The Magic of GAMES
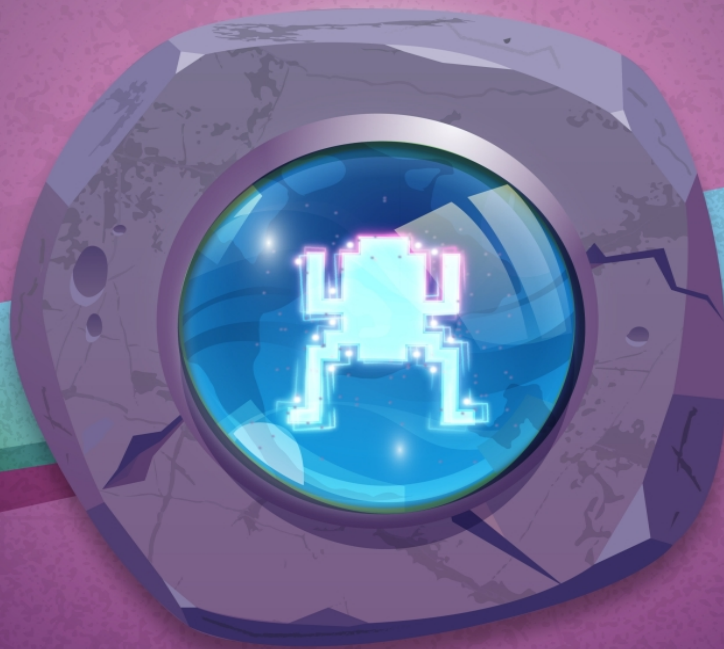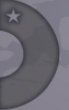
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THE MAGIC OF GAMES

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INTRODUCTION

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THE MAGIC OF GAMES

Magic, while usually considered not entirely real, affects our lives in many ways. It can be a soothing fantasy, a useful and potent metaphor, or at the very least a void we desire to be filled, the universal placeholder for all the voids that make up the human condition. So, we chase those magic moments and wait to feel the magic in the air; we aspire to create at least a modicum of magic in our crafts, and when we are at the end of our wits and abilities, more often than we'd like to admit, we give into a little bit of magical thinking.

Magic in its most general form (as acknowledged by the ancient tomes of Merriam-Webster) is "a power that allows people […]to do impossible things". It is the absolute (and thereby almost divine) ability to create, sometimes counter-intuitive, sometimes seemingly more intuitive than the strict, mechanical and demanding workings of the natural world. *Magic* promises freedom from the laws of physics and society, it represents power through knowledge and the skill to apply this knowledge to the world.

But by the same account, *Magic* is also "the art of producing illusions by sleight of hand": it is the dazzler's deceit, the tricks played on our mind (and our mind playing tricks), the deceptive gleam that diverts our gaze from the truth. *Magic* in this sense is something we need to beware of, lest it make fools of us. But it can also be something quite liberating, an escape from the cold hard truths of our daily

routines, the welcome fantasy that things may, for a while, be a little more interesting than they usually appear.

Between these two understandings of *Magic,* it quickly becomes clear that there is more than one connection between *Magic* and *Games.* In making games, we also exert the power to create otherwise impossible worlds; in playing games, we make experiences or gain abilities that are inaccessible in the real world (especially in times of a pandemic, when even access to the mundane aspects of the real world is often denied); in playing together, we make connections on a level that we can hardly achieve in daily live; when it comes to *Magic* itself, it is rarely so tangible as when represented in games; and finally, there is Johan Huizinga and his *Magic Circle* – the gift that almost magically keeps on giving by providing generations of game scholars with cause for debate and controversy, ranging from discussions of its general usefulness to the burning of argumentative strawmen and the not so basic question why Huizinga chose to put his concept in the context of *Magic* in the first place.

The 15th Vienna Games Conference "Future and Reality of Gaming" (FROG) 2021 - hosted by the University of Krems' Center for Applied Game Studies in cooperation with the Austrian Federal Chancellery - has gathered game scholars, creators, educators and activists to come together and address the Magic of Games in its many forms. The results of these stimulating, thought-provoking and often controversial discussions can be found in this anthology, which we have divided into four parts that reflect the primary focal points of the conference.

The first part ("Representations of Magic in Games") looks at how (and why) magic is represented in games as a subject, as a narrative device, as a game mechanic and as a metaphor. What can representations of magic in games tell us about our real-life desires and perceived limitations? How is magic idealized and how do its representations naturalize the superiority of the few, the (super)natural order of power and the false equivalence of spirituality and science? In this part, *Katarzyna Marak* takes a culture-conscious look at how magic is employed as a game mechanic and as a narrative element in independent horror games, and how it relates to immersion and agency, and along the way explores the medium-specific ways in which digital games shift our expectations of horror experiences in general; *Miłosz Markocki* pinpoints the intersection of game mechanics and narrativity by examining how different kinds of magic can influence and shape the identity of a game world's characters, communities or classes, employing examples from digital games as well as tabletop role-playing games; *Doris C. Rusch* and *Andrew M. Phelps* discuss how, in their game The Witch's Way, they have conceptualized magic as a "resource of the Earth", and how such a kind of magic may help us address the individual and collective issues we face today; and *Hossein Mohammadzade* and *Atefe Najjar Mansoor* argue that magic in games is often used as a metaphor for science that can help us understand how science is often instrumentalized and mystified in real life and avoid the dangerous illusion of an apolitical science.

In the second Part ("The Magic of Creating through Games"), we deal with the question how to harness the power of game design to create impossible worlds, to examine new ideas, to test new solutions and to conquer otherwise mortifying challenges of life; but also how this power can be

used to manipulate and to make false arguments deceptively convincing (not only, but also in regard to COVID-19). Here, *Clio Montrey* examines the magic of fantasy worldbuilding through music, exploring music as an atmospheric, dramatic and immersive device, and drawing a line from classical music to today's videogames. *Benjamin Hanussek* and *Tom Tucek* argue how moral complexity can be used as a game design element that can transform our play experiences, and how moral choice can be implemented as an engaging challenge in games; *Alexander K. Seewald* and *Alexander Pfeiffer* showcase a Magic Mirror they have created based on augmented reality technologies, which lets users take on a potentially unlimited number of appearances -they discuss potential applications of their creation, and consider privacy issues related to such uses; and *Frank Pourvoyeur* presents his reflections on randomness in games, the advantages that an "intention-based luck modifier" might have over the use of simple random number generators, and what game designers can learn from real practitioners of Chaos Magick.

The third part ("Magics of Immersion and Transformation in Games") considers how can the joy of suspending disbelief and creating belief in games can give meaning not only to our play, but to the rest of our lives? How is it that games let us grow beyond our everyday personas by putting us in artificial situations, but still let us connect to each other on a level much more personal than most real-life encounters can provide? Has COVID-19 changed our desire, ability and necessity to immerse in virtual worlds? And how does this immersive quality of games sometimes keep us from seeing beyond the game where we should? Addressing these questions, *Josephine Baird, Sarah Lynne Bowman* and *Kjell Hedgard Hugaas* approach role-playing groups as

transformational containers, which offer players opportunities to safely explore new aspects of their identities, and discuss how new relationship frames opened up through role playing games can not only let players experience intimacy within games, but also allow them to transform intimacy in real life – not without considering how these explorations can take place safely, consensually, and on a basis of trust; *Christin Reisenhofer* and *Andreas Gruber* show how digital games have helped adolescents through the COVID-19 crisis by providing experiences of agency, relationship building and an opportunity to escape from the pandemic's dire social consequences – all based on the findings of a qualitative study conducted in Austria and Germany; *Markus Meschik* presents and discusses a qualitative survey which highlights the mechanisms and dangers of "dark patterns" in digital game financing, which can put especially adolescents under their spell and, at worst, cause serious cognitive distortions; and *Sonja Gabriel* asks how educational games can draw on the magic of fairy tales, either by using narrative elements borrowed from fairy tales, by integrating fairy tale logics into the game mechanics, or by becoming modern, interactive fairy tales in their own right.

The fourth part ("Magic Circles in the Games Discourse") turns the gaze inward, to those who think about games, and to the *magic circles* that determine the form of the discourse on games: how can we, as game scholars, creators, and activists, make the magic of games tangible beyond our own circles, magic or otherwise? What are the roots of today's games discourse, and how deeply are we still entangled in obsolete concepts? What *is* a *Magic Circle* in the first place? And what are the enchantments that we find ourselves under, which make us see some things about games (and about

ourselves), while obscuring the view of others? In this final part, *Alexis Ibarra Ibarra* examines how videogame exhibitions can capture the magic of videogames, and how the aesthetic qualities of videogames can be remediated in physical spaces; *Damiano Gerli* takes a closer look at the first "magic word" in the history of digital games – leading to a discussion of cheat codes as magic tricks; using the crowdfunded board-game World Control as a starting point, *Ivo Antunic* presents the idea of "Playerism" – a form of populism that relies on an inability to distinguish between play-worlds and ordinary life – as well as the presence (or absence) of physical magic circles throughout history; *Nikolaus Koenig* and *Gabrielle Trépanier-Jobin* take a close look at Huizinga's magic circle metaphor, and – by digging out its magical aspects – show how its use within today's game studies discourse might actually conceal its potential as an empowering and liberating concept that, while being firmly rooted in history, would well befit today's social and political discourse; and finally, *Tobias Unterhuber* draws back the curtains to unveil the workings of a remarkable magic trick - the Fountain of Youth that, even after two decades, still gives Game Studies the appearance of being a young discipline – and sheds a light on the functions, implications and often not so desirable effects of a cloaking spell that might put Dorian Gray to shame.

This publication, as well as the conference that has spawned it, would not have been possible without the help of the fabulous contributors who have acted as speakers, authors and reviewers, and who have once again pushed the boundaries of our field. Special thanks go out to Herbert Rosenstingl, whose patronage over the event has, once again, been invaluable. And finally, we are grateful to the greater FROG community, for continuously providing an environment

in which critical reflection, bold ideas, and friendly cooperation can thrive. You create real life magic, and we are thankful for that!

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Representations
of
MAGIC in GaMes

PLAYER'S POWERS: MAGIC AS MECHANICS AND AS NARRATIVE IN INDEPENDENT HORROR GAMES

Katarzyna Marak

The paper discusses the medium-specific ways in which magic is portrayed and used in v H. independent digital horror games. The two most important factors taken into consideration are the practical employment of magic, examined in terms of mechanics, and the fantastical employment of magic, discussed in terms of the narrative. Both these components are significant in horror fiction as a genre, where magic is primarily depicted as a source of threat, and only occasionally as the means to defend oneself - depending on the culture-related politics of magic. Such portrayal of magic does conform to the medium of digital games, but also breaks with the strict long-established convention of typical literary and film horror narratives in a medium-dependent way. Using a number of selected examples, the paper will examine specific representations of magic in game texts, with particular emphasis placed on the relationship between magic and immersion, as well as magic and agency.

Introduction: Magic in Fiction

The presence of magic[1] in fiction goes far back in time, with magic itself being defined, portrayed, and represented in numerous ways. In everyday life, magic is not something that can be empirically observed or proven. There are people who believe in magic, and there are many people who disregard the very concept. Therefore, texts of popular media which concern magic require suspension of disbelief, which needs to be created and maintained. The rules according to which magic functions in fiction should be coherent and clear to "optimally/efficiently maintain" that suspension (Howard, 2014). In the imaginary worlds emerging from popular fiction, home to powerful entities, dangerous creatures, intimidating spell-casters and mystical places, the fantastic scale and ingenuity can occasionally make an odd demand on the audience's suspension of disbelief, but not that often; as J. R. R. Tolkien argued, this is due to the fact that the audience, when giving fantasy fiction credence, do more than just suspend disbelief (by willingly abandoning critical thinking in examining fictional texts for the sake of enjoying the text). While he does not go into detail about what this "more" is, he refers to it as "poetic faith" (Martin, 2019).

An honest examination of any aspect of horror games requires placing them in a broader context of other horror

texts. The same poetic faith attitude observed in readers and viewers extends to horror game players, especially when the game places emphasis on lore; this focus on lore, as Joshua Bycer points out, can make it difficult for the player to "resonate with the character or become interested in the story", especially taking into consideration that "[m]any modern horror games are all about dealing with situations and events that have already happened" (Bycer, 2022). However, independent horror games tend to be small in scope, ranging from several minutes to several hours of gameplay time; as such, they are "meant to be a limited experience and too short to grow [a meaningful emotional] connection" with the avatar (Bycer, 2022). Therefore, engaging fantastic settings and challenges are even more welcome and readily accepted by the players of independent horror games.

This paper is devoted to horror games featuring magic and the way the use of magic in those texts affects the player experience. The two most important factors taken into consideration are the practical employment of magic, discussed in terms of mechanics, and the fantastical employment of magic, discussed in terms of the narrative. Both these components are particularly significant in horror fiction in general, where magic is primarily depicted as a source of harm and peril, and only occasionally as the means to defend oneself - often depending on the culture-related politics of magic of the culture depicted in the game text itself.

There are numerous perspectives on and definitions of magic. As a point of reference for this paper, "magic" can be characterized as calling upon invisible sources that would make it possible for a person or persons to influence events

and affect change in the material world. While discussing magic in games, Jeff Howard situates its representation in a broader context suggesting that there are

two major traditions as potential influences for game magic through which the human imagination has represented and theorized magic - fictive magic and occult magic. Fictive magic refers to sorcery as represented in the literature of the fantastic, broadly conceived to include ancient mythology, medieval romance, and especially modern fantasy. Fictive magic is one of the richest and most direct potential sources of inspiration for game magic. (Howard, 2014).

The other kind of magic described by Howard - "occult magic" - is, on the other hand, any magic in fiction that is or is not related to actual, real-life mythologies, rituals, spells or practices (Howard, 2014). It refers to existing mystical practices among people who believe the veracity of (Howard, 2014) magicoreligious complexes (Pyysiäinen, 2004). For the purpose of this paper, there will be no distinction drawn between religious and non-religious magic, and both of them are discussed as belonging to the same category of magico-religious complexes, seeing as it is not possible to "meaningfully differentiate between magic and religion" (Pyysiäinen, 2014).

The genres most commonly associated with employing magic are primarily fantasy and, to a lesser extent, horror, specifically supernatural horror. As far as the fantasy genre is concerned, magic in a variety of forms tends to be embedded in the depicted world in one way or another, whereas in the case of horror fiction it more often than not constitutes some

sort of supernatural intrusion into the natural order of things (Marak, 2014). Additionally, in contrast to fantasy fiction, which can introduce terror or horror elements but rarely lays particular emphasis on scaring its audience, horror fiction does strive to frighten the audience. Texts of both genres can feature a dangerous werewolf, for example, and the reader or viewer of either remains aware that the werewolf, while presenting a danger to the characters of the fictional world, poses no real threat to them; however, the horror genre aims to create a situation in which emotional responses of the audience will mirror to a certain degree responses of the protagonists of horror texts, thus provoking an emotion which Noël Carroll identifies as art-horror (Carroll, 1990). Curiously, whether or not the threat is realistic (e.g., a human attacker with a knife) or fictitious (a werewolf) makes little difference as far as evoking art-horror is concerned - presumably because not only younger audiences, but also many adults regard supernatural entities such as werewolves, mermaids, or zombies as frightening (Coelho et al., 2021). These characters hold an important place in horror texts belonging to a variety of media (Coelho et al., 2021), such as literature, film, comics, or games. Suspension of disbelief does not seem to be affected by the nature of the threat, since horror texts featuring supernatural elements "tend to trigger the same networks as real-life stimuli" as far as experiencing fear is concerned, "suggesting that supernatural fears recruit the same evolved brain mechanisms as natural fears" (Coelho et al., 2021).

For the most part, magic in horror fiction tends to be depicted primarily as a menacing threat to human characters - either innocent or otherwise. Making magic available as a means of attack or protection for the protagonists would counter the core of horror fiction, which requires protagonist

to be in a position of helplessness and frailty. Although not unheard-of, magic in horror rarely is or even can be used for defensive purposes; such application is by no means absent in horror texts, merely scarce, and is usually presented as a character handling a magic object or creature (as can be seen in *The Harbor* by John Ajvide Lindqvist). Additionally - and, one might argue, more importantly in certain cases - magic in horror fiction tends to be portrayed according to the culture-related politics of magic. In other words, the manner in which magic is portrayed is connected with arbitrary values and relationships of power understood as the given supernatural phenomenon being perceived as morally charged and either granted or denied a place within sacrum. Due to the fact that the global horror fiction market, especially popular culture, appears to be heavily influenced by the American market - mostly owing to the sheer number of available texts and the relative linguistic accessibility of the English language - mystical practices tend to be portrayed with little care for cultural accuracy; there exist texts which attempt to provide accurate context, such as the more recent film *The Old Ways* (2020), but they remain a minority. The dominant perception and portrayal of magic in horror fiction, especially mainstream horror fiction, is oftentimes based on a division between the Western Judeo-Christian religion and the "alternative spiritual paths," which tend to include within and overlap with the label of "occult" (Fry, 2008) "Occult" is a nebulous descriptor with no single, agreed upon definition. As mentioned before, according to Howard, "occult magic refers to human mystical practices amongst people who on some level believe that magic is real (such as voodoo or Western ceremonial magick)" (Howard, 2014), a definition which in itself points to this stereotypical division. For example, Carrol Lee Fry uses the term "occult" in the following way:

Belief in the literal truth of the Bible and atheism are opposite extremes in the national discourse on religion. … A goodly part of those classified in the latter category are among the millions of people who have totally opted out of traditional Christianity and Judaism to follow alternative spiritual paths called New Religious Movements… . They include world religions that are hardly new but are at least new to the United States, brought by the waves of immigration following World War II. … A significant number of these religious paths can only be categorized under the heading of occult. (Fry, 2008).

Such interpretation of what occult is and the assumption that Judeo-Christian practices are somehow fundamentally separate from any other magico-religious ones, results in a portrayal of magic in horror texts which presents any practice outside the Judeo-Christian context as associated with danger and evil - from narratives like *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), *The Craft* (1996), through *The Curse of La Llorona* (2019). As permeating as it is, this portrayal offers the audience a very reductive perspective on magic. It overlooks mystical practices belonging to other world religions (e.g., Buddhism, Ifá, Shinto etc.), excluding concepts, practitioners, and technicians of the sacred, including medicine people, priests/priestesses, or monks/nuns, as well as artifacts and objects of magic significance.

This dimension of culture-related politics of magic is almost non-existent in games, and as a result a variety of mystical practices of various origins is depicted. This might be related to the fact that there exist numerous American Hollywood remakes of works of international cinema, making them

available to wider audiences while simultaneously restructuring the original supernatural concept; examples of this include *The Ring* (2002), *Shutter* (2008), *Quarantine* (2008), or *Mirrors* (2008). A similar effect can be noticed in American film adaptations of games, as it is the case with the 2006 film *Silent Hill.* In the case of the game industry, by contrast, both localizations of AAA games as well as the availability of independent titles with English subtitles translates into the players being exposed to a greater variety of portrayals and explanations of magic. While playing games such as *Stigmatized Property* (2020), *Unforgiving: A Northern Hymn* (2017), *Through the Woods* (2016), or *Detention* (2017), the player will encounter, respectively, Shinto shrines, objects and gods from Nordic mythology, rune stones, and all manner of rituals and artifacts meant to seek the guidance of boddhisatvas and ancestors. However, titles like *Faith* (2017) or *Evil Possession* (2017) offer the player little to no backstory or means of seeking advice or help.

Engagement: Magic and Immersion

Audiences open to fantastic and magical settings and elements tend to be imaginative and flexible, "happy to suspend disbelief in aid of a good tale and eager to enter a wide array of invented worlds," and to "appreciate magic of all kinds, from magical creatures to magical spells to magical places" (Wyatt and Saricks, 2019). In games, the representation of magic is diverse, showcasing both the relationship between magic and immersion as well as, more importantly, the relationship between magic and agency through actions and objects. These actions and objects correspond to those generally associated with actual mystical

practices; actions constitute spells and rituals, namely the use of words or numbers possessing innate power, and ritual actions allowing to manipulate supernatural beings and forces. Objects, on the other hand, include artifacts and talismans, which are potent or sacred in the nature of their power.

This paper is devoted to the way the use of magic in games affects the player experience specifically in horror games. Due to the limited scope of the text, for the purpose of this paper the games discussed will be limited to horror games featuring magic, and not all supernatural horror games. To clarify, supernatural horror games are, in this context, games where the characters are powerless against the supernatural, or games that present a depicted world that features no explicit explanation as to the nature of the supernatural character of that world. Horror games featuring magic, on the other hand, not only make it possible, but actually require the player to perform magic-related tasks, such as spellcasting, ritual preparation or warding in order to proceed. With the subject of analysis narrowed down to these constrains, titles such as *Plead with the Mountain God* (2020), *The Night Way Home* (2021), *Pamali: Indonesian Folklore Horror* (2019), *Prognostic* (2021) and *Colina: Legacy* (2018) would fall into the category of horror games featuring magic, while *The Shore* (2021), *Dispatch* (2020), *Post-Trauma Demo* (2021), *Timore 6* (2018) or *Balavour* (2020) would not, being supernatural horror games.

Since horror games are still horror texts, the player experiences magic most often as the source of threat and terror: curses and spells cast on characters, or instances of summoning demons, various Antichrist characters, or other

destructive entities. Sometimes the magic is vaguely familiar even if the entities themselves are fictional, but such arrangement is rather rare. It does, however, occur in a few games, examples being God in *Silent Hill* (1999) or the Hunter in *The Ritual on Weylyn Island* (2015). In both cases, magic is the main cause of the threat in the game, but it is not the source of immediate danger; this role is fulfilled instead by the worshipers, and to a certain degree by the creatures related to the magic.

Horror games featuring magic portray it as unambiguously capable of influencing events and effecting change in the depicted world. Therefore, the use of magic has the potential to facilitate immersion. In order to do so, the game magic must work according to a system conforming to clear rules and must empower the protagonist. As the player's immersion and engagement with the magic system are established, enhanced, and maintained, the gap between the player's decision and actions and the avatar's performance becomes narrower.

A closer examination of how immersion can be created and maintained in horror games featuring magic can aid in understanding the game features involved, as well as the contribution of some creative choices. For example, *Pamali: Indonesian Folklore Horror* (2019) gives the player control over a character who has just inherited a run-down house after his parents' death. The task of the avatar is to prepare the house for sale by cleaning it and sorting through the family belongings. The player can interact with numerous items, from household objects such as scissors or combs, to fetishes, ceremonial objects, and personal belongings. Some of the

items, such as the wedding memorabilia, appear to be regular items, while others can be immediately recognized as culturally charged, such as the *jenglot* (Marak, 2021b). Since the avatar starts out with virtually no magic-related knowledge, any and every element of the visual environment can have potential magic significance. The game world of *Pamali* is actually one of the better examples illustrating how magic can be effectively and unobtrusively incorporated into the game text.

A game comparable in its incorporation of magic into the virtual environment is *Detention* (2017). While the depicted world of the game is set in 1960s Taiwan under martial law, the virtual environment represents the hell realm in which the protagonist remains trapped, unable to resolve her evil deeds and guilt. The hell realm appears to her - and, consequently, the player - as her high-school building falling into darkness and ruin, where dangerous hungry spirits and other entities now roam the halls. The game world integrates both objects and interactions that affect the gameplay directly (divination packets, offerings) as well as elements which are significant to the overall experience, but not crucial for progression (e.g., praying, examining certain items). Adding ritual practice to the narrative allows to transfer selected cultural aspects to the in-game experience.

Other examples include *Project Nightmares Case 36: Henrietta Kedward* (2021) or *The Conjuring House* (2018), in which there are game world elements which affect the avatar's - and, once again, the player's - perception and comprehension of the depicted world, such as the special glass which allows the player to see what is normally hidden

in *Project Nightmares* or magic artifacts in *The Conjuring House.* In *Curse* (2016), on the other hand, the avatar has at their disposal a variety of magic objects as well as the knowledge of effective actions and rituals which allow the player to both gather information and progress through the game. This kind of integration of magic into the depicted world, the virtual environment, and therefore into the very fabric of the gameplay experience leads to a greater level of immersion; such incorporation, additionally, works especially well in the medium of a game.

Empowerment: Magic as Agency

In the context of works of fiction, art-horror is more directly related to the way the characters' reaction to threat is portrayed than a truly subjective response of the viewer or reader. Specifically, outside of games, the audience is supposed to resonate with "emotional features that authors and directors attribute to characters molested by monsters" (Carroll, 1990). Game texts create space for the horror fiction to continuously evolve and explore the "dark corners of humanity in ways that no other medium can," moving "away from just emulating horror in other media" (Rouse III, 2006). The crucial difference and, simultaneously, key feature a horror scholar has to keep in mind while studying the potential and mechanisms of action of horror game texts is the player's agency, understood here as their ability to respond to the call of the machine (Murray, 2017), and also as their control over the avatar's action (how to move, when etc.). Horror games can employ adequate and unique mechanics fitting the game world reality (Rouse III, 2006), as well as the expectations of the audience. The player can be granted power

through which they can actually influence the depicted world. Magic in game texts not only contributes to enjoyable world building for those players who appreciate such themes, but also makes it possible for them to explore concepts such as bravery, sacrifice, revenge, or power (Wyatt and Saricks, 2019) in a way more meaningful than it is possible in other media. The reason for this is that magic can be employed in game texts as player actions understood as anything from player verbs and mechanics to the overall gameplay experience. Especially independent digital horror games employ magic according to the medium-specific logic. One method is the storytelling and world-building employment of magic in the narrative; the other is the ludic representation - the active use of magic in the form of mechanics.

The idea of magic as an action available to the player is especially important in the context of horror games. Many independent horror games include supernatural enemies and magical objects or entities, while at the same time giving the player little to no means of defending themselves or attacking. In numerous titles, the avatar will confront the supernatural enemy with regular weapons (as can be seen in *Silent Hill, The Boogeyman* or *Perception* (2017)); even more often they will be offered no weapon at all (like in *Song of Horror* (2020), *Timore 6* or *Dispatch).* Consequently, the player is aware of the presence of the enemy, which constitutes an embodied threat, thus making the player's experience of the game as a text belonging to the horror genre more subjective and direct (Marak, 2021c). In this sense, magic can be interpreted as an instance of embodied agency since the player is offered a chance to confront the monster on a more or less equal footing. Additionally, seeing that "[f]ear of supernatural agents differs from common phobic objects ... as they have no

referents in the empirical world" (Coelho et al., 2021) it stands to reason that the player, in order to both experience the agency to the fullest and battle such threats, needs "weapons" whose power cannot be measured or visually observed in the empirical world as well.

From this perspective, magic makes it possible for the player to exercise agency in a meaningful way; the previously mentioned potent objects and sacred places actually affect, directly and immediately, the gameplay results. For example, in the symbolic oneiric sequences of *Detention,* the player can use the food offerings[2] to distract the ghost at the time and spot of their choice in order to get away. In *Night Way Home* (2021), the player can obtain an ōnusa, a wand of purification (mistranslated in the game as "harae", which is the action of using the wand) normally used to purify evil[3]. The wand works reliably every time, just like food offerings in *Detention,* but in both cases the player must rely on their reflexes and strategizing to make the most of the defensive capacity of those items.

In *Project Nightmares,* the player can create a salt barrier by pouring a line of salt to obstruct the enemy's route; if successful, the barrier will stop the phantom pursuing the avatar, allowing them to escape. The barrier, like the food offerings in *Detention* and wand of purification in *Night Way Home,* is reliable, allowing the player a sense of safety. In *Evil Possession* (2017), the player's quest is to set up a ritual to exorcise a demon out of a possessed girl; while the gameplay involves other mechanics and elements, there are stages to preparing the ritual, which - once all the steps have been completed - works without fail.

Sometimes the blend of ludic employment of magic with the narrative incorporation of magic might result in a slightly confusing gameplay - in *Detention,* for instance, some magic objects prove effective, while others do not; this, however, does not mean that the magic itself is unreliable. For example, the wooden moon blocks[4], meant to call upon divine assistance, may be seen by the players as ineffective, since they do not receive any noticeable or meaningful help; however, in the context of the story this lack of response makes sense, since the protagonist is trapped in a hell realm until she resolves her guilt and karma. This cannot be done for her by gods. The items and actions are available to the player, but do not affect the game outcome; even if the avatar performs those actions, she herself is unaware of the fact that they will not work or the reason for which they will not work.

A similar experience - in the sense that the final game outcome is unalterable due to circumstances unknown to the player during their first playthrough - is offered by another game, *Curse*, which employs its magic in a completely different manner. Throughout the game and until the very end, the player has at their disposal all the items and mechanics which are, at that time, dependable and effective (e.g., gaining information by using the ouija board, performing rituals to banish spirits, or opting for psychic reading to see that which is hidden). However, at the very end, when the player uses all the skills, objects, and spells - seemingly successfully - to defeat the evil spirits, the ending of the game reveals a twist, whereupon the player learns that the protagonist had been sent to the Atherton mansion as a sacrifice for the haunted house. It could be speculated that the difference between *Detention* and *Curse* lies in the protagonists themselves; in *Detention,* the player can learn