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Observe, Dismember, Overcome: *Resident Evil 4* (2005; 2023) and *Dead Space* (2008; 2023) as Video Game Extensions of the Body Horror Subgenre

Abstract

Body horror, which is very often defined as a cinematic subgenre (Cherry 2009, Weismann 2021), utilizes themes of mutation, infection etc. to play on resentment towards human form. Emerging prominently in the 1970s and 1980s and shaped by new filmmaking technologies and sociopolitical upheavals, body horror became synonymous with cinema. Cronenberg and Carpenter took part in conquering, in a way, the subgenre through iconic films like *The Fly* (1986) and *The Thing* (1982). While some look for the roots of body horror in earlier literary traditions (Reyes 2024), its characteristics solidified in the cinema of late 20th century. Surfacing of body horror in other media, however, opens possibilities of analysing the subgenre beyond film, e.g., in video games. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom 2004; 2023) and *Dead Space* (Visceral 2008; Motive Studio 2023) extend body horror through game mechanics. The notion of “extended body genre” (Perron 2009), is based on the unity of perception and performance between the player and the character. Survival horror video games utilize interactivity and player agency to extend the experience. Through a grisly sounding „peeling system” (Motive Studio 2023), or combat mechanics, both analysed games emphasise and extend the body horror. What is notable is the fact that both these games force the players to enact the violence and mutilation on the diegetic world. The classic status quo on acting on the audience is accompanied by the new tendency to let it partake in the maiming. Both of the analysed titles also contain gameplay incentives to observe mutations and alike in full effect. Like the characters of the famous body horror films, players in *Dead Space* and *Resident Evil 4*, have to analyse the extent of mutation in their foes and come up with tactics to fight off the monstrosities.

body horror; video games; survival horror; game mechanics; game studies



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Body horror: definition and examples

In cinema, body horror relies on showing the resentment towards the human body and its anguish through mutation, infection etc. (Cherry 2009: 6). What is notable is that a large portion of sources on body horror define it as a cinematic genre.

It comes as no surprise. Horror cinema, fuelled by new filming technologies, Vietnam War, and political upheaval, thrived in the 1970s and 1980s (Weismann 2021: 128). It was in this time that John Carpenter and David Cronenberg shot their influential films. *The Fly* (David Cronenberg, 1986), and *The Thing* (John Carpenter, 1982) have become landmarks of body horror in popular culture. Xavier Aldana Reyes, despite tracing body horror back to earlier periods, like the Gothic, also acknowledges the importance of the 1970s and 1980s in body horror (2024: 3). Even when looking beyond the end of the 20th century in cinema, it is imperative to see the influence of the period on body horror.

The cultural influence of Cronenberg's and Carpenter's films goes far, as even *Rick and Morty* (Justin Roiland and Dan Harmon 2013-present) heavily referenced Cronenberg in the context of bodily mutation in one of the episodes (Sandoval 2014). This proves just how synonymous cinema, or even certain directors, have become with body horror.

Despite strong filmic implications of the subgenre, one should bear in mind that body horror has surfaced earlier and in other media forms. Reyes argues that the core of the subgenre dates back to the works of first-wave Gothic and fin-de-siècle (2024: 1). This allows for the broader analysis and inclusion of more texts, not only films. Body horror has been present in the past, it simply gained formal ramifications and a name in the 1970s and 1980s.

Body horror in video games

As I have established, horror cinema has conquered body horror in the 1980s. Throughout the years academic and popular culture saw it as a filmic genre (see: Cherry 2009). Such status quo has started to change with the emergence of the 1990s, new social upheavals arose, such as moral panic over youth culture. Society started to raise questions about youth culture, including video games, a discourse which culminated because of the Columbine school shooting. Changes in filming technology caused the production

and distribution of films to be cheaper. Similarly, in the 1970s and 80s, moral panic along with technical advancements again lifted horror into prominence.

Video games also made huge technological leaps in the last decade of the 20th century, 3D graphics were starting to appear, and gaming systems developed to accommodate it. Similarly to film, games have also utilized body horror and gore. Through gore, I understand the aesthetic characteristic for gore films. This aesthetic is characterized by explicitly showing death, violence and the collapse of the body (Pitrus 1992: 19). Themes like zombie infection (*Resident Evil* series), mutilation (*Harvester*), body metamorphosis (*Quake 4*) and crippling ailments (*Sanitarium*) have become frequent in digital entertainment.

Such thematical shift both fuelled and was fuelled by the discourse about violent video games. A notable example of this was when the public found out that Columbine school shooters played violent video games, for instance *Doom*. Warning about violent video games became a trend in mainstream media, with people like Jack Thompson becoming de facto celebrities by crusading against the industry. In such time of persecution, players and developers engaged in something commonly referred to as “deviance as resistance”. As the video game industry was accused of raising criminality and causing violence, it started to celebrate brutality to oppose the mainstream media.

Video games became a huge platform for gore in the 1990s and the early 2000s. Many studios experimented with this subgenre and aesthetic, which is visible even in the marketing strategies of games from the time:

Fig. 1. Back covers of *Blood* (1997; left) and *Harvester* (1996; right)



Source: gamespot.com and mobygames.com.

The titles signify blood, violence and obscenity, the descriptions boast „macabre” and „nightmare” they involve (Fig. 1). Krzywinska also observes “constitutive aspects of the horror film genre” in video games marketing, shock factor, visuals, and narrative

(2002: 13). The games shown in Fig. 1 are one of many that tested the boundaries and challenged taboos regarding violence in media. It was in that time that *Alone in the Dark* (Infogrames 1992) and *Resident Evil* (Capcom 1996) series have reared their head. The latter, while being more reserved with blood than, e.g., *Harvester*, is still a product of its time in terms of approach to body horror.

The first and original *Resident Evil* introduces gore and physical abjection rather quickly. Players enter one of the first rooms in the mansion to find a decrepit zombie eating the amputated head of a mangled body (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Gore in the first zombie scene



Source: *Resident Evil* (Capcom 1996).

Between the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century games have thus taken brave steps in body horror and gore. Even Cherry provides a filmic adaptation of *Resident Evil* games as an example of body horror in films (2009: 6). There, it stands in one group with *The Fly* and *The Thing*. This sets a clear line of body horror evolution from films to video games.

Krzywinska explains the reason for this transition by stating that: “Horror offers death as spectacle and actively promises transgression; it has the power to promote physical sensation, [...]” (2002: 13). Such an explanation is even more viable for body horror, which thrives on physicality. This promotion of physical sensation serves to achieve the “spectacle of a body [...] in the grip of intense sensation or emotion” and even “[...] direct or indirect sexual excitement [...]” which Williams (1991: 4) attributes to body genres.

Bernard Perron takes it further by stating that survival horror games are “extended body” genre (2009: 121). He argues that gamers become one body with the game characters in performance and perception. The importance of the virtual body emphasised by Perron ties video game horrors to body horror. The subgenre is, after all, concerned with observing human body and its demise or transformation due to various reasons. The unity between the players and characters is utilized, Perron states, to push the players to act and feel with the character apart from provoking “involuntary mimicry” (2009: 125). Through this imitation of characters’ behaviour survival horror games impose immersion on players. This unity brings video game horrors closer to Grodal’s “PECMA” model of immersion. The abbreviation refers to “Perception, Emotion, Cognition, [and] Motor Activation” (Therrien 2023: 570). Grodal thus pictures

immersion as consuming media by subconsciously following the PECMA flow. The players perceive the diegetic world and then, after a series of steps, respond by moving, e.g., twitching or jumping. Immersion, so vital for video games, is ensconcing oneself in the diegetic world and following an illusion of presence and agency in said world.

Survival horror as a genre

In the previous subsection, I claim that video games have made a name for themselves in body horror. One of the examples I use is the *Resident Evil* franchise, and the first entry in the series. The reason I pair *Resident Evil* with *Alone in The Dark* series in that subsection is not a coincidence. Both these games are foundational texts for a specific subgenre in digital horror called survival horror. Although digital survival horror can be traced back to an earlier 1982 *Haunted House* video game (Staszenko-Chojnacka 2023: 130), it was *Resident Evil* and *Alone in The Dark* to provide a stable framework for the genre.

The assumption that *Resident Evil* and *Alone in The Dark* have started the survival horror genre is very prevalent in game studies works. Both games are credited with starting the subgenre by Nae (2023: 179), and Staszenko-Chojnacka (2023: 131). These two series did in fact lay foundations for how other such games looked at the time. What is notable in Staszenko-Chojnacka's definition is the fact that she distinguishes the 1996 *Resident Evil* and alike as classical survival horror. The postclassical survival horror, Staszenko-Chojnacka argues, mixes action into its thematical layer and eases the difficulty in the ergodic aspect by, e.g., giving the players more storage space (2023: 132). The *Resident Evil* series is so influential, in fact, that Staszenko-Chojnacka calls the fourth entry in the series a milestone showing characteristics of postclassical survival horror (2023: 134). This positions Capcom as both heralds and reformers of an entire subgenre.

Genealogy aside, survival horrors are also distinct in their ergodic aspects. Aarseth defines the "ergodic" as dependent on "non-trivial effort" to traverse (1999: 1). Such non-trivial effort is, e.g., player input, which makes video games ergodic. In this paper, I use "ergodic" as "referring to gameplay".

Ergodically, survival horrors seem to follow a certain framework. This framework seems to also be subject of consensus between scholars. Niedenthal points out that players' vulnerability and underpowering are crucial to the subgenre (2009: 4). Staszenko-Chojnacka also states that the most important rule of survival horror is to survive in the world dominated by monsters, the survival being made difficult by game mechanics, e.g., limited resources and slow character movement (2023: 129). Another of the elements that drive the difficulty up is how the camera operates in these games.

The camera angle is fixed in one point (Fig. 3), like in films, which usually situate the camera in one spot for shots. Players can change the position of the camera only by going from one location to another. Moving the character causes the camera to switch, introducing a new film-like shot. Aesthetically this approach invokes film, ergodically it introduces difficulty for the players. Fixed camera angles limit the view and deny players control over said view. In Fig. 3, there are two blind spots that work against the efforts to navigate and fight the enemies. The difficulty of fixed camera angles in early survival horror points to body genres and keeping the extended digital body "caught in a grip" (Williams 1991: 4). In this case the tight grip on perspective serves to emphasize the terror and uncertainty of traversing the digital manor.

Fig. 3. Fixed camera angle



Source: *Resident Evil* (Capcom 1996).

Although in postclassical survival horror the players have more control over the camera, there are still some limitations on this freedom. The original *Resident Evil 4*, for instance, made turning very slow when compared to other games with third-person perspective. *The Evil Within* (2014) introduced filmic letterboxes to limit the players horizontal view and create two blind spots. These devices show how devoted survival horror is to “gripping” the digital body. Apart from underpowering the players and depriving them of resources, these games also impede the field of view.

Habel and Kooyman also see: “[...] lack of health and ammunition, high-pressure puzzles and an intense sense of pressure based on overwhelming odds [...]” as essential parts of survival horrors (2013: 3). All the definitions outline survival horrors as games forcing the player to make do with limited resources in a hostile environment, overwhelmed by numbers of enemies that permeate the diegetic space.

The scarcity of resources in survival horror games is due to a very characteristic economy model sewn into them. These games often have their currency, like “pesetas” (*Resident Evil 4*) or green gel (*The Evil Within*). These currencies can be spent in shops where one can buy weapons, supplies or upgrades (e.g., *Dead Space*). This economy also serves to amplify the dire situation of the protagonist. The prices are high compared to what players earn. It is often important to weigh whether to buy a healing item or a new gun.

Another notable ergodic element Niedenthal points to are the puzzles, meant to impose “incomplete knowledge” and “cognitive challenge” for players (2009: 4–5). These puzzles often involve finding a missing piece of a mechanism or setting simple mechanisms in place to make them functional again.

Thematically, survival horrors take inspiration from many sources. Staszenko-Chojacka paraphrases Thierran to make a claim that survival horror games clearly are influenced by horror novels and films (2023: 129). It is, in fact, visible in series like *Resident Evil*, that utilizes the legacy of B-movies and camp to create its narratives. Niedenthal also makes an argument that survival horror and Gothic fiction correspond broadly (2009: 2). That would make survival horror share roots with body horror,

which is also traced back to the Gothic by Reyes (2024). Such thematic heritage means that survival horror video games are likely to experiment with body horror.

Taking the above into consideration, that players' "involuntary mimicry" usually comes from beyond conventional tools, like jump scares. Fear in survival horrors comes firstly from the feeling of being overwhelmed by hordes of enemies. What amplifies the scare is that the player may not be ready for another encounter. The fear of lacking resources drives survival horror games. The subconscious fear relies on the strict dosing of ammunition, healing items etc. in the "Claws of the Horde"¹.

In King's three levels of scaring (2006: 26), survival horror would thus rely on terror mostly in subtext. In the quiet moments, the player checks their scarce inventory and feels unprepared and stressed. The horror and revulsion would come overtly with combat and exploration of the locations. It is in that time that the waves of monstrosities come to horrify and repulse.

***Resident Evil 4* (2005; 2023) as a body horror**

The original 2005 *Resident Evil 4* was a huge step in the history of gaming. This was the game that has taken the series from the times of pre-rendered backgrounds and static camera. The move forward meant state-of-the-art graphics and fresh mechanics, but also new themes. From the AI improvement to graphical engine changes, *Resident Evil 4* is a shining technical and aesthetic example of postclassical survival horror. Above, I mention how important *RE4* is in Staszenko-Chojnacka's view.

RE4 follows Leon Kennedy, a former policeman and protagonist of *Resident Evil 2*, on a mission of finding and rescuing the president's daughter in Spain. During the story, he becomes infected by the "Las Plagas" virus causing people to lose their sanity and free will. Kennedy quickly finds out the infected are not run-of-the-mill zombies, like in the second entry (Capcom 2005; 2014). The player can see the "Ganados" in *RE4* are not slow, mindless creatures. They can speak, strategize, and adapt to player's strategy. The fact that Kennedy's metamorphosis is nigh introduces body horror right away.

Fig. 4. Gore in the game



Source: *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom 2014).

¹ Name of Chapter 5 in one of survival horror classics *The Evil Within* (Tango Gameworks 2014). The chapter name suggests the importance of being overwhelmed by enemies in survival horror games.

From time to time, *Resident Evil 4*² shows bloodied and mutilated corpses and maggot-ridden bones (Fig. 4). The combat also spares the player no graphic images. Ganados' heads splash open when hit, the blood remains on them as Leon shoots them. The 2023 remake follows the same idea and utilizes new technology to portray violence.

Fig. 5. Visible torture and mutilation

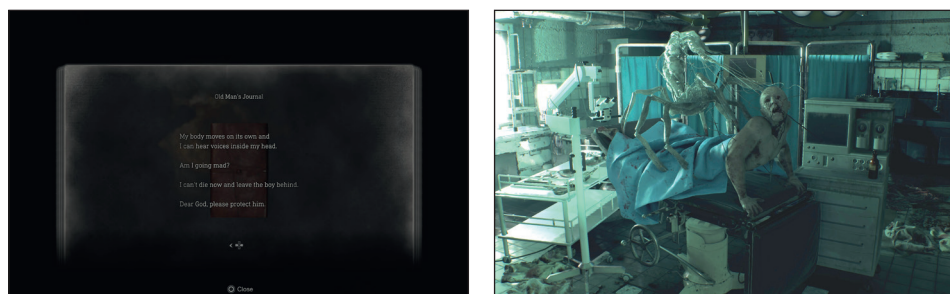


Source: *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom, 2023).

It recalls human and animal torture and mutilation both directly and indirectly (Fig. 5). As a remake, the 2023 game also features Leon being infected by Las Plagas.

This steadily establishes body horror in both iterations of *Resident Evil 4* both thematically and aesthetically. The overwhelming presence of Las Plagas sets a strong theme in the game. Throughout the story, the developers foreshadow how the metamorphosis looks.

Fig. 6. A note describing the metamorphosis and a victim of Las Plagas experiment



Source: *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom 2023)

Another notable thematical element of body horror in the game are the leading antagonists of the story. Every major enemy in *RE4* goes toe to toe with Leon, revealing their true form before the player.

² In the article, I refer to *Resident Evil 4* from 2005 as the original. It is worth noting that I use the 2014 HD remaster. The remaster revamps mostly visual aspects, like textures or resolution. It is also the only version available for my hardware. The content, like gore etc. remains intact and like in the 2005 version.

Fig. 7. Character models of Bitores Mendes (left) and Osmund Saddler (right) after the transformation



Source: *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom 2023).

Fig. 7 shows the models of bosses in *RE4* remake after the transformation. The combination of flesh, blood, and insect-like elements recalls scenes from *The Thing* (John Carpenter 1982). The models are inhuman, twisted, and work like in many body horror films. The design creates an incomprehensible horror of how human flesh can be disfigured and abjected. This shows how just how much films inspire *RE4*.

Emphasising body horror through mechanics in *Resident Evil 4* (2004; 2023)

As I established, body horror is almost omnipresent both in the original and remake *RE4*. Up until this point, however, I analyse only the narrative and aesthetic view on the games. As a game, *RE4* uses not only the visual, but also the ergodic channel, the gameplay. The developers utilize interactivity to emphasize body horror in their game.

Since the beginning of a new game, both *RE4* iterations pit the player against hordes of Ganados. As the ammunition is scarce, and there are plenty of enemies, players must be as accurate as possible. When every bullet matters, a headshot seems a good tactic of fighting a way through enemies.

Fig. 8. A Ganado during a headshot



Source: *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom 2023).

At first, it proves viable to aim for the head. During my playthrough, Ganados' heads were obliterated by bullets (Fig. 8). This tactic is so efficient, in fact, that players may get accustomed to it. After considerable playtime, however, the developers break this balance.

Around the first chapters, both *RE4* versions introduce a metamorphosis mechanic. If Leon lands a headshot, chances are high that the target's head is going to explode, and a twisted abomination will rear its head (Fig. 9).

Fig. 9. A Ganado missing a head, with a visible parasite showing



Source: *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom 2023).

The abomination in question is the adult form of Plaga hatched in the body of the host. The enemies that carry this creature have more health, deal more damage, and are overall harder to kill. It takes a couple of shots to deal with the Plaga, which moves in a fast and erratic manner.

Such an approach strays from a standard approach to combat in gaming. Usually, games make headshots an effective solution to every encounter. Enemies either die on the spot (*Call of Duty*), take more damage (*Dragon Age: Veilguard*), or even drop more experience points (*Tomb Raider*). Here, the macabre comfort of dispatching enemies by shooting their heads disappears. The players must deal with Ganados in a different way and act against the experience from other games. The foes in *RE4* are different, inhuman, alien. Like the foes McReady faces in *The Thing*, Ganados require learning and adaptation. This makes enemies a moving cognitive challenge that reminds the players their knowledge is incomplete. This would make puzzles an element of combat mechanics, not a pacing device, like Niedenthal claims (cf. 2009: 4–5). Such look brings fighting in *RE4* closer to Habel and Kooyman's idea of “high pressure puzzles” (2014: 3). The players must think not only when aligning cogs in silence, but also under stress, surrounded by twisted mutants.

The Ganado metamorphosis is one of many body horror mechanics present in the game. Another notable body horror mechanic is the way Plaga acts on its own, outside of the host. In the castle section, Leon witnesses for the first time as a bug-like creature climbs on and takes over a religious zealot (Capcom 2023). The process resembles the experiment in Fig. 6 and involves squishing sounds meant to emphasise resentment.

Similarly to the metamorphosis mechanic, the enemy becomes stronger and much more durable when controlled by the Plaga. The controlled zealot is also faster, menacingly charging at Leon head-on. One of the most prominent combat mechanics in

RE4 is staggering Ganados. When they are on the ground, they are for the taking. The player may, for instance, use the knife to kill them and save ammunition (Capcom 2004; 2023). This is not the case with the taken over Ganados, as they stand firm and show no reaction to bullets when hit, inducing panic in the player.

The mechanic presented above once more recalls filmic body horror. This time, the body horror of *Alien* chestbursters (Ridley Scott, 1979), or zombie films comes to the stage. The usage of filmic techniques and visual similarities to film classics once again proves the claims of Staszenko-Chojnacka (2023: 129). The fear of having one's body taken over by an alien entity, or a disease permeates the game. There is also the fear of infection, this time a parasitic one. The fear of changes and the humanity that fades. I mention the fact that Leon also carries the disease. The metamorphosis and taking over mechanics serve as a foreshadowing of sorts, a foreshadowing of what will happen if Leon fails to remove the parasite.

The bottom-level Ganados are not the only ones that morph during the game. As I mention, the changes happen also to the main antagonists. From the hulking Bitores Mendes, the village chief, to the mastermind behind the evil plan, Osmund Saddler, all the bosses shed their human form to become monsters. Twisted and more imposing than before, they stand in Leon's way at some point of the game.

The monstrous forms of the bosses are not only for the grisly decoration. Meticulously placed parts of their models are weaker than others. Players must aim specifically at them if they want to deal any significant damage. These weak spots are sometimes highlighted, like Saddler's bloated orange eyes in Fig. 7. Other times, they are less obvious yet still visible, like Bitores Mendes's exposed and elongated spine (Fig. 7). This forces the player to observe the visual gore and mutation carefully. The models cease being only an aesthetic or a thematic element, they become a part of the gameplay.

Shooting at random spots of the models will prove futile or highly ineffective in the long run. Bosses will require more ammunition to be defeated. Such wasteful tactic goes against the design philosophy of survival horror. Paying attention to the hulking mutants in detail and shooting at the right places is necessary to save ammo and healing items. Conserved resources are thus an ergodic reward for noticing the gore in detail. This makes boss fights another instance of "enemies as puzzles" mechanic which I describe earlier in the paper.

Another element of gameplay that ensues body horror are the death animations. Nowadays, one of the most known scenes from *RE4* is the chainsaw decapitation (Capcom 2004; 2023). When Leon comes too close to the chainsaw-wielding Ganado, the foe makes short work of him and cuts off his head. This is only one of the grisly animations present in both versions.

In Fig. 10, there appears another display of gore in the game. Such animations are ever-present when Leon dies. Once again, the game forces the player to look at blood and guts. Carefully crafted execution animations serve as a testament to the body horror omnipresent in both *RE4* games. Where many other games would portray the death of the protagonist unceremoniously, *RE4* goes out of its way to show the full extent of pain and suffering behind Leon's death.

Fig. 10. An execution animation



Source: *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom 2023).

It is important to note that *RE4* cutscenes are almost always very interactive and make players do “quick time events” to react to things happening in the cutscene, usually a danger of some kind. These QTEs, as they have come to be known, often involve pressing the right button at the right time. During death animations³, on the other hand, this agency is taken away. Like in the first entry to the series, the control over camera is lost and the game catches the audience in the grip of “intense sensations” (Williams 1991: 4). Leon, and through him the players, are manhandled and have no possibility to act during the gruesome final moments.

In terms of gameplay, both *RE4* iterations introduce body horror through combat mechanics and animations. The games either give advantage to the unknown and twisted or force the players to fully observe death and obscenity. It is worth noting that the body horror comes mainly from the mechanics themselves. The thematic and aesthetic channel serves only to reinforce and visualise the fear of disease and mutation.

***Dead Space* (2008; 2023) as a body horror**

In a subsection on *RE4* as a body horror I state that the Capcom 2004 hit marks a huge step for the industry. Survival horror transitioned into its postclassical era. An example of this new design philosophy in the genre came four years later. In 2008, Electronic Arts released *Dead Space*, a game that was a product of the evolution.

Ergodically, *RE4* and *DS* are very similar. Both games involve managing inventory in a grid-like system, fighting enemies strong in numbers, or upgrade mechanics. The most noticeable difference between the two is the “tank controls” system present in *RE4* and absent in *DS*. In layman’s terms, in *DS* players can move quickly in any direction and shoot at the same time. In the original *RE4*, Leon changed directions slowly and had to stop to shoot. The clunky and heavy movement of *RE4*’s protagonist resembled a tank, thus the comparison to a tank.

The reason I establish the gameplay similarities is because *RE4* and *DS* differ thematically. Where *RE4* draws more upon the zombie genre and B-movies, *DS* is more derivative of *Alien* through its science fiction setting and cosmic horror. One can be

³ Not to be confused with quick time events that allow the player to break free from enemies’ grip.

established, however, that both games are shining examples of interactive body horror. Apart from the ergodic aspects, both follow the survival horror framework by drawing from film and literature.

DS follows Isaac Clarke, an engineer with a repair mission to the USG Ishimura planet cracker. Isaac has a personal goal in the mission, as his ex-girlfriend Nicole is stranded on Ishimura. Shortly upon landing, however, the team discovers that the ship is overrun with horrid creatures called the necromorphs. These twisted alien hybrids soon turn out to be former crew, they are: “[...] relatively humanoid, whereas others mix human features with arachnid qualities” (Carr 2014). Armed with a plasma cutter (a saw-like tool), Isaac embarks on his lonely journey to repair the critical systems of the ship. Assisted only by video calls from his squadmates, Isaac is alone against the horrors (Visceral 2008; Motive Studio 2023).

Thematically, *DS* is even more keen on body horror than *RE4*. The necromorphs recall abominations from *The Thing* or *The Brood* (David Cronenberg 1979). Visceral Games mixes the religious motifs with the discussion of humanity and evolution. Like in Ridley Scott’s *Alien*, the volatile and deadly hybrid of aliens and humans introduces fear of what may surpass humankind. *DS* also touches upon this motif, the necromorphs are frequently mentioned to be the next step in human evolution (Visceral 2008; Motive Studio 2023). Apart from the fear of change, the players also fear that the hideous changed are physically superior. This is because necromorphs move faster, they are equipped to kill by design and can quickly overwhelm Isaac. Most fights extensively exhaust resources, especially on higher difficulty levels.

DS also ensues much more violence and mutilation than *RE4*. Blood and insides decorate the walls of the Ishimura right from the start of the story (Fig. 11). As Isaac proceeds, the tendency progresses and players see even more gore. Such tendency contrasts *RE4*, which contains visual gore to certain scenes or locations while mostly appearing devoid of visual violence.

Fig. 11. Gore-ridden location in the second chapter



Source: *Dead Space* (Motive Studio 2023).

Visually and thematically, *DS* is a prime example of body horror. With nods to classic films exploiting the resentment towards the body (*Alien*, *The Thing*), Visceral creates a harrowing imagination of the dark future of humanity. Ishimura becomes the players' theatre of body horror.

Emphasising body horror through mechanics in *Dead Space* (2008; 2023)

The element that reveals most body horror tendencies, however, is combat and its mechanics. The plasma cutter is crucial in the game, as Isaac acquires it, *DS* quickly suggests the tactic to fight necromorphs.

Fig. 12. Acquiring plasma cutter



Source: *Dead Space* (Motive Studio 2023).

The sign painted with blood reads “CUT OFF THEIR LIMBS” (Fig. 12). As Isaac puts his hand on the cutter for the first time, players see a short instruction. As the name suggests, the repurposed weapon is most effective when it cuts. Later, the protagonist's squadmate confirms in a video call that conventional rifles and shooting the head is futile against the monsters lurking on the ship (Visceral 2008; Motive Studio 2023). These narrative clues, while heavy-handedly, expose a very complex mechanic. The most viable choice of tactic in *DS* is dismemberment.

In both original and remade *DS* games, amputating limbs is a vital part of the game. Such approach recalls body horror in terms of body mutilation. In the case of *DS*, however, the maiming is done not only by the antagonists, but also by the protagonist. This thus means that the player also partakes in creating body horror. Once again, a survival horror game forces players to pay attention to details, and to, quite literally, dissect enemies. Players have even started to discuss which places to target and how to dismember the necromorphs better⁴. The “tactical dismemberment” mechanic requires the player to look at the repulsive and frightening enemies in detail and then go further as to dismember them.

⁴ An internet discussion started by user mrjpatrick on Gamespot.com (2009).

In the 2023 remake, Motive went one step further and introduced a new mechanic ensuing body horror. The “peeling system” as the addition has become known involves a new method of producing enemy models. In his news article on the subject, George Foster of *The Gamer* describes that necromorphs have been modelled in layers, namely bones, muscles and tendons, and skin (2022). As Isaac dismembers the necromorphs, these layers start to tear and show. One of the creators, Mike Yazijian, states that this system aims to give the players feedback on the damage dealt (Electronic Arts 2022). While the primary goal of the system is purely ergodic, the thematical connection stands out. Peeling off the mutated enemies’ skin, cutting their muscles and tendons; and eviscerating their bones screams body horror. Not only do the players have to pay attention which body part to amputate, they now must see and react to the gruesome consequences. As Carr remarks, necromorphs themselves invoke medical discourse, and disability (2014), which makes the players perform a de facto dissection of their abjected bodies. Dissecting enemies and analysing their entrails to decide where to shoot next ties nicely into the mechanic of enemies as morbid “high pressure puzzles” I present in the subsection about *RE4*.

Conclusion

Looking at the narrative and mechanical aspects of *Resident Evil 4* and *Dead Space* as body horrors reveals a certain tendency. This subgenre, as of late dominated by cinema, but not limited to it, is continuously reappropriated to fit the new medium. The mechanics described above are new horizons in the advancements of the postclassical survival horror, which extends body horror and evolves through it.

As claimed by Perron, the extension is based not solely on the involuntary mimicry and acting on the player. Relying solely on narrative and visuals would bring games involving body horror closer to films of the subgenre, like *The Thing*. In cinema, the audience is but a passive observer occasionally imitating the characters by reacting to the situation on-screen. Despite common roots in Gothic fiction, survival horror approach to body differs from filmic body horror in that games are interactive and rely on player input.

Both original and new iterations of *Dead Space* and *Resident Evil 4* extend body horror through player agency and game mechanics. This means that the players’ “extended bodies” are not solely acted upon by the game. The players themselves become actors in the diegetic world, enacting mutilation and harm through their avatars. The diegetic body is not simply seized by strong feelings and commotion (Williams 1999: 4), it now acts them out on the diegetic world. The players are not only threatened by mutilation, abjection, and mutation, they are also agents of these three. Vital elements, like movement and camera angles are not strictly fixed but rather partially hindered. With more freedom than before, the audience is free to roam and discover the theatre of survival horror.

Body horror in survival horror video games also transforms from visual or thematical aspect to additionally become a game mechanic. Unexpected mutations drive difficulty progression, twisted body parts hint where to attack, and mangled limbs indicate how much damage enemies can take. The narrative, aesthetic, and ergodic frameworks of body horror are set. It is up for the audience to observe the danger and then dismember and overcome it.

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