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Steven Kohm, Kevin Walby,
Kelly Gorkoff, and Katharina Maier
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Consumed by Guilt: Retribution and Justice in *Until Dawn*[1]

Christina Fawcett
University of Winnipeg

Abstract

Horror media, as text, film or game, engages with justice, retribution and punishment. Employing the monster to police social boundaries, horror media reflects cultural norms and the threat of transgression. *Until Dawn* plays into horror conventions but challenges our traditional position as passive voyeur by bringing us into complex encounters with justice. By playing as all eight characters, players engage in both the crimes and punishments of the teenagers trapped on a mountain with human and supernatural threats. Our involvement complicates the dual layers of retribution at play, as the teens are punished for their sins in the tradition of an eye for an eye while the Wendigo embody a supernatural repercussion for breaking the taboo of consuming human flesh. Thus, the game articulates a rational choice approach to transgression and the monstrous retribution that follows. *Until Dawn*'s evocation of the Wendigo in tandem with the traditional elements of horror film and participatory elements of the video game brings the player into the system of sin, suffering and punishment.

Introduction

Until Dawn (2015) from Supermassive Games plays into horror conventions of abjection, moral judgement and suspense, engaging the player through participatory elements. The game maps key choices, showing the outcomes of the player's decisions and mistakes. We play as all eight teenagers, controlling how they interact and what they discover, thus removing the voyeurism of horror films and making us responsible for the characters' survival or

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demise. The story centres on Hannah and Beth Washington, who disappear in the opening; one year later, their loss haunts the space, memories and conversations, while their brother Josh's suffering and grief drives him to gather the group for vengeance. A further narrative of retribution underpins the figure of the Wendigo: the game's core is punishment as response for social or moral transgression. The player's participation in the characters' choices and actions engages us with the characters' mistakes and the repercussions while facing the larger threat of the Wendigo; the game challenges the player's distance from horror's retributive justice.

Until Dawn articulates traditional aspects of horror while disrupting a simple coding of justice, showing parallel forms of sin and punishment: the teens face psychological torture for their mistreatment of Hannah, while the Wendigo face horrific transformation after consuming human flesh. Young (2009) notes our fascination with both crime and punishment, as "[b]ound up with disapprobation and distaste for crime is an intense interest in its forms, motivations and impacts. This doubled relation, oscillating between censure and desire, can be called fascination" (p. 3). The player's participation brings us into cruel and criminal actions, enabling us to examine the motivations through embodiment. The game provides a conservative view of justice through the lens of rational choice, suggesting punishment results justly from immoral action. Our participation is key, so the repercussions are an outcome of our choices and actions in the game-world.

Set in an isolated Albertan mountain lodge, *Until Dawn* opens with a group of teenagers on a winter vacation: Hannah, her twin sister Beth and younger brother Josh have invited friends for a getaway. Hannah is lured into a prank: she follows a letter from her crush Mike, sneaking away to meet him. She begins undressing and realizes she is being watched and filmed by the others; she flees in embarrassment, running out into the snow. Beth follows her, and they are chased off a cliff by an unseen threat. The game jumps forward one year, when Josh has invited the group back to the ski lodge. However, past relationships and simmering tensions result in the group splitting up: Mike and Jessica go to the guest cabin, Emily and Matt return to the cable-car station, and Sam goes for a bath while Josh, Chris and

Ashley play with a Ouija board. Disaster strikes when an unseen assailant drags Jessica violently from the cabin, and an assailant in a clown mask attacks Chris and Ashley, then chases Sam. Events escalate: Josh dies violently, Sam, Ashley and Chris are drugged and restrained, Mike chases a stranger through an abandoned sanitorium, and Emily and Matt try to radio for help at a fire tower that collapses, stranding them in an abandoned mine. Midway through the night, Josh reveals he is alive and masterminded the psychological torture; yet, a greater danger predates the mountain: the Wendigo. The game's core threat is thus a supernatural consequence of taboo: one becomes wendigo by eating human flesh.

This paper will address the concepts of justice and participation, as *Until Dawn* demands choice and culpability. By examining how the game articulates the inherent morality underpinning horror, I argue *Until Dawn* offers complex encounters with justice and retribution through affect and horror (Young 2009). Considered through Valier's (2002) arguments on crime and Gothic horror, *Until Dawn* encourages a reconsideration of justice by engaging with human and supernatural retribution. Focusing player experience around cause and effect, choice and punishment, the game constructs a narrative that relies on and critiques the concepts of horror.

Until Dawn as Horror

Until Dawn draws on horror tropes, featuring an isolated location, a group of unsupervised teenagers, tragic death, the need for revenge and a supernatural threat. The game moves from teen slasher into the story of the Wendigo, an Indigenous undead, while keeping our focus on bodies and the grotesque. Kristeva's (1982) concepts of abjection, the body's engagement and rejection of rot and taboo, inform our complicated relationship with gore:

> A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death … These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. (p. 3)

Life struggling on the border of death underpins the impact of splatter horror, as *Until Dawn* evokes; Valier (2002) notes that the key element of abject horror is it is "met with *both* violent denial and pleasurable fascination … [as] abjection foregrounds ambivalence" (p. 331). In analysis of film's ability to evoke emotional and sensational response, Young (2009) notes that horror's power to move beyond boundaries is central to film and visual media: "the affective dimension … [is] the experience of watching, and the ways in which the spectator is thereby implicated in the onscreen image" (p. 9). Cinematic affect is the body engaging with the sensation without physical experience (p. 9): a powerful tool in constructing response to violence, abjection and brutality. As Grant (2010) notes, the concept of horror is the affect:

> The word "horror" itself derives, significantly, from the Latin "orur," to describe the physical sensation of bristling, of one's hair standing on end. So important are the physiological responses in these genres that the extent to which films produce them in viewers is commonly used as a determining factor in judging how good these movies are. (p. 3)

The game also plays with psychological torture, as Josh manipulates his friends. Torture horror, which articulates malice beyond simple bodily abjection, creates a morally complicated space, as Morris (2010) describes: "the vengeful or sadistic purposes of the torture are a source of horror beyond the depiction of the torture itself, and it is through the torturer's purpose that the justification questions are addressed" (p. 44). The game balances grotesque and psychological horror to articulate forms of punishment, while subjecting the player to jump-scares and protracted visual construction. As Carroll (1990) notes, the "cross-media genre of horror takes its title from the emotion it characteristically or rather ideally promotes" (p. 14). *Until Dawn* develops this affect through visual, narrative and participatory elements: the revulsion, anxiety and bodily engagement bring us into the horror, setting up the player's expectations for the narrative.

Genre tropes not only draw *Until Dawn* into the horror megatext, but also the gaming genre of survival horror. Earlier games, like the *Resident Evil* (1996) and *Silent Hill* (1999) series, do not engage with the morality of player choice, but focus on a singular goal: survive.

Until Dawn moves beyond that structure into concepts of justice and punishment while still looking and moving like traditional survival horror. Fixed camera angles and shot structures emulate film and early survival horror gaming, restricting the angle of view. As Pinchbeck (2009) describes, "[f]orced camera angles are extensively used in survival horror to limit [access to the environment], directly manipulating tension and creating moments of shock where action occurs just beyond the capacity of the player to see" (p. 79). *Until Dawn*'s locked frame constricts the player's view, building fear through information delay or denial, anticipation-building long shots, voyeuristic perspectives, suspenseful irony and jump-scares. The visual and thematic horror construction is the core of the game's language of justice.

Horror traditionally centres on moral messages: from the grotesque vices in morality plays, the social morals of gothic novels, the pithy afternotes in early twentieth century pulps and comics to the modern cinema (Grant 2010). The rules of horror appear in the film *Scream*: "1. You can never have sex. The minute you get a little nookie—you're as good as gone. Sex always equals death. 2. Never drink or do drugs. The sin factor. It's an extension of number one" (Konrad & Woods, 1996). The "sin factor" naturally underpins the rational choice narrative, as transgression merits punishment. Morris (2010) notes that torture horror enacts the impossible Kantian system of retribution: an eye for an eye (p. 46). *Until Dawn* plays with two layers of sin and punishment: the standard teenage slasher wherein sex and betrayal are punished, and the greater social and spiritual taboo of the Wendigo. Like *Silent Hill*, morals are upheld through monstrous intervention. "Silent Hill itself is a monstrous entity, an *unheimlich* town … corrupted by a malicious will which seeks to punish those who offend a perverse moral order. The few souls left wandering its streets move with vengeful intent" (Steinmetz, 2018, p. 273-4). The mountain becomes threatening through the Wendigo policing and predating the space. Horror's conservatism appears in *Until Dawn*'s punishment of sex, as Jessica is the first attacked: after her phone is thrown into the cabin, she goes outside to yell at her assumed harassers.

> HEY! YEAH! PRICKS! THAT MEANS YOU! I KNOW you're OUT THERE! The FUCK are you trying to do? You want to ruin our fun THAT BAD?! Well GUESS WHAT? You can't! You can't ruin our good time! Because Michael and I are gonna FUCK! That's right! We are going to have SEX! And it's gonna be HOT! So ENJOY IT! Because I know WE'RE GOING TO! (*Until Dawn,* 2015, Chapter 3)[2]

Her declared comfort with sex is met immediately with violence: Jessica is pulled through the cabin window by a clawed hand grasping her hair, violently wresting her out [Figure 1]. As Clover (1992) notes, traditional horror victims are often linked to sexual behaviour: "sexual transgressors of both sexes are scheduled for early destruction. The genre is studded with couples trying to find a place beyond purview of parents and employers where they can have sex, and immediately afterward (or during the act) being killed" (p. 33). Valier (2002) notes that emotionally charged responses can result in heavy punishment of crimes, as moral panic and folk devilling create disproportional reactions (p. 323). Horror overreacts to sexuality, continuing traditions of the monster tale: violence and the supernatural police borders of socially appropriate behaviour.

Figure1: Jessica Pulled from the Cabin

[2] All quotations from the game reflect the capitalization, spelling and punctuation provided in the game's subtitles.

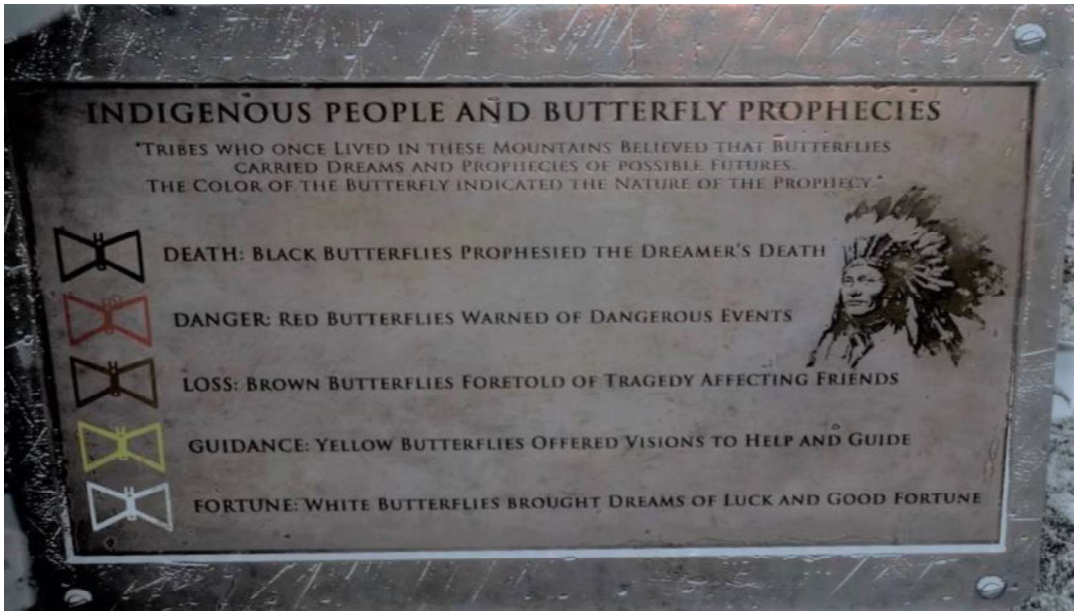
Valier (2002) addresses the power of emotion and gothic imagery in contemporary concepts of retributivism, as penality and punishment evoke strong reactions; she asks early in her article "[h]ow are these raw emotions implicated in the return to retributivism" (p. 320)? Representations of criminality and penality have relied on language of the monstrous, the horrific and the emotionally manipulative, as society's fears have become less grounded in the individual and more in the anonymous, faceless and imperceptible (p. 324). As such, the language of the monstrous in relation to justice reaches beyond the world of horror and has become part of common parlance, and come to define our institutions of justice: "gothic tropes are embedded in the practices of the institutions of crime control and punishment themselves. The florid textuality through which crimes are represented in popular culture both shapes, and is derivative of, the gothicity of legal judgments and penal policies" (p. 322). Archaic institutions of justice and the gothic images of punishment appear in other popular participatory media, like *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (2009), though often with visible commentary (Fawcett & Kohm, 2019). In evoking fear in the discussions of the predator, serial killer, unexplainable villain and unstoppable threat, the monster becomes an element of everyday discourse. As Halberstam (1995) argues, "part of the experience of horror comes from the realization that meaning itself runs riot … The monster always becomes a primary focus of interpretation and its monstrosity seems available for any number of meanings" (p. 2). The issue of this language is that an evocation of the monster becomes an evocation of punishment — the monster is *demonstrare*: demonstration. These bodies demonstrate a community's rules and limits and the punishment one faces for transgressing. As *Until Dawn* shows, to consider justice through the framework of monstrosity is to immediately position retribution as the natural form of punishment. This conservative view of crime as choice and justice as punishment is articulated in horror spaces like *Until Dawn*.

The Wendigo and Punishment

The wendigo, a traditional North American monster, is a supernatural narrative of cannibalism. A creature from Algonquin, Cree and Ojibway mythology, among others, wendigo (or windigo) are violent

spirits embodying the cold isolation of winter that drive hosts to become cannibals: "In northern Algonquian traditions, the windigo was the spirit of winter, which could transform a man, woman, or child into a cannibalistic being with a heart of ice. In time, this being would grow into a giant" (Smallman, 2014, p. 21). Wendigo stories stretch back centuries with a steady focus on cannibalism. Smallman (2014) describes how the loss of self and loss of humanity are at the core of these stories: "These narratives were ostensibly about transformations by (and into) cannibalistic spirit beings. Madness, and the fear of madness, was as important a motif in these narratives as cannibalism" (p. 35). The wendigo's madness and loss of self reflects its role as the monstrous categorical crisis Steinmetz (2018) addresses: the monster's function is to disrupt boundaries and social limits of purity and morality. "While the exact characteristics of the monster are contested, Carroll (1990) usefully considers monstrosity as linked to impurity … Monsters are thus beings that upset our sensibilities and assumptions about the natural order; they disrupt social categories and disturb our ontologies" (Steinmetz, 2018, p. 267). Wendigo represent that categorical crisis, disrupting the natural and challenging the community's conceptions of purity. Regarding the disturbance of norms, Cohen (1996) notes this "refusal to participate in the classificatory 'order of things' is true of monsters generally: they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration" (p. 6). The monster defies social structure, order and boundary: "monsters are identified as impure and unclean. They are putrid or moldering things, or they hail from oozing places, or they are made of dead or rotting flesh, or chemical waste, or are associated with vermin, disease, or crawling things" (Carroll, 1990, p. 23). The tie of the monstrous body and the abject is at the core of the wendigo. The consumption of human flesh and madness disassociates the wendigo from its former self: to break laws and taboos is to lose your identity and place. To lose your place is to become monstrous.

Figure 2: The Butterfly Totem Chart



Until Dawn draws on wendigo to situate the narrative, placing the story on Canadian soil with a Canadian monster. However, a UK-based studio creating a game about predominantly Caucasian characters with a single reference to an Indigenous wendigo flattens and appropriates the myth. While the original wendigo tales stretch across cultures, communities and time, taking on complex social signifiers, *Until Dawn* simplifies the wendigo to its core concept: breaking the taboo of cannibalism transforms the person into a supernatural cannibal. This simplification reduces the wendigo to a modern Western zombie, although the choice to consume human flesh causing transformation provides the game's moral focus. A further grounding in "Indigenous" spaces appears in mapping player decisions through butterflies; the butterfly begins as a simple synecdoche for chaos theory, then is situated in "Indigenous" traditions [Figure 2], using totems to reinforce this connection throughout the game. This framing once again flattens any cultural specifics, tapping into "Indigenous" belief, rather than Cree, Ojibway or Algonquin, who are the primary tellers of wendigo tales, or the Blackfoot or Tsuu T'ina, the traditional caretakers of the Rocky Mountains. While most traditions frame the butterfly as a positive, powerful symbol (Lake-Thom, 1997; Bastian & Mitchell, 2004), its presence as a portent and bearer of messages also carries across

communities. However, the significance is unique to each culture, so using the butterfly to simply add "local colour" draws in signifiers without acknowledging the cultures. Instead, butterflies are simply portents and wendigo are simply zombies demonstrating moral judgement. In a game that demands players consider actions and morality, the designers ignored the moral implications of appropriating Indigenous cultures and histories.

The Wendigo haunts the game from the outset, but only becomes a real threat when Jessica is ripped through the window. Hints appear fleetingly in jump-scares, like a pair of inhuman eyes flashing into view in a set of binoculars late in Chapter 1, or an unseen predator attacking a deer; voyeur perspectives show the Wendigo's movement-based vision, highlighting the teens. The game withholds details of the monstrous threat, building anticipation and enabling imaginative speculation. As Fahy (2010) describes in *The Philosophy of Horror*, horror appeals because it offers a series of experiences: "the anticipation of terror, the mixture of fear and exhilaration as events unfold, the opportunity to confront the unpredictable and dangerous, the promise of relative safety … and the feeling of relief and regained control when it's over" (p. 1–2). Delaying information sets up the eventual exhilaration: we get glimpses and teases early in the game, with the first full reveal taking place when the Wendigo chases Emily through the mines before she is saved by the Stranger. He explains to the teens: "[t]his mountain belongs to the Wendigo … There is a curse. That dwells in these mountains. Should any man or woman resort to cannibalism in these woods the spirit of the Wendigo shall be unleashed" (*Until Dawn,* 2015, Chapter 8). The narrative evokes elements of wendigo myth, particularly aspects of trauma, taboo and retribution. The creature design, highlighted in the bonus content "Bringing 'It' to Life," focuses on how voice cues the monster's human origin. Barney Pratt, *Until Dawn's* audio designer, describes creating the Wendigo's voice:

> For the main vocalizations of the Wendigo we used our own vocalizations, various different animals from the exotic to the farmyard. Various plug-ins and processes to gel these sounds together, and keep a human resonance behind that voice, telling the back story [sic] of the Wendigo. ("Bringing 'It' to Life")

The creature's "human resonance" situates the horror in retribution, rather than simple physical threat. *Until Dawn* draws supernatural danger to the geographic space and thus gestures to the traditional elements of crime and punishment that often underpin horror narratives. While the game highlights the human element inherent in the monstrous wendigo, Valier (2002) argues that modern society positions human crime as shapeless, formless and sensational (p. 326). Blending the criminal and monster complicates our participation in the game, as characters become situated in the same structure of punishment and retributivism.

Until Dawn and Retribution

The narrative motivation of retribution is what Morris (2010) describes as "seeking for an appropriate code of punishment … [T]he appeal of torture-horror is not unlike that offered by the carnival atmosphere of public executions" (p. 47). Josh seeks to hurt those who drove his sisters out into the snow. He further amplifies their punishment through the recording and intended distribution of his psychological torture. His video invitation takes on a clear irony later in the game:

> First off, I gotta say I am super excited to welcome all my pals back to the annual Blackwood winter getaway! So, um … Let me just let you know, let's take a moment to address the "elephant in the room" for a second … it means so much to me that we're doing this. And I… I know it would mean so much to Hannah and Beth that we're all still here together, thinking of them. I really want to spend some quality time with each and every one of you and share some moments that we'll never forget, for the sake of my sisters, you know? (*Until Dawn,* 2015, Chapter 1)

His veiled threat to create memorable moments in the name of his sisters becomes clear when Josh reveals he is alive and has caused his friends' suffering. He frames his invitation through an attempted recovery; the pauses add to his performance as he sets up his friends' traumatic suffering. This effort creating a fiction shows his investment in using horror for punishment. When Josh removes his mask, he takes visible joy in how his carefully crafted fiction has caused suffering.

> How does it feel? Do you enjoy feeling terrorized? Humiliated? I mean, panicked? All those emotions that my sisters got to feel one year ago! Only guess what? They don't get to laugh it off! … I hope you appreciated my little phantasmagorical spectacle! … [y]ou guys are all going to thank me when you guys become internet sensations! … Oh you better believe this little puppy is going viral ladies and germs. I mean we got unrequited love. We got … we got blood! I don't think there's enough hard drives in China to count all the views we're going to get, you guys. (*Until Dawn,* 2015, Chapter 7)

He wants them to feel his sisters' fear and panic, wants to punish them with spectacle. The transition between "One Year Ago" and "Chapter 1" is voiced-over by newscasters discussing the Washington sisters' disappearance, suggesting that publicity has dogged Josh's life. His retribution thus includes the spectacle Morris (2010) discusses, as his actions replay his sisters' panic and enable public fascination with that punishment. Valier (2002) notes that "public gatherings around scenes of violence and trauma [perform] a breakdown between the public and private registers of experience, as well as between mass exhibitions and individual fantasies" (p. 322). Our interest in suffering results in our cultural fascination with monsters as retributive force. Though Josh initially appears as a monster, *Until Dawn*'s larger force of retribution disrupts his personal vendettas. The greater force of justice, an external and presumed universal morality and judgement, appears embodied in the Wendigo as both tortured and torturer.

Until Dawn flattens the Wendigo to an undead who consumes the flesh of a human and thus becomes the suffering echo of their former selves. We only see the miners and Hannah as Wendigo, though the Stranger references the Wendigo spirit having Indigenous origins. The story maintains simplified concepts of desperation and survival: trapped after a cave-in, miners consume one another to prevent starvation. Mike can find records of the miners' horrific transformation in the Blackwood Sanitorium, and finding Butterfly Totems unlocks segments of a video clip entitled "The Past." Upon finding the first Totem, a tutorial screen explains that "[as] you explore you can discover totem artefacts. Picking a totem up and turning it will reveal a colored butterfly and a premonition of a

possible future … The future is uncertain. Whether or not the prophecy comes true depends on the choices you make" (*Until Dawn,* 2015, Chapter 1). The totems, a generic signifier of Indigenous cultures, not only predict the future, but unlock the origin of the Wendigo. The video shows the threat of Blackwood Mountain, as the game makes a small gesture toward Indigenous history in the name of the strongest Wendigo spirit: Makkapitew means "one who has big teeth" in Algonquian.[3]

> Many years ago, my grandfather hunted those possessed by the curse, but there was one that eluded him — the fiercest of all, the Makkapitew. It was a terrible thing, and my grandfather could not defeat it. Some time after, the prospectors came to mine this mountain, until a cave-in trapped the men, and woke the curse again. There were dozens of men. No food, no light. And in that blackness, the hunger came.
>
> They were consumed by their abominable cravings and driven mad. Murderers! Cannibals, eating human flesh. And if you kill this monstrous thing, the spirit is released, and swirls the mountain like an evil wind, waiting to possess again. You best not kill them; I have tried. You can only trap them, taunt them with fire. (*Until Dawn,* 2015, "The Events of the Past")

The clip further explains that the Makkapitew chased Hannah and Beth over the cliff, and then was finally killed with fire. The Indigenous history of the monster is a fleeting gesture, as the more central element is the "abominable" and inhuman actions of the miners: "Murderers! Cannibals, eating human flesh." The anxiety over taboo pervades the Stranger's description, which the player only sees by finding all the totems. Thus, knowledge of the miners' history and the mythology underpinning the game's horror is a reward for completionist gameplay. This reward structure puts value on understanding the moral message of the Wendigo in the game.

Hannah, driven to desperation through circumstance, remains recognizable by her distinctive tattoo — a clue the player can

[3]Algonquin territory is in Eastern Canada and would have no overlap with the Rocky Mountains or the communities that live there. Thus, the name further shows a lack of awareness of Supermassive's designers of the distance and distinctions between Indigenous communities.

discover in multiple photographs and notes. This butterfly tattoo shows a continuity of body from human to wendigo. Lee Robinson, the game's production designer, describes how their visual design focused on degeneration of the human form:

> Understanding the ancient myths of the Wendigo was key for their development, that helped the visual look … such as eyes being milk, almost dead, with loss of lips and eyelids due to frostbite. Fangs growing, and arms and legs getting longer, with skin hardening and thickening to look snarling and menacing, yet withered and lean … Fingers and toenails extending like claws, allowing them to climb effortlessly. We made them look gaunt and weathered, and having ragged remains of clothes they wore, bloodstained and rotten … they retain strong skeletal limbs, which enable them to be agile and quick through the environment. (*Until Dawn* 2015, "Bringing 'It' to Life")

The physical toll of transformation focuses our attention on the environment while remnants of the person's clothing connect the Wendigo to its human past. Visuals of transformation cue monstrosity, as Halberstam (1995) notes: "Slowly but surely the outside becomes the inside and the hide no longer conceals or contains, it offers itself up as text, as body, as monster" (p. 7). We can read the skin, the design and shape of the monster as a hybrid. While we only know the human identity of one Wendigo, human elements remain a design focus and thus play on the uncanny. As near-human analogue, zombies are both human and not, monster and not, and thus exist between categories. Steinmetz (2018) notes that the uncanny is "[i]nvolved [with] a sense of strangeness arising from the paradoxical perception that something is both familiar and unfamiliar, where the real and the unreal become blurred" (p. 268). Horror games create spaces where we engage with this uncanny other; the Wendigo, situated on the margins, creates a form of categorical crisis.

Punishment and Participation

Justice and retributivism complicate our relationship with the characters: we play as all eight characters, collapsing our distance from the wrongdoer. When the game jumps forward after Hannah and Beth's fall, we play as Sam, who questions pranking Hannah.

However, we quickly shift to Chris, a willing participant, then Jessica, Matt and Ashley, who all took joy in teasing Hannah. Morris (2010) notes the significance of viewers' engagement with both torturer and tortured in torture horror films: "Torture-horror requires an audience both capable of empathy with the victims and able to share something of the joy of the torturers, however unsavory … In order to enjoy sadistic torture-horror, the audience must experience both of these conflicting sentiments" (p. 51). The appeal and repulsion draw us into the horror and the complex morality therein. *Until Dawn*, as a participatory space, pushes beyond visual identification and encourages our investment in these characters. Young (2009) argues that filmic framing and the power of the image is that "we see it *haptically*" (p. 12, italics in original). Video games offer more engagement, as the perceptual relation between image and body ties us to the scene, while our participation in choices ties us to the character: we play as Josh after he reveals his psychological torture, positioning us in characters who we witness harming people. In his discussion of play and ethics, Sicart (2013) addresses how an avatar frames our ethical position in the world:

> It determines, to a large extent, players' ethical presence in that world. The values … are important in the fictional creation of that world: players explore those values and live by them. The company that they keep is not only the avatar or the gameworld. It is also their meanings and the interpretations that the players give to those values and that world. (p. 13)

While we maintain our own ethical awareness and engage with the game through a character space, we become complicit in the character's actions. *Until Dawn* pushes projection further by situating the player in all eight spaces.

Beyond our control over choices and conversations, which moves slowly enough to consider options and potential outcomes, action sequences are articulated in two different forms: quick-time events and mandated stillness. Quick-time events require the player to press a button within a designated window to achieve an outcome. The button-dash brings the player into the character's reaction, investing us in the movement and moment. The quick-time format creates urgency, asking us to respond to cues as the character responds to his

or her surroundings. The second tool in action sequences is the opposite: stillness. The narrative justifies this mechanic through the Wendigo's movement-based sight, but the tool creates a novel form of challenge: a game designed to heighten adrenaline and create jump-scares demands player stillness so the character will survive. The need to remain still shifts from character to player, as the PlayStation controller measures the player's movement, going beyond Young's (2009) argument of haptic experience into literally mapping the screen onto the body. The closing segment of the game focuses on Sam and the remaining teens in the lodge, which has been taken over by Wendigo. During a violent fight between Wendigo which the teens helplessly watch, the fireplace gas line breaks, and Mike crushes a lightbulb to create an active source of spark. The player, controlling Sam, must choose when to stay still and when to run, flip the light switch and blow up the house with anyone left inside. The controller's vibration feedback amplifies the challenge, as it simulates a racing heartbeat. The sequence challenges us to leave Sam vulnerable and trust our ability to remain still, as each decision to wait rather than run enables another character to escape safely. Sam is our "final girl," who "perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril; … She alone looks death in the face, but she alone also finds strength either to stay the killer long enough to be rescued (ending A) or kill him herself (ending B)" (Clover, 1992, p. 35). We are positioned with this strong, fragile figure; her survival is literally in our hands. The player must choose to save Sam or try to stay still enough to enable others to escape. The game maps action onto our body to amplify investment and potential projection.

The game introduces each character with a set of descriptive adjectives [Figure 3] inviting us to participate in the story through each character using movement, action and conversation mechanics, in which players choose how characters interact: dialogue appears as branching options, two choices, each with a prompt and emotional tone [Figure 4]. The player thus shapes relationships, prioritizing some connections and sacrificing others. Participating through multiple lenses engages us with all the characters' priorities, preventing simple projection and encouraging a diversified

understanding of the story, seeing relationships from both sides. We can focus on the overall consequence of each choice, addressing what Domsch (2013) notes in his discussion of storyplay and narrative choice:

> The expectation of consequence is what keeps players motivated to make choices … Especially in those cases where they are withholding gameplay information, the player's focus turns towards a decision's storyworld significance. In order to do justice to the importance of player choices in the specific narrative experience of video games, one needs to take a further look at the way that consequence is used, presented, and experienced in them. (p. 137)

Figure 3: Sam and Josh's Character Introductions

Figure 4: Conversation Mechanics

Game design leans into a rational choice perspective, as players operate in a system of cause and effect, action and punishment. Gameplay's nodal form, as Domsch (2013) notes, means a choice closes paths, shaping the story and creating narrative consequence for the player's action. Further than that, *Until Dawn* provides more permanent repercussions for our participation and choice, reiterating the conservative views of justice inherent in horror spaces.

Our choices can harm or kill the characters, creating later challenges: Mike can lose a hand early on, complicating his later actions, or if Matt is killed, Jessica must try escaping the mines alone. Player choices thus take on narrative and ludic repercussions, implicating us through gameplay mechanics. Unlike most survival horror games, the story continues after character deaths: the story moves forward without them. The genuine repercussions capture Conway's (2012) critiques on how the shift away from games with inherent loss results in a loss of ludicity, or play-agency, in favour of play centred on perpetual do-overs (pp. 36–37). The game reinforces the player as participant through Dr. Hill, an analyst who meets with an anonymous character early in the game and intermittently through the story. In Dr. Hill's first appearance, he sets a clear tone for the player's engagement with the game.

> Before we begin, there are a few things I need to make sure you understand … Everything you do, every decision you make from now on, will open doors to the future. I want you to remember this. I want you to remember this as you play your game. Every single choice will affect your fate, and the fate of those around you. So, you have committed to commence with this "game." This is significant. (*Until Dawn,* 2015, Session 1)

Dr. Hill's dialogue about playing a game addresses the screen: the player. This framing positions us as the central actor, despite the various character lenses. The game maps actions on the characters while fundamentally situating choice with the player: the game's theory of justice is inherently a rational choice approach, as we supposedly act freely and thus face justified consequence.

The game focuses our choices through the Butterfly Effect, which maps narrative repercussions for our decisions. The game begins with an ominous introduction that lays out how player choices shape the game: the clip shows a butterfly, before zooming in to follow a single path along a butterfly's wing vein, as the rest of the wing appears to rot. The over-text references chaos theory: "A tiny butterfly flapping its wings today may lead to a devastating hurricane weeks from now. The smallest decision can dramatically change the future. Your actions will shape how the story unfolds. Your story is one of many possibilities. Choose your actions carefully" (*Until Dawn,* 2015, Introduction). Spreading rot keeps our focus on death and decay, abject elements of horror, while the path shows our impact on the storyline. The Butterfly Effect map appears on the Pause Menu to show the player what decisions she has made and their gradually building outcomes: while the characters act, we choose. The focus on player immersion appears in Pratt's description of the Wendigo's audio-design:

> During the chase sequences the anger of the Wendigo is felt by encircling breaths, screams and screeches, that essentially chase you as you're being chased by the Wendigo. We would layer them up in a multitude of layers, sometimes 15–20 sounds playing at the same time, to build up the vocalizations for this fearsome creature which is always in attack mode, hyperactive and chasing you throughout the game. (*Until Dawn,* 2015, "Bringing 'It' to Life")

Pratt's repetition of "you" shows the player is the central figure, rather than the characters, and points to attempted immersion. The affect of putting us in the space makes us feel threatened and attacked. Our responses to this threat become mapped onto individual characters: for example, Ashley and Chris are locked in a *Saw*-esque death contraption. Chris must choose to shoot himself or Ashley, saving one by killing the other; however, as this is part of Josh's staged psychological torture, regardless of Chris' choice, the gun is empty and the saw stops. If Chris chooses to shoot Ashley, she will later lock the door on Chris when he is chased by Wendigo, leaving him to be killed. The player's choices as each character impact their relationships and future actions.

The player immerses in each of the eight characters, before and after transgressive and violent acts, collapsing our choice as player and the characters' actions. Ashley locking the door, effectively killing Chris, is a repercussion for the choices the player made, while we later play as Ashley and thus take on her choices as well. By moving between characters, we surrender to various spaces and embrace different identities and choices. As Sicart (2013) describes, the process of

> [s]urrendering to a game does not mean participants will always play by the rules, but it means that they will commit to playing … Surrendering in a game means taking things as they are designed but also creatively engaging with them to create and interpret what is been given so that the fiction becomes more of a conversation than a monologue. (p. 12)

The game demands, by putting us into people who have caused harm, that we engage with the morality of their actions and our own. In the branching story options, if one discovers evidence that Hannah has transformed into a Wendigo, Josh will recognize his sister when she attacks. If he does so, his life is spared, as she grabs and takes him into the caverns. If Josh lives, he does not do so without cost; a post-credits scene shows him becoming a Wendigo himself. Rescuers discover Josh in the collapsed mine tunnels, consuming flesh as his own face pulls back in a monstrous transformation [Figure 5]. As we play as Josh, his shifting monstrous form highlights how close the monster is to the human. Our separation from the monster is fragile at best.

Figure 5: Josh's Transformation

Conclusion

The post-credits scene of Josh's transformation points to the immortality of the monster. Cohen's (1996) thesis "The Monster Always Escapes" appears in the wendigo's continuity:

> No monster tastes of death but once. The anxiety that condenses like green vapor into the form of the vampire can be dispersed temporarily, but the revenant by definition returns. And so the monster's body is both corporal and incorporeal; its threat is its propensity to shift. (p. 5)

The monster remains a threat to simple categories: it is a mechanism of punishment, and the punished. They are demonstrable figures, showing the audience the suffering that results from transgression in both their actions and their bodies. Valier (2002) notes the collapse of the language of the monster into our understanding of justice shows how our reading of the monstrous other shapes our understanding of crime, criminality and the frameworks of justice. The player's participation brings us into transgression and culpability, as our attempts to save Josh result in his transformation: the monstrous torturer becomes the monstrous Wendigo and we recognize in him a character we played.

Our participation complicates the morality of the game ending: the credits feature police interviews with the surviving characters and

show a time-captioned screenshot of the moment any character was killed. We also face the repercussions of discovering Hannah's transformation, and thus Josh's monstering. While we do not play Hannah, we play as Josh, both in his imagined therapy with Dr. Hill and in the real world. Our play as a character who transgresses and transforms blends conceptions of the human and the monster. Young (2009) notes the significance of our projection into visual spaces, as our understanding of violence takes place on an affective level, rather than a simply cognitive one. This engagement, through participation and choices, brings us into the morality of the game.

In using the wendigo, Supermassive Games has engaged a complex undead figure with Indigenous roots, but cut off the character before tapping into that depth and space. In appropriating the myth and drawing in butterfly imagery, Supermassive Games evokes a space without understanding it, reducing the complex history of the wendigo into any other zombie. They have chosen a zombie with an inherent moral transgression but flattened the figure and focused instead on the player's choice, rather than the monster's cultural history.

The game's self-situating in the genre of horror through tropes and clichés, visual framing and style, builds *Until Dawn* into a tradition of monstrosity and morality. While horror film offers us the opportunity to take vicarious pleasure in the sins and punishments enacted on screen, survival horror games ask us to navigate through the challenges, taking on the responsibility for characters' survival. *Until Dawn* positions us to view the actions of the characters while choosing their paths. We engage with the moral repercussions of our choices, the characters' actions and our own surrender to the game. *Until Dawn* asks us to participate, projecting ourselves into a space wherein we see, create and become the monster.

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