

Stepping into Fear: *Until Dawn* and The Role of Immersion in Horror Video Games

by Sam Miller

Horror is a genre unlike any other. It taps into the cultural, social, and historical context of the time and uses that information against people to scare them. If horror is a direct representation of society's collective fears, it can be analyzed as a text no matter what form it comes in. For instance, horror is an increasingly popular genre in video games, where feelings of immersion and empathy are heightened by our own fears. While film has been the dominant medium for horror for the past several years, video games are taking over because they are capable of bringing something new to the table. Video games like *Until Dawn*, where the player must use their skills and knowledge to keep characters alive, provide a new way to experience horror through immersion and complicity, revitalizing a genre that has been declining in recent years.

Background of the Horror Genre

To fully understand a game like *Until Dawn* requires a prior knowledge of a particular kind of horror film: The Teen Slasher. This is a subgenre of horror that follows a specific set of characteristics which make it unique from other horror films. Teen Slasher films were primarily produced in the 1970s and 80s until the genre died out about a decade later (Colavito 336-338). Films like *Halloween*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, and *Friday the 13th*, the three most popular of this subgenre, all feature the same basic plot: a single man in a mask or other facial disguise stalks and murders a group of teenagers.

This storyline is one of the most well-known plot structures in horror because of the success of the movies mentioned before. These films are called Teen Slashers in part because of their focus on victims who fall under the age of eighteen, but the reasoning runs deeper than just

their age. Jason Colavito, author of *Knowing Fear*, argues that these early slasher films were about punishing teenagers who obtained “forbidden knowledge” in the form of sex or other unseemly behavior (336). In other words, if you were a teenager and you had sex, then you would face the consequences. At that point in history (the 70s), sex was still the world’s worst-kept secret, so these films were aimed at the youth as a kind of warning to lead them away from such forbidden knowledge. The Teen Slasher was successful, at least in terms of ticket sales, but once the genre died out in the 1980s, horror began to change a great deal.

Starting in 2000, horror began to evolve into a multi-faceted genre. There was something for everyone, in the sense that no matter what a person’s greatest fear was, there was at least one movie dealing with that particular subject. According to MovieWeb, an online site dedicated to all things film related, there were almost 350 horror movies released in 2015 alone (Balchack). With that number in mind, it makes sense that some movies would be less than original, but the reality is far worse than a few remakes and poorly thought out sequels. Horror as a film genre has become little more than a contest of who can make the bloodiest, goriest, most violent movie possible. Torture Porn as a subgenre emerged with the likes of the *Saw* and *Hostel* films, where the focus was entirely on physical pain and showing increasingly graphic and violent injuries and deaths, all for the sake of shock value (Colavito 389-392).

Shock value became the standard for horror films, whereas before the genre was more focused on bringing the viewers a cathartic experience. Despite the violence and the disturbing nature of some earlier horror films, Teen Slashers of the 70s included, they always ended in a somewhat positive way. The killer was defeated and at least one person survived to tell the tale and carry on the memory of their dead friends. Even the earliest horror films had what Colavito refers to as optimism. Early horror argued that “a good man can withstand horror and survive or

even triumph, or that by staying clear of forbidden dangers, one might stay safe,” implying that as dark as horror is, it leaves viewers feeling as though they can survive so long as they are good (Colavito 404). Movies nowadays have forgotten this desire for resolution and the need for catharsis while watching something horrifying, but video games have brought back this sense of optimism by immersing players in the horror directly and then giving them the ability to prove they are “good” enough to survive.

***Until Dawn* Through the Lens of Gamer Response Theory**

When Supermassive Games released *Until Dawn* exclusively for the Sony Playstation 4, it was marketed as a survival horror game. The game features voice actors such as Hayden Panettiere, Rami Malek, and Brett Dalton, whose likenesses were captured for the characters they voiced. On top of the enticing premise and cast of celebrities it promotes, the game is also a choice-based narrative where a player’s decisions directly affect who lives and who dies in the game. Supermassive Games’ website tells the players “your actions alone will decide who survives *Until Dawn*,” which sets the tone for the game immediately (Supermassive Games). The statement is truer than it is for most choice-based games, because it is possible to have an ending where there are no survivors, depending on what choices the player makes.

The game starts with a group of teenagers staying in a cabin owned by the parents of three of the teens on an isolated mountain. It starts off as a more or less innocent social gathering, but things quickly turn from fun to tragic when a prank ends with the disappearance of two young girls. Hannah is the victim of the prank and is the first to run off into the woods out of embarrassment. The player starts off controlling Hannah’s twin sister Beth while she goes out in search of her sister after finding out what their friends did. This search scene is the first introduction to the choice mechanic, but it is also one of the few times in the entire game where

the outcome is the same no matter what choices you make. When Beth finds Hannah, they are confronted by a man with a flamethrower and gas mask covering his face and end up falling off the side of the mountain. This is where the prologue ends and the main game begins.

One year after the disappearance of Hannah and Beth, their brother Josh invites the group back up to the cabin to “party like pornstars” as he puts it, to rekindle the friendships that faded after the incident (*Until Dawn*). The rest of the game takes place over the course of one night and the “goal” of the game is to survive until the morning. What looks like a simple horror survival game, though, turns out to be a multi-layered narrative playing on several definitive characteristics known as tropes. The game pays homage to the Teen Slasher genre while at the same time doing what film contemporaries have not as of late, which is invoke a sense of catharsis at the end of the game.

Until Dawn uses multiple old-fashioned horror tropes, taking players back to some of the earlier days of horror film. The first trope is the key to most Teen Slashers: The Man in the Mask. For the first approximate half of the game, the primary antagonist is an unidentified man in a mask who sets up several elaborate traps for the group of friends. The traps force various characters, and therefore the player, to make critical decisions that not only affect their lives but their relationships with other characters.

Players switch from character to character throughout the game as each one attempts to survive whether the character is on their own or with other characters. In one scene, for instance, the character named Chris is forced by the man in the mask to choose who is going to get sawn

in half. His options are Josh, the brother of Beth and Hannah and a close friend of Chris', or Ashley, the girl Chris has romantic feelings for. If you, as Chris, choose Josh, he is



sawn in half and killed. If you choose Ashley, however, the saw blade still moves towards Josh and kills him. Either way Chris is forced to deal with his guilt over having to choose someone to die. Choosing Josh may increase his relationship with Ashley but choosing Ashley can damage the relationship if Chris decides to be truthful about his choice.

These kind of scenarios force players to make difficult choices, and those choices are influenced not by what Chris would choose, were he a real person, but instead what the player themselves would choose. This is an integral part of the Gamer Response and Decision Framework (GRAD) put forth by Sam von Gillern in his article, “The Gamer Response and Decision Framework: A Tool for Understanding Video Gameplay Experiences.” In this article, he proposes the GRAD Framework as a combination of Reader Response Theory and multimodal literacy. When talking about a player’s decisions in regards to playing a video game, von Gillern states that their decisions are influenced by the player’s own “experiences, knowledge, skills...and goals” which ultimately affect how the game plays out (670).

This is true for *Until Dawn* because it is a choice-based game, so the in-game choices are subject to the player’s personal thoughts and feelings. However, this impact extends beyond the literal ways in which the game plays out. The player can perceive the game in different ways depending on the choices they make as well as what baggage they bring to the table. *Until Dawn*

adds to the player's baggage, and overall their perception and experience, by playing to easily recognizable characteristics of the Teen Slasher film.

In addition to the trope of the man in the mask stalking the group of teenagers, the teenagers themselves play into familiar character tropes often seen in the Teen Slasher subgenre. Each character has a set of traits that come standard to who they are as a person, and the intro screens for each character give players an idea of what to expect and therefore how to act when playing as the various characters. There are eight characters in total, four male and four female, each depicting a typical character found in horror. For example, Sam, even though there is no guarantee she will survive through the whole game, is arguably the closest representation to the Final Girl trope.

Most Teen Slashers end with one character surviving the psychopath's rampage, and that character is usually female. Sam is the one who fights back and keeps a level head, therefore making her the most likely one to survive the whole game. Jess and Emily are two sides of the Mean Girl character, with Jess taking on the added role of Dumb Blonde and Emily taking on the role of Overbearing Girlfriend. Matt is the Jock while Mike is the Womanizer, and Chris can either be considered the Nice Guy or the Best Friend, which are similar but not exactly the same. What these tropes mean in terms of theme is not what is important; what is important is their presence in a video game that clearly sets out to capture the aesthetic of the Teen Slasher films of the 1980s.

These tropes activate player's prior knowledge of horror films, and part of the GRAD framework is the idea that a player's knowledge allows them to "interpret situations... formulate goals, and act based on those goals," which makes it easier for them to make decisions that will keep characters alive rather than getting them killed (von Gillern 673). One example where a

player's prior knowledge of horror films ultimately helps them through the game is a situation in which the character Ashley is faced with the decision to follow a voice that sounds like one of the other girls, Jess, or to stay with the rest of the group she is currently



travelling with. Based on similar situations in other horror movies, whether it is a voice or the appearance of someone the character recognizes as a friend, often when someone decides to follow the appearance or voice it ends with the person getting attacked or killed. If the player is familiar with this situation they are more likely to choose “Rejoin Group” rather than “Investigate Voice” as their next course of action. If they choose to stay with the group, then Ashley survives this particular encounter. However, if they make Ashley investigate the voice they discover it was not Jess who was calling out to her. While this prior knowledge of horror film tropes is important to many situations in the game, it is not the only type of knowledge necessary. The other way the game gets players to engage with the game is through the use of more action based mechanics, which rely more on prior knowledge of video games as well as the reaction times and quick thinking skills of the player.

The action sequences within the game are characterized by a series of commands players must execute within a very small time window to successfully outrun the enemy. Characters will run automatically but it is up to the player to help them avoid obstacles by pressing the correct button when the command appears on the screen. These button-presses are known as quick time events and are a test of the player's skills, another integral part of the GRAD framework (von Gillern 673). A player with more experience in traditional video games will likely have faster

reflexes and therefore be able to complete these quick time events easier than someone who does not know what to expect from video games. Players train and use their skills to advance further in games whether that is through leveling up or completing a “mission” like one of the various chase scenes in *Until Dawn* (von Gillern 673). By incorporating reflex-based mechanics into the game alongside the choice mechanic, *Until Dawn* utilizes two key aspects of the GRAD framework to engage players with its “text.” This double level of engagement creates a greater level of empathy in the players because it is their actions directly affecting the outcome. The more opportunities for empathy and engagement in a text, the higher the level of immersion for the player.

The Role of Choice in Immersion

Choices like Ashley’s have consequences the player is forced to deal with throughout the rest of the game. *Until Dawn* does not allow players to restart from a specific chapter or save point in the game. If a player makes a choice and gets an undesirable result, they must continue through the rest of the game or start over from the very beginning. The implication here is that players face the consequences of their actions, rather than going back and picking the other option in order to get a more desirable result. Some choices have greater impact than others, and some choices only appear to have a significant outcome. While Ashley’s choice is very much a life or death situation, the choice Chris has to make ends up being less of a choice and more of a trick.

Josh does not actually die when Chris pulls the lever to save either him or Ashley, even though we are given a cut scene which clearly shows “Josh” being sawn in half. The player finds out later on in the game that Josh is the man in the mask and is playing an elaborate prank on the “friends” he blames for the disappearance of his sisters. Josh has been struggling with mental

illness and has stopped taking his medication, so when he is confronted he fails to understand why all of his friends are so upset. He claims that it was just for fun and for internet fame, but what Josh does not know is that a second antagonistic force has entered the playing field, and unlike his disturbing pranks this antagonist does have a body count.

Until Dawn turned the Man in the Mask trope on its head by revealing that Josh is the one under the mask and unlike most characters fitting this trope, he never intended to inflict any physical harm on his friends. If the game ended there, the game would have failed to encapsulate horror because the genre does require death or at least some physical harm to be terrifying. The revelation that behind the disturbing traps and choices characters like Chris has to make is his friend who is mentally unwell and lashing out in grief does not count as the catharsis horror seeks to evoke. To reach this point, the game introduces a new antagonist that plays to a different kind of horror film. This type of film has several names, depending on which characteristics are emphasized. Based on the background information about this next antagonist, the kind of film being evoked is best categorized as the Monster Movie subgenre.

Simply put, the Monster Movie is a film in which “a monster is discovered, its properties deduced, and the duration of the film is spent trying to put it down” (Colavito 367). Movies like *Dracula* and *Creature from the Black Lagoon* follow this formula, along with a number of others from the 1920s up to the 1960s. At the point in the game where Josh reveals his plan to the characters he has been tormenting, it is also revealed that there is something else up on the mountain with them, something far more dangerous than a mentally unstable teenager with a mask and a lot of free time. There are creatures up on the mountain called Wendigos, based on the Native American legends of people becoming possessed by evil spirits after resorting to cannibalism to stay alive in the wilderness.

The Wendigo is a monster less familiar than the likes of the vampire and the werewolf, but has appeared in horror fiction such as Algernon Blackwood's *The Wendigo* as well as being the featured monster in the second episode of the CW television series *Supernatural*. In the game, a man known simply as The Stranger shows up to tell the teens all they need to know about the monsters to survive the rest of the night. Once they have the information they and the players need to keep going, he is killed by the very thing he has devoted his life to defeating.

The rest of the game is a whirlwind of action packed sequences featuring the quick time events mentioned previously. Many of these quick time events are crucial to the survival of whichever characters are remaining, up to and including the supposed Final Girl: Sam. By giving players all the background information about the Wendigos, including the fact that they cannot see but they can sense movement, the players are now forced to mimic the character's motions or lack thereof to survive. There are several moments in the game where the player must hold the controller, and by extension themselves, perfectly still to avoid being spotted by the creatures. The motion-sensing technology further immerses the player and emphasizes the idea that the player is surviving just as much as the characters are. If the player messes up, it can be assumed that they would die if the situation were real.

The final scene of the game takes place in the main lodge, where there are three Wendigos tracking the survivors still left. Certain characters like Sam and Mike are guaranteed to survive up until this final scene, but in this last confrontation with the beasts there are still choices to be made that will result in either the survival or demise of the remaining characters. The ending is where the catharsis starts to take form because what ends up happening is the house explodes. Fire is the only thing that can genuinely kill a Wendigo, and even then it does not so much kill them as destroy the bodies while the spirits of the Wendigos are released back

into the ether. The final image is of the spirits leaving the building screaming while flames engulf the lodge. Even if no characters survive the game, the player still gets to relax at the end because *they* are free from the horror. They have survived *Until Dawn*.

What *Until Dawn* does as a video game is bring horror back to its roots, where the point is not to be graphic and violent for the sake of shock value but instead to evoke fear and then catharsis. Players use their prior knowledge of horror films as well as their gaming skills to keep eight teens alive for a whole night while the game itself uses technology to convey the need for that knowledge and those skills. This immerses the players in the situation and makes them responsible for what happens, rather than passively watching characters in a film make choices the player or viewer knows are poor choices. *Until Dawn* puts players to the test and begs the question, “Could you really survive in this situation?” and depending on the ending the player gets, the answer to that question might be the most frightening part of the game.

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