

FANTASTIKA JOURNAL

Videogames and Horror: From Amnesia to Zombies, Run! (2019) by Dawn Stobbart

Review by Matt Coward-Gibbs

Vol 5 Issue 1

<https://fantastikajournal.com/volume-5-issue-1>

ISSN: 2514-8915

This issue is published by Fantastika Journal. Website registered in Edmonton, AB, Canada. All our articles are Open Access and free to access immediately from the date of publication. We do not charge our authors any fees for publication or processing, nor do we charge readers to download articles. Fantastika Journal operates under the Creative Commons Licence CC-BY-NC. This allows for the reproduction of articles for non-commercial uses, free of charge, only with the appropriate citation information. All rights belong to the author.

Please direct any publication queries to editors@fantastikajournal.com



www.fantastikajournal.com

VIDEOGAMES AND HORROR: FROM AMNESIA TO ZOMBIES, RUN! (2019) BY DAWN STOBART

Review by Matt Coward-Gibbs

Stobart, Dawn. *Videogames and Horror: From Amnesia to Zombies, Run!* University of Wales Press, 2019. 304 pp.

I feel the need to preface this review with a warning. This warning is not about the book itself, which I enjoyed, but about the approach of the reviewer. As an interdisciplinary scholar that primarily falls within the discipline of Sociology this text left me with a considerable number of unanswered questions. Though, I must also note, it was not Dawn Stobart's purpose to address these questions. Although unintended, this text has invigorated a call for closer work between the humanities and social sciences in the study of videogames, chiming with the reflexive approach which Paolo Ruffino called for in his monograph *Future Gaming* (2018).

I feel it is important to begin with the final chapter of this text. Stobart draws on a rich body of research when she contends in the concluding paragraph of her monograph that "death is the cornerstone of videogaming, used as a method of teaching a player how to complete a game successfully" (186). This is a factor which is especially apparent when considering the majority of mainstream titles, and genres, such as First Person Shooters, roleplaying games, and action-adventure titles where death is the main roadblock to advancing the narrative and in-game progression. As Stobart notes, "it also provides a punishment for the player's failure to successfully navigate a game" (186). Stobart draws on her wealth of work and play experiences to argue that although the death of a player character may be trivial, the death of another can be shocking, or horrific, especially in cases wherein the game has encouraged relationships to have been built between the players and non-player characters (NPCs). Death within videogames is an expected setback, as the likes of Christopher Paul (2018) have drawn attention to, however there are also deep capitalistic and meritocratic underpinnings to be unpicked here. The final sentence that Stobart parts with, I find, acts as a call for action and excites me: "it is death, the threat of death and the fear of death that heightens the player's responses to these questions" (187). However, this leads me to question the emphasis that Stobart places on deep story-play, the process by which the game's narrative is central to the experience of play, and the ways in which players actively "consider the ethical and/or moral weight of these actions" (187). Jack Denham and Matthew Spokes (2019, 2020; Spokes and Denham, 2019; Spokes, 2018) have begun a series of work that engages with such questions and, which I feel, will begin to answer some of the interesting questions and considerations posed by this volume. I say this not to underplay the place of the current volume, but to emphasise the greater need for critical cross-disciplinary work.

Let us return then to the beginning. In the introduction to this monograph Stobbart sets up two major points of interaction. The first between horror and terror; the second between immersion and interactivity (3-9). In adopting a narratological framing, Stobbart works with the contention that immersion is, in essence, a social force allowing for “the player to engage with themes that might be considered taboo [...] all from the physical safe vantage point of interacting with a fictional situation on screen” (4). This absorption in activity is framed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s (2002) concept of flow, albeit briefly. There is some interesting congruence that could have been drawn out more fully here between the interfacing between notions of flow, liminality, and the omnipresent notion of the *magic circle* (see: Huizinga, 1949; Salen and Zimmerman, 2003). Of interest was Stobbart’s dissection of the sub-genre of Survival Horror which in this context is very much framed traditionally, à la *Resident Evil* (1996). This, for me, was a perfect opportunity to return to a consideration of flow, in which the balance between skill required to progress and difficulty of play need to be carefully managed (28). Moreover, especially with more recent releases in the genre, such as *7 Days to Die* (2013), we see cases in which people actively find humour and enjoyment in the act of surviving, rather than it acting as a fear of horror (such as the YouTube videos of [Games4Kickz](#)). There is also a consideration here of the way in which individuals experience horror and terror. Modding culture, for example, in the *Fallout* franchise which, as Stobbart attests, “is not generally considered to be a horror game, but [...] does contain many elements that are characteristic of the horror genre” (29). In cases such as these we see how videogames can be modified by player communities in order to instil more horror within them, one that links to notions of boundary transgression (the topic of Chapter Three) in which the border that exists between the developer and player is blurred. The playing of a modded game itself enacts a Freudian aspect of play in which the game becomes *unheimlich*, no longer entirely familiar to the player but close enough for the player to have a connection to it. These are questions which fall outside of the scope of the volume in question. However, it does open up avenues for further consideration.

The detailed consideration of *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012), an aspect of Chapter Three, offers a deep insight into both the game and the intricate thought processes at play around transgression and intertextuality. In considering the way in which *Spec Ops* allows for multiple endings, primarily based on actions during play, Stobbart draws on “horror that is based in real life” and highlights how the grievous actions explored, documented, or even partaken during the course of play are part of wider societal narratives of war crimes and the dehumanising of others (71). What Stobbart touches on is also the way in which increased attention to writing leads to greater levels of empathy being experienced by players that consequently impacts the seriousness of issues being tackled by mainstream videogames. For example, *Detroit: Become Human* (2018) plays with ideas around racial segregation co-opting the divide between human and non-human, while questions concerning graphical realism and its impact on younger players is part of a larger ongoing discussion about violence and videogames. The query Stobbart poses around the legitimacy of “winning” is of interest here, drawing on the wider ethical problem of engaging with difficult, or possibly traumatic, play. Writing that: “ultimately, the game poses the player a single conundrum: whether the only way to win *Spec Ops: The Line* is not to play, to turn off the game and refuse to interact with Walker and his team” (71). However, this does lead me to question the way in which individuals relate to the

games that they play. Here, I find a point of contention as I would argue that it is very unlikely that an individual may look to “win” via not playing the title itself; primarily due to the cost associated with games (at least at initial release) and the prestige associated with their completion (in the form of virtual achievements). Chiming with my initial contention around further interfacing between sub-disciplines of videogame studies, further evidence is required of the way in which people play, how they play, and why they choose to play such games. We live, after all, in platinum/completionist culture in gaming, in which rewards and badges are presented to gamers for their active engagement and attention paid to the games which they play. The rubric of “winning” via not playing sits in deep contention with the meritocratic nature of the sociocultural framing of mainstream digital gaming cultures where gaming skill becomes a form of capital and, as such, a valuable social commodity.

In the remainder of the volume, Stobbart devotes chapters to discussing storytelling in game play (Chapter Four). Of particular interest within this chapter is the way Stobbart operationalised ideas around how designed spaces are used within videogames to foster storytelling. Although Stobbart adopts Espen Aarseth’s ideas around spatiality (the way space can impact actions), I wonder if it may have been more productive to speak to the mobility turn. I suggest this for a few reasons. Firstly, spatiality is purposeful and, for the most part, speaks to landscapes which are built by designers, which players are encouraged to engage with by way of missions, quests, or collectables in game and encourages such exploration. As Stobbart considers, “in environmental storytelling, narrative is embedded within the design and organization of the landscape and is constructed through the player’s interaction with the landscape” (101). To consider this as a mobility, however, would allow for the recentring of the play and how play is performed. I recognise that these ideas about the performance of mobility are at their most pronounced when considering partial or fully open world games and again this speaks to the multiple ways of considering how games are engaged with. Some of these ideas are, however, considered later in the chapter in the discussion of choice (102). There is, one might argue, a pleasure associated with choice that is integral to conceiving how play is engaged with.

A discussion of identity and perspective forms the basis of Chapter Five where Stobbart considers narrative work as a form of physical participation. In particular, the consideration of the way in which videogames are responded to more actively than the more passive engagement of such other media forms as television. However, this suggests a homogenisation of player experiences, as if to say that all engage and feel the same emotional responses to horror and the horrific. These ideas around “narrative agency” lead to the development of relationships between player and their avatar or at times NPCs (116); even while such recent titles as *The Last of Us: Part 2* (2020) have further drawn into question and complicated questions about the way in which relationships in videogames are positioned.

The penultimate chapter of the volume, Chapter Six, explores questions around monstrosity and the monstrous in which Stobbart contends that “the destruction of a monster was needed for the completion of a game” (141). I did question here if destruction is the correct term to operationalise or whether it could be considered more as a form of permeant escape? Players, as Stobbart rightly

contends, “occupy an ambiguous space regarding catharsis,” primarily based around the ambiguous way in which players individually respond (119). Yet, it is through these cathartic practices that horror can be operationalised and used to its fullest potential; the horror can be based in real life, but so to can the monsters (143).

In sum, Stobbart’s volume works tirelessly to explore videogames and horror but meets both on their own terms, considering the nuances and contradictions between them. As Stobbart notes in her epilogue, “I chose to focus on games I could play myself [...] and all the games I refer to have been subject to a primary playing experience” (189). One might consider this being an area to critique by depending only on the tastes and preferences of the author, which may lead to a limited or warped sample. However, I personally find this approach to be thoughtful and shows the attention paid by the author’s deep exploration, presents these titles as rich texts across the volume. This is a fascinating and thought-provoking monograph which, as I noted at the beginning of this review, has left me with more questions; this is, however, far from a bad thing.

WORKS CITED

- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Classic Work on How to Achieve Happiness*. Revised edition, Rider, 2002.
- Denham, Jack, and Matthew Spokes. “The Right to the Virtual City: Rural Retreatism in Open-World Video Games.” *New Media & Society*, May 2020.
- . “Thinking Outside the “Murder Box”: Virtual Violence and Pro-Social Action in Video Games.” *The British Journal of Criminology*, vol. 59, no. 3, April 2019, pp. 737–755.
- Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1949.
- Paul, Christopher A. *The Toxic Meritocracy of Video Games: Why Gaming Culture Is the Worst*. University of Minnesota Press, 2018.
- Ruffino, Paolo. *Future Gaming: Creative Interventions in Video Game Culture*. Goldsmiths Press, 2018.
- Salen, Katie, and Eric Zimmerman. *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. MIT Press, 2003.
- Spokes, Matthew. ““War...war Never Changes”: Exploring Explicit and Implicit Encounters with Death in a Post-Apocalyptic Gameworld.” *Mortality*, vol. 23, no. 2, April 2018, pp. 135–150.
- Spokes, Matthew, and Jack Denham. “Developing Interactive Elicitation: Social Desirability Bias and Capturing Play.” *The Qualitative Report*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2019, pp. 781–794.

BIONOTE

Matt Coward-Gibbs is an Associate Lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University of York, UK, and part-time Lecturer in Sociology at York St John University, UK. His research considered the nexuses of death and dying; culture and community; pleasure and leisure; and deviance and transgression. Matt's ongoing PhD project presents a sociologically grounded ethnography of analog play in the UK. He is the editor of *Death, Culture and Leisure: Playing Dead* (Emerald, 2020), a steering group member of [DaCNet](#) (University of York) and the reviews editor of *Mortality* (Taylor & Francis).

<https://linktr.ee/mattcowardgibbs>

[@MattCowardGibbs](#)