

The Next Level of Horror Entertainment: Facing Fear in Cooperative Interactive Drama Survival Horror Games

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Abstract

Horror entertainment continues to change, with horror games being another step in this evolution after literature and movies. The paper characterizes how the cooperative mode of Dark Pictures Anthology games influences the horror experience of players. The Anthology has been analyzed via a close reading of selected Let's Play videos, with 42 complete playthroughs analyzed and 18 playlists sampled. The article demonstrates how scare tactics deployed by developers cause players to feel more discomfort compared to a single-player mode. The split perspective of co-op exacerbates stress, tension, and fear as these are being experienced regarding not only oneself but also the other player. Additionally, players' meta-genre knowledge combines with cooperation, thus influencing decisions and, ultimately, the game experiences. All this means that the cooperative way of playing may be seen as yet another step in the horror entertainment evolution.

Keywords: horror games, cooperation, players, Let's Plays, horror genre

1. Introduction: recreational fear

Horror entertainment has been and continues to be very popular in many forms. For example, horror movie viewers have long sought out narratives intended to evoke negative emotions—including fear, anxiety, dread, and disgust—which cannot place the audiences in any actual danger. In this manner, the viewers can playfully engage with the narrative and the simulated threat, experiencing suspenseful delight (Andersen et al., 2020). The viewers or readers of horror texts are aware of the fictional nature of the witnessed events and that their welfare is not at stake (Tamborini, 2003).

Considering games, Rouse III (2009) wondered what form horror games might take in the future, arguing: “as horror games continue to evolve, I suspect

they will become more and more distinct from horror films, in the same way horror films have progressed beyond being straight adaptations of horror prose” (Rouse III, 2009, p. 20). While acknowledging that horror games continue to change, we do not want to answer the question of how horror games have evolved in the past or what are their definite features (despite indicating some of these). Instead, the present article looks at a specific, i.e., participatory, cooperative way of playing these games and how this could influence the players themselves and the genre as a whole.

This study covers horror games with social affordances that enable communication, including cooperative-based gameplay intended to allow players to accomplish a shared goal (Kaye, 2016). This means that the player is facing the dangers of the horror game world not alone, but together, with someone else. The aim is thus to discuss the influence of social presence, interaction, and cooperation on the horror experience and engagement with the game. We use four games belonging to the *Dark Pictures Anthology*: *Man of Medan* (2019), *Little Hope* (2020), *House of Ashes* (2021), and *The Devil in Me* (2022).

To understand this particular mode of playing horror games, it is important to note, that these differ from movies. The horror experience, both for games and movies, relies on tension and fear (Rouse III, 2009, p. 20). Horror fiction aims to immerse its audiences in fictional worlds full of dangers to produce strong emotional engagement (Coelho et al., 2021, p. 409). While horror movies and literature allow audiences for “low-cost, risk-free experience with fear and related negative emotions” (Andersen et al., 2020, p. 2), horror games also present the players with “witnessed fictional events,” but ones which, in contrast to movie or literature, are not irrelevant to the welfare of those players (Tamborini, 2003, p. 420). In games, a character's death is given “real stakes”, since the playable character often constitutes the player's avatar, and the avatar's death has various gameplay-related repercussions (Rouse III, 2009, p. 20). In this sense,

digital games provide a unique experience of the genre. In contrast to horror movies or literature, where the audiences do identify with the characters but are comfortable in their knowledge that they remain free of any consequences (Tamborini, 2003, p. 420), horror games provide high-pressure environments where the players are outnumbered, isolated, and alert to any cues of potential danger. Horror games are also excellent vehicles for players to experience game-specific emotions such as guilt, anxiety, frustration, sadness, or helplessness (Isbister, 2016).

Dark Pictures Anthology are AAA games, with “their reliance on hard fun to keep the player entertained” (Cole et al., 2015). In Triple-A games, “elicited emotions [are] often associated with action movie ... tropes” (Cole et al., 2015). This is mainly

“a result of the intense action and functional challenge that these games require the player to engage in, as well as a dramatic narrative involved a large threat of some kind (e.g. the end of the world, the death of a loved one etc.) that the player must help avert. It is interesting to note that the quality of the narrative isn’t expected to necessarily be very high in order to evoke these ‘blockbuster drama’ feelings” (Cole et al., 2015).

What makes a difference for AAA horror games are the scare tactics complicating a gamer’s choices through instigating fear. This kind of design feature is central for horror video ludic experiences, arousing shock and surprise (Perron, 2018, p. 114)

It is not only the scare tactics, however, that contribute to the actual horror experience in playing horror games. The experience, apart from the shock of surprise, additionally consists of the tension of suspense (Perron, 2018, p. 56). The essential nature of tension is its close connection to “the uncertainty about the outcome of a situation” (Perron, 2018, p. 311). In the long run, tension during gameplay paves the way for fear since the player’s physical body tends to be prompted by the “emotional” brain even before the player is conscious of the emotion; it is not the feeling of fear that brings about the physiological signs of fear, but the other way around—the physiological signs of fear induce the sense of being afraid (Perron, 2018).

Another critical component of the horror experience is the feeling of stress, which follows prolonged tension or elevated anxiety of the player. Stress is the result of external stimuli or stressors. Stressful events, sequences, or demanding mechanics can pressure the player into stress (Ntokos, 2018, p. 35). Stress and anxiety are not as intense as fear, but they can

lead to higher fear levels “if the stressors materialize and augment their presence towards the player” (Ntokos, 2018, p. 35). The nature of the stressor is irrelevant in the case of horror games—the event or threat can be realistic or supernatural, since “supernatural elements tend to trigger the same networks as real-life stimuli,” (Coelho et al., 2021, p. 407) and supernatural fears set off “the same evolved brain mechanisms as natural fears” (Coelho et al., 2021, p. 407).

All these experiences of playing horror games are mostly reported for single-player modes, hence the aim of the presented paper: *to uncover how interaction and social presence of other players in cooperative playing influence how the game is played and experienced, and how this is relevant in the broader context of horror games and horror entertainment in general*. In the next section, we briefly characterize the *Dark Pictures Anthology*. Then we describe the methodology behind this study, i.e., Let’s Plays analysis, report on the findings, and discuss these.

2. *Dark Pictures Anthology*: an overview

The games in the *Dark Pictures Anthology* are labeled as interactive drama survival horror games, and feature five playable characters, whose survival is contingent on the choices and reflexes of the player. The butterfly effect mechanic (Magova, 2020) employed in every game forces the player to make decisions that will affect the game’s outcome. These branching storylines “take the player through one of many possible paths based on the decisions they make” (Welsh, 2021, p. 2). In the context of replayability, the employment of this mechanic allows the players to “navigate through a labyrinth of choices and experience thousands of unique stories, as well as an endless amount of ‘what-ifs’ by the nature of the game’s highly changeable storyline” (Welsh, 2021, p. 2), and the scholars to “think about potentials, transformations, desires, intensities, experimental engagements, and connections among players” (Jagoda & McDonald, 2018, p. 177). Even when only blind playthroughs are considered, i.e. first encounter the players have with the given game, the players familiar with the structure of the *Anthology* games are still aware of the potential results of their choices and the possible transformations of the direction of the given story.

This is especially significant, as there is, in fact, “a limit to the number of actions/possibilities afforded by the game beyond which the game becomes formless and less immersive” (Nae, 2021, p. 13). Ideally, the game should “offer the player the right number of actions so

that it manages to maintain the illusion of reality, but also upholds a stable game design which ensures that core mechanics are ludically relevant” (Nae, 2021, p. 13). The ludic relevance of the butterfly effect mechanic not only translates into the possibility of producing meaningful changes in an otherwise linear story told by each installment of the series but also complements the existing narrative structures. Every game in the *Anthology* has a partially formed narrative that follows specific plot points and a three-act structure with a climax and a conclusion. The choices of the players—not only the ones associated with the butterfly effect mechanic, but also regular dialogue selection, and quick time events—dictate the survival or death of specific characters, their attitude towards each other, and available actions. This, in turn, affects the agency of the players, the tone of the narrative, and the emergent plot of any given playthrough. In other words, each seemingly “innocuous player choice permanently alters the direction of the story” (Welsh, 2021, p. 2).

The brief outline of the premise of each game examined in this article will facilitate the understanding of our findings. The first game, *Man of Medan*, revolves around a group of young people forced by pirates to board a long-lost World War II-era warship, where their perception of reality is affected by a chemical called Manchurian Gold. The game emphasizes individual choices of each character, and the exploration of the environments to uncover Secrets (elements of pull narrative). The second installment, *Little Hope*, is about a group of unrelated people trapped in a haunted town, who, in fact, represent the deceased family members of one of the characters as he tries to come to terms with the tragedy that claimed them long before the events of the game. The primary focus of the game is placed on individual character arcs and on facing threats which are not always what they seem. The third part of the *Anthology*, *House of Ashes*, follows a group of American and Iraqi soldiers trapped in underground caves and temples, where they need to fend off nearly indestructible creatures before they can make their way out to the surface. The game accentuates relationships between characters and favors cooperation over justified hostility. The last game in the series, *The Devil in Me*, tells the story of a documentary crew who visit a recreation of H.H. Holmes’ (19th-century American con artist and serial killer) Murder Castle on a secluded island and must survive the attacks and traps set up by a sadistic serial killer as they try to escape the island. The game stresses stealth over action and difficult choices.

What is particularly interesting in the *Dark Pictures* games is the consistently large ensemble of playable characters, with no single protagonist discernible

(except *Little Hope*). A larger number of playable characters provides little support in terms of easing the tension, and also raises the stakes of the game, seeing as the goal of each installment is to complete the storyline with as many characters as possible still alive. This means that for all playable characters, there is an actual dramatic need, providing them with a simple but compelling reason to be in the given game (Lankoski et al., 2003). The resulting character goals, originating from that dramatic need, are founded on conflict and struggle (Lankoski et al., 2003), as well as the character’s personality. Ludically, this is expressed in all installments in the form of the Traits of each playable character; every character has several personality statistics that the player’s decisions can alter as the game progresses. When controlled by the computer, some characters will retain their original personality as conceived by the creators. However, they can become friendlier and more respectful when controlled by a player (like Conrad in *Man of Medan*, John in *Little Hope*, or Charlie in *The Devil in Me*). This means that the player’s decision-making can affect the relationships between the characters as well, including their inclination to help one another and the resulting chance of survival (as the game permits a story completion with not a single character surviving).

The prologues shape the expectations and the mental state of the players; each game in the *Anthology* is based on a fixed ludonarrative structure, which introduces the premise and themes of the given installment by referencing prior events related in some way to the game story proper. The events in question will have unfolded decades or (in the case of *House of Ashes*) millennia earlier, and they do not provide a full explanation of the game storyline (except for *Little Hope*). These prologues are crucial for *Dark Pictures* games as survival horror texts since they provide the players with partial but relevant information about the threat they will encounter. Since little information is, as Perron points out, more effective in horror games than none at all, causing “a buildup of lasting arousal prior the event” (Perron, 2018, p. 311), the players begin each installment apprehensive, but not equipped with enough knowledge that would lead to “effective coping strategies” (Perron, 2018, p. 311).

Due to their structure and mechanics, which entail alertness to and succeeding at QTEs (quick time events in which the player performs actions shortly after the appearance of an on-screen prompt), the *Anthology* games are good at constructing both stressful and suspenseful sequences in each installment. In order to correctly balance the suspense of tension, the shock of surprise, and the following stress of the confrontation

with the threat, the games make efficient use of an appropriate set of scare tactics. Some of these relate to the game's formal aspects, such as the audiovisual representation or mechanics. In contrast, others result from artistic choices (Perron, 2018) concerning the horror experience of architecture. Every installment makes conscious, strategic use of discursive blind spaces to build tension during exploration, obstructing the visual field of the player, who can sometimes see their character and a reasonable margin of the surroundings, and at other times has to guess what is hidden behind the camera framing and angles. The use of discursive blind spaces paves the way for the impact of diegetic forewarnings in the *Anthology* games. Between the obstructed field of view and the visual or auditory indication of the presence or the approach of a threat in the depicted world, each installment builds suspense and causes tension in the players as they catch glimpses of the dangerous entities or listen for their presence. Extradiegetic forewarnings often emphasize diegetic forewarnings in critical gameplay moments; the combination of both kinds of forewarnings proves to be very effective, as it elicits the most pronounced reactions from the players.

It is also worth noting that a failed confrontation with the threat in every game leads to another scare tactic, particularly characteristic of the franchise: gore imagery. Losing a character to the monstrous entity inevitably results in gruesome death, featuring an explicit depiction of gore and violence. Interestingly, this particular scare tactic is also employed in death scenes caused not by the game's primary threat (the monstrous entity), but by the environment. This is related to the other characteristic scare tactic used in the *Anthology*—environmental threat. The environment is equally dangerous to the characters, and the players face diverse frightening events related to the environment rather than entities, either through traps, challenging terrain layouts, hazardous components, or precarious placement of objects.

All *Anthology* games can be played either in single-player or cooperative mode. The fact that the *Dark Pictures Anthology* games make cooperation possible is significant in the context of the horror experience, with a particular emphasis on the multiplayer playability mode known as the Shared Story mode, which allows two players to connect and play the game online ("Play the whole story online with a friend, making choices that affect you both" as thedarkpictures.com informs). In contrast to the other multiplayer mode—Movie Night, a local (couch) offline co-op mode for up to five players—in Share Story, one player controls two to three characters out of the five-person cast, with one character

being controlled alternately by either player depending on the given game and sequence. In most gameplay sequences, the players share one virtual environment, while in others, they need to navigate different spaces.

3. Methods and criteria

In order to highlight the issue of the influence of social presence, interaction, and cooperation on the horror experience in gaming, we use data gathered from Let's Play videos (Marak, 2021, p. 217) of the four selected games from the YouTube platform. The Let's Plays are analyzed via a close reading of a performative experience of playing the game (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011). Like all recorded user testimonies—such as reviews, message board posts, reaction videos, or podcasts—Let's Plays and playthroughs are stylized and performative (Scully-Blaker et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2013). This is a trait of testimonies that must be acknowledged but is impossible to escape.

The Let's Play lists and videos included in Table 1 were retrieved between March 6 and May 15, 2023. A total of 42 complete playthroughs of the *Anthology* games have been reviewed to examine and characterize the specific nature of blind cooperative playthroughs of the *Anthology* games. The videos were searched using the keywords "Shared Story" or "Co-op" combined with game names, e.g., "House of Ashes." The Let's Plays sampled by all means do not compose a representative sample but are only a small portion of such content available on YouTube and other services. What was crucial in selecting analyzed videos was that both players posted full playthroughs and commented on the gameplay individually. We excluded the videos with players consulting each other outside of the gameplay (using third-party communicators) and making in-game decisions together after such consultations. We wanted to capture the "real" experience of gameplay in the Shared Story mode and how it affects players' decisions. All the analyzed Let's Plays were given codes included in Table 1. These codes serve as reference points in reporting our findings.

Based on the data obtained from the investigation of Let's Play videos, an assortment of scenes from each game has been selected, which serves as a reference point to the analysis of the players' reactions to the scare tactics mentioned in the Introduction. The scenes are listed in Table 2 and are assigned codes that refer to the given title (*Man of Medan* – M; *Little Hope* – L; *House of Ashes* – H; *The Devil in Me* – D). The scenes are also numbered (from SC01 to SC27) and briefly described, as the full story of each game is of secondary importance here. Additionally, the reason for the inclusion of each

scene is provided (“T” for tension and “S” for stress). “Tension,” in this case, refers to suspenseful sequences, featuring little to no action, while “stress” indicates the confrontation with stressors—namely, most often, action sequences.

The selection provided above by no means represents the only thrilling or frightening scenes or the most important scenes. Instead, the choice of scenes reflects the focus of this study by including only the ones that were comparable across almost all playthroughs, seeing as each pair of co-players had the opportunity to experience those sequences (apart from M-SC04 and M-SC07), at the same time being relevant to this study.

Concentrating on particular scenes from the Let’s Play videos allowed us to include and explore the personal gameplay experience of other players and, therefore, to conduct a more comprehensive analysis. It was about seeing how game texts are actualized during playthroughs performed by players who possess meta-game knowledge and competence, as well as meta-genre knowledge. Additionally, examining multiple Let’s Plays of each of the chosen games has allowed us to distinguish individual player biases from the elements contingent on the game texts themselves (Marak, 2021).

Because the primary concern of this study is the horror experience, the research was conducted in the context of the players’ recognition of all *Dark Pictures Anthology* installments as horror games. Consequently, the players are familiar with and would be prepared for the stress, the tension, and the already indicated scare tactics that those games employ. We have also considered the players’ familiarity with the butterfly effect mechanic and the comprehension of the significance of choices, as well as the competence to explore those choices. We include only playthroughs that follow the intended goal of the game (saving as many characters as possible). Additionally, only the previously mentioned blind playthroughs are included, i.e., the recordings of the first encounter the players have with the given game, where all decisions are made based on meta-game and meta-genre competence only, not on the comprehension of the already familiar oncoming challenge. Playthroughs exploring replayability were not considered. In the next section, when presenting the findings, we combine codes from Tables 1 and 2, to refer to both the given video or playlist and a particular scene this video or playlist refers to.

Table 1. List of playlists and videos analyzed

Code	Link
<i>Man of Medan</i>	
P-M01	https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL9GVytZOoSJgn9Thqxs4f_fkYxYa6SEzD
P-M02	https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL8XqEdDO9sqvreuopj9loBKDZOMdoCYVN
P-M03	https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLaA3DUlbb1u-0heeFAwd4L5gBj0RoXDW-
P-M04	https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLmuCNoOBEgjTDQic2073n0Q7o-EaqLFG4
P-M05	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mhQQbbtRUY8
P-M06	https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL2BT64d1kNVxpvmg8FGY2D1O_eSIBFTzs
<i>Little Hope</i>	
P-L07	https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL9GVytZOoSJhQ2HJrTBzYPvV7YxniMga
P-L08	https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL8XqEdDO9sqvgVp0ImEJ2JAvqNoKI8z6x
P-L09	https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLaA3DUlbb1u8HPhVLxqSi9okojBu0K8SC
P-L10	https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLmuCNoOBEgjT3a6_G6jom4uXgYq43otCY
<i>House of Ashes</i>	
P-H11	https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL9GVytZOoSJjJ4dumKYATPGs-DtYjY4HU
P-H12	https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL8XqEdDO9sqviJI6fWuBA4RzDHDH2m8ya
P-H13	https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLaA3DUlbb1u8w4hVGzB5q2sML2dl7112a
P-H14	https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLmuCNoOBEgjROFwKGC-raLp-eDHOdkDDz
P-H15	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mVyKexnt6qE&ab_channel=Marz
<i>The Devil in Me</i>	
P-D16	https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL9GVytZOoSJiqnkq5_WtiyOLusggBKRke
P-D17	https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLaA3DUlbb1u_Nz6k0JSuZDXUZeYcK6v1c
P-D18	https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLmuCNoOBEgjTQKGGqwEM1hiNe4RBNYBG

Source: own study

Table 2. Scenes from *Dark Pictures* referenced in the Let's Play analysis

Code and the aspect of horror experience analyzed		Brief description of each scene
The characters' roles, their significance for the story, as well as the names of places, objects, or phenomena, are not explained. The information is given briefly to indicate the nature of each scene.		
<i>Man of Medan</i>		
M-SC01	S	The pirates board the Duke of Milan (main location of Act 1).
M-SC02	T	Alex and Julia explore the SS Ourang Medan (the game's primary location) and hallucinate.
M-SC03	T	Fliss explores the ballroom under the influence of the Manchurian Gold (she hallucinates).
M-SC04	S/T	The optional sequence of Conrad being chased by the Sailor Girl.
M-SC05	S	Talking to hallucinating Junior, who is influenced by the Manchurian Gold.
M-SC06	S	Alex hallucinates a rat and the final threat in the kitchen (an effect of the Manchurian Gold).
M-SC07	T	The optional sequence of Brad getting lost in the looping corridors.
<i>Little Hope</i>		
L-SC08	T	All characters walk towards the town of Little Hope (the primary location of the game).
L-SC09	S/T	All characters attempt to cross the ruined bridge.
L-SC10	S	The first appearance and attack of the Amy-demon.
L-SC11	T	Daniel and Taylor explore the museum and, subsequently, the execution site.
L-SC12	S/T	The first appearance of the Tabitha-demon.
L-SC13	S	The arrival of the Joseph-demon.
L-SC14	T	The arrival of all demons at the ruined house, where all the surviving characters are hiding.
<i>House of Ashes</i>		
H-SC15	S	Nick and Jason drag wounded Merwin away from the creatures.
H-SC16	T	Jason and Nick attempt to evade the creatures before reaching Naram Sin's temple.
H-SC17	T	Nick and Salim in Sand Caverns attempt to sneak upon and fight the creature.
H-SC18	S	The battle scene in the sacrificial chamber featuring all surviving characters.
H-SC19	T	Jason and Salim explore the alien spaceship.
H-SC20	T	Nick plants the explosives in the vault.
H-SC21	S	The final battle during the eclipse featuring all surviving characters.
<i>The Devil in Me</i>		
D-SC22	T	Erin follows the sounds in the walls.
D-SC23	T	Charlie and Jamie search the hotel (the primary location of the game).
D-SC24	S/T	Erin is locked in the blacked-out room without her inhaler.
D-SC25	T	Jamie wanders the hotel after being separated from Charlie.
D-SC26	S	The suffocation chamber trap.
D-SC27	S	The moving glass wall trap.

Source: own study

4. The impact of co-op mode on the player experience in *Dark Pictures* games

The satisfaction from cooperation in *Anthology* games is directly related to appreciating the feasibility of saving every character of the five-person cast. The cooperative nature of the Shared Story mode encourages a whole range of prosocial behaviors. While playing together, the players focus on the well-being of not only the main cast characters but, if possible, all characters, including non-playable ones (H-SC15, P-H12). Sometimes the players will decide to save a non-playable character, or abandon them, based on their main motivation and approach to gameplay; role-playing as a brave character, they might attempt to save

any character they believe they can (P-H13), whereas relying on meta-genre knowledge might prompt them to kill characters that could later become a risk to others, thus attempting to save more characters by sacrificing fewer (this being prosocial behavior) (P-H11). After successfully guiding all five characters through the game, the players express pride for keeping everyone alive through effective cooperation (P-L07, P-H12).

In the Shared Story mode, the players seem acutely aware of the significance of the butterfly effect mechanic. They recognize that every choice they make could affect the fate and safety of other playable characters (P-L07). The players also recognize specific moments and choices that bring about the butterfly effect. The high inertia of the choices leads to

considerable stress that the players experience right after making the decision, which they report verbally or by quick breathing or squirming (P-L08). However, some of this stress can be alleviated by gaining in-game knowledge. For this reason, another, closely related, important aspect of cooperative gameplay in the *Anthology* games is environment exploration. Almost in every location in each game, the players can find Secrets, Clues, or Premonitions informing about the depicted world and games' events, or insight into potential results of future butterfly choices. The players actively seek this information, talk about it, and try to decipher the meaning of each new clue (P-L07, P-H12).

The release of subsequent installments of the *Dark Pictures Anthology* in roughly one-year intervals resulted in a natural learning curve, as the players seemed to be more familiar with the affordances of each new game than the one before (P-L09, P-H12, P-D18). Consequently, their familiarity with the central premise and mechanics, as well as their expectations, affected both their attitude towards every new game in the series and their competence for gameplay (P-L07, P-H11, P-H12, P-H15). As a result, some of the players who played the Shared Story mode in *Man of Medan* while interacting with one another via third-party communication software—since the Shared Story mode in *Dark Pictures Anthology* games gives the players a choice to not interact with one another extradiegetically—decided to play each subsequent installment without spoken interaction, even if being able to talk over the microphone would have alleviated some of the anxiety and stress. Those players communicated that in their playthrough of the previous game, they tended to drop essential hints and clues to their co-player unintentionally. As a result, many of their decisions were based on the co-player's input (P-L09). Consequently, the mediated environment encouraged the complementary participation of both co-players, and the organization of parallel tasks (Kaye, 2016), but also took away from the suspense of discovering only selected parts of the game story. In other words, a split point of view, coupled with the inherent lack of knowledge concerning the co-players' whereabouts and actions, is often communicated as a thrill and one of the highlights of the Shared Story mode gameplay (P-L08, P-L10, P-H13, P-D18).

Social presence affects the way the players play the *Dark Pictures Anthology* games as horror games. The online co-op mode facilitates the shared experience of flow, understood as a specific “sweet spot where [the players] have the right amount of ability to meet the challenges at hand” (Isbister, 2016, p. 4). Even opting for a split perspective and no spoken communication,

the co-players still seem to enjoy companionship and social presence—the awareness of the other player in the mediated environment of the game. However, there is another side to this aspect of social presence, as the presence of the co-player in the same location and stressful situation incurs the risk of endangering or even hurting the co-player's character. For this reason, the game-specific emotions that players can experience in single-player mode will be accompanied by a range of similar emotions related to the co-players. The frustration, sadness, or helplessness, as well as general discomfort related to the uncertainty associated with high-pressure environments (Gowler & Iacovides, 2019), are visible upon the examination of Let's Play videos. The players often wonder about the whereabouts and actions of their partners, the decisions they have to take but are uncertain of, or acknowledge the camaraderie with co-players. The already mentioned QTEs, the iconic element of the franchise, apart from shaping the gameplay, often lead to the discomfort experienced by the players when things do not go as planned (Gowler & Iacovides, 2019), either for the player's character or their co-player's character. In this way, the social presence also affects both the suspenseful (tension-oriented) and the action-oriented (stressful) parts of the gameplay, where the hiding or keeping calm sequences seem more stressful than shooting or fighting sequences (P-H11). This results from the fact that despite the social proximity, some sequences do not allow the characters to cooperate in a meaningful manner that would translate into the possibility of helping one another, an issue the players often complain about (M-SC04, L-SC10, L-SC12, H-SC16, H-SC17). Interestingly, in the Shared Story mode, the players seem affected by the already characterized fear of the environment. It is even more overwhelming than in the single-player mode as the cooperative mode introduces additional anxiety concerning the safety and performance of the co-player in shared scenes (e.g., in H-SC17, both players have to complete numerous QTEs each before actually fighting the creature). As the fear of the environment increases, the fear of the monstrous entity seems to abate.

In the *Anthology* games, the rather general understanding of social presence takes a more specific form of the acute awareness of the co-player being the one behind the character visible on the screen. This tendency is noticeable in other co-op horror games as well (such as *Phasmophobia*, 2020; *Dead by Daylight*, 2016; and *Pacify*, 2019). It is worth noting, however, that since the *Anthology* offers the players complex narratives and the ludic means to role-play as the characters (a tendency which is more pronounced in the

single-player mode gameplay), the co-players in Shared Story mode focus more on the human player in control of the character rather than the character as such. In blind playthroughs, some characters will be controlled by one of the players and the computer alternately, and some characters will be controlled partially by either of the players and partially by the computer. This manner of distribution of agency among co-players results in treating all playable characters as avatars, translating into dependence and a sense of companionship when the other player is in the field of vision. As a result, the shared space is treated as such regarding objects and resources available to players. When two players explore a dark location, the character with the better light source or weapon will usually lead the way (H-SC19, P-H13/P-H12); if one player cannot access a location or item, the other will not try having seen that (P-M02). On the other hand, being separated from the player-controlled character during one sequence results in more tension, especially without spoken communication—when two players start a scene together, they are more concerned about losing sight of one another; a character controlled by computer is not perceived as companionship to the same extent as a character controlled by the co-player, as is often mentioned by the players (M-SC02, M-SC07, L-SC11, P-M02, P-L08, P-D17).

The social presence in the *Anthology* games also affects another essential franchise feature, which shapes the narrative and gameplay: defining and maintaining relationships. In contrast to the single-player mode, the Shared Story mode offers the opportunity to “adjust” the character(s)’ personality by choosing options that will affect their Traits. This is done to improve the group relationships since sometimes the survival of certain characters will depend on their cooperation. Interestingly, liking or disliking a character usually does not influence the player’s attempts to save that character. However, it may dictate a choice between saving that character and another when such a choice is given. In Shared Story mode, the starting point of every conversation and interaction between any given character and another will be trust and friendliness as determined by players (P-M01, P-M02, P-L08, P-H11, P-D18). For example, in the Prologue of *House Of Ashes* both players controlling the characters of Balathu and Kurum, two enemy warriors, have the option to “BETRAY” the other; however, in the spirit of cooperation, they rarely choose this option (P-H11, P-H12, P-H13, P-H14, P-H15). Even when limited by the narrative design, the players strive for the best possible relationship between all characters; this is true even in tense situations or stressful sequences. For example,

many players will try to improve Eric and Rachel’s relationship (P-H11, P-H12, P-H13) in the scene in Naram Sin’s temple (*House of Ashes*), despite being aware that there is a creature nearby, or prompt Erin to say something meaningful to Jamie in the air trap sequence (D-SC26, P-D17) (*The Devil in Me*).

The immediate result of this trust-oriented and friendliness-oriented strategy is the fact that the players unknowingly, by trying to keep the character relationships sound, increase the repertoire of gameplay actions and responses. Maintaining good relationships with all characters will make any of them more likely to act in the interest of the whole ensemble cast when they are controlled by the computer (e.g., in *Man of Medan*, Julia’s low relationship with Alex at the end of the game will result in her rejection of his attempts to comfort her). Some relationships have an actual influence on the narrative. If the player controlling Rachel in *House of Ashes* has a low enough relationship with Eric, they will not get the prompt to cut Rachel’s rope to save Eric (P-H13). This will result in Eric’s death if the player controlling his character chooses to hold on to Rachel (P-H14).

Another impact of cooperative-based gameplay in the *Anthology* games concerns the third significant feature of the franchise: exploration. The games favor meticulous exploration and encourage the players to share whatever knowledge they obtain with each other by employing pull narrative (Secrets and Clues) and push narrative (certain scenes visible to both players). Any interruption of that process may lead to a greater likelihood of impaired comprehension of the overall narrative, as well as result in a negative effect on the enjoyment of the game, which is closely related to the overall satisfaction of the play experience. There is added urgency in co-op exploration, because specific interactions initiated by either of the players can trigger scenes or the change of location, thus cutting the exploration short and limiting agency (M-SC02, L-SC11, P-M01, P-L08, P-H15). This interference with exploration and the adverse effect of interruptions means that players might miss (sometimes crucial) items of information, as they are cut off from given pull narrative elements, which will result in subsequent confusion. The likelihood that a scripted event initiated by one player can interrupt and cut short the exploration of the other player, as well as the occasional contingency of being able to share information on the presence of a specific character, can lead to impaired comprehension of the overall narrative, which, in turn, negatively affects the enjoyment of gameplay itself, and the satisfaction regarding the ending (even a good one or the best one—P-L07, P-L08). This is especially

visible in the reported disappointment or uncertainty of players in the case of failing to discover the Manchurian Gold (M-SC03) in *Man of Medan*, or missing the bus driver job listing and the newspaper about Anthony's survival (L-SC11) in *Little Hope*. Missing information, or the inability to share information, can affect decision-making (P-L08), cause frustration (P-M06), or create confusion and fear (P-M05). A better understanding of the narrative and plot, in turn, will reduce tension and stress as it aids in quick decisions and strategy, improving the odds of survival of the remaining characters.

The Let's Plays analysis shows that the players of the Shared Story mode tend to rely not only on meta-game knowledge but also on pretty dependable meta-genre knowledge. In the case of the *Anthology* games, this meta-genre knowledge sometimes prompts the players to take certain actions, and, at other times, prevents them from making specific choices or decisions. Some of such decisions are related only to the players' attitude, like the initial refusal to scale a flight of stairs shrouded by the Manchurian Gold mist (M-SC02, P-M02, P-M05), or the apprehension at the sight of the trail of blood in the hotel (D-SC23). Others affect the gameplay directly, like whether or not to open the coffins in Cargo Hold 3A of SS Ourang Medan (P-M01). Sometimes the meta-genre knowledge concerns the agency proper, making the players keep as close to one another as possible (M-SC02, L-SC11, H-SC19, D-SC23, P-L08), refrain from touching items or creatures (P-H11), and scour for and collect anything that can be used as a potential weapon (P-L09, P-M05). Similarly, the meta-game knowledge will contribute to some choices and strategies, contributing to the players' willingness to explore the environments cautiously (P-L10, P-M05), and their constant alertness to the potential QTEs (P-L08, P-H11).

5. Conclusion

As was mentioned in the Introduction, horror entertainment continues to change, and video games are only one of the stages of this evolution, albeit a significant one, as they have brought innovations revolutionizing the entire genre (Rouse III, 2009). In the spirit of such views, we could say that cooperative playing is the next step in the horror entertainment constant evolution, as evidenced by the actions of players and how this type of gameplay is experienced.

Split perspective emphasizes players' cooperation over logic and roleplaying, as there is a constant recognition that their actions and choices are not without

consequences for others. There is a great thrill in this feeling, but it is also stressful, sometimes to the point where some players who play the first game without spoken communication opt for using third-party communication software to alleviate all the psychological and psychosomatic discomforts of not being able to talk to a co-player. We are therefore dealing with another shift in the repercussions of involvement in the horror narrative. As indicated in the Introduction, horror events in literature or movies are mostly irrelevant to the welfare of audiences, and this has changed with games, where the consequences of an avatar's death or harm are more severe. From this point of view, cooperative horror gaming brings another unique experience of the genre—anxiety, frustration, helplessness, and other such feelings resulting from not only engagement regarding the character one controls but also caring about characters controlled by other players. This concern for others, as well as a sense of companionship and social presence, is evident even though players do not use tools allowing them to communicate outside of the gameplay. One can even suspect that the lack of such external communication strengthens the “authenticity” of the experience and, consequently, the sense of responsibility for other players and the fact that co-players do not focus on characters as such, but more on the human players controlling these characters.

In general, cooperative modes in interactive drama survival horror may be seen as another step in horror entertainment evolution also because these modes combine what is best in games interactivity with horror as a genre that tends to work with and around fairly fixed conventions and tropes. As was already mentioned, players rely on this broader meta-genre knowledge when they consider different actions. The co-op mode gives another layer here though, as the interactivity of this mode is not only about interacting with the non-human objects of the game world but also avatars controlled by other human players. The use of meta-genre knowledge is always conditioned by the presence of others, including the need to arrange relationships between characters or explore the game world together.

All this confirms that the cooperative way of playing horror video games can be seen as a new quality for horror entertainment. Playing with others, considering them in one's actions and choices, caring about them, and “using” knowledge in social presence affect how players experience fear, stress, tension, and other emotions. The present article demonstrates this by utilizing a close reading of selected Let's Plays. However, the analysis is limited to a particular game (*Anthology*) and a selection of videos. Additionally, the

players' experiences were discovered by analyzing a specific type of content, not by asking them about these experiences. This may be seen as a limitation of this study. Nevertheless, some rare studies on horror players confirm the present results. For example, the study by Lin et al. (2018) revealed a notable three-fold interplay between fear, horror self-efficacy, and arousal concerning the pleasure derived from the VR horror game (solo mode). The high-fear participants experienced a more significant degree of enjoyment when their horror self-efficacy was elevated. Considering these results, we might say that Let's Plays analysis confirms that the need to care for others (fear for others) adds to enjoyment and self-efficacy.

Overall, this study could be extended to include other titles, be more representative, and use other methods. This would be the next step to discuss whether social presence, interaction, and cooperation—all critical components of the mode analyzed—indeed mean the next stage in horror entertainment evolution and whether this new stage will become more popular among the players and, as a result, more meaningful and profound from the developers' point of view.

6. References

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