

Silent Halls: P.T., Freud, and Psychological Horror

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Abstract

"What is a ghost?"

"An emotion, a terrible moment condemned to repeat itself over and over..."

—The Devil's Backbone (Del Toro, 2001)

This paper analyses *P.T.* (Kojima Productions, 2014), a playable teaser made to demo a planned instalment within the *Silent Hill* franchise. While the game is now indefinitely cancelled, *P.T.* has cemented itself not only as a full gaming experience, but also as a juggernaut in the genre of psychological horror. Drawing from Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny, the aim of the paper is to address how these psychological concepts surface within the now infamous never-ending hallway of *P.T.* and create a deeply psychologically horrifying experience.

Keywords

psychological horror; the uncanny; Freud; game design;



Introduction

The genre of psychological horror is a complex one to navigate through with ease, especially for those that are faint of heart. Despite its contemporary popularity, when the sub-genre first began to emerge within horror films, it was considered to be a detriment to the horror genre (Jancovich, 2010, p. 47). The term 'psychological' was often used to disguise the taming of horror elements instead of pushing the genre into more terrifying territories. Confusion and pretension were considered to overpower any relevant themes of psychological trauma and as a result the sub-genre received an abundance of criticism (Ibid., p. 49-50).

When themes of psychological trauma were incorporated into films, those struggles were depicted within the characters on screen, but often felt quite detached from viewers (Jancovich, 2014, p. 252). Early critics claimed that psychological horror never seemed to instill discomfort in those interacting with the medium and dismissed the label of psychological horror as an "unconvincing explanation [...] for the preposterous behavior of their characters" (Ibid., p. 252). Although such subjective criticism revolves primarily around early psychological horror films, these same issues are relevant within the medium of video games. It is not that horror games cannot be scary, as jump scares will often manage to raise the heart rates of even the most stoic players, but it raises the question of how video games can be a psychological horror without subjecting themselves pretentious disguises associated with the sub-genre.

Although it is just a demo, over the years *P.T.* (Konami, 2014) has been recognized within online communities as a fully realized gaming experience and a model for evoking psychological horror within the medium of video games (c.f. Grant, 2014; Houghton, 2016; Stoeber, 2018). The sensations of dread and discomfort, that are felt immediately upon starting this game, can be traced back to the themes rooted in the history of psychoanalytical theory; the most recognizable component of *P.T.*, the looping hallway, is the primary source of this psychological discomfort and will be the main point of this analysis. By closely examining *P.T.* and the experience of walking through its notable hallway, this article will demonstrate how the game utilizes the psychoanalytical theory of the uncanny to scare players and create a feeling of psychological terror.

Silent Hill

Released in the summer of 2014, *P.T.* began to garner attention amongst online communities and 'Let's Play' videos, as word circulated of the game being a genuinely terrifying experience. At the time of its initial announcement, most people had no idea it was a playable teaser for the next instalment in the *Silent Hill* franchise. Since the first instalment in 1999, the *Silent Hill* franchise has released a multitude of

games that established it as force within the horror genre. *Silent Hill II* (Konami, 2001) has been recognized as a psychological horror masterpiece in the eyes of many players due to its careful implementation of psychological concepts within a simultaneously complex and well-crafted horror narrative.

Many of the games revolve around mysteries taking place in the town of Silent Hill, while players take on the roles of characters who must explore this town in the midst of horrific experiences. The fourth instalment of the series, *Silent Hill 4: The Room* (Konami, 2004) differs from this town setting as it revolves around the character Henry Townshend, who finds himself locked in his apartment and must discover a way to get out. *P.T.* can be compared to the fourth instalment because it shares a similar restriction to a single, enclosed architectural space. The main objective of *P.T.* is to walk through an L shaped hallway and solve puzzles, which function more like ambiguous triggers, in order to unlock the door at the end of the hall. When the door at the end of the hallway is opened, the player can progress through, only to return to the game's starting point and seemingly tread through the same hallway over and over again. As this article will demonstrate, the hallway of *P.T.* creates a perfect foundation for conditions of psychological horror to emerge and take hold of the player.

The Horror

Many horror games are designed around the mechanics of killing to survive, excessive bloodshed, and jump scares. These elements are often directly associated with horror games due to their prominence in popular titles such as *Until Dawn* (Supermassive Games, 2015), *Outlast* (Red Barrels, 2013), *Dead Space* (EA Redwood Shores, 2008), and *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996). In addition to this, horror games are often executed through a simplistic plot that takes place in a highly recognizable environment (Rousse, 2009, p. 16). These simplistic plots are given minimal explanation and the player is thrown into a world they must discover through a veil of mystique. Looking at *P.T.* alongside these conventions, it is clear that the use of killing to survive or blood effects are not central to its game design. Instead, there is a clear emphasis on the incorporation of a simple plot taking place within a recognizable environment (p. 17).

The simple plot of *P.T.* revolves around multiple cases of murder-suicides committed by fathers which the player is encouraged to discover through mysterious phone and radio messages. While the murderous themes may seem to suggest complexity to the plot, very little exposition is given to develop the narrative. While uncovering details to this story, the player will occasionally encounter a ghost named Lisa, who was murdered by her husband and now haunts the very hallway the player must explore. At random moments she will appear, providing the quintessential jump scare used in many horror

games. While these elements fit very well into the horror genre, they are not the main source of horror. The most potent component is the way in which *P.T.* takes the highly recognizable environment, in this case a very mundane looking hallway, and uses it as a tool to evoke psychological dread.

The Uncanny

Within the horror genre, highly recognizable environments become common gateways for game developers to challenge players. Developers create environments which players can easily identify, but then alter them in ways to create a feeling of something being “slightly off” (p. 18). These unsettling environments may create psychological discomfort evocative of Sigmund Freud’s theory of the uncanny.

The term “uncanny” is familiar to the medium of video games. For example, the uncanny valley is frequently associated with video games, and other animated media, that attempt to capture human likeness through computer generated images, but instead of achieving convincing human forms, the characters appear corpse-like and thus evoke a sense of disgust and dread (Simon, 2007, p. 168). This facet of the uncanny in relation to video games is a result of unintentional technological inaccuracy and limitations. While the uncanny valley theory derives from Freud’s initial ideas of the uncanny, it is not the same kind of uncanny that is experienced when playing *P.T.*

Freud’s theory of the uncanny emerged in his 1919 essay, appropriately titled “The Uncanny”. In this essay, Freud explores his ideas concerning feelings of unsettlement and fear through a threshold of familiarity and the unknown. Within video games, the uncanny can manifest itself in two ways, firstly, as previously mentioned, through the uncanny valley and secondly, through a direct invocation of the psychological anxieties that Freud explored within his essay (Brown & Marklund, 2015, p. 4).

Creating psychological horror through the uncanny is an intentional design choice found in several video games. Freud’s uncanniness most often manifests itself within what Kirkland identifies as the “architectural uncanny” (Kirkland, 2009, p. 2). The term “uncanny” Freud’s description of the German word *unheimlich*, which is “the opposite of *heimlich*, meaning ‘familiar,’ ‘native,’ ‘belonging to the home,’” therefore something unfamiliar and unhomely (Freud, 2003, p. 124-125). The environment of a game, particularly those of horror games, emphasizes the *unheimlich* by taking a recognizable setting and disrupting it to the point of agitation.

In addition to Freud’s uncanny, Martin Heidegger developed a theory of the uncanny, and his conceptualization of the sensation is recognizable in video games. Both Freud and Heidegger address the discomforts of uncanniness, but Heideggerian uncanniness focuses distinctly on theories of temporality. He argues that the uncanny sensation is

achieved when an individual “experiences or considers the impossibility of infinite being” (Brown & Marklund, 2015, p. 5). Heidegger’s theory can be likened to the uncanny sensation of *Déjà vu*, the feeling of experiencing an event as if it has already occurred before. This sensation renounces the linear understanding we have of time and creates discomfort by suggesting an infinite being where a single existence can be multiplied, introducing the notion of the double.

The theory of the double is one of the central aspects in Freud’s major arguments in his uncanny theory. The double refers to the ideas of one’s shadow or mirror image. The double is often an allegorical representation of a second self or consciousness, and is usually manifested through the visual of a Doppelgänger (Schweiger, 2010, p. 18). Within video games, the double could refer to a player’s avatar, which acts as a doppelgänger for the player to act out scenarios they would normally be unable to achieve. However, the doppelgänger can lead to an inaccurate representation of the self which evokes the uncanny valley. Considering other aspects of the double beyond the avatar allows us to avoid this association because, as previously mentioned, the uncanny valley is not intentional.

Within both Heideggerian and Freudian uncanniness, the double can be an external manifestation of the involuntary repetition of certain situations. Repetition evokes the feeling of something fateful and inescapable which causes unsettlement within individuals (Freud, 2003, p. 237). This causes individuals to reevaluate each experience and question which one is the authentic one, evoking feelings of uncanny unfamiliarity. Now that we have explored the relationship between the uncanny and double, we can return to an analysis of *P.T.*

The Intention

In order to recognize the intentional application of theories of uncanniness within *P.T.*, we should consider the work of two of the game’s contributors, Guillermo del Toro and Junji Ito. Both del Toro and Ito are considered to be masters of horror and upon closer inspection, their works borrow many elements from the theories of the uncanny as well as psychoanalysis. In the film *A Devil’s Backbone*, del Toro challenges conventions of perspective by using a child’s viewpoint, thereby evoking the uncanny. Taking place during the Spanish Civil War, the plot revolves around a boy who loses his father to the war and is forced to live in an orphanage where he encounters a ghostly presence.

The events that occur within the orphanage become an allegory for the civil war taking place beyond the walls of the school. Through a child’s point of view, del Toro expresses a blurred connection between past and present, being and non-being (McDonald & Clark, 2014, p. 137) and most importantly serves the question of what could be fantasy and what is reality (Thomas, 2011, p. 16). This correlates directly to Freud’s views as the “uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy

and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary” (Freud, 2003, p. 150). The events within the orphanage serve as a reflection for the external events and the mirrored narrative becomes uncanny in its attempt to familiarize the horrors of war through the eyes of a child.

Looking at the second contributor, Junji Ito, the uncanny and double are recognizable in his magnum opus, *Uzumaki* (Ito, 1998-1999). The manga tells the story of a town that becomes so obsessed with spiral shapes that spirals come to curse the town and begin to manifest themselves within the surroundings and people. *Uzumaki* directly translate to the word ‘whirlpool’ which is often associated with the repeated spiral shape. Whirlpools have the unique property of actively drawing someone in involuntarily. Not only does *Uzumaki* reinforce imagery of the double and the motif of repetition but it encompasses the theory of the uncanny through the hybridization of human and spiral, capturing a familiar human in a strange, unknown form.

Furthermore, the short story, *The Enigma of Amigara Fault* (Ito, 2002), continues Ito’s fascination with the uncanny as the plot follows the discovery of human shaped holes within a mountain following an earthquake in Japan. The protagonists discover that there are holes identical to their silhouettes and are compelled to enter them, only to face a death-like state. The sense of recognition when an individual finds his or her matching hole, paralleled with the unfamiliarity of what they face, is almost the very definition of the uncanny and provides grounds for recognizing the uncanny within *P.T.*

The Hallway

We have established what the uncanny theory is and that its occurrence in *P.T.* is likely very much intended by its developers, who have used it in their past work. We can now a chance to truly investigate how the structure of *P.T.*’s hallway manages to conjure these theories and elicit feelings of terror. As previously mentioned, the hallway of *P.T.* is what the entire game is structured around and where the uncanny sensations stem from. The details of the hallway are very mundane, and the décor and furniture read as simplistic, homely and *familiar*. This apparent mundanity allows the player to become properly situated in a strange, new environment and to acknowledge one half of the uncanny threshold: familiarity. The first instance when the player gets through the looped hallway and enter the second loop, there is an automatic sensation of dread despite entering a seemingly recognizable hallway once again. The source of this dread is created by registering that the door should not rationally lead to the same hallway, therefore it enters the realm of architectural uncanniness.

The game begins with surroundings that can be rationalized and understood by players, but, after each loop, the environment shifts just enough to prevent players from getting comfortable. In one moment,

the hallway may house a particular arrangement of photographs, while in the next, the images are obviously misplaced and morphed. Lights might suddenly turn off or the bathroom door might be open when before it was closed. These changes occur gradually and, importantly, they encourage a compulsive evaluation of the player's surroundings. This compulsion is evocative of psychoanalytic themes that Freud explores in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1961). Freud accounts the pleasure in repeating traumatic moments as an opportunity to take mastery over challenges that led to failure (p. 9-10) – trying to make the unfamiliar seem familiar, and therefore, less frightening.

Consequently, when aspects of the environment do not change, the remnants of the uncanny continue to influence the way the environment is scrutinized. A photograph may be in the exact same location as it was in the previous loop, or the garbage on the ground may appear the same as it did for the last three loops, yet the mind begins to question whether they have changed or not. This unsettling doubt would not be accomplished through terrifying, dramatic changes. Rather, these subtle changes, which straddle the threshold of familiarity, make players question every detail. This reevaluation aligns itself with Heidegger's notions of the double, particularly regarding to the function of time. Most of the time the clock in *P.T.*'s hallway reads 11:59. This established time allows players to replay a fragment repeatedly, making it all the more terrifying when the clock eventually strikes midnight as suddenly the player is thrown further into the territory of unfamiliarity. As described earlier, when a particular moment of time is repeated, this causes the individual to reevaluate each experience and question which one is the authentic. In questioning the authenticity of each loop, the player is denied complete familiarity, despite having repeated the same hallway multiple times.

A truly unsettling psychological experience occurs when you start to doubt your own senses in a game, as they are the very instruments that are supposed to help you navigate through the game's environment. When the player begins to doubt their senses, they surrender themselves to the surroundings, leading to a feeling of powerlessness. This powerlessness is emphasized by the first-person camera perspective. Unlike many *Silent Hill* games which employ the third-person perspective, the use of the first-person perspective makes the doubts and fears resonating within the hallway feel all the more immediate. The first-person camera blurs the distinction between player and character, creating uncertainties around identity – the boundary between self and character (Spittle, 2011, p. 316-318), and furthers the psychologically dreadful experienced through the uncanny hallway.

Conclusion

There may be games that have more impactful story lines, realistic ghosts or terrifying jump scares; however, despite the short duration

and simple execution, *P.T.* and its now infamous hallway has cemented a new standard in the genre of psychological horror. While there are many threads woven into *P.T.* that create a sense of uncanny horror, such as the disturbing narrative of familicide and the constant threat of the ghost, Lisa; the hallway remains to be the foundation for unsettling sensations. *P.T.*'s utilization of the uncanny as the source of horror not only made the demo revolutionary at the time of release, but has now created a legacy for psychological horror games to follow. Since the release of *P.T.*, games like *Layers of Fear* (Bloober Team, 2016), *Resident Evil VII* (Capcom, 2017), and *Visage* (SadSquare Studio, 2018) have borrowed many familiar cues from *P.T.* in order to usher in a fresh wave of horror. The success of *P.T.* and the many games it has now inspired, demonstrates that what feels most familiar can be used to create the most unsettling of experiences.

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