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"Even's nightmare was just beginning…": Lost in Random and the Gothic Tradition

Abstract

The Gothic is a hybrid mode with the ability to merge with other media forms, and, predictably, it has been adapted into video games. Gothic themes, motifs, tropes, characters, and settings are often appropriated, transformed, and assimilated to in-game narratives and mechanics. Indeed, looking back at the history of video games, game designers have been frequently drawing on the Gothic by representing labyrinthine spaces, ghostly enemies, and uncanny objects (Kirkland, "Gothic" 109). In Lost in Random (Zoink AB, 2021), the Gothic is prominent in its narrative, atmosphere, and aesthetics. The game features decaying, haunted, liminal settings and bodies that offer possibilities to transgress and subvert boundaries and unveil a hidden past that refuses to fade away. This article examines the intersections between Lost in Random and the Gothic tradition. Focusing on the themes of transgression, subversion, liminality, past, and duality, it observes, on the one hand, how these themes are present in a cultural work that falls into the strand of 'happy Gothic,' as introduced by Spooner, and, on the other, how the Gothic works in Lost in Random.[1]

Keywords: Gothic, video game studies, transgression, duality, liminality, subversion, Lost in Random

Once upon a time, in the kingdom of Random, there lived a mad Queen who controlled a mysterious black dice. By her decree, every child of Random would be given the honor of rolling the dice on their twelfth birthday to determine which realm of the kingdom they belonged to, thereby deciding their fate for all eternity. Roll a one and the child would be sent to Onecroft, destined to live a life of struggle. … Roll a six, and they would live a life of luxury in the Queen's dark palace. Or so it was told…

("A Twisted Fairytale")

1. Video games and the Gothic: A Framework

Lost in Random (Zoink AB, 2021) is a Gothic fairy-tale-inspired action-adventure video game in which the roll of a die determines one's fate. The protagonist, Even, watches her sister, Odd, as she rolls a six on her twelfth birthday and is taken by the wicked Queen of Random to the idyllic Sixtopia, destined to live happily ever after. A year after losing Odd, Even wakes up to find a ghost hovering over her bed. The ghostly figure is holding the plush doll she gave to Odd as a gift before she was taken to Sixtopia. Fearing for her sister's well-being, Even follows the ghost through Random to rescue her. In this journey, Even meets Dicey, a sentient die that becomes her trusted companion. Together, they fight to end the Queen's reign and reinstate true randomness to Random.

This Burtonesque fairy-tale game relies on transmedial labels, termed 'milieu,[2] drawing from a Gothic visual aesthetic and building a narrative around traditional Gothic conventions, including transgression, subversion, liminality, a haunting past, and duality. This article, to explore the intersections between Lost in Random and the Gothic tradition, analyses these themes through the lens of game studies, considering the work of game scholars who approach the presence of Gothic in the in-game narrative, mechanics, and representational style of video games. The analysis also comprises studies focusing on Gothic literature and other forms of culture, a critical approach that has been met with criticism. As game scholar Ewan Kirkland states, for some scholars in the field, applying concepts drawn from Gothic studies to the analysis of video games "resemble[s] a reductive effort to explore digital games using inappropriate concept designs to analyse very different media" (Videogames and the Gothic 8). Kirkland defends the appropriation and application of conceptual frameworks derived from other Gothic media because "videogames can be situated within traditions of Gothic culture" (8). These frameworks are essential to the study of the Gothic in video games, especially given that, since its literary emergence in the eighteenth century with the publication of Horace Walpole's The Castle of Otranto (1764), the Gothic has proven to have an extraordinary capacity to adapt to and merge with other media forms.

Indeed, Catherine Spooner compares Gothic narratives to a malevolent virus that has "escaped the confines of literature and spread across disciplinary boundaries to infect all kinds of media" (Contemporary Gothic 8). Kirkland and Tanya Krzywinska back up the Gothic's ability to infect other media. In their contemplations, Kirkland states that the Gothic is a trans-media genre ("Gothic Videogames" 106), while Krzywinska underlines that the "Gothic's capacity for constant and definition-bruising reinvention is evident through the ease of its adaptation into game form" ("The Gamification of Gothic" 58). Hence, in video games, Gothic themes, motifs, tropes, characters, and settings are appropriated, transformed, and assimilated to in-game narrative and mechanics. For instance, Laurie N. Taylor coins the term 'ludic-gothic' to differentiate between video games featuring Gothic aesthetics and those in which the Gothic is tied to gameplay – that is, it refers to the "games that may be generically classified as horror or Gothic, but which are dependent on the boundary crossing that is definitional to the Gothic in other forms" (Taylor 48). As she further explains, the ludic-gothic is generated when the video game medium transforms the Gothic to "show how borders and boundaries can be erected using cutting-edge technology while also being subsumed into a process that undermines the transparency and hierarchy that technology brings" (57). In Limits of Horror: Technology, Bodies, Gothic (2008), Fred Botting considers the relationship between technology, video games, and the Gothic, arguing that

> *[u]nlike the world of fiction, where superstitious credulity and imaginative identification are required to make the leap of realising, in emotional effect at least, fictions, [video games] perform the work of visualisation themselves, while continuing to play with patterns of anticipation, expectation and shock that constitute the minimal Gothic plot. (84)*

These explorations focus primarily on survival horror video games, such as Doom (1993), Resident Evil (1996-), and Silent Hill (1999-2014), and the pervasive feelings of dread and anxiety that arise from the implementation of Gothic elements into in-game functions.

A wide range of video games exhibit Gothic elements and characteristics, whether they be classified as Gothic or not.[3] In Videogames and the Gothic (2021), Kirkland argues that "there is something inherently Gothic about the videogame medium"; that is,

[v]ideogames have always featured labyrinthine spaces, patrolling ghouls, locked doors, secret rooms, hidden passageways, arcane puzzles, and death. Games designers working across different series, cycles and genres have incorporated dungeons and dragons, neo-medieval fantasy, spooky houses, dark industrial spaces, detective protagonists and narratives of traumatic pasts into their work. (4)

The Gothic is further identifiable in in-game functions, including "tension between player agency and game-pre-determination," "inconsistent narrative worlds," "uncanny doubling of avatar as boss battle adversary," "scarred games spaces testifying to the inescapable influence of the past on the present," and "non-participatory digital films intruding on the playable world like moments of psych disturbance" (Kirkland, "Gothic Videogames" 106-07). The Gothic is, therefore, ever-present during the gaming experience, bringing a new dimension to the mode and exercising psychological effects on the player.

Although this article does not focus on in-game mechanics, the Gothic is appropriated and assimilated into Lost in Random's in-game functions. For example, locked doors separate Random's six districts. The in-game use of locked doors to reveal hidden spaces, as Shira Chess expresses, "turns this thematic element of the gothic into a literal game mechanic" (393). Additionally, the Dice Arenas are board games within a video game, alluding to the Gothic literary device of a story within a story.

2. Lost in Random: A Gothic Fairy Tale

On the first anniversary of Odd rolling the One True Dice, the Queen's die, Even wakes up rattled from a strange nightmare about her sister only to find a ghost in her bedroom. Even attacks the ghost with her slingshot, but it dodges the shot and drops the toy, which Even gave her sister as a gift on her twelfth birthday. Craving answers, Even follows the glowing figure, visiting every realm of Random (each representing one of the faces of a six-sided die) and the Valley of Dice, which calls to mind typical Gothic settings.

Onecroft is a decrepit junkyard perpetually surrounded by fog, with sinking teapot houses and a rusty shipyard. Oners, the district inhabitants, collect junk that no one knows where it is taken.

Two-town is a town of dualities and split personalities. Some personalities share the same body, while others replicate their own bodies and become doppelgängers of their creators. Threedom is in shambles; there is debris everywhere due to a civil war that began after the King was mysteriously murdered. The Shadowman, a mysterious figure that devours children who venture too far from home, haunts this realm. Fourburg, once known as Four-Town, is surrounded by a foggy forest inhabited by spider-like automatons. In the Soothsayer Tents lives the Rugmaker, a woman with mystic powers, and hidden underneath the town's catacombs is a witch, Ooma. Fivetropolis is a decaying industrial town whose perpetual production pollutes the surrounding waters, creating a grimy and diseased landscape. The Card Makers are imprisoned in the city and forced to use their craft to build the Queen's automatons.

Sixtopia is far from the utopia its name promises. Behind a colorful, dreamlike cardboard palace lies an ominous maze, dark crystal dungeons, and a decaying castle. Similar to Gothic settings in other media forms, the castle is gloomy and set apart from Random, and ends up collapsing on itself. A dangerous secret is kept inside those four walls: the children are taken to a Lovecraftian dimension and given to the Dark Lords. Finally, the Valley of Dice, a sacred site, is a maze of ruins cloaked in heavy fog. It is patrolled by deadly automatons waiting for the next Dice Wielder and their die to wake them from the slumber. The Valley is depicted as a crypt, the land of the dead – nothing more than a memento of the Dice Wielders' bygone glory.

Random's six wards and the Valley of Dice invoke a sense of entrapment and isolation, as every district is cloistered from the others, and no one can leave unless the Queen's die rules so. Lost in Random's decaying, haunted settings that hide unsettling mysteries and are populated by tyrannous queens, bogeymen, and ghosts, together create the Gothic atmosphere of suspense and bewilderment. Although each district has its peculiarities, they feature a color palette of a myriad of blue and purple hues found in the skybox,[4] the landscape, and the visual elements.[5] The game's aesthetics draw on the whimsical macabre, which "deliberately blends the cute, fanciful and quirky with the gloomy, grisly and morbid" (Spooner, "Gothic Comic" 196).

Gothic tropes, Krzywinska observes, "can appear in games that do not seek to discomfort players, instead providing images best defined as cute" ("Games" 265). Lost in Random's aesthetics, though Gothic-like, can be described as cute (Morrow), and, in my experience, the game does not

seem to intend to instigate a ubiquitous sense of fear in the player, although it features harrowing, obscure, dream-like sequences and eerie sound effects, such as creaking doors, cawing crows and hooting owls, children weeping, and battle cries amid darkness and fog. Thus, as a post-millennial Gothic cultural work, Lost in Random falls into the strand of 'happy Gothic.[6] Spooner, who coined the term, states that "in the twenty-first century, Gothic texts, products, imagery and artefacts can no longer be regarded as almost universally gloomy and miserable, or even scary and horrid" (Post-Millennial Gothic 3). Happy Gothic defines works that "combine conventional markers of the Gothic with a mood of pleasure, lightness or celebration" (23). Such is the case of Lost in Random, a video game that mixes the sinister and the whimsical.

Nevertheless, the Gothic is not simply a sack crammed with ghosts and skeletons, dark and foggy landscapes, and haunted castles with locked doors hiding terrible secrets. Together, these images construct meaning; they are essential to think critically about Gothic themes of transgression, subversion, liminality, the haunting past, and duality, as follows.

2.1. Deadly Transgressions and Tough-As-Heck Queens and Baronesses

In the Gothic tradition, transgression is crucial to interrogate the limits of internalized rules and values. The transgression of boundaries, "especially [of] those boundaries that define the normative power structures" (Taylor 49), such as social, gender, sexual, and ethical boundaries, permits to question, define, redefine, or reaffirm those exact boundaries. However, these transgressions can trigger intense feelings of fear and terror, which can serve to reinforce the necessity of limits of morality and propriety (Botting, Gothic 5). In Lost in Random, transgressions function to question and disrupt cultural and societal beliefs.

Death is the primary transgression in the game. The Queen disrupts its course by freezing her sister, Natalya, at the moment of her demise. Lost in Random's narrative explores the consequences of this transgression: the emergence of a dystopian world in which families are torn apart, the inhabitants traumatized and driven insane, and children abducted and sacrificed to an otherworldly entity. Whenever a child rolls six, they are taken from their homes with the false

promise of living in a luxurious, magical paradise. However, when they arrive at Sixtopia, isolated from their families and friends and surrounded by threats, such as the automatons and Nanny Fortuna, they are mistreated and put into an endless slumber, allowing the Dark Lords to feed off their nightmares and negative emotions, such as paranoia, bitterness, and fear. Narratives of child abuse are not new to the Gothic mode. David Punter and Glennis Byron argue that "the fate of children, their powerlessness in the face of persecution, is [a] recurring Gothic theme" (289). They exemplify their claim by showing that children have been persecuted and abused, from Charles Dickens's Little Nell in The Old Curiosity Shop (1841) to Stephen King's Danny in The Shinning (1977). The abuses perpetrated by family and society are embedded in scenes of extreme threat and isolation. The children of Random can only live without being afraid after the Queen accepts her sister's death and gives up the power the Dark Lords bestowed upon her in exchange for the children.

To restore order, Even transgresses the physical boundaries imposed by the Queen that no one can move between realms. To transgress these geographical boundaries, Even rolls Dicey and must get the number engraved on the door that separates each ward. If Dicey´s pips do not match the number in the door (pips are earned when a game level is concluded), Even may attempt to open the doors, but the player hears the narrator stating its impossibility. In this sense, Even and the player must transgress borders: the first to save Random, the latter to progress in the in-game story.

Patriarchal structures are also transgressed, permitting their subversion. The Gothic, as Taylor acknowledges, "has often subverted social and cultural systems in order to present empowered women characters" (54).[7] The Queen rules the six realms with an iron fist, withdrawing power from male characters. The Mayor of Two-Town admits to Even that he fears the Queen, as well as Nanny Fortuna,[8] having no power to stop her. The Queen is not the only female character who subverts traditional gendered power dynamics. Threedom is a district ravaged by the never-ending civil war between the Triplets, the Count, the Duke, and the Baroness, each blaming the other for their father's death. The Count is paranoid, imagining assassination attempts at every corner, and his best friend is a plush doll, Count Shmoo III. The flamboyant Duke oversees a decadent court in shambles, overindulging in cake. He hosts a never-ending party so that his aristocratic subjects

would not be thinking about the war everyone else is fighting in and dying for![9] While Even, upon meeting them, describes the Count as mad and the Duke as lazy and coddled, she states that the Baroness is scary and tough-as-heck (Lost in Random). The Baroness, unlike her brothers, mastered the art of war. Indeed, she supervises the battling grounds, having learned from Neeshka, the late King of Threedom's bodyguard, the importance of winning, never surrendering, and duty. She opposes women's roles in warfare, standing on the frontline. Furthermore, while both her brothers dress in frills and silks, rather impractical for the battlefield, the Baroness wears a metal skirt embellished by functional canons.

These female characters subvert conventional forms of femininity. On the one hand, they are not passive bystanders nor enclosed in a domestic sphere. On the other hand, their physical representation plays against the erotization of female characters in video games with Gothic configurations, may these be heroines or non-playable characters (NPCs), representing powerful women who are not objectified![10]

Even subverts the expectations of traditional children's roles. Contrary to Punter and Byron's claims on children and abuse, Even is not powerless in the face of persecution. She has agency and subverts cultural expectations of children's passivity. She takes responsibility for rescuing her sister and taking rule of Random. Indeed, adults ask her to help them make the right decisions or find objects, sending her on side quests[11] that comprise resolving puzzles, roaming trenches, and fighting dangerous automatons. Ultimately, a child rebels against the Queen's evil control and terminates an unfair system that separates families and snuffs children. In this instance, like the subversion of social and cultural systems and expectations to empower female characters, the Gothic allows the subversion of child and adult power dynamics to bestow power on children, often seen as passive agents in dire need of adult guidance.

2.2. Betwixt-and-Between Life and Death, Reality and Fantasy

Transgression and subversion frequently occur within liminal spaces or bodies "situated either on or at the recognized borders or boundaries of subjective experience" (Garner 401). Liminal spaces and bodies are thresholds where the destabilization of binary relationships occurs. Lost in Random

represents liminal physical spaces and psychological states-of-being, problematizing binaries, including real and unreal, supernatural and natural, and past and present.

The folk of Random transgress and straddle thresholds. For instance, the ghost Even sees floating in her bedroom is a liminal being on the threshold of life and death, destabilizing and transgressing seemingly fixed boundaries. Due to confronting the living with their mortality, the ghost disturbs, sparking restlessness and disquiet, as observed in Even's reaction to its presence. This response is associated with the uncanny. Sigmund Freud explains this concept as "that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well-known and had long been familiar" (124). It is a sensation of dread that arises from confronting something ambiguous – that is, something strange yet disconcertingly familiar. James Aaron Green provocatively suggests there are "more opportunities in video games than in literature to achieve the uncanny" (17). Although the uncanny may not be experienced by the player in Lost in Random, since it belongs to the happy Gothic category, the game does "not aim to shock or scare but [is] playful or even celebratory in tone" (Spooner, Post-Millennial Gothic 7), its characters still experience such unexplainable unrest. Even reacts to the ghost with uncertainty, yet she cannot suppress a sense of familiarity. After all, she dreams about the ghost moments before, and it holds her sister's plush doll.

The NPCs that inhabit Random are both human and anthropomorphic entities, such as wolves, fishes, and cabinets, to name a few, with exaggerated features, such as long limbs, baggy eyes, and protruding teeth. Reminiscent of ghosts, they embody a liminal state of being. However, since they are part of the world of Random, they do not incite terror in or signify strangeness to Even, though, due to their physical difference, they could be understood as monsters. In recent media, the humanization of the monster has rendered them sympathetic – as Spooner argues, "monsters have become thoroughly incorporated into the discourse whose limits they once troubled," and, hence, "contemporary monsters are primed for comic treatment" ("Gothic Comic" 192). These monstrous NPCs have become comic subjects. Once terrifying outsiders with the ability to evoke the uncanny, monsters now have a voice to express their views, building a comic Gothic narrative in which cultural difference is celebrated rather than feared (Spooner, "Gothic Comic" 191) or destroyed.

Due to their tribulations, children are also portrayed as liminal in this video game. Indeed, in Gothic media, children are often represented as liminal. Margarita Georgieva claims that "[t]he essence of the gothic child is to be both one thing and its opposite, which confers on its portrait a polarised and ambiguous aura, and simultaneously a combination of the two" (196). Frequently, Gothic children, she adds, "are represented on the threshold of death, on the margin of society … orphaned, abandoned, lost, [and] deprived of heritage, escaping or running," and consequently "are temporarily given access to borderline spaces outside of society – forests, islands, abandoned cottages, ruins, prisons" (197). Even is a Gothic child. As a Oner, she lives on the margins of society and constantly finds herself on the threshold of death throughout her journey, from encountering liminal revenants to finding herself in deadly battles against automatons. While lost in Random, Even ventures into marginal, remote spaces where she is alone, apart from the presence of supernatural agents like Dicey, away from societal and adult authority and influence. This distancing, akin to that of Gothic heroines who find themselves wandering through labyrinthic castles and mansions beyond the patriarchal gaze, empowers Even to wield her agency and challenge the injustices of her surroundings.

Georgieva also notes that the birth of Gothic children is commonly intertwined with death. As mentioned, Even's adventure begins after she confronts a ghost – it is revealed only later in the story that the ghost is Natalya. Though the player does not know yet, they are confronted with two versions of the child, "one living and one dead, one a symbol of the future and the other of the past" (Georgieva 198). The first meeting between Even and Natalya does not evoke birthing imagery, but this encounter of a living and a dead child reinforces Even's status as an archetypal Gothic child![12]

Even often finds herself in an unconscious dreamworld. She is surrounded by darkness inside this liminal psychological landscape, where past, present, and future intertwine, muddling boundaries and realities. This transitional space reveals to Even her sister's life as a Sixer and the corruption inflicted by the Queen. It also exposes the Queen's and Natalya's tale through enigmatic dialogues and rhymes that are only understandable after Even arrives at Sixtopia. Moreover, between reality and fantasy, Even encounters pivotal characters that she has yet to meet; she is attacked by the Dark Lords; while following her sister's cries for help, she encounters the Visionary, one of the five

Card Makers; and before arriving in Two-Town, she hears Royam's voice while top hats emerge from the dark waters. Even dreams about future events. Foreshadowing is a common device used in the Gothic mode, where "orchestrated symbols, hints, suggestions, mystery, and evocative names of people and places become tools in the elevation of anxiety, expectation, and uncertainty" (Snodgrass 125). Lost in Random incorporates foreshadowing to prepare players for unexpected events all the while maintaining an air of mystery and foreboding.

The Valley of Dice, the Bag, and Natalya's chrysalis represent liminal physical spaces within Lost in Random. The Valley of Dice is a site isolated from society, where remnants of magic survive. Standing on the margins of Random, the Valley is a liminal space where the boundaries between the natural and supernatural are blurred. The Bag belonging to the Bag Brothers, Ludo and Bruno Bets, developed a desire for flesh and forced the two brothers to feed it. Although the brothers perished long ago, they were reanimated to keep tricking victims and continue to nurture the Bag. Even is deceived into the Bag and, inside it, discovers the lingering spirits of its victims, trapped long after their bodies have been devoured. The Bag blurs the limits between life and death, not allowing those who have long since died to cross over into the afterlife. Natalya is in an isolated limbo, frozen in the moment of her death, fully conscious and in pain. The chrysalis sustaining her is another liminal space: inside it, time is suspended, but Natalya can still sense the passage of time on the outside.

Similar to liminal settings in Gothic narratives, liminal spaces in Lost in Random are disruptive. They give Even freedom and the opportunity to unbury hidden secrets that challenge her beliefs. They are also haunting spaces, conveying the past (and the future) to the present – the past that refuses to fade away.

2.3. The Past Is the Past. Or Is It?

At the beginning of Even's adventure, an NPC, Astrid, tells her she is afraid the past is the past. Nonetheless, Astrid could not be more wrong. The return of the past to haunt the present is quintessentially Gothic. The Gothic "is profoundly concerned with the past, conveyed through both historical settings and narrative interruptions of the past into the present" (Spooner, Contemporary Gothic 9). The past is always awaiting to interrupt the present in the form of hauntings to

destabilize it. According to Kirkland, hauntings in the Gothic might be literal, "in the form of ghosts or supernatural entities, connected not only with historical pasts but originating in the beliefs of previous cultures and societies," documentary, "involving recently discovered information concerning forgotten deeds which come to light through rational methods of investigation and research," or might "assume the form of uncovered objects pointing to some hidden injustice, a dusty skeleton evidencing violent crimes, or secret rooms revealing clandestine activities" (Videogames and the Gothic 3). Since The Castle of Otranto's publication, the "found manuscript" motif has been a common trope in the Gothic. Spooner explicates that this motif is represented as

> *the discovery of a lost or hidden document that reveals dreadful secrets concerning the fate of its author, before crumbling away just before the crucial point is made. This manuscript is often in poor condition, fragmented, missing important information [and its] narrator may be unreliable or inarticulate. It is often framed by supporting narratives that elaborate on or question the story told inside. (Contemporary Gothic 38)*

Video games incorporate this trope, having the player collect missing book pages, documents, and letters to understand the in-game world's past and how it affects the present. Indeed, video games expand this trope, as Taylor argues, using books, paintings, pictures, vases, and sculptures to reveal historical events and to show that the game world is inhabited by the past (53). Lost in Random uses book pages and paintings to reveal Random's dreadful past.

Even can reconstruct the past by collecting ten storybook pages – a record of the history of Random. Through them, she learns about Random's true randomness, the Dice Wielders and their Dice, and the No Dice War. However, the last page has been manipulated to hide the Dark Lords' existence. Likewise, Random's past is represented in the paintings. At the beginning of Even's adventure, the player learns that Even's mother is a painter. The paintings are displayed on the walls of Even's home, telling of her family's whimsical (mis)adventures. Others are covered, hidden from the Queen's prying eyes. As the narrator acknowledges, the veiled paintings tell stories the Queen prefers to be kept untold – stories that, if they were to come to the surface, would endanger the Queen's tyrannic reign. In Sixtopia, the decaying castle's walls hold royal portraits. One depicts the Queen and Natalya as children (the same age as Even and Odd). These paintings represent the Queen's past and secrets, uncovering Natalya's existence. Objects and ruins are also

reminders of the past, bearing memories and histories that must be unveiled. For instance, to help Neeshka, the bodyguard of Threedom's late King, remember who murdered the King, Even collects objects connected to the fateful night, such as a finger, a family portrait of the Triplets and the King, Neeshka's mechanical arm, and the murder weapon. Together, these objects build the past Neeshka has forgotten in her madness. The ruins of the Valley of Dice are engraved with the history of the Dice Wielders and Dice, embossed drawings symbolizing the power of the Dice, and Dice Wielders and Dice walking side-by-side. The ruins of Four-Town, whose derelict and lifeless stones are shrouded in fog, lost to memory, are a testament to the war and the Queen's search for Ooma, whose pips give dice their powers. The Queen wishes to destroy the Valley of Dice, as she destroyed Four-Town, to keep everyone believing that only she has a die and make sure no one else will become a Dice Wilder and begin an uprising. Lost in Random depicts the past as exerting an inevitable influence on the present. Contrary to Astrid's statement, the past is the present.

As in literary Gothic, in Lost in Random, "the present is characterised by oppression, injustice, a sense of misalignment, imbalance or incompleteness, which the past attempts to reconcile" (Kirkland, Videogames and the Gothic 3). Natalya's ghost, a representation of the past, guides Even to Sixtopia to save Odd before she falls into the Dark Lords' hands and to stop the Queen's reign of terror. This eruption of the past into the present acts as an attempt to end the injustices and power imbalances of the present and usher in a new, bright future. Here, like in other Gothic narratives, the past functions as a disruptive device to restore order.

2.4. Moody and Destructive Split Personalities

In Lost in Random, Two-town, as the name indicates, comprises two towns (one upside down), two moons, and residents with two personalities, switching between them every time the Queen rolls her die. One day, they are happy and jolly, and the next, they are sorrowful and pessimistic. Nevertheless, the forced mood-switches have "gone on so long that people are starting to physically manifest these personalities, sometimes in grotesque ways" (Velocci). While in Two-Town, Even confronts the nefarious effects of this imposed duality.

Even meets a potion maker and archetypal mad scientist – Jared and Jored. Although the Gothic has long been preoccupied with doubles, as in texts such as Edgar Allan Poe's "William Wilson"

(1839) and Oscar Wilde's The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890), the potion maker can be interpreted as an allusion to the well-known Gothic novella Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (1886) by Robert Louis Stevenson. Like Jekyll, Jared and Jored are working on a drug that will make whoever takes it the dominant personality, locking the other out of the body. In this instance, Lost in Random expresses Gothic self-awareness – that is, it expresses a conscious knowledge of the Gothic's textual legacy and the interconnections between it and the in-game narrative. Even also encounters Two-Town's Mayor, whose "dormant personality manifested almost entirely into a person of its own that grows out of his tophat [sic], ruling upside-down in his own twisted mirror-flipped version of Two-Town" ("Realms of Random"). This bodily manifestation has taken the name of Royam (his creator's name spelled backward). The Mayor describes Royam as his opposite, his dark side – a nightmare constantly growing into becoming his own being (Lost in Random).

Otto Rank defines three types of doubles: the physical double, the double that shares the same body as the doubled, and "a likeness which has been detached from the ego and become an individual being" (20). While Jared and Jored share a body, Royam detaches himself from the Mayor – enraged after Even destroys Two-Town's second moon, Royam separates his identity from the original self. As a representation of the darker side of the Mayor, Royam is a doppelgänger – a shadow self that haunts its creator. As Carl Jung describes, the shadow self is "the thing a person has no wish to be" (qtd. in Samuels et al. 138). It represents the unconscious part of the psyche that has been repressed. Through duality, the Gothic mode often portrays the shadow self as one's dark side. The creator projects their anxieties about themselves on this oppositional being in order to confront and embrace them. After Even defeats Royam, the Mayor forces his doppelgänger to return to him. When Even, confused, asks the Mayor why he has re-merged with Royam, he tells her that she should not ignore her dark side (Lost in Random). Royam embodies part of the Mayor and ignoring one's dark side might make it fester. The Mayor's assertion that everyone is "multivariate" is reminiscent of Gothic narratives on the double which dwell on the notion that even the most respectable person has a dormant side, and that the relationship between these two sides is a complex one. As the Mayor rationalizes, he needs Royam because each half can do something the other cannot (Lost in Random).

The relationship between Even and the Queen also evokes duality. Although the Queen attempts to turn Odd into her heir, the double nature of Even and the Queen is established early in the game. After leaving Onecroft, Even falls asleep and finds herself in another dream landscape where her parents compare her to the Queen. In a bizarre dialogue, they tell Even that "[y]ou'll always be her [the Queen], Even. Her desires are Odd" (Lost in Random). This relationship becomes more intricate as the game progresses. While lost and separated from Dicey, Even calls for her companion near a well on the outskirts of Fourburg. Her voice echoing back from the well sounds similar to the Queen's. Moreover, Even and the Queen have the same goal: to protect and save their sisters. Often, in horror video games where the protagonists are children or adolescents, and the antagonists are powerful females, there is a doubled association. For instance, in American McGee's Alice (2000), Alice and the Queen of Hearts are doubles: the Queen is the embodiment of Alice's madness. In the sequel, Alice: Madness Returns (2011), not only do they undeniably share physical similarities, once hidden behind the masks, but the Queen's consumption of Alice reaffirms their doubleness – the ingestion is an attempt to piece them together. In Little Nightmares (2017), Six's and the Lady's doubled association is also suggested. After defeating the Lady, Six consumes her and becomes a vessel of her dark power. Through eating the Lady, Six embraces her shadow self.

The game features several confrontations between Even and the Queen, in which the Queen persistently attempts to destroy Even physically and mentally. As Rank states, "the impulse to rid oneself of the uncanny opponent in a violent manner belongs [to] the essential features of the motif" (16-17) of the double. This instinct to annihilate one another reinforces a reading of Even and the Queen as doubles – Even's presence threatens the Queen's existence, and they must engage in battles to become the last double standing.

3. Conclusion: Facing Childhood Nightmares

Even's journey takes her into liminal spaces where everything she knows is called into question, and she must choose to either transgress and subvert boundaries or remain confined to a world where she cannot face her past or shadow. Hence, in Lost in Random, transgression interrogates and transforms societal rules and order; subversion challenges passive roles attributed to women

and children; liminality introduces thresholds that query intrinsic values and entrenched beliefs; the haunting past emphasizes the importance of remembering and how rewriting history can wreak unimaginable social damage; and duality acknowledges the limits of what is acceptable and unacceptable, bringing to attention the importance of balancing each part of the self.

As a Gothic cultural product that engages with anxieties, Lost in Random is entangled particularly with fears associated with childhood. These fears do not only pertain to Even but also to the Queen, whose childhood trauma – seeing her sister's body mortally pierced by an automaton while fighting in the Dice Arena – triggered the events that destroyed Random's randomness, the Dice Wielders and their Dice, and initiated the Dark Lords' influence over the Queendom. Childhood fears materialize in Lost in Random: the terror of losing the family or self, of getting lost in the woods where the big bad wolf from fairy tales looms in the form of spider automatons, and of being taken by the Bogeyman that hides in the closet or under the bed – or, perhaps, as in the case of the Shadowman, just behind you. In Lost in Random, the Gothic builds an in-game narrative where children confront their worst nightmares and emerge stronger.

Moreover, through the exploration of Gothic representations in Lost in Random, this article demonstrated that the Gothic can be an intrinsic part of video games that are not labeled as horror (game studies on the Gothic often take survival horror video games as the object of their study). Besides, it contends the assertion that in video games, "[c]omedy undermines the seductive, immersive purpose of the Gothic" (Krzywinska, "Games" 267). Falling into the strand of happy Gothic, Lost in Random intertwines Gothic discourses with a mood of delectation and flimsiness, suggesting that instead of destabilizing the Gothic's immersive intent, the pleasure and lightness of the game add new layers to how the mode operates in the twenty-first century.

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[2] Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska first introduced the concept of ‘milieu’ in Screenplay: Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces (2002). The word milieu is preferred to ‘genre’ because it “encompasses character design, narrative, atmosphere, and iconography” (Krzywinska, “The Gamification of Gothic” 61). The genre of a game is defined “mainly by aspects of gameplay type or the mode in which a game is played” (Krzywinska, “The Gamification of Gothic” 61).

[3] Krzywinska explores the conditions a digital game requires to be placed under the label ‘Gothic Games.’ She argues that for it to be a Gothic game, it must feature five Gothic coordinates: the false hero, the mise-en-scène, the creation of a pervasive Gothic affect (this coordinate englobes the representation, production, and simulation of psychologically affective emotional states, such as “paralysis, claustrophobia, vertigo, alienation, estrangement, dread, discomfort, disorientation” [“The Gamification of Gothic” 60]), “style,” and function.

[4] The skybox is “anything beyond the immediate environment that the player will see: it can include the horizon, the sky, and even the ground” (Clare).

[5] Tim Burton’s cinematic work has popularized the Gothic palette and aesthetics of Lost in Random. His work “takes on characteristic Gothic narrative themes, yet does not fit conventional horror moulds, so that its Gothic properties are expressed in mainly visual terms” (Spooner, Post-Millennial Gothic 25).

[6] Spooner’s conceptualization of ‘happy Gothic’ is rooted in Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik’s foundational work Gothic and the Comic Turn (2004), in which the authors argue that comedy has always been present in and central to Gothic texts.

[7] The representation of powerful women as villains reinforces the construction of dominant women as monstrous (even if, in the end, the Queen redeems herself). See Sarah Stang’s “Shrieking, Biting, and Licking: The Monstrous-Feminine in Video Games” for more on female monstrosity in video games.

[8] In Fourburg, Fourman only keeps his gambling den and blasphemous non-animated die because Nanny Fortuna is his cousin. Her power allows him to do whatever he pleases – without her, he would be impotent.

[9] The Triplets represent aristocracy excesses, particularly notable in the artifice of the Duke's court. Before being able to talk to the Duke, Even must learn how to greet him properly, which encompasses learning how to curtsy, how to use titles, and the suitable form of address. Gothic novels often explore social conflicts. As Gary Kelly claims, Gothic fiction depicts court culture "as shallow, ineffectual [and] doomed to fail in the face of bourgeois values" (6), representing the overindulgences of the upper classes and their mistreatment of lower social status.

[10] Exploring horror video games that incorporate the Gothic mode, such as the Resident Evil series, and feature female heroines, such as Jill Valentine, Claire Redfield, and Ada Wong, Bernard Perron writes: "They are strong and brilliant women. They know how to remain calm when it is really necessary, to defend themselves, and to use a variety of weapons. They are, except for few events, able to get out of difficult situations and to solve hard problems expediently" (378). However, their bodies are objectified – whereas men often wear appropriate clothing (uniforms, long trousers, and jackets), heroines wear tight and short clothing that often exposes their skin and highlights their breasts. In such games, Bernard stresses, heroines "are undoubtedly eroticized through the ways they dress" (381).

[11] A task given to the player that does not directly affect the main story.

[12] Gothic writers "frequently fashion their plots so as to establish links between living and dying children" (Georgieva 198). One of the techniques to do so is by means of portraits. Even comes across portraits of Natalya all over Random – may it be outside the Nostalgium, an archive of books and paintings in Threedom, in the battle arena in Fourburg, or on the castle's walls in Sixtopia. Natalya's portraits are often juxtaposed with portraits of the Queen, suggesting their connection.

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