Phantasmagoria
Designing Super-natural Terror
Johanna Koljonen
(SOME THINGS MUST BE BELIEVED TO BE SEEN.)

– ANDREW McNEILLIE
On ghost stories:

• why do we have them?
• what are they (the good ones) about?
• how can we design games about them?

• should we? (not indiscriminately)
“The brain baulks at non-meaning; meaninglessness, like formlessness, becomes the dominant scandal against reason, and reason, seeking to abolish it, generates fantasies (Goya comes to mind, for his iconic image of himself, with its magnificent warning, ‘The dream of reason produces monsters’).

Storytelling

- = the creation of meaningful narratives by ordering events, images, ideas, symbols in a coherent way.
- Establishes, reinforces and/or challenges social norms
- Creates safe spaces for exploration of the unknown, of “the other”, of taboo, of “the unthinkable”
Storytelling

- Also: the construction of the self
Storytelling

- That is: the construction of the self in the social context
Storytelling

- That is: the construction of the self in the social context AS ONE WHO BELONGS.
Biological Limits

- Fight/flight reflex etc survival
- looking for threats & for humans
- the mind will err on side of terror
- the mind will err on the side of disgust (later possibly: charismatic abnormality)
Biological Limits

- Most or all cultures have ghost and/or demon stories
- NB: Does not require Jungian collective subconscious
- NB: Does not prove existence of paranormal phenomena
Suggestive location, players do the work
Shit that freaks all people out

- Crossing time-space boundaries (broken reality)
- Crossing health/illness boundaries (taint of death, broken causality)
- Crossing ritualized* life/death boundaries
Shit that freaks all people out

= “The Uncanny”

a Freudian concept of an instance where something can be familiar, yet foreign at the same time, resulting in a feeling of it being uncomfortably strange.
Shit that freaks all people out

- *The life-death boundary is a boundary that bleeds (for the above-mentioned reasons in combination with grief and love).*
Easiest life/death transgression:
Surprise animation
Inanimate objects = Scary

• When they’re suddenly animate
  • [lat. anima = mind, soul]
• When they demonstrate intent, especially unpredictable or malicious
  • Pre-science: animistic religions
  • Post-science: poltergeist phenomena
Suggestive setting + moving shit around in surprising ways
Ghost Stories

- Sadness
- Terror / Horror
Approaching GHOST STORIES

- Atmosphere
- “Plot” (Central conflict + Solution conditions)
“the haunted house / Indian burial ground cliché”
Ghost Stories

- nostalgia
- melancholia
- fear of abandonment
- fear of social change*
- alienation
- heartbreak

- fear of death
- bereavement
- acceptance of loss
- terror of disease and of abnormality
- trauma survival
- terror/horror
Approaching ghost stories

• Atmosphere
• “Plot” (Central conflict + Solution conditions)
• Situations, setting, narrative
*DARK WATER (HIDEO NAKATA, 2002) DIVORCE, SINGLE PARENTHOOD (FROM BOTH A CHILD AND A PARENT PERSPECTIVE), SOCIAL MOBILITY (DOWN)
URBAN ALIENATION = PRESENT IN GHOST STORIES SINCE AT LEAST THE 1880S.
FEAR OF TECHNOLOGY = IN HORROR FICTION SINCE AT LEAST 1815.
dark Water (2002): Elevator
Poltergeist (1982): TV
Physical manifestation of time/space breakdown
Physical manifestation of life/death transgression
Ringu (1998): VHS tapes
Requiem for a Dream (2000): Refrigerator
Ghost stories are littered with crumbling (gothic) texts.

ruins
diaries
old letters
b/w photos
ancient books
wills
carvings
engraved jewellery
etc
STILL TRUE.

ALSO: RETRO TECH ACTIVATES
NOSTALGIA FOR LOST FUTURES.
Alienation Technologies

- Liminal states seem to be symbolically connected with certain machines (esp communication devices like trains or phones)
- They break unity of time/space, life/death
- Charged with symbolic (cultural) meaning: rapidly changing social webs, and status, and societal change
- Charged with personal meaning: time economies, memory
- Activated through animation-possession
PROSOPOPEIA
(JONSSON, ERICSSON ET AL, 2004)

FUNCTIONAL TECHNOLOGY FOR SPEAKING TO THE DEAD

EVP = Electronic Voice Phenomena (a form of “instrumental transcommunication”)

WHITE NOISE
Some things must be seen to be believed
DESIGN CHALLENGES:
TIME
DESIGN CHALLENGES

• Game time limitations and narrative expectations make establishing the ordinary relatively difficult.

• Establishing another era/environment eats up more of this limited time.
If both ghosts and the living are player characters, their perception of time should probably be different: its pace, its shape, and/or the subjective date.
Previous Occupants

- Frederik Berg Østergaard & Tobias Wrigstad, 2010 >>> jeepen.org
- Two story time planes, same motel room (players take turns, influence each other)
- (Classic Jeepform technique: no absolute character ownership)
the Shining, 1980
Lots of ghosts, few of the living?
Mutual NPC-ing

- Not all character groups have to play with the same game mechanics
Mutual NPC:ing

Mystery resolved
Game ends
Conflict resolved
NB!

- OPTIMAL LOGISTICS TIME ≠ OPTIMAL EXPERIENTIAL TIME
DESIGN CHALLENGES: BODIES
DESIGN CHALLENGES

• Players playing ghosts have physical bodies

• The character possesses the player body; further possession or messing around with body perception is difficult
Flawed proportions and other illusions

Pseudoscope
The other senses

• Sound at the limits of perception
• Images too fast to consciously perceive
• Attention illusions
• Temperature
• Wrong surface materials
BODY ILLUSIONS
150 year tradition in ghost effects for fun and profit

Google: Mediums, Seances, Hoaxes
But don’t forget
RFID tags, arduino,
holograms, etc.

Google: Ghost Special Effects
DOES THE PLAYER/CHARACTER BODY OVERLAP ALLOW FOR SEPARATE INPUT ANALYSIS?
IF: YES, HOW DO YOU DESIGN FOR THIS?

IF: EVENTUALLY, HOW LONG IS THE LAG?

IF: POSSIBLY, HOW DO WE TEST?

IF: NO, ARE THESE GAMES EVEN ETHICAL?
• Willing suspension of disbelief… helps?
• Character doubt helps the player negotiate disbelief
IDENTIFY THE MINIMUM NUMBER OF SUGGESTIONS AND GHOST EFFECTS THAT WILL ALLOW THE PLAYERS TO EXPERIENCE YOUR STORY.
THEN INVITE ME TO YOUR GAME.
THANK YOU.

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