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7. Fear

'By the time you're exploring a ruined department store full of people wearing the faces of discarded mannequins it's hard to tell where you crossed over from "cop solving crimes" to "man potentially in hell"' (Hurley, 2019)

'Uh, they used to be allowed to walk around during the day too. But then there was The Bite of '87. Yeah. I-It's amazing that the human body can live without the frontal lobe, you know?' (Phone Guy, Five Nights at Freddy's)

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7.1 Introduction

As an employee of Freddy Fazbear's Pizza, a security guard of sorts (the previous incumbents having mysteriously disappeared), the mundanity of sitting in my office, monitoring security cameras, turning lights on and off and occasionally closing doors in a seemingly empty restaurant, is periodically punctured by my inevitable murder at the hands of homicidal animatronic animals: by day, they entertain children at pizza-based parties but at night they stalk the checkerboard corridors of the pizzeria in search of human prey they can stuff inside one of their vacant suits.

I first played *Five Nights at Freddy's [FNAF]* (Cawthorn, 2014) with my friend Tom. He was visiting from South Korea, bringing with him his knackered laptop (which added nicely to the fuzziness of the security camera footage) and the promise of solid jump scares. Jump scares are those moments when an unexpected event physically shocks you into recoiling: they are often slightly foreshadowed by an expectation that something bad is going to happen[1]. We played *FNAF* in my living room, with the lights out, at 2am. We were both partially inebriated. I screamed so loudly at one point, I thought the students living next door would bang on the wall. This is by no means a unique reaction – a quick search of YouTube for 'Let's Play' videos of the game will attest to that – but it does beg the question as to why gamers choose to engage in games that are intentionally fear-inducing, or disgusting, or horrific.

As Ruberg (2015, p.122) expresses, it is important to consider 'the seemingly unpleasant [as it] allows us to uncover underexplored modes of experience'. I would not describe *FNAF* as a fun experience, but it was definitely a memorable one. Ruberg also argues that not all games are fun, but the aspects of what makes them not-fun are equally revealing. Fun, she explains, fails in capturing the totality of experience: 'the accidental fall from a treacherous platform […] a flash of bile when an opponent meets a player in combat and wins' (p.133). In this chapter, my intention is to consider fear – which Dennis, Burke and Kant all include in their formulation of the sublime – and how this relates to the virtual sublime through the challenging of the perceiving subject in response to a fear-inducing object (and how the 'abject' plays in to this).

FNAF occupies a variety of not-fun aspects in terms of its design and could therefore be considered an archetype for games that engender fearful responses. Through these aspects, it is possible to delineate important facets of the virtual sublime. Firstly, the game substantially limits the gamer's agency. You are, at least in the early iterations of the game, physically fixed in place. You are

[1] My favourite one from cinema is the scene outside the diner in *Mulholland Drive* when the 'dumpster man' appears from behind the restaurant. Or that bit in *Descent* where the camera pans around the survivors in the cave to reveal a humanoid cannibal at the end of the line.

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able to operate the cameras, which overlay your field of vision (obscuring your view of approaching monstrosities), you can turn on lights and open and close doors, but all of this is achieved by simply moving your view left to right and clicking on particular buttons. Your agency is further limited by an ever-decreasing power bar – you can use all of the above until the power goes out, at which point you are prey to the robots stalking you in the dark. Limited agency, as a number of scholars have identified (see Perron, 2004; Newell, 2016), is a feature of this particular genre of gaming which is often called 'survival horror'. For Kirkland, survival horror can be understood as fostering a 'sense of helplessness, entrapment, and pre-determination' (2009, pg. 64), so given the fixed nature of the viewpoint and the action in *FNAF*, we can say this game conforms to the standard expectations of the genre.

Secondly the game features characters that, to put it kindly, are thoroughly unsettling. Again, this chimes with tropes from other survival horror games which I will detail shortly. Broadly speaking, these sorts of antagonists – as Švelch (2019) develops (see 7.3) – can be thought of as 'computational others': like us in some ways, but also somehow distant and threatening in their inhumanity. This distinction between the gamer and the Other is crucial to understanding the density of transmission in terms of affective experience. With *FNAF*, the computational others develop from the uncertain (you are unaware what you are dealing with until an ex-employee calls the office to let you in on the horrible truth) to the downright horrifying as they attack and inevitably kill you.

Thirdly, survival horror games, in relation to the purposeful limiting of gamer agency, are frequently accompanied by restrictive narratives that add to an 'on-the-rails' gameplay experience. This differs markedly from the apparent freedom of the open world vistas of *RDR2* or *W3:WH*, in that survival horror games are typically confined to organized spaces where player agency is regulated through types of interaction and highly restricted narratives. Games like *Bioshock* (2k, 2007) achieve their narrative structurally (akin to Jenkins 'narrative architecture' [2005a]), with the gameplay taking place in the underwater city of Rapture, where the mutated former residents - Little Sisters and Big Daddies - are the result of a failed social (and medical) experiment with Randian individualism and genetic splicing. Other games like *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (The Chinese Room, 2015) tell literal stories through the narration of absent characters who are represented by gold shimmering haze (so vaguely ghostlike, *but not quite*), leaving the player with a sense of unease as they try to piece together where everyone went [spoiler: it isn't the Rapture]. The reason this narrative fixity is interesting is the way in which it clearly contrasts with the earlier discussion of the role of rhetoric. In Chapter 5, rhetoric was dismissed as failing to sufficiently engender affective experience owing to the lack of density of transmission, and the for rhetoric to fully problematize the subject/object distinction. Here, if we move from the sublime as something uplifting in a transcendent sense, to something horrifying (in the Burkeian tradition, and Kant's mathematical/dynamic sublime) – what

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Kristeva (1982) calls 'the abject' - then rhetoric is perhaps affording transformative potential as fixed narratives speak to underlying fears about identity and the world around us. We shall see.

Ultimately, my aim is to try to convince you that the way that fear operates, the way it is programmed in to *FNAF* and other games as part of captivating subjects through a retentional economy (Ash, 2013) of affective design, is a spectrum. This spectrum maps across Guyau's transmissive affects, from what I am going to call 'immediate/visceral fear' (of an interpersonal attack on the gamer/avatar), through 'the uncanny' (the unfamiliar familiar[2]), to the structural, systemic fears of the concrete present. Our experience of fear – intrinsic to specific experiences in individual games – is not simply immediate or primal but is the product of extrinsic fear (located in the concrete present). It is through the metaxical processes that connect aspects of this spectrum that we find the virtual sublime.

Of course, the other clear connection is to particular understandings of the sublime in relation to the 'terrible', which can be read through Dennis' fear of God as manifest in certain types of natural phenomena, Burke's sublime in the pleasure/pain principle and how pain is inflicted but unbidden by the individual, as well as Kant's bipartite sublime: the mathematical and the dynamic. I will unpack each of these and apply them accordingly.

7.2 Terror, magnitude and the Kantian sublime

Before developing the sublime in relation to fear and video games, it is worth returning briefly to some of the philosophical underpinnings of associated ideas discussed in earlier chapters. Of those scholars whose work on the sublime I have introduced, who will be most useful in the context of fear? Burke (1759; 1996) directly contrasts the sublime with the beautiful, and as we saw in Chapter 5, he does this by considering the characteristics one would associate with each. The beautiful is smooth where the sublime is painful, the beautiful is soft, where the sublime is ragged: beauty is light, but the sublime is gloomy. Whitehead (2015) demonstrates this contrast expertly when reflecting on the survival horror game *Alien Isolation [AI]* (Creative Assembly, 2014), where you attempt to flee a crashing space-station stalked by Giger's classic xenomorph through a maze of collapsing tunnels and falling-apart mess halls: 'this is a game during which you'll spend a lot of time frozen in fear, hiding from certain death - but you're just as likely to find yourself stopped in your tracks to admire the scenery.'

The sublime is terrifying and terrible for Burke, and the beautiful is pleasurable. Drawing on utilitarian ideas of pleasure and pain, the sublime is found in the latter, with the facility for pain to

[2] In *FNAF* this is achieved by taking the familiar – a child's party venue, a relatively safe space – and making it unfamiliar

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interject in such a way that the individual is unable to fully reconcile their responses. As outlined in Chapter 2, Burke frames the sublime as the outcome of an affective experience by a powerful state or action that reaches beyond the individual's control. A pleasurable experience, Burke argues, requires little effort on behalf of the 'neutral character', whereas pain 'is always inflicted by a power in some superior, because we never submit to pain willingly' (1759;1996, p.137). Crucially, as previously argued, the terrible and fearful in a Burkeian sense are also located in objects which operate 'in a manner analogous to terror' (p.131).

What constitutes the terrible in the context of objects obviously differs from person to person and has changed over time. For Dennis (1704; 1996, p.38), it is partially religious (Gods, daemons, witchcrafts) but also natural (tempests, earthquakes, tigers) and manmade (war). As with artistic representations of the time – the paintings of Fuseli and Blake for instance - today we might see fear similarly through analogies in particular media (films, video games). What unites eighteenth-century terror and our current fears is the problematic relationship between tangible objects and what they might mean or represent: for example, although Dennis' fear of the terrible is located in specific things - all serpents and pestilence and raging seas - these fears speak to a broader existential threat of the many unknowns that confront us, notably the amorphous 'Other'. Our ability to square away that which causes fear, to rationalize and recapitulate – to make something more or less terrifying – operates along a scale which is dependent on sufficient information. For example, as Lavers (2009) argues, descriptions of animals on the Indian subcontinent, channelled through the limited framework of travelling merchants and relayed to relatively immobile Europeans, managed to transform the rhinoceros into a unicorn (it has four legs, can run quite fast. It must be a horse…with a horn on its head). Fear develops and spreads in the sorts of environments where information is limited, or in the case of video games, where information is deliberately restricted, or agency is purposefully curtailed to achieve affective experience.

The amorphous nature of fear and the terrible in the sublime is, as I have previously discussed, is arguably encapsulated in Kant's analytic of the sublime, specifically bifurcated into the mathematical and dynamical. In the former, the terrifying is that which moves beyond the subjectively great to the absolutely great, '…a presentation that makes us aware of its own inadequacy and hence also of its subjective unpurposiveness for the power of judgment in its estimation of magnitude' (Kant, 1790; 2008, p.109). The absolutely great challenges our ability to rationalize and subsequently codify affective experience. I would argue that the amorphous nature of fear is therefore transformative, is sublime. It has the potential to operate at sufficient density to transmit differing forms of affective experience, particularly in the context of nervous expression (Guyau, 1887).

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With the dynamical sublime, Kant engages with fear directly, but offers a nuanced understanding of sublime experience in the context of connectivity and distance: this will be important in the context of the virtual sublime because the any engagement with a fearful experience in a video game is automatically distanced by process from the gamer, through the hardware to the software and back in a feedback loop. The video game may reify your fears in some sense, but that is still mediated through a control device, an interface, an avatar. Kant likens this experience thus:

> We can […] consider an object fearful without being afraid of it, namely, if we judge it in such a way that we merely think of the case where we might possibly want to put up resistance against it, and that any resistance would in that case be utterly futile (1790; 1987, p. 119-20)

In this sense, Kant is arguing that the object of fear invokes a response, but at a stage removed. As perceiving subjects, we can imagine the fearful thing, can imagine our inability to push back against it and come up lacking. However, the thing itself is not required to be present, I would argue: it just needs to be represented in such a sense that we can make a judgement about it in the terms outlined above.

The balance between pleasure and pain, as seen in Burke, is tested by Kant as well. He argues, in relation to threatening natural objects that 'the sight of them becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is, provided we are in a safe place' (p.120). Pleasure and pain can comingle, providing we are sufficiently distanced to be offered the chance to imagine resistance (even if futile) because this raises the mind from what he describes as 'the middle ground', towards the potential of the sublime. This might go some way to explaining, on a theoretical level, why gamers engage with experiences they know are going to scare them.

What we have then is a history of fear and terror as key components of eighteenth-century conceptualizations of the sublime. For Dennis, this related to contemporaneous fears about God as manifest in the (super)natural; for Burke, the sublime rests in the terrible/fearful world of unbidden pain and our inability to resist; for Kant, resistance is also a factor, but the relationship between pleasure and pain is contested through points of overlap and the ability for the sublime to challenge our ability to rationalize the subject/object distinction in the first instance, and the potentiality for distance to allow us to conceive of the fearful as sublime. In relation to this latter point, and in conjunction with a variety of contemporary literature on fear and gaming, I think there is a clear argument to be made for how fear manifests as a spectrum of affective experience, related to Guyau's

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theory of transmission: my intention then is to posit and test this idea to see if the virtual sublime, in relation to fear, operates in this way.

7.3 Fear, games design and agency

Järvinen (2009, p.90-94), in his work on the application of the Ortony, Clore and Collins model of emotional engagement, highlights a number of key factors in the relationship between a gamer's experience and the design of a game, situating this in relation to 'attraction emotions', or whether or not objects – game settings, design, soundtracks etc. – result in players liking or disliking a game. The relative level of like or dislike results in consequences across a spectrum, with travel in the direction of dislike eventually provoking disgust: game developers, Järvinen argues, know and play on these associations (see also Ash, 2013). Whilst in Chapter 4 I spent some time detailing the conceptual issues with equating emotion and affect, the spectrum Järvinen outlines has clear overlaps with Guyau's notion of the importance of density in transmission: if affective experience is related to liking or disliking, it sufficient response is required for this to take place. It also begs the question that, if designers are purposefully making games that are disgusting, why do gamers engage in games they might actively dislike, that they know might provoke fear?

Järvinen frames this in relation to a number of variables – both local and global – and the variance across these variables means that vastly different games – he uses the example of *Super Monkey Ball* and *Silent Hill* – can both provoke fear, albeit in different ways: SMB achieves this through a fear of falling (from the race course), and emotional uncertainty results from this, whereas *Silent Hill* achieves a alternative uncertainty through the environmental design of the town, the use of fog and the unpleasantness of the characterizations (p.94). If fear – as a suitably extreme response to stimulus – operates in this way, is it possible to develop a model for understanding fear through types of affective experience?

Before moving towards this, I want to visit scholarship on video games, fear and design to offer a grounding in my later analysis. I opened by discussing the ways in which *FNAF* purposefully prevents gamers from active engagement. Rehak (2007, p.143) considers this in the context of *Doom 3*, a first-person shooter in which id Software who designed the game purposefully limited player agency through game mechanics. Rehak explains that

> Navigating the zombie-filled environment, players may use a flashlight to illuminate their path, but cannot hold a weapon at the same time. The choice – *see where you're going* versus *defend yourself blindly* – leads to much panicked toggling back and forth

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> between gun and flashlight and is suspenseful or annoying depending on your disposition.

In *Doom 3* we see how the 'operational rules' of the game (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p.132-135) bump up against the agency of the player, something previously identified in other forms in Chapter 5 and 6. The restricted use of the torch makes you choose between seeing or not seeing, which in turn has clearly been designed to create tension and atmosphere, but as Rehak attests, it very much depends on your disposition. Some gamers may enjoy the challenge, and concomitant fear of not being able to see, but others designed a software patch to allow the game, on PC at least, to be played with both a flashlight and weapon drawn. There are those who want to play in one style, and those who are less inclined, as Järvinen explained: this is not just difference between games, but also difference within games, framed by the design choices that have been made.

Disposition can also be linked to retention, where games that invoke an affective experience through fear are still those predicated on keeping gamers engaged. Salen and Zimmerman (2004, p.333) discuss this in terms of games following a process that balance out a designer's want to create content that entices gamers in ('crossing the boundary of the magic circle') but also keeps them in place. Survival horror titles in particular are faced with the difficult juggling act of retaining gamers in through carefully balanced operational rules, game mechanics, content and procedural rhetoric, and narrative unpleasantness. *FNAF,* for example, is both scary and frustrating. Whilst I chose to engage, there are plenty of gamers for whom this type of title is of no interest.

Choosing not to engage can demonstrate something beyond frustration with rules and game mechanics. King and Krzywinska (2006, p.202) argue that game playing is bound up in the relationship between the specific qualities of playing (the operational rules for instance) in conjunction with the imagination of the gamer. They state that 'the kind of behaviour familiar to individual players from particular types of games might be expected to contribute to the repertoire-stock of their imaginations': I am not suggesting that this means if you play a violent game you become violent (a debunking of this can be found in Denham and Spokes, 2018 and Denham, Hirschler & Spokes, 2019) but rather that different types of games – following my earlier exploration of Bakhtin and tropes in rhetoric – correspond to different types of expectations, and these can work in favour or be to the detriment of designers of survival horror titles. Some gamers want to play, others – perhaps framed by their imagination and other factors – do not.

Tied to this, Spittle (2011, p.314-16) highlights how, with regards to the conventions of horror cinema, video games operate 'a rhetorical and narrative shorthand reliant on the probability that players of FPS' [first-person shooters] can be expected to have a familiarity with the rhetorical tropes

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and representational practices that they will encounter in horror games.' Whilst this may seem an obvious observation, one that mirrors Jenkin and Deuze's work on convergence and transmedia storytelling (2008), in the context of fear and the sublime it is an important one. What these expectations afford the gamer is the opportunity to engage in genres they are familiar with and enjoy or that there is also the potential to have those expectations challenged: it is the latter where the affective experience of the virtual sublime is most likely to be found, when those individual qualities of the perceiving subject are undermined and disassembled by the object (where possible!).

The dynamic between agency and the loss of agency can be considered vital, given that from what I have explored so far the virtual sublime is only possible where player agency, or the impression thereof, is afforded the widest possible remit (including, as in Chapter 6, the ability to move beyond the programmable confines of the game itself). How can a sublime encounter be possible in games that function to limit agency in some of the ways suggested above (withholding information about the avatar, heavily regulated environments, restrictive narratives and so forth)?

Spittle (2011, p.324-5) thinks this through in the context of the gamer as a 'defender of subjectivity'. Whilst gamers, as per Salen and Zimmerman's assertion of applied imagination, might be said to possess a unique informed position that they map on to their avatar, there is a tension in the fact that 'games implicate the gamer as controller of the action' and in doing so the gamer is afforded 'a proliferation of possible readings of abject and uncanny rhetoric depending upon the way the player/character traverses and interacts with the game world.' So although games based in 'horror' as a genre, much like the Bakhtinian 'adventure' trope discussed in Chapter 5, allow gamers to engage in spaces that are in some way other to their quotidian experience, they are impacted by a multitude of routes towards affective experience based on the 'proliferation of possible readings', intrinsic and extrinsic to the game, both agentic and scripted by designers. Fear becomes a powerful tool to challenge identity through operational rules, game mechanics, narratives and the unexpected perspectives gamers bring to the table when they play.

As in Dennis, and in Kant, I would argue there is a spectrum in which fear operates. This runs from the immediate, interpersonal horror of individual encounters with the object of fear (different types of Other), through unnerving and weird engagements with environments and entities who remind us of ourselves and our lives *but not quite,* all the way up to macro-level structural fears about our society, our institutions and the world we live in. Video games are a representational and simulational tool for designers and gamers to explore these fears in what might initially appear to be a safe environment, one step removed from 'reality' through the proxy of the game interface, controls and the like.

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From the perspective of the transmission of affective experience, I want to develop this spectrum through key exemplars, in relation to those scholars of the sublime who use fear and terror to understand experience. Despite the seeming gulf in representative form between painting, architecture and video games, the latter as an interactive media facilitates different types of encounter that alert us to the power of the virtual sublime (returning to the understanding that playing a game is no less real than the tangible, physical concrete present of climate change, food shortages, and war[3] [Shields, 2003]). At heart, fear – running from the 'immediate/visceral', through 'the uncanny', to the 'structural/external' – demonstrates the ways in which the metaxical process of play challenges the perceiving subject in pushing it towards the unreconcilable object. My intention is not to suggest that all games within a particular genre of 'survival horror' are the only places where this affective experience is possible – I will also briefly look at games like *The Witness* [*TW*] (Thekla Inc., 2016) and *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* [*AC:NL*] (Nintendo EAD, 2013) – but rather that a multiplicity of fearful experiences are spread across a spectrum, which in turn suggests the relative magnitude of affective transmission. In this sense, video games that are in some way fear-inducing offer an ideal testing ground for understanding the virtual sublime.

7.4 Immediate/visceral fear (via the abject)

Immediate/visceral fear relates to the gamer/avatar encountering an object that provokes fear or a fearful response. *FNAF* works because the gamer, after their first death[4], is aware of the operational rules of the game very quickly and whilst you know the jump scare is coming, it continues to terrify because of the variability in when it takes place. This difference relates in part to the agency of the player – have they run the camera out of power already, are the doors knackered – but also the specific design choices of the developer. There are a number of gameplay dynamics that are used to achieve this. So far, we've seen the jump scare as being effective in provoking the gamer in an immediate physical and psychological response, as well as the ways in which gamers are given the ability to fight or have the opportunity of flight restricted.

Fear can also be engendered through other design approaches and developing an atmosphere within a game space is important: we've seen this in the context of lighting (*Doom 3*) but sound design can be equally powerful. I never got further than about an hour of game time into *System Shock 2 [SS2]* (Irrational Games, 1999), after the tedious character design training levels that is. The game environment of the *Von Braun,* controlled by the malicious AI SHODAN, was too much for me. The

[3] Except obviously climate change, food shortages and war are objectively worse.
[4] Or, in my case, third death

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lost-in-space setting and, more importantly, the frightening sound design prevented me from going any further than the initial hub-levels, where walls painted with slogans in human blood were nothing compared to the audible shambling and groans of the stations mutated inhabitants. You never knew when an attack was coming, but you could hear it gradually approaching from multiple directions. My immediate response to the visceral horror of these distorted occupants and their plaintive cries was to stop engaging.

More recent titles, such as *SOMA* (Frictional Games, 2014) and the aforementioned *AI* achieve similar things in terms of environmental design, though with the added advantage of better graphical fidelity (see Chapter 6), which in turn makes the experience seem more real. For Wakeling (2015), *SOMA* is terrifying because 'the horror manifests itself in the hideous creatures that stalk and pursue you […] in these moments of isolation where the sound design really comes to life: all menacing growls, piercing shrieks, and something scurrying in the vents above'. *AI* encapsulates how environmental design, when combined with a monstrous antagonist, can be used to great effect in invoking fear in the player. McCaffrey (2014) explains how the 'clomping of the alien's footsteps, the bassy whump of it skittering around in the air vents above you, its angry shrieks and hisses – they all make Isolation very good at ensuring that you're never comfortable'. This combination of the game space, and the fear-inducing enemy that occupies it, has at its heart a central tension that speaks to the virtual sublime, namely how the player is made to, in one way or another, confront a terrifying Other of which they have limited understanding: the nature of this Other, and the challenge in reconciling what it represents, affords us affective experience as gamers.

SS2 featured a variety of mutated humans intent on killing the player, something which Švelch (2019, p.258) describes in detail in relation to *Bioshock* - a game routinely considered the successor to the System Shock franchise:

> The woman starts attacking your character, screaming incoherently. You have no choice but to bash her with a wrench. The illusion of humanness has been shattered. Like most survivors in Rapture, that woman is a 'splicer'—a decaying and deranged, monstrous ex-human. It is not only her tattered clothes and weird grin that gives it away, but also her relentlessly aggressive, repetitive behaviour [sic], which clearly puts her into the category of video game enemy, or more generally, a *computational other*—a non-human algorithm-driven agent.

There are two points of interest here in relation to fear and the virtual sublime as an affective encounter with the immediate/visceral. Firstly, the computational other is not simply an external

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process manifest through a mutated representation, but rather exists in a *metaxical state*: it isn't inhuman, in that possesses qualities – elements of language, dress, interaction – that we would consider human, but then it is also deranged and intent on splattering your insides up the wall. It is this irreconcilability that points towards a Kantian idea of the sublime, except of course there is nothing dynamic about it – the fearful object is not at arm's length where it can be rationally considered but is instead charging at you with a wrench. Secondly, as Švelch later highlights, 'splicers, as portrayed in the finished game, are *in transition* from humans to monsters' (2019, p.262). The fact they never reach, held in a perpetual failure to coalesce, is indicative of a virtual sublime with particular regard to the Deleuzian formless figure in Francis Bacon's work (1981): splicers are fear-inducing precisely because they are neither one or the other.

These computational others are a good example of both the loss of agency of the gamer – your opposite cannot be reasoned with and will attack you – and how video games confront the gamer, through engagement with the immediate/visceral fear of a *thing* coming for you, with inhumanity *in reflection*. Kant would argue that this opposite is precisely disgusting because of the way in which it simultaneously challenges the beautiful – splicers antagonise the player's familiarity with the human form in their deformity – whilst insisting that we enjoy it. In *Critique of Judgement*, Kant explains that (1790; 2008, p.141)

> the object is represented as insisting, as it were, upon our enjoying it, while we still set our face against it, the artificial representation of the object is no longer distinguishable from the nature of the object itself in our sensation, and so it cannot possibly be regarded as beautiful.

This idea of the disgusting is powerful because it implies irreconcilability, but it also exists on a spectrum. Korsmeyer (2012, p.753) explains how

> disgust is but one of several powerful affects that art [and, for our purposes, video games] deliberately arouses to shape a narrative, to intensify the impact of an image, and to convey profound and difficult meanings. It takes its place alongside fear, pity, grief, sorrow, melancholy, dread – all the emotions that have given us versions of the ancient paradox of tragedy, namely the striking puzzle represented by the fact that art that is supremely uncomfortable to experience may be sought after and accorded the highest value – even enjoyed.

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This reading of the disgusting, in relation to fear, can be seen in the context of video games as aspects designers actively factor into their games through the application of atmospheric effects, jump scares and limited player agency. It also addresses the earlier enquiry about why gamers would play games they potentially actively dislike, or recoil from. In Burke's conceptualization of the sublime, we experience fear and pain as inflicted by unbidden encounters (which gamers might seek to avoid), but encounters with disgusting computational others can still be enjoyed on Korsmeyer's terms, because the horror they confront us with speaks to the separate underpinning reality of existence where fear is but one competing experience.

Kristeva's work on the abject (1982) might call this disgusting thing 'the abject'. The abject is witnessed as separate from subject and object and is useful in its ambiguity because it antagonises the binary by exposing 'the border between self and other as constituted and fragile, and threatens to dissolve the subject by dissolving the border' (Young, 1990, p.144). There is still an element of the Burkeian pleasure/pain dynamic in the concept of the abject, but this is considered in terms of Lacanian psychoanalysis: the abject opposes Lacan's object of desire, which seeks to maintain symbolic order by allowing the subject to capitulate their pleasures in objects. Instead Kristeva (1982, p.2) explains that the abject is 'the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses. It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's rules of the game'. In the context of the video game, the symbolic order of simulation that facilitates types of play and engagement with virtual worlds is challenged by the abject, and in turning to disgusting, horrifying but interactive simulations, the expectations of the gamer can be deconstructed leading to a sublime encounter.

A particular scene in *Outlast* (Red Barrels, 2013/14) exemplifies this neatly, where you/your avatar awakes strapped to a wheelchair. Dr. Rick Trager – described as a 'Variant', so not a million miles away from a *Bioshock* splicer – uses a pair of bone shears to remove two fingers from your hand, an injury that persists throughout the remainder of the game. As Newell (2016, p.37) details, the experience of this removal, which takes place during a cutscene but is done in such a way that it retains the first-person perspective from normal gameplay, has the effect of thrusting the gamer 'into a keenly masochistic mode of spectatorial identification'.

For Kristeva, the abject is how the real pushes forth into our lives (in contrast with *objet petit a*). The abject in video games, through the process of metaxis and transmission, is closely interrelated to the abject in our quotidian experience. In this sense, the immediate/visceral, whilst clearly connected to our initial psychological gut reaction to being confronted by a thing that makes us fearful (where the object crosses the line towards the perceiving subject) is also something more: it operates as a proxy for the unnameable, primal fear that challenges our identity and sense of self. Kristeva

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(1982, p.10) says this abjection indicates the heterogeneousness of the self and its counterpart in the Other, facilitating a space of uncertainty: 'thus braided, woven, ambivalent, a heterogeneous flux marks out a territory that I can call my own because the Other, having dwelt in me as alter ego, points it out to me through loathing.' In doing so, I would argue that the effect of the abject in video games with immediate/visceral encounters, through the transmission of nervous affect, is to provide us with sublime experience, until our cognizing self attempts to recapitulate and rationalize away the fear ('it's only a game!'), ignoring the falsehood of this reassurance.

If the Other uses the abject as a way of challenging the self, it speaks to a broader series of fears. Kristeva sees this in the separation of human from animal, where the abject operates at a primal level, an instinctive underlying aspect of the human condition. Historically, she argues, 'by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder' (1982, p.12-13). An example of this on a practical level in video games is the attempt to separate out the avatar from the animalistic xenomorph in *AI*. H.R. Giger, in discussing the underlying fears that haunted his xenomorph designs, has previously identified his physical aversion to snakes and maggots as well as his adolescent obsession with sex as distinguishing his body-horror illustrations[5] (Huston, 2017) thereby locating the abject in a particular space and mode of production.

In addition to these primal fears, I think fear in a contemporaneous sense also relates to concerns that we are less readily able to pin-point. With the immediate/visceral fear of encounters with computational others, we are confronted with our potential inhumanity, but we are also able to clearly identify the antagonist even if we are unable to fully reconcile the Other. How then do we attend to irreconcilable *sensations* and impressions where the antagonist is not easily locatable? The Freudian notion of the uncanny can help us understand this further.

7.5 Uncanny fear

Immediate/visceral fear, through the notion of the abject, explains to some extent how the sublime can be located in relation to simulated interpersonal encounters with computational others, where the encounter of sufficient density to transmit affect (notably related to the nerves and aesthetics in Guyau's typology [1887]). It is also important to understand how nuanced fear can be, as true in video games as it is in everyday life. The relationship between our everyday lives, and the familiar

[5] As a brief aside, it is also interesting to note that in the same interview, when discussing the building of the xenomorph in the original *Alien* film, Giger explains how the animal and the sexual were intimately linked: 'see the muscles and tendons of the jaw? We made them out of stretched and shredded latex contraceptives'. This is telling given that, according to Dan O'Bannon the scriptwriter, the original *Alien* film was also designed as a parable about interspecies rape (see the *Alien Evolution* documentary in the Quadrilogy box set for information).

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experiences which govern our activities, underpins much of Freud's work in developing the 'uncanny' as a way of 'investigating the subject of aesthetics' (1919, p.219). Freud begins by situating the uncanny as related to that which is frightening, but takes issue with the imprecise way in which the term has been used in the past. For my purposes here, an element of precision is also required: I will be using Freud's specific German definition because, as Freud explains at length, the etymological importance of the word governs its use and without precision we'll have the word meaning different things in different cultures (initially 'uncomfortable' in English, but 'gruesome' in Arabic and Hebrew) (p.222). For Freud, the uncanny 'undoubtedly belongs to all that is terrible—to all that arouses dread and creeping horror' but it also has a crucial interplay with its opposite in German. Unheimlich [uncanny] is the opposite of 'heimlich' [homely] and whilst we might want to claim that the uncanny is therefore that which is unfamiliar rather than familiar, Freud urges caution – 'the relation is not capable of inversion [and] something has to be added to what is novel and unfamiliar in order to make it uncanny' (p.221-22). That which is added, Freud derives from Jentsch (1906); a level of uncertainty that operates between familiar and unfamiliar, what we might call the 'unfamiliar familiar'. Jentsch discusses how to successfully affect the uncanny, the subject need only regard the object with a level of uncertainty. He used the example of not knowing if a figure is either an automaton or a human, and this has specific application in the context of video games.

A definition of the unfamiliar familiar, rooted in figurative aesthetic representation, is a useful way of exploring how the uncanny relates to fear and ultimately the virtual sublime. Indeed, the opening quote of this chapter, a review of the game *Condemned*: *Criminal Origins* (Monolith, 2005), neatly demonstrates how the familiar (a department store in a shopping centre) can be quickly destabilized by taking those known elements and altering them just enough to make them unfamiliar again. Similarly, to return to the opening example of *FNAF*, Scott Cawthon – the developer of the game – explained how the uncanniness of the animatronics was inspired by his first game 'a family friendly game about a beaver […], but when I tried to put it online it got torn apart by a few prominent reviewers. People said that the main character looked like a scary animatronic animal' (Couture, n.d.). Fear can be said to operate as both uncanny and immediate/visceral. With the latter, *FNAF* is frightening because of the propensity of jump scares that directly challenge you on an interpersonal level, but it is also the former in the way that the animatronics, as Cawthon identifies, are both familiar (animals) but not familiar enough. This jars with our quotidian experience because these representations are *not all there*. Being unable to pinpoint exactly what it is that is missing – the Freudian transformation of the unfamiliar into the uncanny – solidifies the experience of dread. It also hints at where the sublime might come in; being confronted by the immediate/visceral affords the perceiving subject the opportunity to realize its own mastery in overcoming the magnitude of the

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fear-inducing Other it is presented with (as per the Kantian mathematical sublime), but the disparity between the object itself (the animatronic) in opposition to what it does (it kills you) is irreconcilable, making it uncanny and sublime. Through the proxy of the game and its inhabitants, fears of an unknowable Other – the unfamiliar familiar – can never be fully assuaged.

As in the previous section, uncanniness can be achieved through particular operational rules, game mechanics and environmental choices. In understanding how the uncanny is engendered in video games, I would argue the confluence of Švelch's (2019) 'computational others' and the game world setting collide to produce this effect. The uncanniness of computational others is clearly present in Švelch's (2019) development of the term and the game *Bioshock*. Švelch roots his uncanny through the behaviours of splicers in the game and how these mirror - without quite replicating - our own lives firstly in the choices made in the game but secondly in our own everyday existence. In the context of the operational rules of the game, splicers are antagonists, but they are also formerly human, corrupted by experimentation and the environment in which they have grown (the city of Rapture). They are proxies for us in terms of how they look – distended versions of human, but still recognizable – inviting us to consider how corrupted we would have to be in a material sense to take on their form. Švelch writes that the dehumanizing process involves further corruption through addiction (to a drug called ADAM): what is noticeable about this allying of dehumanization to addiction beyond it echoing the transformation from '"good" capitalist consumers into deviant consumers' (p.269) is that the gamer is also required to make choices about how to collect and use ADAM. In this sense, there is little to distinguish antagonists from protagonists, further blurring the lines of identity between subject and object.

Besides the literal horrors of deformed humanity, the terminology used to describe computational others in *Bioshock* is also telling. 'Splicers' etymologically imply some combination of the recognizable and the unfamiliar, but the homely and familiar can also been seen in other antagonists in the game, such as NPCs like 'Little Sisters' and 'Big Daddies'. Uncanny fear is at its most affective when the seemingly unfamiliar of the game echoes the familiar of our concrete present existence. This is present in a number of other titles, a great example of this being the playable demo of *P.T.* (7780s Studio, 2014), an interactive teaser from Konami for the game *Silent Hills*[6].

P.T. combines many of the operational rules and mechanics I've already introduced, such as jump scares and elements of supernatural horror, most notably the random attacks of a hostile apparition called 'Lisa', along with limited player agency (you get a torch; you can run but not far). The

[6] *P.T.* was pulled from the PlayStation Store when *Silent Hills* was cancelled, much to the consternation of gamers. Subsequently, it has achieved a sort of mythical status amongst those who have been able to access and amend the original demo to explore how the game was going to be designed.

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setting is an average suburban house (familiar) or at least it appears to be until you realise the corridors loop indefinitely and family pictures randomly drift away (unfamiliar). The procedural rhetoric your unnamed avatar engages with combines familiar objects from the home (a bathroom sink, a refrigerator) with classic body horror tropes (there's a mutated foetus in the sink and the fridge is full of blood). A similar theme, the invasion of the familiar space of the home by the unfamiliar, can also be seen in *Project Zero 3: The Tormented* (Tecmo, 2005), a game which utilized evil spirits transposing themselves from photographs into the home lives of the protagonists as a survival horror trope. This challenging of the quotidian with an unknown threat conforms to the definition of the uncanny, with Riendeau (2014) explaining how even as a brief demo, the setting and the people who occupy it (as computational others) results in the unfamiliar familiar: there is 'a sense of family trauma and domestic violence and the duality of the "real world" and the nightmare world.' *P.T.* is successful in being uncanny because it makes it increasingly hard to reconcile which is familiar and which is not.

The uncanny environment is seen in a number of titles which include immediate/visceral markers and those which do not. *SOMA* (Frictional Games, 2015) has plenty of jump scares, but also uses 'environmental details [to] fill in the blanks' (Wakeling, 2015) about what has happened in the underwater research facility where the game is set. You have recognizable locations (changing rooms, mess halls and the like) but they are populated by the unfamiliar – robots who might be being controlled by humans, or who might have downloaded human consciousness[7]. The game uses these familiar tropes for the gamer to latch on to, but then destabilizes these associations to provide an experience oscillating between uncanny and immediate/visceral.

The presence/absence of humans is in fact where much of the power of the uncanny is located in video games. *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (The Chinese Room, 2015) features a bucolic English countryside devoid of people but populated by their memories; *The Witness* (Thekla Inc., 2016), an island-based mega puzzle features Pompeii-esque casts of what could be a former populace; and *Sea of Solitude* (Jo-Mei Games, 2018) features shadowlike characters sailing across abandoned cities that were presumably once peopled. The uncanniness these titles produce is all framed through environmental design and the implication of a familiar that is now unfamiliar. Other titles like *Kentucky Route Zero* (Cardboard Computer, 2013) achieve the uncanny in ways that can be isolated through analysis – transmedia use of Lynchian tropes, a ghostly road trip through ambiguous settings – but never fully capitulated; I couldn't fully tell you why this game is so unsettling.

This is the power of the uncanny in producing fear. Uncanniness is potentially more powerful than the immediate/visceral in terms of the transmission of affective experience because it operates

[7] I suspect Jentsch would love this.

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across a longer time scale, in broader environments and through actions and interactions that we know, but we also do not fully know. The uncanny works because 'the fear of the unknown is often more terrifying than the blunt reality of coming face-to-face with your pursuer' (Wakeling, 2015) as in the immediate/visceral part of the spectrum.

But how is the uncanny something that transmits sufficient affective experience to engender the virtual sublime? Firstly, this could be considered in a transcendent, even religious sense to return us to the genesis of the sublime in the work of Longinus, Dennis and others. Otto (1958) discusses the nature of the uncanny in the context of his notion of 'the numinous', that is something that implies the presence of the divine in an awe-inspiring sense. The beginning of this process involves 'the feeling of "something uncanny," "weird." It is this feeling which, emerging in the mind of primeval man, forms the starting-point for the entire religious development history' (p.14-15). It is powerful in challenging our idea of self and identity precisely because it 'penetrate[s] to the very marrow, making one's hair bristle and limbs quake' (p.14-15) whilst still being anamorphic, never fully coalescing in to the recognizable and therefore reconcilable.

The uncanny delimits our ability to reconcile subject and object by destabilizing our understanding of the latter, and this lack of conciliation affords us a sublime experience, albeit one that we might not necessarily register in the same way we would an immediate/visceral fear of the Other. The ambiguity of the unfamiliar familiar is no less powerful, but it manifests itself in such a way that its irreconcilability lingers rather than instantaneously shocks. In the context of video games, this nuanced can be seen in Brown and Marklund's (2015, p.14) work on *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (Nintendo EAD, 2013) – here, a game that is ostensibly about being mistaken for a town mayor is also deeply strange because of the 'unnatural and hollow mimicry of societal structures'. Indeed it is this last element that pulls us towards the third pillar of fear as external/structural, which I feel sits at the opposite end of the spectrum to the immediate/visceral, but illuminates both this and the uncanny by situating player engagement and game design within a much broader series of threats where the virtual sublime is bolstered by rubbing up against the concrete present directly.

7.6 Structural/external fear

Whilst *FNAF* is, on an operational and procedural level, a reasonably rudimentary video game with limited agency and options for the gamer, it does include structural/external concerns to a degree, and in closing these three sections on the spectrum of fear, I will argue that the fear we experience as gamers, both immediate/visceral in our play and through our engagement with uncanny spaces, scenarios and computational others, is actually a proxy for external fears of one of any number of contemporary societal problems. In *FANF*, the external world asserts itself in several senses, which

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pronounces and intensifies fear. This can be seen, as the opening quote in this chapter demonstrates, in the initial call-in from a former employee - and their disturbing explanation of the things that have happened to previous employees: interestingly, the job you have taken on continues to be advertised despite your employer knowing people have been killed. Further to this, your lack of agency in the game itself is reflected in the player-character/avatar presumably taking on the job despite knowing the risks: dude gotta get paid etc.

These sorts of actions in the case of *FANF*, whilst not necessarily fear-inducing in the sense that being murdered by a metal fox with an eye patch is, still indicate underlying concerns about the precarity of employment, the lack of safeguards and the rampant uncaring nature of late capitalism where killing workers is more a formality than a tragedy. I do not want to oversell this specific example, but a variety of other horror-themed titles routinely refer outwards out to broader issues including the nuclear fallout of *NEO Scavenger* (Blue Bottle Games, 2014), the environmental degradation of *FAR: Lone Sails* (Okomotive, 2018) and fears of communicative diseases in *Pathologic* (Ice-Pick Lodge, 2004) through to the deadly nature of survival in a war-torn future in *This War of Mine* (11 Bit Studios, 2016) and contemporaneous concerns around immigration in *Papers Please* (3909 LLC, 2013): even in a seemingly mundane management strategy title like *Sim City 2000* (Maxis, 1994), social inequality manifests itself through problems associated with population density and access to services.

The most straightforward way to demonstrate how structural/external concerns are amplified through video games and play is through an example. Here I extrapolate out from Newell's (2016) work on the body horror of *Outlast* (Red Barrels, 2013/14) and its downloadable content *Whistleblower* (Red Barrels, 2014), which is a sort of prequel to the main game. It is interesting to note that Newell is also interested in the sublime, though his reading of the sublime as contrasting with the abject is problematic: he argues, for instance, that Korsmeyer sees the abject (or 'sublate affect') as achieving the opposite of the sublime - something depressing rather than uplifting - whereas she actually argues, through Burke, that the sublime is also productively unpleasant and terrifying in tightening a slack mind (2002). Nonethessless, Newell's unpacking of *Whistleblower* in particular can be read as a series of benchmarks for structural/external fear through a combination of representational aesthetics, procedural rhetoric and operational rules.

In *Whistleblower*, your avatar - a software-engineer named Waylon Park – is subjected to a series of unpleasant tortures at the hands of various characters, including, for example, a cannibal Variant called Frank Manera (a classic computational other) who refers to Waylon as 'meat', neatly demonstrating an important level of depersonalization between you and the Other. In Newell's analysis, Manera can be differentiated from other antagonists both psychoanalytically and in a structural sense through his position within the 'Project Walrider' story arc, whereby the Murkoff

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Corporation attempts to create an ideal being through the manipulation of nanites[8]: Manera, with his 'baby talk […] repeatedly asserts a sense of acquisitive desire for [Waylon's] body' (2016, p.41). Newell continues

> Unlike Chris Walker, another major antagonist whose murderous rampages are linked with military structures of containment, surveillance, and control, or Trager[9], whose sadistic experiments mirror the exploitative practices of neoliberalism and unethical science, Manera is driven only by imbecilic, hyperphagic appetite, by a pathological need to possess and consume.

This typology can be expanded outwards in the context of our contemporaneous concerns in the 21st century. In Walker we see an aesthetic representation not just of the threat of the military – also identifiable in games as varied as *Fallout 4* (Bethesda, 2015) in the guise of the Brotherhood of Steel and the lack of accountability in *Special Ops: The Line* (Yager Development, 2012) – but also of the wider surveillance culture in which we live our lives. It is as much about the military as it is about governments, or shadowy conspiracies in the hinterland between: our collective inability to directly pin-point what our fears are prevent us from attending to them. Video games reflect and amplify this, again confronting us with our own failures beyond the game space. This is fear as scalar – we cannot identify our position within the magnitude of terrible things that are happening – and fear at a distance (Walker is a proxy for the military), echoing the Kantian analytical sublime.

Similarly, Trager, in fulfilling what initially appears to be a fairly standard trope of 'mad Nazi scientist' not only represents the sort of visceral, abject horror discussed earlier but also occupies a space that combines both the 'neoliberalism' Newell ascribes and, crucially, an underpinning approach to rationality that has supposedly guided scientific progress since the Enlightenment. Trager, alongside the procedural and content rhetoric of *Outlast* in a more general sense, is the manipulation and destruction of the recognizable body, over which we have a semblance of control, through a transformative process that pulls the gamer from perceiving subject closer to the irrational mutated abject/object. The virtual sublime operates within this transition, initially muffled by the immediate/visceral of losing digits, through the uncanny (he at least *appears* to be a scientist) to the structural/external fear of the absence of rational action. This type of obscured structural fear can also be seen in *SOMA* where the somehow conscious robots hides the wider scientific failures of research

[8] The detail is not vital, but is probably useful for context: the underlying issues with human experimentation are a recurring theme in games reaching back to the original *Wolfenstein 3D*

[9] You'll recall I introduced him earlier – he was removing fingers with a bolt cutter.

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on the base, in *SS2* where the zombiesque mutants of *Von Braun* mask the potential horror of unchecked artificial intelligence and even the robotic 'dinosaurs' of *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017) are impressive enough to make you forget that the tribalistic culture in which your avatar is an outcast is a vision of our future, where our present 'technological advancement' is depicted as nothing more than decadence and hubris. Structural/external fear is damaging but functions on a different level to the immediate/visceral or uncanny, where operational rules, aesthetically unpleasant environments and a panoply of jump scares often conceals underlying structural concerns (I explore this elsewhere in the context of systemic violence and capitalism in Denham, Hirschler & Spokes, 2019).

The relationship between individual encounters with the immediate/visceral as indicative of the structural can equally be seen in the games outside of the survival horror genre, notably in the best-selling game of all time, *GTA V*. One particular scene in which Trevor – the sociopathic meth-dealer who is one of three playable avatars in the game – tortures a man to obtain details of an assassination was singled out by both academics (see Atkinson & Rodgers, 2016) and opponents as varied as MPs, the teachers' union the ATU, and Amnesty International (Hern, 2013) as an egregious example of the horrors of video game entertainment. Interestingly, given that the game involves activities as varied as mowing down pedestrians and paying sex workers for a lap dance, it is the one-on-one nature of the interaction[10] evoking the immediate/visceral that drew the most ire. In contrast with games like *Outlast* where the gamer is the recipient, it is understandable that an interactive torture scene of a NPC would prove controversial. However, this obscures the broader structural fear at work here: the gamer via the proxy avatar of Trevor is a de facto employee of a government agency - the 'FIB' in the game – and as such represents an absence of agency, in the sense that you are forced to participate. You are provided only the illusion of control through your interaction. It is precisely this imbalance that offers fertile ground for thinking about the sublime as fear that is faraway and of considerable magnitiude: the fear that through structural means our independence to act is curtailed; these experiences are affective and sublime because they point at something unreconcilable that we have no agency over extrinsically.

7.7 Fear and the sublime

In this chapter my aim was to explore differing facets of fear as both a key component of video games but also one which has preoccupied a variety of thinkers of the sublime from Dennis to Kant. In Chapter 5, I largely dismissed the role of narrative and rhetoric in engendering affective experience

[10] This interaction includes 'teeth pulling' and 'electrocuting a man by connecting him up to a car battery'.

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towards the virtual sublime, as even games with a particularly strong, even heart-rending narrative (*GoW* springs to mind) are stymied by the distance between player and avatar, between the concrete present of the world around us and the virtual environments that seek to replicate elements of that for entertainment.

Fear, however, challenges my argument.

With fear, we see the separation between concrete present and virtual increasingly blurred through the process of metaxis, whereby a gamer's engagement with operational rules, game mechanics, procedural rhetoric and aesthetic representations push back from the hardware in numerous ways. Using games that can broadly be considered part of the horror or survival horror genre (with a super brief mention of *Sim City 2000*!), I addressed this through a spectrum approach, situating experiences that could enable sublime encounters ranging from the immediate/visceral, through the uncanny, to the structural/external.

Fear, with its precursor 'the abject'[11], is present in a variety of theories of the sublime, particularly in attending to the subject/object binary. Fearful experiences are affective ones (as well as being emotive) and our inability to fully rationalize and explain away these experiences, be they jump scares, creepy looking robots or attacks on the notion of progress, is indicative of the virtual sublime: video games facilitate the sublime by making us fearful. This is witnessed ways that directly connect the virtual sublime to antecedent ideas of the sublime in eighteenth-century philosophy.

Immediate/visceral fear conforms to both Dennis' reading of the terrible in the context of those objects in the world that promote fear and our reactions to those fearful things: within video games, this can range from jump scares through to environmental design. Furthermore, as a gamer, the responses you might have when encountering a homicidal animatronic chicken, or a relentless zombie, correspond with the Burkeian tradition of the sublime as located closer to pain than to pleasure, something further developed in the context of Kristeva's work on the abject.

The uncanny, which I framed through Freud's etymological work on the familiar/unfamiliar, achieves the sublime through the virtual by appealing to the irreconcilability of contextual associations that are both a thing that we know and a thing that we don't know. The virtual sublime is located where we experience something that is known to us but which still provokes fear (to an extent): when our cognizing self as a perceiving subject attempts to rationalize this, we are found wanting. The lack of pin-point accuracy in describing our fears in the context of being mayor in *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* or looking at CCTV screens in a kid's pizzeria highlights the problem with squaring away the thing we recognize and the nagging sense that something is amiss. This type of fear, and the sublime

[11] For additional application of the abject, see also Carr (2014) who offers an interesting exploration of the abject in the context of ability/disability through a case study of the game *Dead Space.*

Spokes, M (2020). Gaming and the Virtual Sublime: Rhetoric, Awe, Fear, and Death in Contemporary Video Games. Bingley: Emerald.

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experience that results from it, is more insidious than the immediate/visceral, because the source of concern is not readily available.

The uncanny is close in some respects to the Kantian dynamic sublime: where Kant argues that we can find a thing fearful without directly experiencing it, we can see this in the games that we play. We are not amnesiac research scientists waking up on a deserted underwater base (*SOMA*), or the last surviving crew member on a spaceship pursued by a ravenous xenomorph (*AI*), so we are able to keep that which is fearful at a distance, as 'the sight of them becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is, provided we are in a safe place' (1790; 2008, p.120).

Structural/external fears interrogate this place of safety however, suggesting that these fearful objects – the computational other, the hostile environment, the body horror embedded throughout the procedural rhetoric and operational rules of a game – are never far away, but are instead aspects of much broader societal concerns. The collapse of rationality, the surveillance state, the rampant destruction of finite resources in the pursuit of capital accumulation: these issues are all of a scale that the individual is not in a position to rectify or challenge. Representational proxies of mad scientists, military personnel and inhuman antagonists speak to our lack of capability in confronting problems of such magnitude there is no conceivable way of addressing them.

In this sense, the structural/external offers parallels with Kant's mathematical sublime, as the nature of our fear – exemplified through the video game – corresponds to the absolute. Kant argues that whilst the absolutely great transcends our imagination, the mind is still a crucial determinate in understanding this through the 'supersensible' nature of reason: our interaction with the sublime moves from a tangible encounter with an object towards the realization that identifying our own inadequacy is itself demonstrative of the power of the mind. The structural/external fears enacted in the games discussed here are perhaps so great they are hard to conceive of, without stepping away and reflecting at a distance. In the context of fear, I would argue that this is what keeps gamers returning to games they know are going to provoke a fearful and virtually sublime experience: the affective transmission - as direct interaction with the nervous system, in Guyau's terms (1887) - is of such intensity in an immediate/visceral, uncanny or structural/external sense that it challenges the identity of the gamer as a cognizing, perceiving subject (until that is rearticulated through reflection and the moment passes).

Following the pattern established throughout the book, before formulating an overarching theory of the virtual sublime in Chapter 9, I want to focus on three intertwined components of video games from an operational level – namely failure, repetition and death - that reflect more contemporaneous work on the sublime, with a focus on Lyotard and Deleuze in particular. Augmenting and applying their theories of the sublime, in conjunction with related ideas of 'stuplimity' (Ngai, 2005)

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and 'flow' (see for example Csikszentmihalyi, Abuhamdeh & Nakamura, 2014) which Shinkle (2012) has previously identified I will return to issues of agency as well as considering how video games proffer an affective experience of the virtual sublime through failure and repetition, but also with regards to death as an 'unpresentable event'.