to the virtual space (and attendant sense of player vulnerability) is compounded by the slow speed with which one is able to rotate one’s perspective. The fact that the game is one of positioning means that one must master the environment as much as one must master opponents. The deliberate nature of the game as noted by VanOrd means that the player is forced to engage in a more conscious decision-making process with reference to navigation and threat assessment, and suspends the player in a particular mode of action and reaction. It is here that we can perhaps most clearly understand what Grodal means by a “mismatch between grandiose input and blocked output.” The relationship between game environments and the deliberate nature of player activity constitutes one of the sources of the power of *Resident Evil 4*.

As Burke mentions, our experiences are often shaped through contrast; we feel things more strongly when opposites are juxtaposed. The modulation of contrasting perceptual states contributes to the pace and rhythm of playing through *Resident Evil 4*. Spatial perception and visual occlusion in the castle section of *Resident Evil 4*, for example, is shaped by navigation through environments in which regularity and axial symmetry is contrasted with meandering features. This contrast is often felt when we move from the ceremonial and regular spaces of the castle (Hall of Rites, Hall of Water,

for example), to the winding tunnels and passages beneath the ground level, such as the Mine and Processing plant. Purposeful navigation and visual perception on the horizontal plane is often stymied in *Resident Evil 4* and *Silent Hill 2* by labyrinthine spaces. These spaces correspond closely to the Gothic prototype. With reference to the stories of Poe, David Leatherbarrow contends that:

The labyrinth is the form of most of Poe's interior passages. Spatial movement in Poe's fiction is typically an ongoing negotiation with unexpected obstacles and unforeseen changes in direction . . . In such a place one was always without external reference and fixed orientation. Any sequence is alternately redirected by intermediate walls and panels as well as vertically by steps in ascent or descent (Leatherbarrow, 1986: 13).

Labyrinths in survival horror games come in several varieties. There are spaces that are explicit labyrinths, such as the nighttime hedge maze inhabited by wolf-like Colmillos in Chapter 3-2 of *Resident Evil 4*. In this setting, tight quarters, frequent turnings, and slow avatar rotation, combined with the speed of the opponents, add to the sense of vulnerability. There are also spaces that are implicitly labyrinthine. Perhaps most fiendish, and effective, is the labyrinthine section of *Silent Hill 2* in which navigation through a banal interior space is rendered much more difficult when the map function, upon which the player has relied, becomes unreliable. Normally, the player locates a map for a new environment upon entering it, and progress (such as doors that have been opened, or tried and found to be locked) is updated continually. In the labyrinth section, no overview is granted. The map is only updated to show player progress, sketching hallways as they are traversed. It cannot be used for wayfinding or to plan one's

movement. Frequent backtracking is necessary, which is complicated by the fact that Pyramidhead prowls in a random fashion through the subterranean sections of the labyrinth.

Navigation on the vertical axis is also an important contrast in both games. In *Silent Hill 2*, vertical movement often takes the form of jumping into darkness, where one cannot see the bottom of the pit. Confronting this primal fear within the safe confines of the game is the only way to move forward. It has been argued that there is an aesthetic of the vertical in video games (Johansson, 2003); in virtual spaces devoid of gravity, one is freer to play on this dimension. And indeed, one experiences a kind of extension of the vertical dimension in the middle section (Silent Hill Historical Society and Toluca Prison) of *Silent Hill 2*, in which one jumps and descends repeatedly, seemingly travelling great vertical distances to go a very little way in the actual space of the game world, moving from the level of the town down to the shore of Toluca Lake through the prison section. Upward vertical movement is also important in the castle sequence of *Resident Evil 4*, in which the climactic boss fight is preceded by a lengthy ascent to the top of a tower, the ascent to which is foreshadowed by a cutscene at the beginning of Chapter 4-3. Once again, these spaces correspond to the archetypal spaces of gothic fiction. Hennelly argues that the figure of the cathedral unites the varying architectonic forces of the gothic, playing vertical aspirations against underlying caverns, natural forms against artificial symmetry: “The artifice in Gothic cathedrals mocks the natural models of forest trees, stressing especially the vertical tension between spiritual spires and charnel/carnal catacombs, what The Monk terms ‘vaults above and caverns below’” (2001).

Darkness and Obscurity

Dark environments are a cliché within the horror genre. Therefore, it is important to reiterate that darkness is only one means of creating the obscurity that lends itself to the sublime terror of the survival horror genre. That said, it is possible to note that the patterns of darkness that one experiences in *Resident Evil 4* result from several different dynamics. First, *Resident Evil 4* exhibits a single day/night cycle over the game as a whole, beginning in the daytime, followed by dusk and night, and the final cutscene image is a sunrise (this pattern is very similar to *Silent Hill 2*). The bulk of the action in the game takes place at night, or under moonlight, though much occurs in interior spaces where we are less aware of changes in the time of day. The differences between day and night illumination are, according to the design team in the “Making of” *Resident Evil 4* video (Capcom, 2008), deliberately dramatic, and are intended to support variations in the way in which enemies are perceived. Other patterns of darkness emerge not from the structure of value in the overall form of the game, but arise rather as a function of player navigation through simulated 3-D spaces. Light and dark in the games often correspond to the implied source of simulated illumination in the scene, whether coming from torches, incandescent lighting, or flashlights. Movement from exterior to interior environments also creates changes in overall illuminance levels.

Besides supporting an overall sense of spatial and temporal progression through the game, the distribution of light and dark illumination in *Resident Evil 4* environments also displays a logic that enhances a sense of player vulnerability through obscurity. The darkest environments in the game occur in the middle of the castle

sequence, in the almost completely black Storeroom (Chapter 3-4). One plays through this sequence as Ashley, the character with the most limited health and defensive resources, and hence the greatest vulnerability. This segment is notable for being the only one in the game in which the source of illumination is a flashlight shining from the perspective of the player's avatar. The scene, in which the dusty Armaduras, first revealed in Ashley's flashlight's beam, subsequently come to clanking, dangerous life, is a striking moment, a passage of intense creepiness, and one that invites comparison to other survival horror games, such as *Silent Hill 2*, in which the flashlight is frequently the main source of illumination.

Another important strategy of obscurity through darkness in survival horror has to do with exploiting the darkness edge in individual environments. A good example of this is the behavior of the split-head hounds in *Silent Hill 3* (Konami, 2003). In the Silent Hill amusement park and subway sections, they often lope along just outside pools of illumination, just barely perceived in the darkness, before making forays towards the player's avatar. The edge of darkness functions in these cases as a focus of attention (and worry) in itself.

Tracking the Edges: Atmospheric and Obscurity

The opening sequence of *Silent Hill 2* must be considered a masterpiece of game exposition. First the letter, a bathroom, a winding trail, a smear of blood on the asphalt, a blunt piece of wood, and, finally, we experience the terror of the writhing, unrecognizable human form (reminiscent of the "floundering, squealing white thing on which Sir John Clave's horse had trod one night in a lonely field" in H.P. Lovecraft's

Rats in the Walls (1923)). Told through cutscene, voiceover and music, experienced through player navigation and exploration, the opening sequence introduces us to a character and his motivation, and we learn on our own how to move forward into Silent Hill. Most of all it is the mist that serves as the binding substance of the exposition; fog in *Silent Hill 2* is a fluid, permeable medium that is endlessly fascinating, as it both hides and reveals.

Strategies of obscurity involving atmospherics are exploited fully in *Silent Hill 2*. In contrast to the prototypical gothic environments of *Resident Evil 4*, the settings of *Silent Hill 2* owe more to the North American small town gothic of David Lynch. No castles here; rather, the haunted house becomes the haunted community. Vastness is exchanged for the familiar and quotidian, and dramatic lighting is replaced with fog and grainy indistinctness. The environments of *Silent Hill 2* contain fewer of the traditional settings of the gothic sublime, but rather participate in the “uncanny,” the unheimlich. As Vidler writes, “for Freud, “unhomliness” was more than a simple sense of not belonging; it was the fundamental propensity of the familiar to turn on its owners, suddenly to become defamiliarized, derealized, as if in a dream” (1992: 45). In many parts of the game, when one is on the streets of the town, large portions of the frame are simply rendered as darkness or atmospheric fog. Against a background of anticipatory sound, punctuated by growls and radio static, obscurity enhances the sense of vulnerability and suspense.

The degree to which the fog of the opening scenes of *Silent Hill 2* dominates our attention is revealed in eyetracker studies. Gustaf Berg, Niklas Norin, Staffan Persson & Johan Ögren – students at Gotland University in Sweden – conducted eyetracker studies

of the first exterior environments of the game, as well as segments inside the Woodside apartments (2006). Running tests with subjects of differing degrees of survival horror experience and skill, they analyzed the data by plotting eye fixations (where the players looked, and how long) at one-second intervals. The players spent an average of 31.5% of their playing time scanning the fog edge, which is defined as the transparent area just on the border of visibility. This data supports just how important the strategy of obscurity through fog is in the opening sequence of *Silent Hill 2*. This is especially true if we are new to the game, and are not yet sure of what we will encounter. The students also compared the fog edge with the darkness edge that results from flashlight usage within the Woodside apartment complex interior sequences, which are mostly played out in small rooms and tight hallways. Here they found that the darkness edge was much less emphatic, drawing the attention of the players only about 5% of the time. One interpretation is that this attention is a function of felt vulnerability. In expansive, outdoor environments, sources of danger can approach from almost any direction, while in claustrophobic spaces there are much more limited angles of access. The darkness edge in the Woodside apartments often overlaps with interior architecture and walls. As Perron has noted, this dynamic is different in survival horror games such as those from the *Fatal Frame* series (Tecmo, 2001-2008), in which ghosts can approach through walls.

Conclusion:

Whether our journey takes us through labyrinths, darkness or mist, in the end, survival is its own reward. Our journey through the caverns, castles and haunted houses of survival horror games is a compelling experience in which we can taste the emotion of

fear most fully, because we can (eventually) act in the face of our fears. It is the process of perception and action – scanning, anticipating, feeling and doing – that is exercised by these games. The magnificent gothic spaces of *Resident Evil 4*, and the uncanny, fogbound and surreal ambiance of *Silent Hill 2* offer two quite different explorations of gothic themes in interactive media. They provide a new media playground for an established genre.

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