

Substitute Theater: A Digital Theater Experiment in Video Games—Taking the Game Layers of Fear as an Example

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With the emergence of new media, traditional art forms have also undergone further transformations, revealing their inherent vitality in the media age, as exemplified by the embodied perception of theatrical spaces and stages in video games. The game “Layers of Fear” begins with ancient Horror and immersive artistic illusions, constructing a unique atopia space within the game. The game evokes theatrical memories through “haunted” mansions and paintings, highlighting the dramatic nature of the game and thus building a theatrical pathway at the game’s design level. The game also features unique digital avatars that materialize the player’s presence, further exploring this pathway. Using embodiment as a medium, and visual immersion and the perception of Horror as bridges, further experimentation with digital avatars gradually expands the player’s world and brings the player’s character to the audience. In the virtual world, digital avatars retain the immersion of fiction and illusion, and also imply the possibility of immersive theater practice on digital interfaces. The immersive digital theater of illusion will ultimately be staged in video games and completed in virtual reality games.

Keywords: Layers of Fear, atopia, fluorescence, double, digital theater

Layers of Fear is a first-person horror game developed by Polish developer Bloober Team. Inspired by 16th-18th-century paintings and architecture, players delve into the mind of a mad painter, exploring his twisted and altered mansion to uncover the terrifying truth behind it all. The story revolves around the painter’s inner world, requiring players to find clues in a constantly shifting environment to reveal the secrets of his madness. In the game, players explore a constantly shifting 19th-century-style house, where the surrounding environment can completely change with each turn of the viewpoint. The game’s environments blend Victorian-style decor with psychedelic elements (such as rotating and endless rooms), presenting players with a maze of fluctuating and elusive images and sounds from the protagonist’s memories through a walking simulator gameplay style, disrupting the stable space of movement.

In this game, the story elements are not confined to a fixed space; the game’s progression is only achieved through the player’s manipulation of the space surrounding the character. This digital avatar format fixes the player’s vision within the game space, thus highlighting the fear the game emphasizes. However, in the process of realizing fear, the game’s room movement seems to naturally constitute a moving theater, and further representations of fear reveal elements of horror drama one by one. So, how exactly does Layers of Fear highlight drama within the essence of Horror? And what effect does it achieve in the player’s sensory experience to move towards drama? Behind the game, the digital avatar expands the immersive experience and directs the viewer’s

role as the player, ultimately constructing an embodied dramatic experience, while also showcasing another possibility for digital theater—video game theater.

Horror Themes: From Horror Drama to Horror Games

Before the emergence of the medium of horror games, Horror had already permeated various genres and forms of expression. Horror is an immersive emotion and a good way to connect different media. Before the construction of the substitute theater of games, as a projection of emotions common to media, Horror was already a medium within a medium, because Horror is a place where sensory perceptions converge, and also a way of returning to the inner thoughts of the subject. However, setting aside the ancient emotion itself, in various media, Horror will transcend the simple emotion and thus cleverly spread throughout works of art and art forms, thereby turning the perspective of Horror to the Horror of art. “Generally speaking, when the word Horror is used in the following text, it should be understood as art horror... It is a name that crosses art and media genres, and its existence has been recognized in ordinary language” (Carroll, 2003, p. 12).

Artistic Horror is a combination of fear and disgust ... When the monster is unclean/disgusting, or when the work implies this uncleanness, when these elements are combined with the viewer’s desire to completely avoid the monster, a work is artistic Horror (Carroll, 2003). Horror is an ancient emotional mechanism, but as the subject’s acceptance and perception expand, Horror will no longer remain in the most primitive natural Horror¹, and the definition of Horror will gradually change. However, Horror still has its own path in terms of psychological reaction. Just as the word “horror” comes from the Latin word “horrere” and the Old French word “orror”, it will be associated with an abnormal (from the subject’s point of view) physiological state, namely, feeling excited, and this stimulus is still active in various forms of expression today. So, what exactly is artistic Horror in art form? Artistic Horror is the complex technique of evoking disgust and threat through elements and images or narratives in art design, as well as the interaction between techniques (Carroll, 2003). Some researchers have attempted to define fear using psychology and have gone a step further than the previous classifications of destruction and non-existence, classifying psychological fear into four levels: disability, loss of autonomy, separation, and self-death (Reyes, 2024).

Under the influence of art horror, different forms of expression have gradually unfolded different constructions, especially in the emerging medium of video games, which have shown a completely new sensory dimension. Of course, “horror itself is not a mechanical description of game design...horror is more of a philosophy or theme that can be applied to any game type” (Bycer, 2021, p. 20). This rule will naturally be mixed in with the carriers before the game, further realizing the illusion and immersion. So, the proposition of Horror is not only the core theme of major works of art, but also the effect that will be presented in the medium. This seems to be the purpose that all media will use Horror to achieve, and it also returns to the problem of the horror paradox. As the same effect of Horror, as the same space where immersion will be achieved, how should drama, as the emotional venue before the game, present Horror? And what is the relationship between it and video games? Even if the birth of horror games may have more of the special characteristics given by its medium status, it is still necessary to explore the pre-game.

The existence of horror drama is relatively limited. Strictly speaking, there is no term for horror drama, because Horror has always been a part of drama. This was assumed at the origin of drama. Even before Horror

¹ That is, facing the threat of death from wild animals or the cruelty of nature.

was defined, drama was already performing Horror. Sophocles' performance of Oedipus can be seen as the progenitor of the dramatic tradition, that is, presenting terrifying behavior on stage to discuss the fears of contemporary society (Bissett et al., 2023, p. 9). Horror truly became a theme in drama, mainly in the 18th century. At that time, the dramatic creation was deeply influenced by Gothic novels, thus forming a unique Gothic drama, which further took Horror as the core of expression. Back in the 21st century, horror dramas such as *The Exorcist* and *The Fly* began to draw inspiration from movies rather than just literary works. But what truly brought horror drama to a new era was immersive horror drama. This type of drama emphasizes the audience's immersion, changing from the traditional audience-performer relationship to an interactive experience in which the audience participates in the narrative. For example, works such as *Sleep No More*, *Delusion*, and *The Woman in Black* rely more on the external theatrical environment to create a "haunted" atmosphere, achieving this through stage lighting and sound effects. 21st-century horror theater, through postmodern techniques, immersive experiences, and borrowing from popular culture, has redefined the stage presentation of horror themes, giving it characteristics such as immersive examination, self-reference, and interaction with popular culture (Bissett et al., 2023).

Horror drama also has a deep intertextuality with horror films, which is often achieved through the reference of elements between the two different media. In horror films, artists often use sound, lighting, time, movement, and other stylistic means to evoke fear in the audience (Fu, 2016). "Illusionism, Monsters and Meta-horror-theatre as a Medium for the Horror Genre" argues that Horror in drama is often achieved through reference, because although Horror and drama are widely discussed, they are always separated, which leads to many performances not being classified as true Horror. In this context, Horror in drama naturally relies on reference and is more experimental. That is to say, in order to better achieve the horror effect, the new era of drama will equip the theater with special effects and referenced stage design methods, including the use of some sound effects, to induce the audience to seek fright through auditory stimulation (Vessies, 2021).

On another level, horror drama is also related to visual novels, thus constructing possibilities before digitization and further building connections with games. In the context of modern communication, visual novels have become an emerging medium belonging to the present and the future, and even the narratives of most modern games belong to the broad category of "visual novels" (Song, 2022). Visual novels are audiovisual games characterized by "visual" and "narrative", containing a large amount of text, accompanied by diverse elements such as music, sound, animation, and video, and possessing characteristics such as playability, visual appeal, and interactivity. Visual novels also have strong interactivity, showcasing the coexistence of multiple media, especially with the development of VR technology in recent years, which has innovated the way of expression, expanded the narrative space of the work, blurred the boundary between virtual and reality, and allowed players to have a more realistic experience in the story world (Li, 2023). In shaping a horror experience, visual novels, like horror dramas, also use immersive surroundings to further blur the boundary between virtual and reality. Looking at these three different media, the expression of Horror relies on similar spatial locations to achieve the same terrifying emotion, especially in visual novels. Visual novels, situated between literature and games, serve as an intermediate form connecting drama and games. Furthermore, the presence of space is naturally prevalent in contemporary horror games. Does this mean that games also construct related theatrical spaces, thus staging digital dramas in virtual space?

Before constructing space, horror games have their own unique development, building the world of horror games. The applicability of art horror will naturally flow to horror games. “When you play video games, you certainly don’t really feel that your life is in danger... which means you want to exclude any emotional investment, which naturally causes fear” (Carroll, 2015, p. 341). As one of the video game types, horror games adopt the role-playing framework and originated in the late 20th century. The earliest horror games are generally considered to have appeared in the 1980s. The horror games of this stage are highly pixelated. “Game developers were inspired by horror novels and invested in investigative narratives... and made players take evasive actions (escape traps and enemies) instead of fighting” (Pimentel & Melo, 2018, p. 203). Most of the game designs imitated the horror movies that had already been released. “Many series use popular IPs as the basis for video games. Popular movies such as *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Jaws*, *Friday the 13th*, and *Alien* have video game adaptations” (Bycer, 2021, p. 4). With the development of technology, by the 1990s, designers introduced 3D lenses and laid the foundation for the design pattern of subsequent horror games through fixed lenses and limited perspectives, and continued to retain the mechanism of permanent death. At this time, two popular horror game IPs also emerged, namely “Resident Evil” and “Silent Hill”. When players were immersed in the surprise of confrontation, the games in the early 21st century returned to the non-confrontational situation and completed the basic classification of horror games as another major branch. Such games include “Zero: ZERO” and “Outlast”. These games use a video recorder or night vision device to realize the movement of the character’s perspective, while resource management is cleverly transferred to the device’s power, thereby prompting players to solve puzzles and dodge actions to avoid combat. At the same time, the first-person perspective is redefined to make it more emotional to arouse fear, rather than just as a shooting window. “The study of horror art (Horror) and game media is like Frankenstein’s monster... intertwined with sensory experience and profound meaning of thought” (Keshwinska & Han, 2022, p. 108). The main characteristics of horror games are bizarre characters, chilling soundtracks, and terrifying plots. The main story involves escaping an unfamiliar environment, either by hiding from enemies or by resisting sudden enemy attacks. There are many types of Horror in horror games, such as psychological fear, sudden fright, and survival (Zhang, 2022). In terms of classification, the book *The World of Scary Video Games* uses a Horror game pyramid model to classify horror games in detail (Pimentel & Melo, 2018).²

Like other horror works, games evoke feelings of fear, tension, and disgust in the recipient. “Horror games also create an illusion...to try things forbidden by social norms...to experience supernatural phenomena” (Thon, 2019, p. 139). Looking at and examining different media types, games seem to be inherently closer to drama, because in the immersion of Horror, games naturally bring out appropriate spaces, collaging theatrical elements from drama into various levels of game design, and also deepening the sense of immersion through Horror, which is exactly what digital drama seeks to achieve. From the perspective of the inherent attributes of drama, previous visual novels were connected to the textual level of drama, and visual novels can be considered a type of game. Then, horror games, which go a step further, deepen the connection with drama from the level of performance and experience.

As a space-oriented horror game, *Layers of Fear* is more dramatic than other horror games, directly placing the focus of Horror on the immersive perception of the subject. The game field is not fixed, but uses a fluid space

² This study analyzed different levels of horror game experiences using a model and explored how game design can evoke fear in players. The basic level consists of games with a horror background (such as “Castlevania: Symphony of the Night”), which only incorporate horror elements visually, thematically, or in packaging, but do not evoke genuine fear. The middle level comprises games that occasionally use horror effects (such as “Fear”), incorporating Horror in specific scenes or sound effects, but primarily focusing on action or shooting. The top level consists of games whose core objective is fear (such as the “Resident Evil” series), continuously eliciting fear in players through game mechanics, atmosphere, and plot design.

to guide players to find clues. This fluid perception makes the game no longer just a walking simulator. It prepares a drama for the player, pushing the player towards the audience in an immersive atmosphere, and giving the audience the player's name. *Layers of Fear* provides a certain degree of interactive space.

The dramatic exploration of the game's interactive space aims to build a bridge between the game and the drama in the usual sense by connecting the game interaction in the cyber context with the theater performance relationship in the real context. (Zhang, 2023, p. 123)

Horror Spaces and Theaters: The Construction, Theatrical Imitation, and Paths of Game Landscapes

Layers of Fear is a psychological horror game where players explore a constantly changing 19th-century-style house to uncover the terrifying inner world of a mad painter. The game is based on the painter's inner world, unfolding the plot through his psychological changes during his creative process. Players will explore a vast manor, attempting to understand what happened to the protagonist and his family, and complete the final painting; different paintings lead to different endings. Upon release, the game was hailed as a "chronicle of psychedelic horror games", using psychedelic spatial changes to achieve psychological fear, immersing players in a terrifying environment. The game employs a linear narrative, with no backtracking or locked areas. Besides moving from room to room, players can interact with various objects to find documents and other important items. At the beginning of the game, players quickly explore each room, surrounded by unfinished paintings, notes between a couple, and a quiet children's room. However, once players enter the studio, the area outside the door twists and turns in an unfamiliar way, and the psychedelic atmosphere begins.

Before the game constructs an immersive drama for players, "*Layers of Fear*" features a unique spatial design, beginning with the rooms each character enters. Through constantly changing paintings, room settings, newspapers, and letters, psychological fears are imprinted on these latent spaces, hinting at the psychedelic fiction and reality of the mind, thus forming a *atopia* space. On another level, as the spatial scenes alternate and the player's immersive interaction occurs, the horror game space transforms to some extent into a haunted stage, flickering with Morash's "fluorescence", drawing back the curtain on the video game drama.

Atopia: A Fictional Yet Realistic Space of Terror

The word "Atomic" originates from the Greek prefixes *ἀ-* (no, deprived) and *τόπος* (place), indicating a space as opposed to habitable places. In the case of natural *atopias*, such as the ocean, Antarctica, or outer space, the environmental characteristics of these regions not only make construction in these spaces (prerequisites for habitation) difficult, but also make them inherently dangerous to human life (Garner, 2019). Discussions of *atopia* in virtual situations are even more important, just like the deeper layers of cyberspace. *Atopia* is always concretized through the character's mental spatial perception. Unlike the sense of spatial loss, *atopia* will bring about a collision between spaces. It must start with a habitable space, and then have fragments of space outside the space permeate into the original space. The only thing these fragments need to trigger is the character's perception of external space, and make the character suddenly realize that their own space is so closed, and that the subject is under unconscious spatial compression, reversing habitability and inhabitability. The primacy of *atopia* is the character's misinterpretation of space, which is often exacerbated by the operation of mental space. Misinterpretation is a means of concealing the truth, and also a warning to the world to abandon the idea of omniscience. *Atopia* is not necessarily an actual existing space; the feeling of intrusion into a spiritual space, the intervention of external information in a closed space, and the dialogues that occur in a spiritual space are all prophecies of *Atopia*.

Layers of Fear is dedicated to creating psychological Horror. In the game's notes, the developers mentioned that the game contains many unsettling elements (dismembered or possessed dolls, a jumble of childhood items, humanoid figures (i.e., mannequins), blood and blood-like substances, flames, visual depictions of burns, auditory and visual hallucinations, rats, and confined spaces, etc.), all of which are achieved by the player pushing open door after door. In designing the game's scenes, the developers juxtaposed the original appearance of the house with the dilapidated haunted house, cleverly juxtaposing reality and fiction through the protagonist's mental perception. The character's mental space creates a warm and comforting reality, while the physical space breaks down the fiction, rendering the mansion after its transformation. Between reality and fiction, the door is the only definite element, and behind the door lies more of a mental intrusion, creating a sense of uninhabitability on a cognitive level.

Layers of Fear is filled with multiple room landscapes, procedurally generated without limit, allowing players to experience the artist's mad inner world between reality and fiction. Within the game's realistic space, the scenes primarily revolve around a mansion, filled with elements of dilapidation and decay: crumbling walls revealing decaying bricks; worn-out carpets exuding a musty smell; and flickering chandeliers casting shifting shadows. These details create an ancient, desolate, and unknown atmosphere, making players feel as if they are in a cursed place. The walls are adorned with bizarre paintings, possibly depicting unsettling scenes; strange experimental equipment and scattered letters lie on the tables; rats constantly scurry in front of the player's view, especially in the main studio, where distorted mannequins and oddly colored canvases are scattered haphazardly. These scenes blend Victorian-style decor with psychedelic elements (such as rotating and endless rooms). The game also contains a series of forbidden rooms.

Passing through the house is the biggest attraction of the game. As the name suggests, we pass through the environmental layers that describe memories and go deeper and deeper into the artist's mind. These layers are expressed through the house itself, which is full of images of his past, twisted by the ghosts and guilt in his heart. (Garner, 2019, p. 204)

"In *Layers of Fear*, what is scattered in the space is not objects containing information, but the past itself: memories, emotions, and images" (Marak, 2017, p. 56). Therefore, the game places narrative elements in the transformation of space on the one hand, and strives to achieve psychological Horror on the other hand. When psychological Horror intersects with the design of space, a atopia-like spatial layout becomes a more suitable spreader of Horror, or rather, the unknown nature of atopia solidifies the Horror within it.

Before psychological Horror successfully invades the player's mind, the game has already set up the preconditions at the narrative level. Like many horror games, *Layers of Fear* uses an unreliable narrative.

The game gives the ability to "see" to the painter, which is the only focus of the game, while establishing the untrustworthiness of his eyes. This unreliability makes the character constantly relive the fear of collapse and the feeling of disintegration. (Beyvers, 2020, p. 164)

The vision is the best place to construct psychedelia. The game camera often uses shaking and distortion to make the player and the character fall into unreality together. "*Layers of Fear* gives the ability to observe entirely to the painter, while showing that his eyes are not trustworthy, because he seems to have lost his grasp of reality and his own rationality" (Bogost, 2008, p. 181). In the game, psychological Horror and artistic Horror will be mixed and further linked by the special field of Atauban. This Horror is set as a resistance to unclean and disgusting things and extreme mental split and chaos, that is, blurring the boundary between virtual and real, and

causing the subject to fail to confirm his own field. In this process, “the artist almost became Dr. Frankenstein...the room lost its shape, the architecture became meaningless...the last version of the house had almost no resemblance to the house when the player started the journey” (Li, 2023, p. 207). In the player experience, Atauban is confined to the swarms of rats and dummy figures, the labyrinthine rooms, and the artist’s fictional mental space. This labyrinth is medieval multi-linear,

and the wanderer acts as its wanderer...beyond simple cartographic decisions; he not only chooses which street, alley, and arcade to pass through, but also which tobacco shop to visit, which passersby to observe or ignore, which carriage to ride, and which puddle to step into or avoid. (Bogost, 2008, p. 75)



Figure 1. The room in “Layers of Fear”.

At the beginning, players can control the character to find advertisements for rat extermination experts and correspondence in the drawers, so that the whole house seems to have been exterminated. The letters deny the fact that there are rats in the house. However, players can observe how rats suddenly appear through the eyes of an artist, and as the game progresses, hundreds of rat traps can be found in the scene.

The protagonist sees, hears, and feels rats under the floor, in the pipes, and even in his wooden legs, under his skin, and in his hair. His obsession with these imaginary rats is so great that he probably painted his version of Leonardo da Vinci's "Lady with an Ermine": a terrible, twisted figure that is both like a rat and has rats in his hair. (Marak, 2017, p. 179)

In a corridor that is completely lit by red lights, several mannequins cower and pose in fear and submission. Two other mannequins can be seen standing at the ends of the corridor, with more confident poses, although it is hard to say whether they are mannequins or humans. These unclear elements give a great visual impact and also show the encroachment of space on the subject, brewing an inverted structure. In such spaces, what is confirmed is no longer the object itself, but rather the object through which it is confirmed. The object is the intruder, also implying the fiction of the real space. The room is also filled with large amounts of paint smudges, resembling both the decay of color and the embers of a flame, further suggesting that this is a world that can be painted over.



Figure 2. Woman holding a silver rat.



Figure 3. Corridor with lifelike figures.

The game's most distinctive feature is the transformation of space. Every move the player makes is accompanied by a change of scene, and the room behind each door is generated infinitely, corresponding to the character's psychedelic state.

It is not the narrative perceived by the player that changes and redefines the stable space, but the illusory space reproduced in the artist's memory that continues to change around the player's avatar, defining the game narrative experienced by the player. (Zhang, 2023, p. 57)

In the transformation of space, the original architectural structure no longer has any meaning, and the scene will constantly change between the undamaged happy house and the dilapidated and messy gray room, and is also accompanied by the change of weather outside the room. Sometimes the player will also get caught in a loop of doors within doors and rooms within rooms, even if she opens different doors; or be squeezed into a smaller position by the crowded and narrow walls, and have her way blocked by bricks; or she may find herself in a room

full of burnt paintings. In addition, there are several elevators in a house that is only two floors high, which also causes the player to not only lose her position in the house, but also lose all sense of space. The room is like a maze, like the folds Deleuze described, thus forming a new Baroque aesthetic: “It provides a concept of space and time as a continuous unfolding, each fold representing a new layer in reality, intertwined with other layers to create a complex, multidimensional world” (Zhang, 2024, p. 105). Video games have the potential for deterritorialization, but at the same time, any deterritorialization is accompanied by reterritorialization, so the space in video games has infinity (Liu, 2020). This is also the basis for the existence of space in *Layers of Fear*.

As the plot progresses, the fictional mental space of the characters is revealed one by one. After the ending is completed, the mansion scene will no longer change, and walking around the mansion is like the ending:

The scene seems to provide an opportunity to “objectively” observe the surrounding environment without the painter’s distorted gaze—it shows that the house is indeed neglected and chaotic, but it seems to expose all the visual and architectural impossibilities as the protagonist’s fantasy. (Marak, 2017, p. 183)

It is worth noting that the characters fall into the misconception of mental space. This misconception naturally comes from the confusion of the senses. Atopia originally represents a terrible environment that is not suitable for living, but in the characters’ own experience, these terrible environments even appear more often than normal environments. That is to say, in the space that has already been lost, atopia can constitute reality. Whether it is a cozy children’s room, a kitchen with warm colors, or a hall with bright elements, these all constitute a heterogeneous atopia. It is the inversion of structure in the chaotic part, which is to return to the fictional reality. Between the zone of spiritual comfort and the zone of pollution, the painter loses the boundary, which constantly makes the real space fictional, thus explaining why the scenes behind the door vary so much, but the only constant is the studio and the canvas. “Space itself is a painting, evolving from its role as an emotional stimulus, becoming a narrative stimulus” (Manai, 2021, p. 135). Even the writer himself is trapped in the painting. One of the game’s endings is to reopen the canvas and start the next cycle, which means that even if atopia is truly perceived, the subject cannot break free from the fictional reality, because reality will no longer be reached, just like the absence of space itself, constantly escaping outward. The spiritual illusion under atopia further pushes the game’s room onto the stage of a theater, and connects the theater with the paintings in the game, highlighting the drama.

Theater Fluorescence: Haunted Paintings and Memory Mechanisms

In multiple rooms, paintings also occupy an important position. When facing paintings, players always feel a sense of unease, as if being watched by the paintings. But soon these paintings begin to do more. They will follow the player to change scenes, or the paintings will be given life. The paintings are like spaces outside the room, allowing players to access more information outside the scene in the seemingly closed mansion. This is also a common game reference method. As a walking simulator, *Layers of Fear* naturally has the basic settings of this type of game: “Walking simulators and general games often rely on past actual records, such as newspaper articles and clippings, letters and handwritten notes... to represent the overlap of various points in time” (Zhang, 2023, p. 65). Paintings also show points in time, but they lead to external spaces, or rather, paintings highlight real spaces, because spaces are no longer fixed in the character’s imagination. This interaction is like an intertextuality.

The game setting is very similar to many classic works of Gothic literature (and their film adaptations), such as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), Oscar Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), Edgar Allan Poe’s *Oval Portrait* (1842), and more recently Stephen King’s *The Shining* (1980). (Li, 2023, p. 207)

“It demonstrates the potential of this medium to create fluid, constantly merging and overlapping identities” (Waszkiewicz, 2020, p. 76). When the paintings are ghost-like and scattered throughout the room, the interaction with the theater space also occurs. Just like the disappearing theater fluorescent space, what emerges and flickers in the paintings is the memory mechanism that confirms reality, which also creates a “haunted” atmosphere. The closed room is like a closed theater, turning from the player’s role to the audience, thereby fading the memory space in the paintings and achieving the loss of the theater space, constructing a path from the game stage to the theater. Behind the stage and theater, in the lost space where nothing exists, real fear is about to emerge. The game also uses more references to get closer to the truth:

“The game starts by bringing themes such as madness, visual art, and picture changes into the player’s attention... The real story behind the portrait of Dorian Gray: Is it always true?” The player’s attention is drawn to the numerous paintings in the house, all of which are real works by famous artists, such as Augustus Egger’s *Past and Present: No. 1—Misfortune* (1858), Rembrandt Hammerson van Rijn’s *Kidnapping of Ganymede* (1635), and Lavinia Fontana’s *Portrait of Antonitta González* (1595), thus asking whether the portrait is the artist himself or the model? (Marak, 2017, p. 181)

The game also draws inspiration from the movie *The Shining*. “In *The Shining*, the space of the Overlook Hotel is overturned by ghosts and harsh weather, while in the game, the protagonist will have hallucinations and must traverse constantly changing landscapes. Both works use the same family structure” (Li, 2023, p. 208).

In his exploration of theatrical space, Morash proposed an original theory of theatrical space—the formation of a space that begins to fade. He used the word “fluorescence” to suggest a sense of loss and mourning, which is understood as the light emitted by dying particles to present a spatial crisis (Morash & Richards, 2013). According to Morash, a special theatrical space is created by the evoking of a sense of loss, because when a play creates a sense of loss, a new invisible space is generated on stage: a contradictory space, a non-existent space, thus contrasting the present and non-present spaces, making the space truly unfamiliar (Morash & Richards, 2013). Unlike the pre-existing space, although the lost space is invisible and non-existent, once the perception of this space is captured, the primacy of the senses touched will be preserved at that moment. This highlights the common significance of both the pre-existing space and the lost space, just like the moment the camera freezes, one side is the world within the lens, and the other side is the world that has already disappeared in the eyes, because the scene of the next moment cannot be preserved, but changes with the movement of the wind and grass. Therefore, in the sense of space, loss is equivalent to absence. Loss is not disappearance, but rather a nomadic journey to another undiscovered space. Loss also reveals the truth of drama.

In the game, the paintings serve two purposes. On one hand, their wandering nature, like ghosts, imbues the game rooms with a ghostly element, naturally involving Horror, but primarily fulfilling the designer’s intentions, and also echoing existing haunted theater concepts in horror theaters. On the other hand, the nomadic spaces within the paintings tell the truth, preserving the most genuine emotional elements, using fading spaces to generate other spaces, thereby triggering memory mechanisms and forcing the characters within the space to approach the truth through the traces of ghosts. So, what role do the game’s paintings play in the ghostly atmosphere and reshape the haunted theater? And how do they display fluorescence to achieve realistic memory?

In his book *The Ghostly Stage: Theatre as a Memory Machine*, Marvin Carlson argues that theatre, as a cultural activity, is closely related to memory and retelling. Theatre is essentially “ghostly” because it always creates a “ghostly” effect in the same setting, the same space, with the same bodies (stage and audience seating),

and the same material (Carlson, 2003). Ghost theatre creates an atmosphere that prompts the audience to constantly recall, treating the entire theatre as a phonograph of memories. Almost every element in theatrical creation is reused. Any audience member who frequently watches a performance in a theatre will recall the artworks they have previously encountered. This reuse and retelling of memories gives theatre a “ghostly” characteristic. In “Layers of Fear”, the paintings are nodes of memory. Although the game contains hundreds of spaces, as players become more proficient, they will find that the number of paintings in the game is limited, and the sudden appearance of paintings and their tracking of characters will trigger the characters’ memories of family and the purpose of piecing together fragments of handwriting. The primary nature of ghost and haunted theater is naturally about Horror, “in a haunted house, the door refuses to open or close... the isolation or return of something terrifying and partially forgotten” (Keshwinska & Han, 2022, p. 329). But as the scenes are repeated and the fear spreads, the fear gradually becomes fixed, and the memories attached to the fear also become primary. “Several paintings are highlighted in the game, sometimes fictional, sometimes real... space changes professions... becoming a reflection of the ravaged psyche” (Bogost, 2008, p. 136).

The ultimate goal of the game is to complete the artist’s painting, which takes different forms depending on the choices made. Therefore, in this open game structure, whichever painting is completed corresponds to another painting glowing, both echoing real memories and forming specific memory mechanisms. These mechanisms lead to three endings for the painter: repentance, madness, and a cycle of repetition—some of the game’s few truly authentic moments. The glowing painting stage not only connects to the external nomadic space but also serves as a place where memories occur, thus perfecting the authenticity of both art and memory. In the game, each time a key item is collected or a key event is completed, the painter can return to the studio to complete a part of the painting. Clues to each part are provided by other paintings in the room. The glowing paintings in the room correspond to different painting materials, forcing the painter to constantly recall his painting process. The other paintings are missing or represent six parts, which are later pieced together to reveal skin, blood, bone marrow, hair, fingers, and eyes—all from the painter’s deceased wife, ultimately fused into the bloody painting on the canvas. It is worth noting that a large number of paintings were discarded in a corner of the room, which seems to indicate the diversity of real memories and further highlights the nature of nomadic space and the fear of cycles, like a recurring nightmare.



Figure 4. Partially damaged painting.



Figure 5. Abandoned art studio.



Figure 6. The cycle ending—Wife.



Figure 7. Confession painting—Wife and daughter.



Figure 8. The mad ending—Self-portrait.

Digital Stand-in Practice: The Possibilities of Digital Theater

From paintings to spaces, *Layers of Fear* constructs a unique game landscape and provides a new way of integration at the level of images and spaces.

The use of game images to convey the fictional content of the game does not diminish the use of these artworks to tell a story through images... The narrative of image art and the art space to achieve the novelty and even drama of the game is also a new pictorial narrative medium comparable to the level of film. (Bogost, 2008, p. 139)

Through dynamic spatial design, the game creates an effect similar to the switching of theatrical scenes, and also uses space as a field for narrative and expression, and associates the game landscape with the theatrical stage, with atopia fiction and lost fluorescence.

In the game, the character goes through a psychological process from madness to collapse, and this psychological change is reflected through changes in space and environment. The painter's studio is sometimes bright and sometimes dark, sometimes messy and sometimes clean. This change reflects the dramatic conflict in the character's heart, and also achieves the effect of stage lighting and set design in the visual contrast. The sound effects and background music in the gameplay play a role similar to theatrical background music. The eerie music and the sudden sound effects create a tense and terrifying atmosphere. The player's exploration and design of the space also gives the player a strong sense of immersion. The electronic avatar of the game leads the player into a terrifying scene, realizing a certain degree of digital embodiment. "Layers of Fear does not transfer story elements in a constant space, but manipulates the space around the character to suggest the main storyline; players must move their avatars" (Beyvers, 2020, p. 56). This is not only a psychedelic horror chronicle, but also a new experiment in video game drama.

In 2011, Willoughby of the Department of Drama at Virginia Commonwealth University first proposed the concept of "Video Game Theatre" in his master's thesis, and it has since gained recognition from some people in the theater industry. There is no universally accepted definition of video game drama. Peng Luo once tried to define its meaning in "An Exploration of Video Game Drama", namely, "Video game drama is a general term for emerging stage performance art that uses language, action, dance, music, and other forms, based on the digital technology of video games, to achieve the purpose of immersive interactive narrative" (2022, pp. 85-86). The integration of games and drama is not difficult to achieve. As far as art forms based on Horror are concerned, the creation of Horror often tends to start from the immersive effect of the object, and to trace back the emotional

structure of the subject through immersive sensory experience, so as to achieve the dual purpose of psychological Horror and horror paradox. At other levels, games and drama also have a certain degree of overlap. In terms of narrative strategy, both video games and experimental drama use a spatial narrative and a non-central narrative. Moreover, drama also explores the potential of games from the integration of film and games, and turns to the pursuit of effective aesthetics (pp. 87-88).

In terms of theoretical exploration, as early as 2003, Huang Mingfen first proposed the emerging concept of “digital drama studies” in his research on drama and video games. It mainly explained the subject, object, medium, means, content, ontology, mode, environment, and mechanism of digital drama on the basis of pan-drama, and regarded video game drama as a type of “intelligent puppet show”. Zhou Ning then elaborated that it is a representative of interdisciplinary research in the second transformation of drama studies, and its “cross-disciplinary scope is so large that it may range from traditional humanities to modern information science” (Zhou, 2015, p. 102). Although the number of video game theater practices is small, EK Company, founded by Eddie King, a theater teacher and theater director in Connecticut, is constantly conducting such experiments. They are based on traditional theater adaptations, and real actors on stage interact with digital puppets controlled by backstage mechanics to recreate certain video game scenes. The 2021 Wuzhen Electronic Theater Festival’s screening of “The World in a Day” and “Game Boy” further heralded the emergence of the first year of video game theater in China. It is not difficult to find that the key factor for the birth of video game theater lies in the pursuit of immersion, and in the phenomenology of theater and film, it connects the substitute element in video games with itself. Games are inherently an adventure of substitutes, and when this adventure is fixed on the stage of theatrical art, this embodied performance that transcends physical factors fixes the experience of the incarnation in a specific field, and also foreshadows the possibility of video game theater.

When constructing video game drama, immersion is given primary consideration, especially visual immersion. In visual immersion, individuals, whether as viewers or players, participate in the objective experience before them. Beyond the visual aspect, horror games, as a form of entertainment, also possess a unique sense of eeriness. This sense compels participants not only to be immersed in the electronic screen but also to externalize the experience, incorporating their surrounding real environment, like an expanded “magic circle.”³ Ultimately, with the development of virtual reality technology and the addition of novel gameplay mechanics, video games will eventually complement “immersive gaming”, using the embodied as a medium to further connect the assumed reality of drama with the extension of the game’s magic circle. Performative virtual reality games will become the ultimate goal of the fusion of drama and games.

Emily Brown and Paul Keynes proposed the theory of game immersion. They believe that game immersion has three stages.⁴ To achieve the final complete immersion, vision is the primary factor that cannot be bypassed, because players will always mark the information they receive in front of them as the reality of their perception. Visual immersion further mobilizes the pleasure satisfaction of the desire organs, allowing players to enter the game world where “what you see is pleasure”. Although the reality of the senses will affect the player’s judgment

³ The term “magic circle” was first proposed by Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga to refer to the “absolute and special order” of the game world, which is distinct from everyday reality. The circle represents the artificiality of art, similar to the hypothetical nature of drama.

⁴ In the first stage of immersive experience, gamers invest more time, energy, and attention. In the second stage, gamers delve into the details of the game, attracted by its visual elements, mission segments, story plots, and other aspects. In the third stage of game immersion, players empathize with the game characters and are stimulated by the atmosphere created by the game’s format (such as images and sounds), thus achieving complete immersion.

of immersion, rather than relying solely on visual devices and the further deepening of visual reality, it is better to encourage players to

pay more attention to things that better meet their own value needs—that is, things in the virtual world that respond to their own similar or identical life experiences... break away from the development orientation of “visual realism” alone. (Ye & Chen, 2024, p. 445)

Therefore, technological breakthroughs are often not the most important virtual boundaries, and the degree of emotional investment of players seems to occupy a more important position. In addition to vision, as another aspect of emotional investment, an immersive illusion cannot be ignored. This is a necessary condition for the realization of digital drama. The illusion that tends towards art in the Horror of games is also what digital drama expects to achieve, because illusion comes from the immersion of imagination. Before the digital age, illusions were perceived as moving images in theaters, and later extended to any documentary footage. With the advent of gaming media, illusions are often achieved through fictional immersion, which is also a clue to the artistic achievement of digital theater. This cultural practice of fictional immersion is wide-ranging—from stage performances to painting, oral and written narratives, and contemporary video games—it brings a strong visual identification.

The immersive transformation of emotions comes from the participation of the body, and will also be accompanied by the body’s feedback to the emotional core, building a benign interactive field. Returning to video games, the substitute factor of the game comes from the body in the game. The game body is highly digitized, but it is not simply a virtual body. “It can be the most common, ubiquitous body of the player holding a mobile phone or game console... an adapted gamified digital body” (Wei, 2023, p. 53). “Virtuality provides an absent presence for the aesthetic subject. In the cyber space corresponding to the real space, humans can exist in the form of avatars” (Wang, 2023, p. 164). In the virtual space, if players want to believe that this is the world they can create and change, they must rely on immersive technology. “It can be said that video games not only require immersion to the maximum extent... Immersive technology refers to a multi-sensory (mainly visual and auditory) digital environment that expands or completely replaces the user’s real environment with digital content” (Ye & Chen, 2024, p. 55). The development of video games has gradually formed a digital phenomenology, just like the viewing phenomenology that arose after the development of theater and film media. Electronic avatars have expanded the ways of human practice and, at the same time, extended the transmission of the subject’s consciousness to the virtual digital world. In the digital world, avatars contain a dual embodied structure shift. In the past, embodiment was always an exploration of the mind and body. However, the emergence of the digital world is like a mirror space. The meta-universe that it constitutes is precisely the flashing and concentration of information from the real universe into digital code. The body is no longer a participant in the subject, but also a target. “Before video games, we really could not find another fulcrum besides the body... without getting rid of this bodily composition” (Lan, 2019, p. 77).

As a digital substitute, the game substitute is a concretization of the concept of substitute in digital performance, and also emphasizes the level of the body to achieve embodiment. The concept of substitute has a long history. In theatrical activities, substitutes have been presented in the form of puppet drama. “The projected substitute of the performer usually has a dialogue and duet with the live counterpart” (Dixon, 2007, p. 242). In the information and digital screen, digital substitutes follow the puppet show, from the graphic avatar of the virtual world to the manipulable human model, from virtual dancers to puppet substitutes. These substitutes

enrich the expressive forms and themes of digital performance. Similarly, video games build a more experiential substitute form with immersive game screens. Players change the relationship between players and characters by controlling substitutes, and at the same time, they also structure the definition of the player's self-subject identity. Like an inverted marionette, game characters generate pseudo-life in the game that is not purely dependent on the player, and further form a game ecology (Wang, 2023, p. 76). This theory is like the dual embodiment structure of the incarnation. On the one hand, the incarnation points to the real player, and on the other hand, the incarnation also includes the game character. The embodiment realizes the contextual meaning.

Using a substitute to connect reality and fiction, the flowing information transmitted within the line naturally leads back to emotions, and these emotions are most directly expressed by fear. This is an important reason why horror games are constantly emerging, and it is also a solid direction for breaking down the communication barriers of art media. In the emotional factors of Horror, facing familiar things, whether in video games, dramas, or reality, will breed grotesque Horror.⁵ The reason why the feeling of grotesque Horror is strange is precisely because this feeling occurs in the place where people should feel safest and most familiar. That is to say, the feeling of "not at home" or "uncomfortable" arises from the concept of home and familiar places (Freud, 2007). In the game "Layers of Fear", this grotesque Horror will be continuously deepened by the player's memory of the painting and the spatial structure of the painting, and the subject's perception will be exposed in familiar areas with familiar windowsills, cabinets, oil painting frames, and even some famous paintings, but then suddenly break all the intact spaces, or the painting will suddenly change into the plague to echo the inappropriate pendulum sound in the display, or the footsteps flickering in the floor plan. The perception of the bizarre is more common in Horror or immersive theater. The eerie lighting, pulsating visuals, and the stagnant stage after the initial shock all subtly evoke a sense of familiarity and unease. Games strive to avoid the absence of immersion, constructing game worlds like "Layers of Fear". The best way to do this is to break the game's magic circle, replacing the return to the real world with a universal sense of fear. The bizarre is precisely the optimal perceptual structure offered by this game. This perception of the bizarre places both players and viewers in a special interactive zone, much like the boundary between the hypothetical nature of drama and the game's magic circle, further returning to the dimension of the surrogate's reality. This inevitably leads to the issue of embodiment, existing between virtual information flow and reality.

Embodied, acting as a mediator, is often manifested in the interaction between games and movies. This is also the realization of digital embodiment, which in turn constructs some video "viewing phenomenology" and preserves the immersive experience of games. Immersion is precisely the future direction of drama and the initial definition of games. In digital embodiment, embodiment will develop into the player's sense of ownership and self-positioning over the virtual body, as well as the process of integrating the virtual image as a tool into the body schema. Embodied makes players feel that they are integrated with the virtual character, enhancing the immersive experience of the game (Hofer, Hüsser, & Prabhu, 2017). In the collision of different media, the mediating role of embodiment is manifested in the storage and operation of emotions, which requires mentioning the effects of Horror in movies and games. The Horror in games is stored in the digital embodiment practice of the character. That is to say, once the embodied perception of the character decreases, the Horror will be broken.

⁵ The concept of mystery and terror originates from Freud's psychoanalytic theory, first appearing in his work "On the Mysterious and Terrifying". He began by tracing the meanings of various word combinations from their roots, and then returned to literary works for further discussion, combining previous research to arrive at this conclusion. Freud believed that what evokes mystery and terror is something hidden and familiar, something that, though repressed, ultimately manifests itself.

Or, horror games are achieved in this way because horror games require more players to complete the whole process. Compared with movies, the digital embodiment practice in movies is more distributed in the plot and character orientation. This storage of emotions will play a more complex role. Body ownership and the integration of virtual images as tools into the body schema, “If the character expresses emotions... the emotional expression of the avatar transforms the monad back into a binary by destroying the materialization” (Dixon, 2007, pp. 20-22).

Under the mediation of embodied emotion, embodied practice will allocate the proportion of embodiedness around the storage and perception of emotion. However, whether it is watching in a theater or the audience’s direct participation in drama, complete embodiment and immersion will always be eliminated by external factors. So, how can we realize the digitization of drama on the ontology of embodiedness? And how can we closely link video games and drama? Returning to the ontological theory of games and drama, games construct falsehood and reality through their “magic circle”, while drama retains the principle of assumption and has profound performativity. Does this mean that replicating the performativity of video games with different technological media is enough to achieve the goal in an experimental setting? This inevitably leads us to look at so-called “virtual reality games”. This is related to the concept of “immersive games”. Immersive theater, for example, completely pulls.⁶ The audience is taken into the “inside” of the hypothetical nature of the theatrical performance, inviting the audience to “come on stage” and participate in the construction of the theatrical situation. This type of game practice expands the scope of the magic circle, and the direct result is that life situations are introduced into their own hypothetical structure (Gao, 2024). The boundaries between virtual and reality in games are blurred, and at the same time, immersive senses and emotions are placed on an equal footing with theatrical genres. True immersion is imminent, and the ideal of implicit drama breaking down the barriers of time and space is also deepened. At the technical level, the rise of VR has laid the technical foundation for virtual reality games, and at the same time, it has expanded the boundaries of the magic circle on the ontological level. It provides a phenomenological body, enriches the intersubjectivity of players, and also foreshadows the fusion of the hypothetical boundaries of drama. The phenomenological body based on “perceptual embodiment” in virtual reality embodies a paradoxical intersubjectivity: “I” am “I”, and at the same time, “another me”, but at the same time, players are gradually moving towards the identity of the role, and the performer will become the actor (Gao, 2025). The performative field then descends, and the hypothetical periphery will infinitely converge with the boundaries of the magic circle. It brings strong visual identification, blocks the embodied senses, and ultimately connects electronic doubles and digital drama.

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⁶ It adopts a broader methodology of cultural studies and game studies, mainly exploring the formal and aesthetic characteristics of immersive games by focusing on the relationship between the game world and the real world.

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