Gamification or Reconciliation?: Responsibility, Empathy, and Ethicality in Residential School Narrative Adaptation for Games and Simulations

Marissa Stelmack

By utilizing the concept of embodied empathy, exploring the ethicality and responsibility in storytelling, and prioritizing the voices of Indigenous scholars, I propose to examine the possibilities, or limitations, of game play and simulation to induce or enact reconciliation through a gamified residential school experience. Within the game studies context, Jenny Kidd (2015) has defined empathy as "an other-oriented feeling that can lead to a number of positive outcomes such as a motivation to respond with care, or with action," although importantly "not all empathetic encounters are in themselves positive ones" (p. 418). There is currently a lack of scholarship examining the relationship between, and possibilities of, empathetic gameplay and residential school narratives. Thus, I will undertake an examination of the empathic and ethical consequences of two residential school narrative adaptations: The Raven and the Light, an indie game created by Mark Basedow in 2015, and the Embodying Empathy project, a VR experience created by the University of Manitoba in 2014.

Embodying Empathy is an example of a simulation that seeks to adapt the direct experiences of residential school Survivors, and the project as a whole is "owned, controlled, and led" (although not created) by the Survivor Governing Council (Woolford, 2022, p. 414). The same cannot be said of The Raven and the Light, which is a Gothic horror game created by American game developer Mark Basedow in 2015. In light of the ongoing repercussions and realities of Canada's colonial history, it is important that the words, narratives, and experiences of Indigenous peoples are not co-opted for content by non-Indigenous creators. Sophie McCall (2020) specifically emphasizes that one of the responsibilities of settler-scholars in telling residential school narratives is "to 'give back': to return what has been taken from land, stories, and communities [and] to build reciprocal relationships through a shared engagement in a decolonizing process" (p. 5). Through an examination of these two disparate adaptations by non-Indigenous creators, I will identify if and how McCall's identified responsibility is fulfilled by these projects, and how residential school narrative adaptation can be utilized to further reconciliation and empathy between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples of the land now known as Canada.

In light of the potential disparity between the need to prioritize Indigenous voices in Indigenous storytelling, and the desire to foster increased empathy and understanding for Indigenous experiences in the non-Indigenous community, this paper will explore the ethicality and effectiveness of gamifying the residential school experience to enact cultural competency, understanding, and empathy. While Basedow's game uses Gothic elements to simultaneously situate and decenter players within one of the genre's key themes ("the past return[ing] to haunt the present") (Kirkland, 2022 , p. 3), it is important to consider if this is a decolonizing narrative, or if it is a continuation of the appropriation and silencing of Indigenous culture that has been occurring for centuries. The University of Manitoba's decision to create a guided simulation, rather than a gamified experience, in their adaptation of a similar narrative offers a key point of comparison. By highlighting the differences in the treatment of residential school narratives by an individual not affiliated with an Indigenous group and a project that intentionally centers Indigenous voices, it is my hope to illustrate the importance of praxis, reciprocity, and ethical responsibility in cultural storytelling adaptation.

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Author Statement

Marissa Stelmack is currently completing an MA/MLIS in Digital Humanities at the University of Alberta. Marissa has previously completed an MA in English at the University of Calgary and BA (Honours) in English at Brandon University. As a settler-scholar herself, she is interested in researching how Indigenous peoples are portrayed by non-Indigenous authors, creators, and scholars in literature, digital media, and academic writing. Her recent capstone project examined the treatment of Indigenous male bodies in Indigenous-written erotica and non-Indigenous-written Native American romance fiction. As part of her thesis, she is currently researching the possibilities of Indigenous Knowledge preservation and documentation through digital library initiatives and alternative metadata and classification systems.

Simulating Trauma, Empathy and Empowerment: Emotional Adaptation in *Missing: Game for a Cause*

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Abstract

Video games are no more a pastime activity, rather it has evolved into a media worth demonstrating, representing, simulating and critiquing the world around us. Integrating cross cutting aspects into the world of digital games, the overall functionality and authenticity of the medium has remarkably increased. Interactive digital platforms, particularly digital games have with the utilization of corporeal themes engage players with intellect and emotions, thereby transcending video games from mere pastime activity to academics' worth analysis. The indie game *Missing: Game for a Cause* offers a compelling narrative that explores the emotional and physical trauma of a girl forced into prostitution, her resilience and struggles to regain autonomy. Centered around the theme of missing persons, the game uses emotional trauma as a core element of its storytelling and gameplay. The game set in a typical Indian scenario, especially reflecting the conditions of red-light districts in Kolkata, narrates the issue of human trafficking

and its distressing realities. This could transcend the social, cultural and geographical boundaries as it resonates with globally pervasive issues.

The interactive storytelling mechanism facilitates emotional engagement, thereby encouraging the player not merely as a passive onlooker, but as a dynamically immersed character who gets entwined in the progression of the narrative. This participatory paradigm epitomizes the zeitgeist in contemporary game design, where interactive narratives power up players to explore real-world issues and emotional challenges (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003). The personalized narrative techniques in the game evokes a sense of responsibility and agency on the part of the player. The gameplay moves forward only with the dialogues selected by the player, which intensifies the emotional attachment of the player with the trafficked girl. The consequences of the action and selection of dialogue options define the destiny of the girl. The setting, characters, names, streets, darkness and light all create an adaptive environment, particularly for an Indian player. The narrative structure evokes empathy in the player rather than the playfulness or fun element tied with gaming. By simulating the labyrinthine emotional landscape of fortitude and sorrow, the game inculcates the elements of empathy and engagement through adaptive game mechanics that enhance emotional narrative experiences. This methodology showcases the potentiality of video games to accost sensitive, real-world issues in ways that strike a chord with the players, thus refracting complex issues through the lens of interactive storytelling, thus proffering innovations into the intersection of gameplay mechanics, narrative adaptation, and emotional design. This paper examines how *Missing: Game for a Cause* leverages dynamic narratives and adaptive game mechanics to engage players emotionally, cultivating empathy and a nuanced understanding of the subject matter. The study situates the game within the broader discourse of interactive digital narratives, highlighting its

contributions to the field of serious games that address "wicked problems" such as human trafficking. Examples of serious games addressing similar themes include *Papers, Please*,and *This War of Mine*. The former delves into the ethical quandaries confronted by immigration officers in Arstotzka. The latter immerses the gamers in the hardships of civilians during wartime. These games involve the players through the mechanisms of interactive storytelling and decision-making, binding them with spellbound social issues, hence bringing out critical reflection and empathy. Further, this study investigates how customized gameplay creates a paradigm of participation that enables players to deal with real-life issues by playing the game.

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Biographical Note of the Authors

1. Principal Author – Ms. Sajna A

   Ms. Sajna A is an Assistant Professor at MES Kalladi College, Mannarkkad, a distinguished aided institution affiliated with the University of Calicut, Kerala, and accredited with an A+ grade by NAAC. With over 12 years of experience in teaching English Language and Literature, she has developed expertise in various aspects of literary and cultural studies. She is currently pursuing doctoral research in Game Studies, exploring the intersection of digital gaming and narrative frameworks.
   Her scholarly work spans a range of interdisciplinary fields, including cultural studies, animal studies, and trauma and resilience. Ms. Sajna has published numerous research articles and has presented her work at both national and international conferences. Notably, she delivered a paper on "Redesigning Indian Mythology via Games" at the Central and Eastern European Game Studies Conference (CEEGS 2023) in Leipzig. Her academic contributions reflect a commitment to exploring innovative approaches to traditional narratives and their contemporary reinventions in the digital age.

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   Dr. Suhail Abdul Rub P. is an Assistant Professor of English at PTM Government College, Perintalmanna, affiliated with the University of Calicut, Kerala. With 14 years of experience in teaching English Language and Literature, he completed his Ph.D. in 2017 from the University of Kerala. In 2009, he was awarded the Shastri Research Student Fellowship, further enhancing his academic profile.
   A registered research supervisor with the University of Calicut, Dr. Suhail has made significant contributions to the field of Cultural Studies. He has authored chapters in academic books and published several scholarly articles. His research interests are diverse, encompassing indigenous culture, Covid literature, and cultural narratives, reflecting a commitment to interdisciplinary inquiry.

Dr. Suhail has presented his research at numerous national and international conferences, with a notable presentation on Game Studies in Germany. His academic work continues to enrich the scholarly discourse on cultural studies, with a focus on contemporary issues and evolving cultural paradigms.

"No one cares about a few forgotten lunatics": The Failures of Adapting Mental Illness and Disability in the *Outlast* Series

Horror games have been historically criticized for their poor portrayal, and demonization, of individuals living with mental illnesses (Ferrari et al. 2019). The iconic villains of popular horror games such as Pyramid Head in *Silent Hill* (2001), Leland Vanhorn in *Condemned: Criminal Origins'*(2005), The Origami Killer in *Heavy Rain* (2010), Hans Tiedman in *Dead Space 2* (2011), and Josh Washington in *Until Dawn* (2015) are all reductively characterized as either criminally insane or manifestations of psychological trauma. These tropes are often also used to characterize horror game protagonists, deuteragonists, or the non-playable-characters who make up these gruesome worlds. The blatant and continued misrepresentations of mental illness and disability deserve to be—and have been—critically examined. Previous scholarship has surveyed the impacts of how games can further stigmatize people with mental illnesses, which leads to continued prejudice and discrimination (Henderson & Gronholm 2018). What is often not considered is how these games try, and often fail, to critique the stigmatization of people with mental illnesses despite potentially good faith attempts to create critical social commentary.

Our previous research argues that, when deployed in video games, horror is no longer a genre but a medium—a mode of communication (Schmidt & Heeg 2025). By framing horror as a medium, we consider how it moves beyond guts and gore toward exposing "wicked problems" (Rittel & Webber 1973). While games such as the *Resident Evil* franchise showcase clear "wicked problems" like climate change, corporate greed, government corruption, and biowarfare, the "wicked problems" embedded in other horror games, such as the *Outlast* series, may be not as clear. Developers at Red Barrels describe their *Outlast* series as a first-person, psychological survival horror video game. Despite the drastic environmental and narrative differences between the first and second games, the thread that binds them is the nefarious Murkoff Corporation that experiments on people living with mental illnesses. The *Outlast* series presents a world in which the main antagonists are those living with mental illnesses and physical deformities, who chase and harm the player character. However,they are also not entirely responsible for the harm they perpetuate because they are largely reacting to a larger external threat—that of the "wicked problem" of dishonest corporatized medical care that leads to inhumane experimentation. In fact, the series attempts to point toward multiple "wicked problems" including corporate oligarchy and biological warfare with references to the CIA's unethical experiments through Project MKUltra.

However, the *Outlast* games remain deeply offensive in their stigmatization of mental illnesses, pathologizing of queerness, and vilification of physical disabilities. Mental illnesses are extremely common, with statistics pointing to 1 in 5 people struggling with mental health (Canadian Mental Health Association 2021), and yet the intense, centuries long "stigma and discrimination associated with mental health constitute a worldwide multifaceted problem" (Henderson & Gronholm 2018). Despite the problematic representation within the series, *Outlast* (and its DLC *Whistleblower),* and *Outlast 2* were critically acclaimed and praised for reviving the survival horror subgenre. James Davenport' review of *Outlast 2* concluded that the

game "excels as a beautiful, brutal journey through extreme spiritual anxieties" (2017)—ignoring the game's horrific ableism, misogyny, and frivolous depictions rape and child sexual abuse.

Our presentation will focus on the first three games in the *Outlast* series (we will not look at the 2024 *The Outlast Trials)* and how they attempt to point toward "wicked problems," but ultimately fail to adapt a destigmatized portrayal of mental illnesses and physical disabilities. We will analyze these games using Noël Carroll's notion of the monstrous from *The Philosophy of Horror* (2003) building on our existing research regarding how horror, when deployed in video games, morphs into a medium and drops all genre-related classifications. Carroll theorizes that monsters (i.e. antagonists) found within horror are both physically and cognitively threatening, as they compromise what is considered to be common knowledge of how we perceive the world to be—namely able-bodied and neurotypical (2003, 34). The world of *Outlast* is, indeed, threatening, not only for the able-bodied protagonists but also for individuals living with mental illnesses and physical disabilities. When games continue to use these denigrations, it perpetuates societal attitudes in which illness results in isolation, suffering, and condemnation.

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Pamela Maria Schmidt is a graduate of the University of Waterloo's Experimental Digital Media program in the Department of English Language and Literature and is currently the Interdisciplinary Project and Communications Manager at the Games Institute. Her Master's research focused on ambient and apocalyptic rhetoric, the use of dread by mass media, and climate change. During this time, she was also a narrative designer, developer, and project manager on the knowledge mobilization game *Illuminate,* an educational simulation game that teaches young children the impacts of climate change. Schmidt's current research explores the use of horror as a communication tool in video games, adaptations, and monstrous representations. This work is forthcoming in "Horror As Medium: An Examination of Environmental Horror in Video Games," co-written with Sid Heeg as part of the forthcoming collection *Epistemic Genres: New Formations in Digital Game Genres* (Bloomsbury).

Sid Heeg is a PhD candidate at the University of Waterloo in the Sustainability Management program. Heeg is an interdisciplinary scholar whose main work revolves around mis- and disinformation in rural farming communities. As a social media specialist who straddles rhetoric, media studies, and narrative interpretation, they have published in media studies, games studies, and in Canadian and global Indigenous literatures—focusing on the decolonization of genres and the intangibility of cultural heritage. They have co-presented on the topic of horror in video games with Pamela Maria Schmidt, including "Horror as Medium: Wicked Problems and Environmental 'Non-Horror' in *Resident Evil V, VII*, and *VIII*" at the 2023 International Conference on Games and Narrative; "Horror as Medium" at the 2024 Beyond Play Conference; and in "Horror As Medium: An Examination of Environmental Horror in Video Games" in the forthcoming edited collection *Epistemic Genres: New Formations in Digital Game Genres* (Bloomsbury).

Abstract for CFP: Adapt, Adopt, Adjust: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Adaptation, Storytelling, and Simulation (ICGaN'25)

Paper Title: Mental Illness Representation, Interpretation as Interaction, and the Horror of Limited Agency in *Until Dawn*

This paper seeks to examine the unique interactivity within the interstitial 'therapy' sessions that occur between the main gameplay chapters in *Until Dawn* (2015). In these sessions with The Analyst, Dr. Hill, the player is completely stripped of their agency. While they were able to run around, look for clues, and interact with their surroundings in the main chapters of *Until Dawn*, suddenly they are stuck sitting in front of a desk in a room where they cannot even freely turn their head to inspect their surroundings. Traditionally, "[i]n video games, players' agency is delimited by the system—what they can see, say, and do" (Muriel and Crawford 145). However, in *Until Dawn,* there are two distinct systems at play: one delimiting the agency in the main game, and a much more restrictive one delimiting the agency in the sessions with Dr. Hill. In these interludes, the player cannot do anything without first being prompted by Dr. Hill. They cannot act; they can only *react*, *observe*, and *interpret*.

While the main sections of the game are in third-person point of view (POV), with the player observing the character they are controlling, the first six sections in Dr. Hill's office are almost entirely in first-person POV. Because of this shift in perspective, the player has no idea which character they are playing as during these sessions – and as Dr. Hill frequently addresses the events and characters from the main portions of the game, the player would be forgiven for assuming these are metafictional sessions in which *they* are his patient. After it is revealed that one of the main characters, Josh Washington, is actually Dr. Hill's patient in these sessions, the POV shifts to third-person to match the main chapters of the game. Notably, this is also when the sessions with Dr. Hill become exclusively cinematic cutscenes. The sessions are no longer visually distinct from the main gameplay, and the player comes to understand that they are hallucinations that Josh is having throughout the game. As if to mirror the lack of control that Josh feels as his mental state deteriorates, once the player knows that Dr. Hill is not speaking directly to them, they can no longer interact with his sessions at all. The lack of interaction for the last three scenes with Dr. Hill —coupled with Josh's extremely limited playability overall—highlights Josh's own lack of control and agency, giving the player a glimpse into how frightening and debilitating severe mental illness can become without proper treatment.

In this limited first-person perspective, I argue that interpretation becomes the key way that the player interacts with the narrative. While the sessions with Dr. Hill lack the ludic interactivity and agency found in the main sections of *Until Dawn*, they offer a wealth of details ripe for player interpretation. These sections with Dr. Hill put the player in Josh's shoes and force them to simply observe as he spirals into psychosis, making them just as scared and powerless as Josh himself must feel. The player cannot act because Josh's mental illness is not something that can be overcome at this point in his life… Or, after being potentially misdiagnosed and incorrectly treated for years (as his symptoms and medical records suggest) and suffering the sudden loss of his sisters, perhaps Josh has decided that he cannot or does not want to be saved. Regardless, *Until Dawn* forces the player to confront the perceived hopelessness of Josh's situation by stripping away their interactive agency in all of his scenes, giving them only the ability to experience his psychological break and try to glean meaning from the madness.

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Presenter Biography

Julie Veitch is a PhD candidate in the English Language and Literature department at the University of Waterloo. Her research focuses on modern children's and YA horror-mystery books, movies, and video games. She is especially interested in character agency, depictions of monstrosity, didactic messaging, and the lingering legacy of the Gothic within these narratives. She has previously presented papers on Gothic horror, psychological horror, and detective fiction at NeMLA 2021, the Popular Culture Association 2022 Conference, and MLA 2024.