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Real World, Real Monsters: Adapting Gothic Horror for Location-Based Augmented-Reality Games

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INTRODUCTION

Gothic fiction has been reinvented several times, most recently in the 20th century for cinema and video games. This paper presents our experiences reinventing Gothic fiction once again, using the distinctively 21st century medium of the Location-Based Augmented-Reality Game. A number of other projects have used Gothic (or ghost) stories in the context of location-based augmented reality (Kretschmer et al, 2001; Dow et al, 2005; Ballagas et al, 2008), and while these projects are no longer available for analysis, we expect they have borrowed from Gothic traditions. What this paper aims to contribute is a theoretically informed and methodical way to go about such adaptation.

We present a postmortem of our award-winning game *Bram Stoker's Vampires* (2012). After introducing the core gameplay, we take our theoretical starting point in Fred Botting's introduction to the Gothic genre (1996) and discuss how themes, techniques, tropes and narrative methods from the Gothic in general, and *Dracula* in particular, were adapted for use in our game. We group the features under five headings: setting, narrative structure, temporal and spatial transgression and liminality. We then draw on Jesse Schell (2014) to discuss how the basic game elements— aesthetics, gameplay, story and technology—were chosen to adapt each particular Gothic feature to the medium of the location-based augmented-reality game.

CORE GAMEPLAY

Bram Stoker's Vampires casts players as paranormal investigators who equipped with paranormal detection devices (smartphones) explore the real world in search for paranormal activity. By collecting and analyzing an increasing body of evidence, players gradually construct the story in their minds and ultimately solve a mystery. The game falls within the categories of “locally staged treasure hunts” (Montola et al., 2009, pp.32–34) and “urban adventure games” (Montola et al., 2009, pp.42–44).

Bram Stoker's Vampires contains four “gameplay modes” (Adams, 2009). The Map helps coarse-grained player orientation by showing the player's location and an outline of the play area, but not the specific locations of paranormal encounters. The Radar enables a search/explore mechanic by showing a traditional “ship's radar” view of paranormal

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encounters in the vicinity but no terrain features, encouraging players to explore the site to get close to the encounters. When near an encounter, the Ghost Viewer enables a scan/capture mechanic where the player uses a “camera” (augmented reality) view to see visual spectres and capture them by taking photos. Photos go into the Casebook that also contains short profiles for the characters encountered. Game progression is structured in a non-linear fashion, allowing variation in the play experience. The game has two modes: *site-specific* in which it is set in a fixed location using curated geographical points for encounters, and *random* in which it stages itself to the player’s location.

SETTING

“Heavy historical trappings” (Botting, 1996) are used in many Gothic stories, and *Dracula* of course features a medieval lord as antagonist and a ruined castle and abbey as his homes. In site-specific mode, the game is set in Trinity College Dublin, a 16th century university campus, chosen for its atmospheric qualities as well as its historical relevance to Bram Stoker’s life. The campus serves as an encompassing Gothic “trapping” in which the player is immersed and helps Gothicize the game’s augmented-reality view and the paranormal photos collected during play.

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

Botting (1996) describes Gothic stories as “tortuous, fragmented narratives relating mysterious incidents, horrible images and life-threatening pursuits,” and *Dracula*’s form is deliberately fragmented: diary extracts, medical journal excerpts, personal letters and newspaper clippings. In *Bram Stoker’s Vampires*, we retained *structural* fragmentation by dividing the narrative into encounters that players experience in a non-linear fashion and must collate in their minds, similarly to the task performed by a reader of *Dracula*. We further added *spatial* fragmentation by scattering the fragments across the play area. Hence, the act of re-composing the narrative becomes not only an intellectual but also a physical act.

TEMPORAL TRANSGRESSION

Botting (1996) writes that “Gothic atmospheres ... have repeatedly signalled the disturbing return of pasts upon presents,” and *Dracula* is all about the past (Medieval Europe) intruding on the present (Victorian England). Table 1 shows this in terms of characters, setting and origin of the characters’ power. In *Bram Stoker’s Vampires*, we retained the temporal transgression of Count Dracula upon the Victorian characters, but replaced Dr Van Helsing with the ghost of Bram Stoker. Consequent changes were made in setting and origin of power, as shown in table 2. In addition, we added the present time, facilitating a three-pronged temporal transgression in which the player is haunted not only by the vampires, but also by their Victorian author, who is himself haunted by the monsters he created.

	Middle Ages (MA)	Victorian (V)
Character	Count Dracula	Van Helsing (& co.)
Setting	Transylvania	London
Origin of Power	Occult/Supernatural	Science

Table 1: Temporal Transgression in *Dracula*. Transgression happens from MA→V.

	Middle Ages (MA)	Victorian (V)	Present (P)
Character	Count Dracula	Bram Stoker	Player
Setting	Transylvania	Dublin	Reality
Origin of Power	Occult/ Supernatural	Literature	Technology

Table 2: Temporal Transgression in [REMOVED]. Transgression happens from MA→V, MA→P and V→P.

SPATIAL TRANSGRESSION

Botting (1997) writes that Gothic storytelling devices “destabilised the boundaries between psyche and reality, opening up an indeterminate zone in which the differences between fantasy and actuality were no longer secure,” and *Dracula* is an excellent example of such “a fiction with pretensions to ... veracity.” App Stores do not allow publishers to categorize games as utilities, so instead we designed our visuals to be photorealistic and to blend beautifully with the backdrop provided by the setting (figure 1) and also adopted a sophisticated mix of real world and game world audio in order to blur the boundary between fact and fiction (Paterson et al, 2010; 2013).

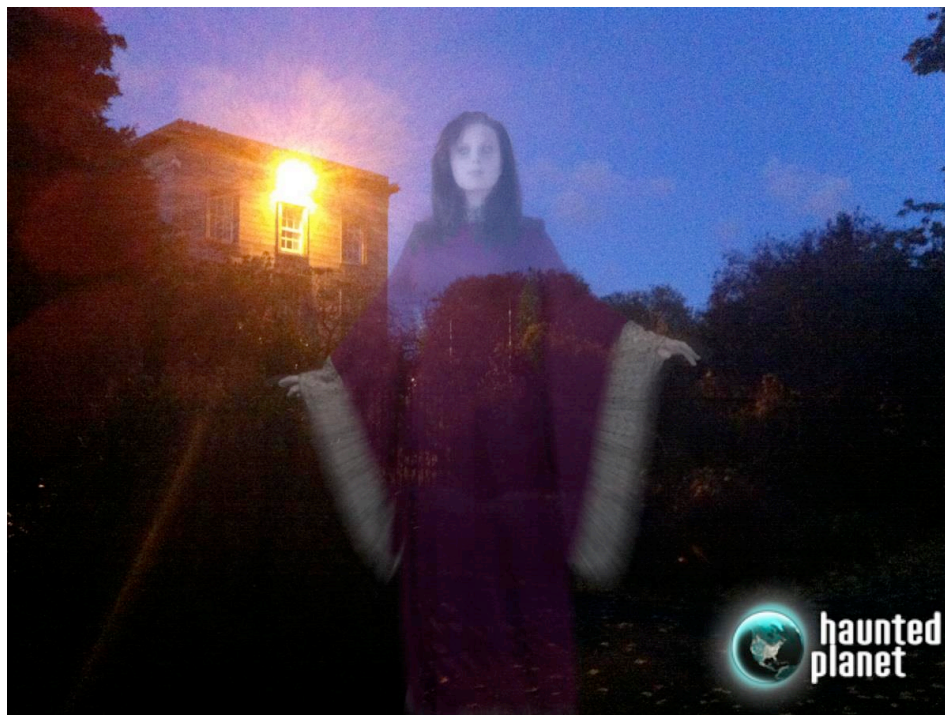


Figure 1: Player Photograph of Female Vampire

LIMINALITY

Henry James has stated that “a good ghost story ... must be connected at a hundred points with the common objects in life” (1865) and *Dracula* of course refers to much that would be familiar to an English contemporary (e.g., Mina’s typewriter, Dr Seward’s phonograph). In *Bram Stoker’s Vampires*, the smartphone handset is the common

technological object that our game transforms into a paranormal investigative tool, i.e., an artefact of science, which acquires fantastical properties, because it allows players to interact with a hidden ghostly world. The game world becomes a threshold space and the smartphone a liminal object that sits between the game world and the real world.

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