

**THE UNCANNY IN  
HORROR VIDEOGAMES**  
**AESTHETICS OF CREATURES**

**BACHELOR THESIS**

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## 0. Abstract

The 'uncanny' as proposed by Ernst Jentsch (2008) and following Sigmund Freud (FREUD), concerns itself with an eerie sensation that is evoked by intellectual uncertainty and the strangely familiar. Masahiro Mori (1970) also argued, that artificial figures like robots evoke negative emotional responses like unease or eeriness depending on their degree of human resemblance. The closer these artificial figures resemble an actual human being, the more they would provoke an unsettling feeling for their viewer, as finer discrepancies become more obvious.

Those theories will function as the basis to explore the phenomenon of the uncanny in videogames and how this feeling of unease and eeriness gets utilized in the horror genre. For that, the definition of the body-horror genre as proposed by Linda Williams (1991) will be examined and an exemplary study case of the creatures from *Silent Hill* will showcase, how uncanny monsters can be created. Furthermore, the literature of Noël Carroll (1987/1990) will function as a basis to explore, how monsters, in the bounds of art-horror, can become fascinating, while building up to how even grotesque uncanny displays of the human body can be set in an artistic /aesthetic light. For that, the mad artist of the game *The Evil Within 2* and his 'art installations' will be explored, while taking said art-horror as the reason to being able to enjoy this 'gamerly' staged horror.

In summary, this paper will guide the reader through facets of the uncanny/strangely familiar: From disturbing to grotesque to aesthetic/artistic. All study cases will be referring and redirected to the theoretical basis of the uncanny to provide a closed circle of research.

## 1. Introduction

Puppets, life-like robots, silhouettes, zombies and other human-like figures all generate an unsettling feeling in their viewer (cf. Paluzzi, 2019), which we might describe as ‘*uncanny*’. This eerie sensation is different from mere fear or terror; it is a “class of terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar” (FREUD, pp.1-2). This feeling was already explored in the early 1900s by psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch (2008) and after that Sigmund Freud (FREUD), who build up on the former’s foundation to define the uncanny as something, that *estranges the familiar*. Taking a cartoonish doll as an example, this figure would not scare easily, until parts of its body are replaced by those resembling a real human being (cf. Paluzzi, 2019). The reason for that would be, that the figure crosses the line to the so-called *uncanny valley* (cf. *ibid.*), as defined by robotics professor Masahiro Mori (1970): As human-like figures are almost, but then again, not quite human, they cause an eerie sensation in their viewer, as the resemblance to the self would be negatively connotated (cf. Mori, 1970). The less distinguishable from the ‘real’ being it is, the more it would become something *unknown* (cf. Paluzzi, 2019). Uncertainty regarding the beings nature is evoked and contributes to generating an uncanny sensation in the viewer, who “may then ask, ‘if that is not human, then what is it?’” (*ibid.*).

Going over the essays of Ernst Jentsch (2008), Sigmund Freud (FREUD) and Masahiro Mori (1970), a summary of their findings concerning the uncanny will be presented as basis for the following chapters. This paper will then explore, in which form the uncanny can be found in the horror genre, specifically for videogames. For that, the definition of the body-horror genre as proposed by Linda Williams (1991) and other literature will be explored, to define, what characterizes the monsters that are home to the genre and why they can ultimately become uncanny creatures. An in-between exemplary study case will show, how some of the findings can be applied to the monsters of the game *Silent Hill*, to followingly continue with an investigation on why horror can be a pleasurable experience. For that, art-horror as proposed by Noël Carroll (1987) will be examined, while also considering the fascination monsters evoke. To present a fitting closure for this paper, a second exemplary study of the creatures and figures from the horror game *The Evil Within 2* with regards to their uncanny attributes will be done, while the direction of the investigation will be turned from sheer grotesque uncanniness into an artistic light.

In summary, this paper will guide the reader through facets of the uncanny/strangely familiar: From disturbing to grotesque to aesthetic.

## 2. The Uncanny

### 2.1 Ernst Jentsch

The *uncanny* was first explored in a 1906 essay of psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch, in which he brings forth, that the feeling of uncanniness would arise from certain experiences of the uncertain or undecidable (cf. translator's preface: Jentsch, 2008, p.1). The German word *unheimlich* would present a rather fortunate composition of words, according to Jentsch, as it "appears to express that someone to whom something 'uncanny' happens is not quite 'at home' or 'at ease' in the situation concerned" (Jentsch, 2008, p.2). It would express a lack of orientation connected to the thing or incident encountered, though it would hold no value to define the essence of the uncanny, as this effect would not necessarily occur for every individual on the same level, if at all (cf. *ibid.*, pp.2-3). Though the perception of the uncanny might not apply to everybody "this does not mean to say that it would be impossible to give a working definition of the concept of the 'uncanny'" (*ibid.*, p.3). To come closer to said essence, it would be better not to ask what is, but to investigate the psychological origins of the uncanny and psychical prerequisites to experience an uncanny sensation (cf. *ibid.*). The new and the unusual would present something, that initially evokes unease, mistrust or even hostility in people in contrast to the things dear and familiar to them. (cf. *ibid.*) As Jentsch explained, this response would emerge due to the difficulty of quickly establishing connections of the new to an individual's "previous ideation sphere (...) – in other words, the intellectual mastery of the new thing" (*ibid.*, p.4).

*That which has long been familiar appears not only as welcome, but also – however remarkable and inexplicable it may be – as straightforwardly self-evident.*

(Jentsch, 2008, p.4)

As an example, Jentsch gives the daily spectacle of the rising sun as a concept accepted without commentary since an individual's early childhood (cf. *ibid.*). Only if we question said enigma it would be, "that a particular feeling of uncertainty quite often presents itself" (*ibid.*, p.4). This disorientation and confusion regarding something known would also occur for many people, who are aware they are being fooled (e.g., illusions), often resulting in an extremely uncomfortable sensation they could not repress (cf. *ibid.*, pp.5-6). Another example regarding the feeling of uncertainty Jentsch brings forth, are masked balls, as the disguises would impose an awkward impression on some sensitive and generally nervous adults, who would be incapable of becoming accustomed to the very (cf. *ibid.*, p.6). External circumstances would furthermore increase their "tendency to bring about such sensations of

uncertainty” (ibid., p.6), when an abnormal psychological base due to e.g. illnesses, exhaustion, depression, fears etc. are present in an individual (cf. ibid.). Apart from all those causes of uncertainty, there would be one very particular trigger for uncanniness to arise though, as Jentsch suggests in his essay:

*Among all the psychological uncertainties that can become a cause for the uncanny feeling to arise, there is one in particular that is able to develop a fairly regular, powerful and very general effect: namely, doubt as to whether an apparently living being really is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate – and more precisely, when this doubt only makes itself felt obscurely in one’s consciousness. The mood lasts until these doubts are resolved and then usually makes way for another kind of feeling. (Jentsch, 2008, p.8)*

When something seemingly lifeless would suddenly move, its spectator would question its nature (e.g., is it psychological or mechanical?), entailing a feeling of terror, that would not abate as long as there persists doubt (cf. ibid.). A locomotive at night would evoke similar feelings, as long as the spectator has no knowledge about the machine’s nature, wherefore the noises of the apparatus might remind them of human breath (cf. ibid.).

Especially wax figures would impose an unpleasant impression on many people, particularly in semi-darkness, where it would become hard to distinguish a life-size figure from an actual human being (cf. ibid., p.9). This unpleasantness could even remain after one has gained knowledge regarding the object’s nature, in the form of “semi-conscious secondary doubts which are repeatedly and automatically aroused anew when one looks again and perceives finer details; or perhaps it is also a mere matter of the lively recollection of the first awkward impression lingering in one’s mind” (ibid., pp.9-10). Furthermore, automatic figures would increase this effect, though the intensity would depend on the figure’s size and mechanisms: A doll that can close its eyes would cause no notable sensation, whereas life-size machines with fine mechanisms could very easily cause feelings of unease (cf. ibid.). These emotions discussed would also explain the horror of dead (human) bodies, as Jentsch argues (cf. ibid., p.15), as thoughts of a latent animate state would lie so close to them,

*The human desire for the intellectual mastery of one’s environment is a strong one. Intellectual certainty provides psychological shelter in the struggle for existence. However it came to be, it signifies a defensive position against the assault of hostile forces, and the lack of such certainty is equivalent to lack of cover in the episodes of*

*that never-ending war of the human and organic world for the sake of which the strongest and most impregnable bastions of science were erected.*

(Jentsch, 2008, p.16)

Further factors in the origin of the uncanny are found by Jentsch in anthropomorphism and (abnormal) mental states: Giving the example of reinterpreting an inanimate thing as part of an organic creature, especially in poetry /fantasy, one could come up with something terrifying out of the most harmless phenomena, perhaps even due to a weak mind caused by e.g. hallucination (ibid., p.12). In addition to that, people would have the tendency to project their own attributes onto things, ascribing them the same animate state, and following being terrified by it, as Jentsch states (cf. ibid., pp.12-13). Furthermore, mental disorders like epilepsy could seem 'demonic' for viewers, who possess no expertise in the concerned field, whereas experts likely would not show such an emotional response when possessing sufficient knowledge to classify what is seen (cf. ibid., pp.14-15). Knowledge and continuous exposure to certain things would make people unaffected by them, as Jentsch argues (cf. ibid., p.15).

To summarize Jentsch's line of argumentation, he found, that the origin of feelings of unease and ultimately uncanniness would derive from intellectual uncertainty, especially regarding the nature of a being, and the doubt, whether something is animate or inanimate.

## **2.2 Sigmund Freud**

Connecting to Ernst Jentsch's line of thoughts, Sigmund Freud's in 1906 published essay "The 'Uncanny'" continues exploring the concept of the 'strangely familiar'. According to Freud, the uncanny would belong to all that is terrible, arousing creep dread and creeping horror (cf. FREUD, p.1). He proposes, that there must be a quality, which lets one distinguish 'uncanny' from 'fearful', connecting the former to the "class of terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (ibid., pp.1-2). Freud notes, that Jentsch's definition of the uncanny would be incomplete, as he didn't go beyond intellectual uncertainty /missing mastery of knowledge, which he finds to be incapable of explaining the impression of uncanniness (ibid., pp.2&7). Therefore, Freud proceeds to show in the course of his essay, how the familiar can become uncanny and frightening.

*The German word unheimlich is obviously the opposite of heimlich, heimisch, meaning "familiar," "native," "belonging to the home"; and we are tempted to*

*conclude that what is “uncanny” is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar. (FREUD, p.2)*

Not everything new would be uncanny by default though, as “something has to be added to what is novel and unfamiliar to make it uncanny” (ibid., p.2) Freud attempts to find another fitting definition of the ‘uncanny’ in foreign languages, but eventually returns to the German word ‘heimlich’, meaning “belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, intimate, comfortable, homely, etc.” (ibid., p.2), which he finds to belong to two sets of ideas: On the one hand to what is congenial, and on the other to what is concealed (cf. ibid., p.4). In his essay Freud comes to find, that the uncanny is brought forth by something repressed that recurs; a class of morbid anxiety, which originally could have been any kind of emotional affect, but has been transformed by repression (cf. ibid., p.13). It would be something old and familiar, something “established in the mind that has been estranged” (ibid., p.13). This feeling described would come forth especially in relation to dead bodies, death, and alongside that, ghosts and the return of the dead, what would be connected to humanities uncertainty as to whether death is an inevitable fate, as Freud argues (cf. ibid., p.13). However, to his example of the living dead Freud objects in a later part of his essay, that a moment of resurrection in fairy tales, e.g. Snow-White, would hardly be an uncanny moment (cf. ibid., p.16), though one could argue that such an event would be clear of uncanniness only under the condition, that the reanimated dead would look and act the exact same way as prior their ‘death’ (same bodily state, articulation etc.). In addition to people’s attitude towards death, other primitive beliefs in e.g. witchcraft and magic, infantile complexes like castration or involuntary repetition (like a path that lets a wanderer return in the same spot over and over again) would all be factors, that turn something fearful into something uncanny (cf. ibid., p.14). To many people being buried alive would be “the most uncanny thing of them all” (ibid., p.14), and in addition to that, an uncanny effect could easily be triggered when something till now regarded as imaginary suddenly appears in reality (cf. ibid., p.15).

*Our conclusion could then be stated thus: An uncanny experience occurs either when repressed infantile complexes have been revived by some impression, or when the primitive beliefs we have surmounted seem once more to be confirmed.*

(FREUD, p.17)



### 2.3 Masahiro Mori

In 1970, Masahiro Mori, robotics professor at the Tokyo Institute of Technology, took the matter of the uncanny into the sphere of robotics and hypothesized, how people would react to almost human-like robots (cf. Editor's note: Mori 1970, p.98). He proposed, "that a person's response to a humanlike robot would abruptly shift from empathy to revulsion as it approached, but failed to attain, a lifelike appearance" (ibid., p.98). The more human-like a robot's appearance, the higher it would be "perceived as familiar to a viewer, until finer nuances from human norms caused them to appear eerie, evoking a negative effect for the viewer" (Tinwell & Grimshaw, 2009, p.4, quoted from cf. Mori, 1970).

Towards industry robots, which lack resemblance to human beings due of their intended functionality /purpose, people would hardly feel affinity towards them, therefore placing these machines far off the valley of eeriness (cf. Mori, 1970, p.98). According to Mori, prosthetics would manage to mimic real body parts well, but as soon as the spectator realizes, that said body part is artificial, they would feel an eerie sensation (e.g. when doing a handshake due to the texture /coldness of the material etc.) (cf. ibid., p.99). This would lead to the prosthetic turning uncanny, as the human-like resemblance is negatively connotated, letting us lose our affinity towards the very (cf. ibid.). Not only the looks and feel of artificial figures would be relevant though, but also the movement, could contribute to intensifying the creepiness of an already eerie object (e.g. prosthetics) (cf. ibid., pp.99-100).

*Imagine a craftsman being awakened suddenly in the dead of the night. He searches downstairs for something among a crowd of mannequins in his workshop. If the mannequins started to move, it would be like a horror story. (Mori, 1970, p.100)*

Another example Mori provides regarding movement, is a human-like robot with an accurate number of face muscles: Would it execute a smile with only half the speed as natural, the robot's expression would turn creepy instead of happy, showing that "because of a variation in movement, something that has come to appear close to human—like a robot, puppet, or prosthetic hand—could easily tumble down into the uncanny valley" (ibid., p. 100). However, , an escape from the uncanny valley would be possible via design choices, as Mori predicts, that a safe level of affinity would be achievable by pursuing a non-human design (cf. ibid.). At the end of his essay, Mori concludes, that the eerie sensation would probably be a form of instinct protecting us from proximal sources of danger, e.g. corpses or members of different species, making it a mechanism of self-preservation (cf. ibid.).

Having gone through the three different approaches of Jentsch (2008), Freud (FREUD) and Mori (1970), the origin of unease and eeriness, that can ultimately turn into the *uncanny*, can be defined as something familiar that has been estranged, while intellectual uncertainty, especially doubt as to whether something is animate or inanimate, lets us question a being's nature. Particularly dead bodies and humanlike robots would play with our expectation of (latent) animate states, and the more human-like something appears, the higher it would be perceived familiar, until finer discrepancies cause it to evoke negative effects for the viewer.

### 3. Body Horror & The Creation of Monsters

“Horror has flourished as a major source of mass aesthetic stimulation” (Carroll, 1987, p.51) and its portrayal of violence and terror features ‘body spectacle’ in a most sensational way, as Linda Williams (1991, p.4) argues, letting her define a specific genre: The *body genre*. The previously compiled findings on the uncanny can partly be found in said genre definition, which furthermore connects to the question of a being's nature, or rather, how violation against nature can create monsters.

According to Williams (1991), horror, that is centred around the gross display of human bodies, would be the second lowest system of excess in cultural esteem next to pornography (p.3). Bodily excess, as she defines it for the horror genre, would lie in “the spectacle of a body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion” (ibid., pp.3-4). Often showcasing graphic violations of the human body, this body horror could also be called *biological horror*, as Cruz (2012) states, as it would be characterized by the “manipulation and warping of the normal state of bodily form and function” (ibid, p.161). The play with the fear of the potential destruction of one's own body would be central to the genre, while taking strength in the former mentioned biological abnormality in anatomy and bodily functions (cf. ibid.).

But how can this violation against nature be utilized? As Noël Carroll (1987) states, the horror genre would be “marked by the presence of monsters” (p.52), which would evoke fear and disgust due to their violation against reality, as Sauchelli (2014, p.40) argues. Their “disturbance of the natural order” (Carroll, 1987, p.52) would let them be regarded as abnormal, presenting a bridge to the previous definition of the body- /biological horror genre. Not only fear, but also disgust and revulsion, would be central reactions to such beings (cf. ibid., p.53), letting Carroll portray monsters as something extraordinary in an ordinary world (cf. ibid., p.52). Especially contradictory beings that are often seen in the horror genre like

zombies or ghosts, which are both living and dead, would be impure beings, according to Carroll (1987, p.55), as they are interstitial /contradictory. Furthermore, categorical incompleteness would be a standard trait of monsters, as states of disintegration or missing body parts like heads and limbs would be frequently seen on the very (ibid., p.55).

*Rather, monster X's being categorically interstitial causes a sense of impurity in us without our awareness of what causes that sense. (...) They are unnatural relative to a culture's conceptual scheme of nature. They do not fit the scheme; they violate it. Thus, monsters are not only physically threatening; they are cognitively threatening. They are threats to common knowledge. (Carroll, 1987, p.56)*

With his last comment regarding the threat to knowledge, Carroll continues to conclude, that “what horrifies is that which lies outside cultural categories and is, perforce, unknown” (ibid., p.57), letting us reconnect to Jentsch’s (2008) intellectual uncertainty as a trigger for the uncanny. Higgins (2016, p.70) took the definition of monsters even closer to the uncanny, as he argued, that aside from the former stated categorical violations, monsters’ anthropomorphism, or rather, their violation of the line between human and non-human, would be what makes them uncanny, taking the example of the hybrid ‘Xenomorph’ from the movie *Alien* as an example. Cruz (2012) put emphasis on (interspecies) hybrids in his definition of biological horror as well, as these category confusions would be “especially frightening when the monster is partly human” (ibid., p.162). It can be argued, that this unease connected to the hybrid, especially in the specific case of a partly human being, can be led back to the missing intellectual mastery as described by Ernst Jentsch (2008) and the concept of the estranged familiar as proposed by Sigmund Freud, therefore ultimately making the hybrid uncanny. Monsters would be “almost-but-not-quite human” (Higgins, 2016, p.71), making them “not the ultimate ‘unknown,’ but combinations of human and nonhuman” (ibid., pp.76-77). What would make monsters so terrifying but fascinating at the same time, would lie in their disturbing but compelling combination of the self and the other, letting them reside in the uncanny valley (cf. ibid., p.77).

#### **4. The Videogame Uncanny**

Now that we have explored what defines the horror genre, in particular in the case of body- and biological horror, and how violations against nature can create uncanny monsters, we

have a solid basis to move on to the medium, that will be the object of later study cases, in which we will reconnect and apply the prior findings: *Videogames*.

For (the horror genre of) videogames Hoeger and Huber (2007) have argued, that if the uncanny can be characterised as the familiar made unfamiliar, then a *gamerly uncanny*, which is “activated by its implementation in a software-based virtual environment in a fictive game-world” (p. 152), could be identified. This videogame simulacrum could evoke a sense of the uncanny by triggering resemblance anxiety due to the imperfect simulacra of living bodies, which in the case of videogames are (human-like) game characters (cf. *ibid.*, p.153). Hoeger and Huber (2007) see Jentsch’s (2008) theory of intellectual uncertainty as crucial to the uncanny in games (cf. *ibid.*), while the sense of eeriness and fear radiating from a character would increase the stranger the very is perceived to be, as Tinwell and Grimshaw (2009, p.3) argue. Investigating the level of eeriness felt by viewers based on their perceived strangeness /uncanniness of characters, Tinwell and Grimshaw have found, that due to technical restrictions for interactive characters, the sense of uncanniness could be exaggerated in either a negative or even positive way (given the paper was published in 2009, there were limitations to real-time game characters that aimed for photo-realistic faces and natural animations): For zombies, or arguably any non-human characters in horror games, which intentionally want to evoke an eerie sensation, the uncanny would be advantageous, but if the goal was to create a convincing human-like character, unnatural behaviour would raise the viewer’s awareness as the character mismatches with their expectations (cf. *ibid.*, p.5). Tinwell and Grimshaw came to the hypotheses, that the sense of uncanniness would rise with an increasing lack of human-likeness in facial expression, voice, and especially mouth articulation, and also due to asynchronism between sound and lip movement (cf. *ibid.*, p.23). An example for that is *Quantic Dream’s* technical demonstration called “The Casting,” showcased on the Electronic Entertainment Expo in 2006, which presented real-time rendered footage using the PS3, advertising it as a display of believably authentic human-like characters (cf. Tinwell, 2014, p.xv). However, the audience watching the footage was not impressed, but rather shocked, as they perceived the characters as uncanny due to their strange and unnatural behaviour, especially in their facial animations (cf. *ibid.*, p.xvi). This would be connected to the fact, that most people would rely on facial expression in themselves and others to effectively communicate as part of daily social interactions (cf. Tinwell, 2014, p.xiii). The previous example also connects well to Mori’s (1970) theory of the uncanny valley, as those fine nuances in facial expression and overall behaviour can make characters evoke an eerie sensation. Other examples for uncanny

characters can be found in games such as *L.A. Noire* or *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, that “were highly criticized for their human characters that don’t look quite right” (Schwind, Wolf & Henze, 2018, p.45), what would result from conflicting cues in a character’s appearance like inconsistency in their state of realism (e.g. unnaturally large eyes in a realistic face) (cf. *ibid.*). Therefore, it should be avoided to combine realistic, detailed textures with non-human-like features to avoid an uncanny effect (cf. *ibid.*, p.46).

## 5. Study Case 01: Silent Hill

The *Silent Hill* game series by *Konami*, which had its debut in 1999, revolutionized the survival horror genre (Fandom, *Silent Hill Wiki: Silent Hill (franchise)*). Focussing on corruption and darkness in the world and of humanity, the *Silent Hill* series creates disturbing nightmare worlds via the depiction of often graphical violence (*ibid.*). Aspects of humanity and repressed traumas of protagonists are manifested as horribly disgusting and hostile monsters, presenting the games strength in psychological horror (*ibid.*). As many of the creatures of *Silent Hill* possess human-like attributes in their physique, though often warped or violated, they present an ideal ground for an analysis regarding the uncanny. Therefore, three creatures will be looked at in connection to the findings of the prior chapters.

### 5.1 Valtiel

*Valtiel* (*Figure 1*) is a creature appearing in *Silent Hill 3*, that possess an overall humanoid appearance and wears robes resembling a butcher’s apron (FANDOM, *Silent Hill Wiki: Valtiel*). Aside from this first glance human resemblance, his head is rapidly vibrating, taking the viewer the ability to make out his facial features (*ibid.*). However, there would not be any facial human-likeness to begin with, as Valtiel’s face is blank and leathery with stitches in the place of a mouth (*ibid.*), presenting an advantage for an uncanny sensation to arise, as facial expression is completely absent, although it is incredibly important for



*Figure 1: Valtiel. Silent Hill 3.*

interhuman communication, as Tinwell (2014) argued. Furthermore, Valtiel does not speak, but only growls /lets out warped sounds, which arguably further decategorize him as human. This creature evokes fear and ultimately a sense of uncanniness, as it is an abnormal being that violates certain human characteristics, as e.g. Cruz (2012) described for biological horror.

## 5.2 God

Coming from the third instalment of the *Silent Hill* series as well, *God* (Figure 2) appears as a giant humanoid being, that is half skeletal (FANDOM, Silent Hill Wiki: The god). Its body is malformed and missing flesh on its legs, which are ending at the knees (ibid.), making God an impure, contradictory being, as described by Carroll (1987), because of it moving despite obvious signs of decay and missing body parts. It possesses all facial features, though its skin is cracked like porcelain and God's eyes are always shut as if it is sleeping (FANDOM, Silent Hill Wiki: The god). In the context of *Silent Hill 3*'s story, God had just been born, wherefore its behaviour, "lacking consciousness,



Figure 2: God. *Silent Hill 3*.

sentience and self-awareness" (ibid.), let the creature seem like a baby, though it roars like a beast (ibid.). Given its size, level of decay and beastly roars, God is an uncanny view for its spectators due to its violation against nature in combination with its (high) level of human resemblance.

## 5.3 Siam

The *Siam* (Figure 3) is a creature appearing in *Silent Hill: Homecoming*, presenting two humanoid figures horrifically fused and tied together by bondage-like straps (FANDOM, Silent Hill Wiki: Siam). The male bottom figure covered in clothing full of belts, has

muscular arms, which morph into “huge, club-like appendages“ (ibid.), estranging him from the familiar concept of the human body. The female figure on top, which is tied and fused into the male’s back (ibid.), is merely wrapped up in the male’s vest, while apart from that, only wearing stilettos. Both figure’s



Figure 3: Siam. *Silent Hill: Homecoming*.

faces are partly covered by straps, as the female’s hands are tied above her head, only letting both her and the male’s mouth show (ibid.). What estranges this creature even further is the fact, that the female’s tied hands make up a third mouth, which is the actual mouth of the Siam creature (ibid.). Therefore, aside from the abnormal arms of the male and the fused flesh, another categorical violation as described by e.g. Cruz (2012) is present, making the Siam cross the line between human and non-human. What seemingly could only have been two human beings tied together, turns out to be an uncanny monster.

The *Silent Hill* series presents a variety of nightmarish monsters that arguably reside in the sphere of the uncanny, because of them being “almost-but-not-quite human” (Higgins, 2016, p.71), as this short study case showed. They combine a familiar human physique with contradictory elements like decay, ultimately presenting horrifically warped and biologically abnormal beings that are estranged from cultural categories (cf. Carroll, 1987, p.57). They are ‘unknown’ and therefore horrifying (cf. ibid.), letting us reconnect to Jentsch’s (2008) theory of intellectual uncertainty, which can evoke unease. *Silent Hill*’s monsters are disturbing but compelling combinations of the self and the other (cf. Higgins, 2016, p.77), letting them become uncanny monsters.

## 6. Art-Horror & Fascination

As the previous study case showed, *Silent Hill* offers disturbing monsters that warp the familiar into something abnormal. But how can it be, that consumers are unsolicitedly playing and even enjoying such horror games, although they evoke negative emotions?

To unravel this paradox, we come back to the findings of Ernst Jentsch (2008), who already proposed in his 1906 essay, that art (e.g. literature, stage play) would be able to purposely evoke uncanniness with artistic intention, as there would lie pleasure in the emotional excitement to which the characters of the art form are subject (cf. *ibid.*, pp.10-11). It would be an artistic pleasure that radiates from said excitement, as we as the spectators or consumers could experience emotional blows without consequences, awaking a strong feeling for life (cf. *ibid.*, p.11). Horror would aim “at producing a distinct aesthetic emotion (...), combining fear and revulsion with pleasurable cognitive interests in explanation and understanding,” as Freeland (2004, p.189) argues. This emotional state evoked by horror would therefore be called: *Art-horror* (cf. Carroll, 1987, p.52), as it imitates real horror by triggering fear symptoms, while still having an enjoyable effect (cf. Schweigert, 2018, p.7). To visualize this, Carroll (1987) gave the example of a fictional monster being presented on screen: Since the creature is not real and only the thought of the very is frightening, the viewer is merely art-horrified and does not run from it in fear (cf. *ibid.*, p.56). For horror games, fear and its symptoms would be evoked by the content they present to the player, or they would be mimicked by the game’s mechanics and design, making horror games to an experience without consequences, as Schweigert (2018, p.7) argues, also connecting to Jentsch’s (2008) previously stated findings. Art-horror would not only elicit mere emotions, but an entire mood, according to Sauchelli (2014, pp.43-44), as it is guiding the viewer’s attention towards unpleasant aspects of reality. Works of art-horror would generally present the audience with “representations of or ideas or real objects that are related to death, monsters, or other possibly threatening supernatural events (...)” (*ibid.*, p.44), but also with morbid “real misfortunes involving the death of people, actual evils, or hallucinated threatening monsters” (*ibid.*). Although any aesthetic attention towards those topics would generally be considered inappropriate, “this does not mean that repelling or menacing representations of such issues cannot be attractive or aesthetically pleasing; in fact, for many horror fans, this is precisely the case” (*ibid.*, p.44). “In certain circumstances, our attention is determined by the particular stylistic features of a work, while in others, the atmosphere contributes to and directs our attention in a morbid way onto the aforementioned unpleasant



issues” (ibid.). According to Bantinaki (2012), “horror often goes deep in our psyche to unveil what in real life we repress” (p.390), presenting a bridge to Freud’s findings regarding the uncanny. Art-horror would be “an articulation of our fear of elements beyond control” (Sauchelli, 2014, p.46), therefore presenting a way of coping with real events of life (e.g. death) (ibid.). Works of art in general, that elicit negative emotions, Sauchelli also describes as *painful art*, which’s “pleasure and pain, in particular when related to art appreciation, are not opposites but rather ‘parts of a dense and complex phenomenon’” (cf. Korsmeyer, 2005, as cited in Sauchelli, 2014, p.47). The negative mood characterizing art-horror would not contrast with the concept of beauty, and in addition to that, the negative emotions evoked would work as experience intensifiers, which are “transformed by art into a positive aesthetic encounter” (Korsmeyer, 2005, as cited in Sauchelli, 2014, p.47).

Aside from the pleasurable emotions without consequences and its contradicting appeal of morbid representations as described above for art-horror, we now come back to the findings of Carroll (1990, p.190), who describes, how art-horror promotes *fascination* through horrific beings. Higgins (2016, pp.76-77) proposed this as well, claiming, that aside from unease, monsters that combine human and non-human aspects would evoke fascination due to their compelling fusion (cf. ibid., p.77). Furthermore, Jentsch (2008) argued, that “one of the most reliable artistic devices for producing uncanny effects” (p.11) would be the “uncertainty as to whether the reader has a human person or rather an automaton before him in the case of a particular character” (ibid.). Being unable to investigate a character that evokes uncertainty directly, via artistic manipulation by the author, would make up a dark feeling and doubtful tension (cf. ibid., pp.11-12). Curiosity and fascination would be basic to the genre, making Carroll (1990) produce a twofold theory regarding art-horror, which he called the “paradox of horror” (p.190): On the one hand, there would be the attraction /fascination that lets people seek out horror, and on the other hand, there would be the appeal /curiosity elicited by the narrative (cf. ibid.), similar to what Jentsch (2008) described as artistic manipulation to evoke uncertainty. Being “classificatory misfits” (ibid, p.191), objects of art-horror would be both disturbing and interesting at the same time and given their categorical violations (as also prior described for the definition of body- /biological-horror), they would demand *attention* (cf. ibid.).

*Not everything that fascinates horrifies and not everything that horrifies fascinates. However, (...) there is a strong correlation between fascination and horror due to the fact that horrific monsters are anomalous beings. That is, both fascination and*

*art-horror converge on the same type of objects just because they are categorical violations. Where there is art-horror, there is likely to be at least the prospect of fascination. Fascination is not remote from art-horror, but is related to it as a probable recurring concomitant. Moreover, it is a recurring concomitant because the genre specializes in impossible, and, in principle, unknowable beings. This is the attraction of the genre. (Carroll 1990, p.191)*

“Whatever distress horror causes, as a probable price for our fascination, is outweighed for the average consumer by the pleasure we derive in having our curiosity stimulated and rewarded,” as Carroll (1990, p.193) argues, though there might even be connoisseurs of gore, who attend art-horror simply for the gross-out, making disgust essential for their pleasure (cf. *ibid.*).

Pulling the findings of this chapter together, art-horror provides a way to encounter negative but at the same time pleasurable emotions without consequences, while there would also lie appeal and aesthetic pleasure in morbid representations of real misfortune for some consumers. Furthermore, fascination would lie in the horrific beings that are home to the horror genre, as they would demand attention and elicit curiosity in spectators due to their fusion of human and non-human aspects. (cf. Bantinaki, 2012, Carroll, 1987/1990, Freeland, 2004, Jentsch, 2008, Sauchelli, 2014, and Schweigert, 2018)

## **7. Study Case 02: The Evil Within 2**

After examining works concerning the uncanny, bridging those findings to the genre of body-horror as well as to the creation of monsters, and finally looking at art-horror and fascination to explain, why encountering the uncanny (monsters) might present an enjoyable experience, this last exemplary study case will apply the findings to figures of *The Evil Within 2*. With that, a closed circle of research for the paper will be provided, while opening the discussion to future research.

*The Evil Within 2*, developed by *Tango Gameworks* and published by *Bethesda Softworks* in 2017, is a survival horror /psychological thriller (FANDOM, *The Evil Within Wiki: The Evil Within 2*), that takes the player into “the nightmarish world of STEM” (Bethesda, *The Evil Within 2*). In it, horrifying threats await as the world twists around protagonist *Detective Sebastian Castellanos*, who tries to bring back his loved ones (*ibid.*). Aside from mere

zombie-like creatures that function as the general enemy to the player, there are two beings that stand out: For the first half of the game *Stefano Valentini*, a “mysterious photographer with supernatural powers” (FANDOM, The Evil Within Wiki: The Evil Within 2), who acts as one of the game’s antagonists, creates monsters out of human body parts. His two “living art creations” (FANDOM, The Evil Within Wiki: Guardian), the *Guardian* and *Obscura*, function as his servants that try to eliminate the protagonist (ibid.). However, aside from these monsters, Stefano Valentini also has a twisted way of displaying his other victims: In stationary time-loops, capturing the victims’ death, blood splashes in slow-motion, creating ‘art-installations’ for the player to behold.

In the following, creatures and art-installations of *The Evil Within 2* will be examined with regard to their uncanniness, while also opening up the discussion to a new field of aesthetically pleasing displays of body-horror. Although the monsters and art-installations of the game could be deeply analysed in their symbolism and hidden psychology, this study case will focus on their attributes of uncanniness.

### 7.1 The Guardian

This tall abomination consists of “the mutilated human remains of various women murdered by Stefano Valentini” (FANDOM, The Evil Within Wiki: Guardian) and is seemingly held together by barbed wire. The *Guardian* (Figure 4) is a horrendous fusion of flesh and machine, with its right arm ending in a large buzzsaw that emanates a high-pitched sound whenever its blade is spinning. However, what really demands the spectator’s attention and causes an eerie sensation, are the creature’s multiple heads, “each one wearing a different expression, with the central one facing forward and sporting a wide, maniacal grin” (ibid.). Especially the “hysterical giggles” that change “to a very deep, throaty (...) cackle when it spots a potential victim” (ibid.) are evoking a sense of eeriness.

Connecting these attributes of the Guardian to the findings of the prior chapters, the creature displays bodily excess as described by Linda Williams (1991), that is defining for the body-horror genre. Arguably being the embodiment of graphic violation, this monster plays with the fear of the potential destruction of one’s own body, as proposed by Cruz (2012) for biological horror. In addition to that, the Guardian clearly falls into Carroll’s (1987) category of contradictory beings, because it is a living creature born from fused /bound together remains, while only partly keeping a human silhouette. As it violates nature, this creature evokes intellectual uncertainty as described by Jentsch (2008) and furthermore, estranges

the familiar (cf. FREUD) in a grotesque way, letting an eerie sensation arise in its spectator. Especially the multiple faces that are caught in emotion, combined with the giggles and chuckling, let the Guardian reside in the uncanny, as it plays with the visual and auditive hints that are so important for interpersonal communication (cf. Tinwell, 2014, p.xiii). Although the uncanny thought of a latent animate state for dead bodies, as proposed by Jentsch (2008), might hardly apply to the mutilated remains the



Figure 4: *The Guardian. The Evil Within 2.*

Guardian consists of, it is noteworthy, that the player is nevertheless confronted with this sensation: The possibility of the Guardian reassembling itself from piles of remains that are scattered all over the game's map, occurs multiple times, wherefore the player might experience said sensation whenever they encounter those piles of body parts.

## 7.2 Obscura

Coming to Stefano's "prized pet and ultimate masterpiece" (FANDOM, The Evil Within Wiki: Obscura), *Obscura* (Figure 5) is a being that sets itself apart from the other creatures inhabiting the world of *The Evil Within 2*: A female corpse arched backwards holds an old camera in the place of a head (ibid.), while its neck is slowly fusing with the accordion-like part of the apparatus. In addition to that, the upper body sits on a "stitched-together pelvis with three legs" (ibid.), which's feet wear the shoes of a ballet dancer, making Obscura walk disturbingly elegant on its tiptoes. Like the Guardian creature, Obscura has its own distinct set of noises, which are warped groans /moans. Whether they derive from pleasure or pain,

or a different emotion, cannot be clearly determined, although they sound rather lustful in certain moments. These estranged sounds, paired with the nudity (exposed breasts) and the shoes of a ballet dancer, arguably create a rather obscene but aesthetic figure despite its grotesqueness.



Figure 5: Obscura. *The Evil Within 2*.

Like the Guardian,

Obscura can be categorized in the body-horror genre and shows similar estrangement of the familiar. Its warped body that fuses with the camera lets the creature become an uncanny view to behold, as it is a hybrid of flesh and machine; a combination of the self and other, that would be an especially frightening category confusion (cf. Cruz, 2012, and Higgins, 2016). In combination with its looks, Obscura's movement enhances the possibility for an uncanny sensation to arise even further, as her estranged body with an unnatural leg count /position defies common knowledge and therefore is cognitively challenging for its spectator (cf. Carroll, 1987). This also connects to Jentsch's (2008) proposed intellectual uncertainty.

### 7.3 Art-Installations

Aside from Obscura, who already presents itself as a being between the grotesque, the uncanny and something artistic, there are a few 'art-installations' created by Stefano Valentini, which arguably further blur the line of grotesque obscenity and art. As stated in the beginning of this chapter, *The Evil Within 2* presents art-installations, which are Stefano's way of presenting his victims in an 'artistic' light. Even though the setting /mood was not something of interest within the scope of this paper, some environmental aspects regarding the art-installations are to be considered. Not the general setting or a specific location of the game are meant, but the details within the installation's capsule of stopped time: Splashing

blood and falling rose petals, captured in a specific moment, accompanied by exquisite classical music, framing the ‘art piece’ in an eternal loop of time.

Taking a look at Stefano’s art-installation called “Rebirth”, this piece presents a floating female corpse dressed in a white, flowy gown that resembles a bride’s dress. Her face is covered in white cloth, while blood is splashing from behind her head. In addition to that, multiple additional arms are attached to her back, making it resemble some sort of wings. Furthermore, below this ‘centre piece’ there are also other dismembered but reassembled corpses with bouquets of red roses instead of their heads, while a pile of mutilated remains lies beneath the figures. As the art-installation is frozen in time, the splashing blood, rose petals and the white cloth create a dynamic composition, that is presented with accompanying classical music in the spotlight.



Figure 6: *Rebirth*. *The Evil Within 2*.

This display of human remains might be obscene, but its artistic construction transforms it into a composition, which is both grotesque and aesthetic. Although the art installation might not be a living being, it arguably still is somewhat uncanny, as it presents disfigured human bodies, that are intended to be looked at by the player. The play of something horrible (dead humans) being dragged into a contradictory setup (artistic installation) might be the most uncanny, but also appealing thing about this creation. Art-horror, as described by Carroll (1987), makes it possible to behold this ‘art-piece’ without consequences, or rather, without the weight of reality, as it is not real. Stefano’s creations would arguably be less ‘enjoyable’ if they were not set in a videogame. As “pleasure and pain, in particular when related to art appreciation, are not opposites but rather ‘parts of a dense and complex phenomenon’” (cf.

Korsmeyer, 2005, as cited in Sauchelli, 2014, p.47), the art-installations of *The Evil Within 2* open up the discussion for further research in regards to e.g. why exactly they are aesthetically pleasing and furthermore, if the creations are aesthetically pleasing to all spectators.

To conclude this short study it can be said, that *The Evil Within 2* plays with the concept of the familiar, mostly human bodies, and estranges /disfigures and reassembles them in a grotesque way. Going from the Guardian over *Obscura* to the art-installation, a development from mere gore over to somewhat aesthetically pleasing creations can be seen. The first two creatures analysed are uncanny, as they are contradictory and abnormal, wherefore they challenge common knowledge. Furthermore, they also present extreme graphic violations of the human body, what makes them uncanny monsters of the body-horror genre. For the art-installation the same aspects apply, although this creation opens the discussion to deeper psychological investigations. Fascination and curiosity might outweigh the distress horror causes (cf. Carroll, 1990) and art-horror provides a safe space to explore and 'enjoy' this bombastic creation, but this type of 'artistically pleasing horror' should be investigated further.

## 8. Conclusion

To summarize the findings of this paper that explored the uncanny as a phenomenon and finally applied it to videogames of the horror genre, the uncanny can clearly be utilized to create eerie monsters via uncanny attributes in either physique, movement or auditive aspects. As monsters violate nature and therefore challenge common knowledge, they become something unknown, what can let an eerie sensation arise. Especially when a creature is a hybrid that combines both human and non-human attributes, this being can become particularly frightening, as it estranges something long known to us into something abnormal. The emerging intellectual uncertainty, especially regarding the warping of the familiar, creates feelings of uncanniness. This became particularly obvious when examining the creatures of *Silent Hill*: They confront the player with contradictory beings that, in the examples used, all estrange the human face to evoke eeriness. Whether it is the almost complete absence of facial features or the missing of facial movement, the creatures of *Silent Hill* warp the most important contributor to human interaction, making them truly eerie.



They are “almost-but-not-quite-human” (Higgins, 2016, p.71). However, ‘gamerly` staged horror in the bounds of art-horror provides a safe space to ‘enjoy` emotional blows without consequences. Furthermore, the fascination and curiosity monsters elicit due to their “combination of the self and other” (Higgins, 2016, p.77) contribute to turning horror into a pleasurable experience. The last study case regarding the uncanny figures of *The Evil Within 2* finally combined all the prior findings, while especially showcasing the characteristics of the body-horror genre in its creature’s grotesqueness and ‘spectacular` art-installations. Here, the latter in particular manage to combine the grotesque and uncanny into something aesthetic; a gruesome spectacle for the viewer to behold.

To conclude this paper, uncanniness is a powerful attribute in the horror genre and can even be turned into something to linger your mind on within the bounds of art-horror.

## 9. Outlook

The study case of *The Evil Within 2*, especially the art-installations of the game’s antagonist, provide a base for future research and open up multiple questions. First, a definition of ‘art` would need to be defined, to see, why the installations might, or might not at all, be art. In addition to that, it would need to be explored, why exactly those creations are aesthetically pleasing or if they are even universally pleasing to all viewers on the same level. Furthermore, symbolism in uncanny art might be of interest, and the question, if art-horror and fascination /curiosity are the only explanation for enjoying these creatures /creations should be investigated, perhaps via an empiric survey. Also the reason why we enjoy experiencing negative emotions in media and the pleasure it evokes could be explored by going deeper into psychology.



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## 10.3 Figures

Figure 1: Valtiel. Silent Hill 3. Team Silent. Konami. FANDOM. Silent Hill Wiki: Valtiel. <https://silenthill.fandom.com/wiki/Valtiel?file=ValtielArt.png>.

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