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Play Me for a Fool: Horror-Inducing Madness from Edgar Allan Poe to *The Dark Eye* (1995)

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Abstract

Madness often serves as the driving force behind the actions of Edgar Allan Poe's protagonists, making their psyche a central component of his horror stories. Theme, however, is only one element that contributes to the horror affect/effect in Poe's oeuvre: his talent for evoking horror through narrative structure and tone (Punter 1996) positions form as another crucial aspect of his poetics. When adapting Poe's tales for a different medium, authors and artists need to confront both the thematic clusters that Poe favored and the stylistic choices that he deployed in conjunction with his themes.

This contribution explores how the 1995 video game *The Dark Eye* adapts several works by Poe, focusing on the transposition of madness-induced horror. The game is of particular relevance because it approaches Poe's stories in four different manners: first, the game adapts three of Poe's best-known stories ("The Cask of Amontillado," "Berenice," and "The Tell-Tale Heart") for interactive gameplay. Second, it features full or abridged versions of Poe's poems and stories ("Annabel Lee" and "The Masque of the Red Death," recited, and "To Helen" and "The Premature Burial," in written form). Third, it constructs a framing narrative which retrieves Poe's themes, merging several stories, and proceduralizes his horror-inducing style for the video game environment. Fourth, it makes ample use of Poe's Gothic atmosphere to induce horror and terror not only narratively, but also visually and aurally.

The contribution thus argues that *The Dark Eye* serves as an all-encompassing attempt to adapt Poe's madness-related stories beyond the mere thematic dimension, showing that Poe's innovations can persist across different media.

Keywords: Poe, horror, madness, video game studies, *The Dark Eye*, American Gothic

Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe's mastery of the Gothic short story has granted him longevity within the pantheon of the American canon. Countless works analyze his style, themes, and ability to convey horror through a combination of the two. David Punter, in *The Literature of Terror*, praises him for his "enormous and varied" contribution to Gothic, highlighting how some of his recurring themes were trendsetting and, at some junctures, genre-defining (as is the case of detective fiction, for instance). "Yet," Punter writes, "Poe's greatest contribution was in terms not of themes but of structure and tone, in the evolution of a variety of symbolist terror in which he has never been surpassed . . . . Although Poe did not invent the Gothic short story, he invented something within it, a kind of story which does not move by simple narrative but by spiralling intensification" (177).

Poe's long-lasting legacy survives in the countless adaptations and appropriations of his work, fostered by his *ambiguous position* between highbrow and lowbrow literature (Neimeyer 208) that made him "a mass-cultural writer" (Elmer 4), one that tried to appeal to a wide audience even in his own time, choosing themes that allured his contemporaries (Campbell xviii) within a genre, the Gothic, that had been on the popular market for close to fifty years (Silverman 111-12). Per Mark Neimeyer, Poe's appeal also relates to the *thematic uncertainty* that his stories rely on; the uncanny juxtaposition of a banal reality to the irrational, horrendous, or inexplicable is what makes his narratives pass the test of time, as they offer the audience both escapism through the unusual and relaxation through the familiar (209).

Commenting on the thousands of illustrated editions of Poe's stories, Burton Pollin suggests that Poe may be considered "the most popular modern author for visual illustration" (2), a claim echoed more recently also by Barbara Cantalupo in the 2018 *Oxford Handbook of Edgar Allan Poe*. Neimeyer's survey of Poe's reception in popular culture confirms and expands this point by highlighting the hundreds of audiovisual adaptations made for the big and small screen. Despite the at times drastic differences among these derivative works, which in some cases borrow little more than the title or atmosphere from Poe, Neimeyer

identifies several trends which link many of them, negatively. First, Poe's works are often toned down through the removal of the most macabre or horrifying acts; it is the case of several illustrated abridged editions for children, but also of many comic book adaptations. Second, there is a strong tendency to conflate Poe's life with his fiction, especially in film adaptations (Neimeyer 216). Third, adaptations tend to add a moral explanation to stories for which Poe provided none, at times going as far as contradicting the spirit of the original (Neimeyer 215).

Much has changed in the twenty years since Neimeyer's survey was published in the *Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe* (2004), and if the complete lack of mention to videoludic adaptations might have raised only a few eyebrows in the early 2000s, despite Henry Jenkins' remark that games are "the art form of the digital age," today the omission is glaring. No references to Poesque video games appear also in more recent surveys of Poe's afterlives (e.g. Perry and Sederholm's 2012 collection). Despite the widespread acknowledgement that "video games have experienced exponential growth in their relevance and social impact" and have become the "largest form of entertainment and cultural expression today" (Cerezo-Pizarro et al.), to the best of my knowledge, only three studies tackle to some extent Poe's legacy in video games. Angel Torres-Toukoumidis, Tatiana León-Alberca and Eduardo Henriquez-Mendoza's article (2024) is the most comprehensive attempt to identify the defining traits of Poe adaptations in video games, but it falls short of the mark by choosing to analyze only five extremely niche, non-commercial video games. Elisa Silva Ramos (2021) uses Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" to analyze the detective formula as reprised in the video game *Return of the Obra Dinn*, which is however no direct (nor implicit) adaptation of Poe's work. Marco Caracciolo (2019) focuses specifically on dream states and atmosphere in two Poe video games, *The Dark Eye* and *The Last Door.* Caracciolo's article is the closest in intent to the present contribution, which focuses on the adaptation of a specific thematic-stylistic feature of Poe's stories in video games, i.e., horror-inducing madness.

As the following section will detail, Poe returns time and time again to the subject of madness in his stories, but far from representing it univocally, he experiments with a wide range of mad characters, settings, and narrative choices to instill horror in his readers. This madness-induced

horror, I purport, is what makes Poe's stories fertile material for videoludic adaptations. Horror, in fact, is one of the few genre labels that has managed to cross media boundaries without too much hassle – becoming a "milieu" for video games, in Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska's terminology.[1] While most literary genres tend to mean little when applied to video games, whose categorization prominently follows mechanics more than content (Adams; Aarseth; Juul), horror has made its way into the classification of some subgenres of video games, e.g. survival horror, and is generally used to describe the atmosphere of games across different mechanics-based genres. Though the existing literature on horror in video games focuses prominently on survival horror (especially the two franchises that essentially defined the genre, *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill*), a wide range of games belonging to other videoludic categories rely on it to power their narrative and gameplay. *Layers of Fear* (2016) is a prime example of a game that exploits psychological horror, rather than horror tied to resource scarcity and the necessity of survival in a monster-infested setting. More recently, titles like *Ten Bells* (2024), *Reveil* (2024), *Alan Wake 2* (2023), and *Madison* (2022) have expanded the psychological horror genre, which often features the trope of a mad protagonist or narrator. *Layers of Fear* and *Ten Bells*, especially, fit neatly into what Krzywinska (59-61) calls "Gothic video games," i.e., video games that "gamify" the Gothic literary genre (55), "where Gothic themes are woven into story, game mechanics and representational style" (58). Both are set in an enclosed Victorian-looking space inhabited by strange occurrences and entities that question the protagonist's sanity; both feature gameplay mostly consisting in moving through said Gothic space – pacing, hesitating, turning around when encountering monstrous happenstances, running away in a fright – much like Gothic heroes and heroines trapped in their mansions and abbeys would.

Not all horror games can be described as Gothic. Krzywinska identifies five coordinates of Gothic video games (59-61), which must all be present to build a full Gothic immersive and interactive experience for the player. A doomed "false hero" protagonist moving within "haunted, disquieted and uncanny spaces" are two of the minimum requirements for a Gothic narrative (59), both contributing to the "affective" coordinate, which determines the psychological "mood" of the player and should elicit "paralysis, claustrophobia, vertigo, alienation, estrangement, dread,

discomfort, disorientation" – the third coordinate (60). The fourth coordinate is "style," i.e. the aesthetic and linguistic choices such as "editing, phrasing, elisions, use of time, auditory and visual elements" (60), often combined with the Gothic mise-en-scène to produce environmental storytelling (60). The fifth and final coordinate is function, i.e. the use a game makes of Gothic, or in other words, what Gothic is for in the wider architecture of the game (61).

Krzywinska sees these five coordinates as pertaining to the *milieu* of a video game and argues that Gothic exceeds it to also influence gameplay mechanics and user interaction (i.e., the *genre* of the video game). I would rather argue that game mechanics and player interaction pertain to the fourth coordinate, style, as the specific way in which the mechanics are built and experienced by the player constitutes a stylistic choice. Be that as it may, gothic games tend to have a gameplay that frustrates the player's agency and disrupts the traditional win/lose scenario for the game ending, in line with the impotence and doom often found in literary Gothic.

Gothic video games are not a recent innovation: early precursors were, e.g., *Myst* (Cyan, 1993) and *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* (Gray Matter Studios, 2001). Most Poesque video games fall naturally into this category: *Phantasmagoria* (Sierra Online, 1995*)* evokes the Gothic atmosphere of Poe's stories; *The Dark Eye* (Inscape, 1995) adapts them more directly and embeds them in a new Poe-inspired narrative. Video games, essentially, seem to be following a trajectory similar to that of cinema and television in adapting Poe: some – few – games try to adapt his stories faithfully; others – most – borrow his Gothic settings, tropes, and atmosphere but depart, at times radically, from the original stories.

In what follows, then, I will build on Poe scholarship to describe how Poe's mad characters, settings, and style are adapted to elicit psychological horror in the Gothic video game *The Dark Eye* (1995). In doing so, I wish to show that "faithful" Poesque video game adaptations – i.e., adaptations that do not sacrifice style or themes in favor of playability or medium-related necessities but rather strive to translate all features of Poe's poetics – are indeed possible, albeit rare. This essay takes a holistic approach to the study of video games, following in the footsteps of several scholars (Lindley; Atkins; Atkins and Krzywinska; Kokonis) who strived to bridge the narratology/ludology divide by arguing that the narrative,

mechanics, and rules of the game should all be taken as part of a wider, single product. Further, it embraces Barry Atkins and Tanya Krzywinska's claim that video games are texts in a Barthesian sense, i.e. cultural artefacts whose readability derives from the combination of plot, visuals, music, mechanics, rules, and player psychological and physical interaction, and hinges on the player/reader's ability to take in all facets of the text as a whole (6).

Madness in Poe's Works

Some of Poe's most memorable characters were, or appeared to be, madmen. Usher and his friend, the unnamed narrators of "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat," Egaeus in "Berenice," Montresor in "The Cask of Amontillado," all show how rich and varied Poe's depiction of madness is: there is the insane but lucid criminal, the victim of "monomania" – often secluded in a library –, the vengeance-driven psychopath. Madness also exceeds the mere characterization of Poe's protagonists: it is tied to consumption and decay – of the body, of infrastructure, of society – and it pervades Poe's style, often by way of evoking a "dark sublime" (McGhee 57). The following subsections track the trope of the madman in Poe's works, highlighting passages and features that will return in the analysis of *The Dark Eye.*

Lucid Madness

Poe was fascinated by aberrant behavior and its scientific causes, as well as by the legal intricacies connecting crime to madness (Cleman 626). Around the time Poe wrote "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843) and "The Black Cat" (1843), there was a lively public conversation surrounding the insanity defense, which was making inroads in American courts granting absolution or reduced sentences to murderers that had "lost the *use* of reason" (rather than reason *tout court*) on claims of *moral* insanity, which did not impinge on a person's rationality (Cleman 629). In 1845, Poe published "The Imp of the Perverse," defined as an "overwhelming tendency to do wrong for the wrong's sake" (279) which elicits a "strong antagonistical sentiment" toward the "desire to be well" (280).

Poe's perverse characters seem to echo the moral insanity defense[2] while countering it with their words. The narrator of "The Imp of the Perverse" tells the readers: "you might . . . have fancied me mad. As it is, you will easily perceive that I am one of the many victims of the Imp of the Perverse" (281-82). He proceeds to illustrate how lucidly, rationally, he had committed a murder and kept it secret for years, only to fall prey to his uncontrollable impulse to consign himself to the hangman.

The narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" opens his story with a question: "True! – Nervous – very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why *will* you say that I am mad? . . . You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen *me*" (177). Ironically, Dan Shen points out, the narrator's insistence that he is not mad and his claims to lucidity prove that he is rather morally insane in the "scientific" sense advanced by Poe's contemporaries (339). Similarly, the narrator of "The Black Cat" blames perverseness for his heinous acts but also rejects an insanity diagnosis: "mad I am not" (182), he says in the incipit, and he too lingers on the lucidity with which he brought his own demise to himself. Commenting on these three stories and their relationship to the insanity defense, John Cleman concludes:

> Whereas the insanity defense sought to alter radically the moral content of brutal acts, Poe's perverseness and the parallel confession compulsions in "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat" effect a radical restoration of their moral consequences. Both utilize a concept of obliterated will and "loss of the use of reason" – an aberration of normality in the insanity defense, a normality of aberration in Poe's perverseness. But, as if responding to the unsettling resolution of successful insanity defenses, the apparently incongruous disjunction between brutal acts and a response of pity or sympathy, Poe's deterministic forces lead the guilty to the hangman. (640)

The Monomaniac Madman

In a classic essay on "Ligeia," Roy Basler writes that Poe "dealt deliberately with the psychological themes of obsession and madness," with several of his stories showing "a similar preoccupation with the *idee fixe*, or obsession, in an extreme form of monomania which seems intended by Poe to be the psychological key to its plot" (qtd. in Engel

140). Poe's second "brand" of madman is the man fixating on a single object, which can elicit both pleasure and horror, and which often confines him to a secluded, enclosed space. It is the case of most stories featuring beautiful yet sickly women: apart from "Ligeia," a male narrator obsesses over a dead or dying woman in stories like "Morella," "Berenice," and "The Fall of the House of Usher." Leonard Engel explains that "[a]bout the effect of an enclosure on the plot of a tale, Poe [in the *Philosophy of Composition*] has written 'a close circumscription of space is absolutely necessary to the effect of insulated incident: – it has the force of a frame to a picture'" (140). Locked away in their libraries, abbeys, or private rooms, these men are (self)caged within a space that feeds their obsession by eliminating outside stimuli and letting their mad psyche take over, in an endless feedback loop. When the outside world does penetrate their monomaniacal overconcentration, their madness "dissolves the meanings of even the most familiar and mundane of objects, making those objects uncanny, or unheimlich. . . . It is precisely the dissolution of meaning and the resulting experience of the uncanny that become sublime for Poe's characters" (McGhee 56). The sublime experience that McGhee describes, however, is not one from which the protagonists derive pleasure, but horror, which emerges from the safest, most familiar places – the mind, the body of the mad protagonists and their beloveds, their domestic spaces – and is doubled by the decay of the object of their obsession. Disease, then, in its physical and psychological form, is the source of "domestic" sublime, and consequently of horror in the monomaniac protagonist story.

The Madness of Revenge

A third type of madman found in Poe is best exemplified by Montresor, the murderous narrator of "The Cask of Amontillado." Differently from the abovementioned lucid madmen, he never claims to be sane, nor does he advance the theory that he is, indeed, mad. "Cask" centers on Montresor's revenge against Fortunato, whose "thousand injuries" Montresor had borne to the best of his abilities, only to snap when "insult" was added (Poe, "Cask"). Montresor's monstrous actions (he entombs

Fortunato alive in his cellar) are detailed as the fruit of patient waiting and planning, so as to make the revenge all the more effective. Nevertheless, Montresor's decision to exact his revenge in such a violent and horrendous way classifies him as a madman. More precisely, Kate Stewart identifies the source of madness in Montresor's obsession with revenge (53), making him monomaniac-adjacent, although his obsession lies on a different object than those of the characters mentioned in the previous section. She further claims that Montresor can be understood as a man with a split personality – the friendly man Fortunato thinks he knows, and the vengeful murderer he actually meets during "the supreme madness of the carnival season" (Poe, "Cask"). Madness, while not directly addressed, pervades the text in atmosphere and is underlined by the ringing of the bells that decorate Fortunato's cap. As Kate Stewart comments, "The costuming is ironic, to be sure, but it serves a dramatic function. The bells on Fortunato's cap ring time and again. With each ringing, Montresor slips farther and farther into his own 'supreme madness'" (54). Madness in "Cask" is thus more atmospheric than explicit, narrated environmentally through sensorial clues. In other words, madness seeps into Poe's style, as it often does in stories that treat madness more explicitly.

The Madness of the Text

Poe's treatment of his chosen subject exceeds the thematic level, influencing his style as well. That "spiralling intensification" that Punter described as Poe's most valuable contribution to Gothic is the shape horror takes when it becomes part of one's stylistic choices, rather than merely the thematic ones. Madness, too, finds its place within Poe's formal choices. Ib Johansen contends that in some of Poe's stories not only the protagonists but also the text itself is mad: "this 'madness' seems to have left its impress or imprint on the very *textuality* of the text(s) and thus seems to disrupt the stability of the narrative system itself" (1). Poe's texts often seem to "explode" via intertextuality, codeswitching, *mise en abyme*, quotations, and oblique references to real or fictional texts. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," the text seems to mirror Roderick's

schizophrenic behavior by letting other texts and languages interrupt, distract, evoke, expand. In "Usher," nothing seems to happen by chance, Johansen argues, with the consequence that "everything is charged with meaning" (3). Usher himself, though, tries to become "'the master of the signifier,' imposing his own (subjective, idiosyncratic) interpretation" (5). He fails, and his madness spreads to the narrator, making the readers ultimately mistrust the text, which remains inconclusive and inexplicable, essentially non-communicative. The text seems unable to contain – constrain – its characters, settings, and themes ("The frame doesn't fit," Johansen writes [3]). Just like Usher's friend, it is contaminated by Usher's madness to the point of total *rational* unintelligibility. At the same time, the text's Gothic atmosphere and use of the "dark sublime" (McGhee 57) affect the readers, leaving them with the impression that something horrific has trespassed, even though *what*, precisely, remains beyond their comprehension. According to Caitlin Duffy, Poe achieves this "by instituting a persistent sensorial overload and a variety of perspectives that overwhelm his characters," implying that full meaning is achievable only if different perspectives are inhabited simultaneously (70). Poe masters this sense of incompleteness, this unreachable complete grasp on an object or reality, by "incorporating multiple incompatible viewpoints" that produce a highly uncomfortable experience for his characters (and audience), as Poe demands reality be continuously questioned and one's personal perspective and bias taken into consideration. Further, the reader's "status as outside observers is almost immediately troubled once they become privy to secret knowledge" (Duffy 71).

Though "Truth" seems to be the objective of prose in Poe's view (Shen 322), he makes Truth unachievable by layering a number of fragmentary perspectives and overloading the readers' sensory input, disorienting them. Is Lady Madeline really a ghost? Is a dead heart actually beating loudly enough to be heard? Readers and critics have been debating these unsolvable questions for centuries, now,[3] perhaps not fully realizing that they draw their affective power from their very unanswerability.

The Dark Eye

Poe's treatment of madness feeds into the genre/milieu of Gothic video games in *The Dark Eye*. An obscure first-person psychological horror video game, *TDE* was developed by Inscape and published for Windows and Mac by Warner Interactive Entertainment in 1995.[4] A point-and-click adventure, it features a hand-shaped pointer which drives the whole gameplay. The player, who receives no directions, is forced to click on virtually any object, character, and area available to jumpstart short QuickTime video sequences – filmed in stop motion using grotesque clay puppets and dubbed, among others, by American author William Burroughs in the role of Uncle Edwin – that move the game forward. There is no game over; the game simply waits for the player to stumble on the right next sequence until the end of the story.

The author of the game, Russell Lees, pitched the idea for the game to Inscape's founder Michael Nash as a "dropping into the tales of Poe" – something he later regretted, deeming it a "completely nonsensical sentence" (Rose). Nevertheless, his phrasing hints at the developers' intentions of "dropping" the player into a character and giving them the experience of an actor embodying it: "We tried to map that psychological investigation that an actor would bring to a part onto spatial investigation. . . . We were trying to 'trick' the player into doing a psychological investigation of the part they were playing" (Rose). In this, the game closely embraces the same impetus of Poe's writing. *TDE* interacts with Poe's oeuvre in four ways: first, the game adapts three of Poe's best-known stories ("The Cask of Amontillado," "Berenice," and "The Tell-Tale Heart") for interactive gameplay. Second, it features full or abridged versions of Poe's poems and stories ("Annabel Lee" and "The Masque of the Red Death," recited; "To Helen" and "The Premature Burial" in written form). Third, it constructs an original framing narrative which retrieves Poe's themes, merging several stories, and "proceduralizes" (Bogost; Murray)[5] his horror-inducing style for the video game environment. Fourth, it makes ample use of Poe's Gothic tropes to induce horror and terror not only narratively, but also visually and aurally, relying on environmental storytelling.

The game is played from the perspective of an unnamed protagonist who has just arrived at his elderly Uncle Edwin's mansion, at a remote coastal location. There, he finds his brother Henry, who is courting his cousin Elise against Edwin's wishes and strict prohibition. As the protagonist moves through the labyrinthic mansion and interacts with paint thinner and other hallucinatory objects, he enters a "nightmare" mode which takes him into "The Cask of Amontillado," "Berenice," and "The Tell-Tale Heart," played twice: once from the perspective of the murderer, following Poe's narration, and once from the perspective of the victim. In the intervals between nightmare fugues, the protagonist finds out that Elise's health is failing. After she dies, she is placed in the cellar overnight. Henry, heartbroken to the point of (alleged) insanity, receives a letter in Elise's handwriting, forged by Edwin and delivered by the narrator, that persuades him she is still alive and waiting for him on the cliffs. Once he runs there, he finds Edwin's valet instead, who kills him. The narrator then meets Edwin for the last time, is blamed for his brother's death because he facilitated Henry and Elise's doomed relationship, and falls into the last of the nightmare sequences, from which he "recovers" by crossing fragments of the three interactive stories and finally breaking down the same wall he had previously erected to bury Fortunato in "Cask," only to find it now leads to Edwin's cellar, where Elise has escaped her coffin and has carved out her eyes. The narrator's already unstable sanity shatters, ending the game (Fig. 1).

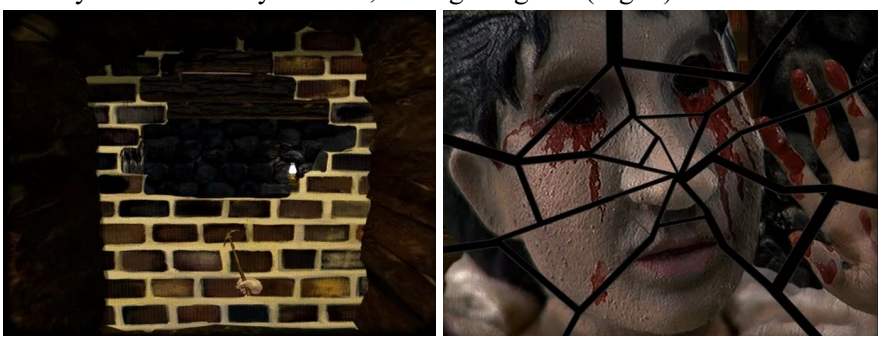

Fig. 1: Left, the narrator tears down the wall. In the background, the player can see the lamp that Henry made his brother leave in the cellar in case Elise returned from the dead. Right, the last frame of the game (depicting Elise with her eyes carved out) shatters.

TDE revolves around madness at all levels, making it the main catalyst of horror in the game: it is the central theme of the framing narrative, of Poe's three adapted stories, and of the "schizophrenic" gameplay.

Madness in the Framing Narrative

The original framing story, titled "Malevolence," is credited to Lees. It is essentially a collage of Poesque tropes (such as the ailing old man, the incestuous lovers, the premature burial, the descent into madness) and repurposed quotes from various works by Poe. The video game opens with a male voice reciting: "For the wild narrative which I am about to tell, I neither expect nor ask for belief. It would be mad to expect such a thing in a case where my own senses reject their evidence. Yet I'm not mad, and I surely do not dream." This mirrors closely the opening of "The Black Cat": "For the most wild, yet most homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. Mad indeed would I be to expect it, in a case where my very senses reject their own evidence. Yet, mad am I not – and very surely do I not dream" (182). This places the whole game, from the outset, within the "lucid madman" category mentioned earlier, and sets up the narrator as unreliable: he claims not to dream, but much of the game is spent within nightmarish renditions of Poe's stories; he argues he is not mad, but madness is what awaits him at the end of the game, invalidating his initial claim to sanity. Much like the narrator in "Usher," which is equally unreliable and falls victim to the contagion of madness (McGhee 64), the player is welcomed at the door by a valet (Fig. 2), who grants the narrator access to the house. The game, subsequently, traps the player within the mansion for the entire game, only letting him "leave" via the nightmares. Much like the setting of "Usher," the mansion is dark and decaying, with a large hole in one of the external walls and disquieting paintings and décor (Fig. 3). The house contributes much to eliciting a sense of unease in the player, who can easily get lost in the rapid perspective changes that a click can cause,[6] and who is ultimately unable to leave, "falling" with it. Differently from "Usher"'s narrator, in fact, the protagonist of the game belongs to the decaying family and cannot survive its demise. The game thus departs from Poe's story (whose narrator manages to survive the fall of the old aristocratic House of Usher),

extending its destruction to the entire game. Prey to hallucinations, but still claiming lucidity, the game narrator's last words are:

> The full import of the lantern, the madness-inducing fumes, Henry's premonitions – all these *came clear to me at once*, and I could feel and hear a great rending, as of a mirror breaking, roll throughout the house, growing in volume and strength and even as I looked on, the house around us, the vault, the lantern, Elise, her bloody eyes, all shattered – shattered into a hundred thousand shards, shattered as to the dark depths of my very soul. (*TDE*)

In true Poesque manner, not only the characters and the house shatter with the ending of the game, but also the narrative itself, which finds no clear resolution, and the gameplay, which leaves the player unable to remedy the fall of the aristocratic family they belong to.

Fig. 2: Uncle Edwin's valet.

Fig. 3: Edwin sits near the torn down wall.

All the framing characters contribute to the madness of the game: beyond the narrator, Henry exhibits clear parallels with Usher, whose pallor and extinguished "lustre of the eye" (64) Henry inherits (Fig. 3). He, too, seems to be suffering from a keenness of the senses that convinces him of having buried his loved one alive ("I can feel her blood flowing through the house, I hear her whisper, I hear her very heart. I pounded at the door to her vault – I swear I hear rustling within! Do you understand? She lives!" [*TDE*]), which makes Uncle Edwin declare that he "has lost his sanity" because "he is of an exceedingly sensitive nature." Monomania seems to overtake Henry, but Uncle Edwin is equally in its throes: angered by Elise and Henry's courtship despite his forbidding it, he seeks revenge with insane clarity, exacting it on Henry via his valet, mirroring the focused madness that Montresor exhibits in "Cask." Elise, finally, is

driven insane by her premature burial – finding herself entombed, she claws her way out of the wooden coffin and tears her eyes out in despair, prompting the narrator's final descent into shattered madness.

Madness in the Adaptations of Poe's Stories

Madness enters the very gameplay of *TDE*. Interacting with apparently innocuous objects will prompt a nightmarish state that transports the reader into the body of a murderer first and his victim later, breaking the narrative flow of the framing story and making for a highly fragmented gaming experience. Though the gameplay never changes, technically, with the player only tasked to click obsessively – *monomaniacally* – until the story moves forward, in the interactive stories, the game tweaks its interaction with the player by way of changing the animation of the cursor, equipping the player with a tool, or giving sensory output that echoes the "madness of the text" in Poe's originals.

The first of the three stories the player encounters is "Cask," playing Montresor. It opens with a reformulation of Poe's incipit: "Revenge means nothing unless the avenger makes himself know to his victim." Only some passages from the original are expressed verbally, but Poe's atmosphere and mood are remediated via visual and aural means. The bells, that Stewart connected to Montresor's descent into madness, start ringing the moment Fortunato follows Montresor down to his cellar, a visual labyrinth of no easy navigation for the player (Fig. 4). They appear in the subtle score accompanying some QuickTime scenes (as one of many instruments) and are evoked by the jingle of the chains as soon as Montresor binds Fortunato to the wall. The chain jingle is followed by a heart-rending scream and the laughter that Fortunato lets out, driven mad by fear, as the player continues to build a wall (Fig. 5). The bells return, following the original story, as the final sound Montresor hears before setting the last stone. All these aural cues contribute to building the "spiralling intensification" that Punter recognizes as the marker of Poe's fiction. Additionally, the player can also hear the word "revenge" pronounced ominously by the narrator's voice whenever they cross one specific area of the labyrinth, which happens often as the player switches visuals to find their way to the nook where they plan to entomb Fortunato, heightening the monomaniac focus on getting retribution for Fortunato's

wrongs. The game departs from Poe's story only in *not* having Montresor reply to Fortunato's screams with even louder ones. However, as the game shifts perspectives, and the player finds themselves inhabiting Fortunato's body, they are forced to repeat the very scream they caused while playing Montresor, in a sense retaining the aural echo in the gameplay.

Fig. 4: The labyrinthic cellar.

Fig. 5: The player entombs Fortunato.

Sound also plays a fundamental role in the game's rendition of "Berenice." While playing as Egaeus, for the most part within the confines of his library, the player can interact with portraits and landscapes hanging on the wall, the fireplace, a book, and several other objects. Each activates a QuickTime snippet that references, obliquely or directly, his cousin Berenice and the necessity of their nuptials. The game thus expresses the intensity of Egaeus's obsession with his ailing cousin from the outset. The sentences echo and repeat over and over again as he navigates the space, in a cacophony of voices and whispers accompanied by ghostly visions of Berenice that overwhelm the player. After the player/Egaeus notices Berenice's teeth (Fig. 6), the voices and whispers stop, and each click prompts the voice of the narrator repeating "teeth," clearly mirroring Egaeus's monomania in the original story. This obsession for the teeth, more visual than aural in the original story, also acquires a graphic rendition in the game: after the shift in aural output, the portraits all morph to show deformed, toothy smiles (Fig. 7). Interrupted by the maid informing Egaeus that "Berenice is no more," the game fades to black and skips to the moment when the news of Berenice's tomb being desecrated breaks. There, the game conveys Egaeus's guilt visually, by showing his bloodied hands and Berenice's pulled-out teeth, and aurally, through the rattle of the teeth falling from a small box (Fig. 6). This first

rendition of "Berenice" follows the structure of the original story, not showing the desecration of the body directly. In the second retelling from Berenice's perspective, however, the horrendous act is experienced by the player in the first person. After waking up buried, the player can only knock against the lid of the coffin, listening to Berenice's panicked breaths and her pleas to be let out. When the lid opens, it is to a view of Egaeus brandishing a spade and readying himself to pull out all her teeth. The story ends with a distorted scream. This counters one of the criticisms Neimeyer levels at Poe's adaptations, i.e. their toning down the source material. Far from it, *TDE* doubles down and increases the horror via perspective shifts and a poignant use of visual and aural cues.

Fig. 6: Left to right, Berenice, her pulled-out teeth, and the narrator/Egaeus's bloodied hand.

Fig. 7: One of the portraits, before and after the obsession with teeth begins.

"The Tell-Tale Heart" is the third story *TDE* adapts, far into the framing narrative – a telling choice, it being the one treating madness more directly, of the three the game lets the player experience interactively. The classic incipit is taken almost verbatim from Poe's

original, with changes only to the second part: "True! Nervous – very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am. By why do people say that I am mad?"[7] This shift is interesting enough: as the player is inhabiting the narrator, rather than the passive audience listening to the narrator's defense, "you" would not have worked. The game thus shifts to the generic "people," those outside the narrator/player assemblage. The game continues to retrieve snippets of the original text, but the brunt of the affective effort is once more undertaken by the visual and aural choices: as the narrator walks around his empty house, his thoughts on the innocence of the old man and his lack of reasons to murder him echo repeatedly ("he's done me no harm;" "I don't want his money;" "what is it about him that makes my blood run cold?"). The visuals are equally striking: the narrator draws a portrait of the man, his eye struck out (Fig. 8), and, once the old man returns, the game responds to the narrator's silent question zooming in dramatically on his blue eye (Fig. 9).

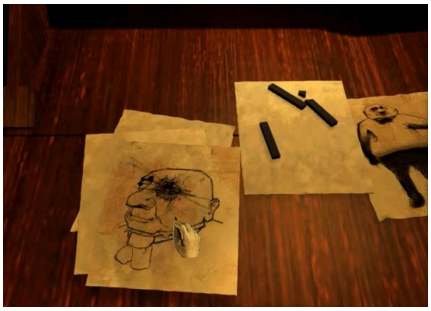

Fig. 8: The narrator draws the old man.

Fig. 9: The old man's eye, reflecting the narrator's face.

Fiddling with a grandfather clock, the player jumpstarts the murder sequence. As the clock strikes over and over again, the player approaches the slumbering man muttering "gently, gently" in a deranged voice. Once he finds the man awake and terrified in the darkness, the beating of his heart becomes noticeable, and the player/narrator kills the old man, finding relief in the disappearing of the heartbeat. After dismembering the body off-screen, the player is tasked with hiding a bloody bag of human remains under the floorboards. Per the original, the police arrive, the narrator starts hearing the old man's heart and confesses, closing the first of the two renditions of the tale with the classic "It is the

beating of his hideous heart!" The second rendition, from the murdered old man's perspective, shows him intent in domestic matters: cooking soup, waiting for the other man to return, singing to himself as he goes through his personal belongings, encouraging the younger man to eat. His side of the story is cut short by his brutal murder, which ends with a bright light cutting through the darkness and a "groan of mortal terror" (Poe 178). This surprisingly domestic, calm interlude, interrupted by the murder and later jumpstarting the narrator's final return to the framing narrative, well underscores the thematic ambiguity that keeps Poe relevant to modern audiences, moving between the "normal" and the "disturbing" – indeed finding the disturbing in the normal – even more than the original story afforded.

The Madness of the Videoludic Text

As shown so far, madness is present thematically into the textual, visual and aural dimension of *TDE*, both in the framing narrative and in the playable adaptations. Just like Poe wove madness into his style and narrative choices, so does the game, enmeshing it in its narrative and videoludic structure. *TDE*, in fact, "reads" like a schizophrenic text, much like "Usher" according to Johansen's analysis: microscopically, the selected quotes from Poe's stories, rewritten to sound more accessible to a contemporary audience without subtracting from the mysteriousness of the text, are repeated continuously, echoing as the player proceeds. Chosen words ("revenge," "teeth") recur whenever a player clicks and lands on a specific interactive object, contributing to the breaking down of language and meaning in favor of affect. Such verbal repetition mirrors the gameplay mechanics, wholly consisting in clicking obsessively, *madly*, until the game responds and moves forward. The setting being limited to the enclosed spaces of the mansion of the framing narrative, and the cellar, library, and house of the three adaptations makes the clickable objects finite in number, with the consequence that the player will click around in circles, with once inert objects responding in nightmare mode, or at specific points in the story and not before or after, contributing to a claustrophobic mad chase for the next right click.

Macroscopically, Poe's adapted stories are split in two, with direct quotations distributed equally between the playthrough as the murderer and the one as the victim, so that the full story can only be experienced after playing both versions. The "great rending, as of a mirror breaking," rolling throughout the house and destroying the stability of setting and characters thus also reaches the narrative and the player, who finds themselves inhabiting seven different characters throughout one gameplay. Not only are Poe's stories torn in two; putting them back together by playing both versions will not result in a neat reconstruction of the original. Due to the addition of the victim's perspective, missing in Poe's stories if not for quick mentions, the sum exceeds the original, essentially making "the frame" not fit. Similarly, the framing narrative explodes: it holds two states, "reality" and "nightmare," and it is continuously interrupted and influenced by the interwoven adaptations of Poe's short stories, whose narrative madness seems to spread to the framing story, eventually leading to the full breakdown of narrative and gameplay alike. The game itself, in a sense, resists the rule of classic games: one cannot win *TDE*, only experience it. "Winning" it means completing it, but, in reaching the end, the player is wholly unable to avoid their character's demise, only achieving complete madness. Indeed, playing *TDE* means accepting that we, the players, are contributing to the worsening conditions of our character and his family, as we guide him through increasingly insane reveries. This, Krzywinska argues, is where the Gothic intersects gameplay to the point of oxymoron: "'To act' (and to act in a timely and correct manner) is the leading currency of interactive games and 'to be unable to act' is Gothic articulation, or perversion, of this currency in games" (71).

Conclusion

To conclude, *TDE* shows that it is, indeed, possible to preserve the spirit and atmosphere of Poe's stories in transmedia adaptations. This 1995 video game succeeds where most other adaptations fail: it does not subtract from the original but derives, expands, and pays homage. It respects not only the themes but also the formal elements that typify Poe's oeuvre, translating them for the videoludic medium, and manages to

reproduce that "spiralling intensification" of affect while walking the fine line between domestic safety and inexplicable horror, the markers of Poe's enduring legacy. Moreover, the game potentially makes Poe's stories – and American Gothic in general – reach a new audience. Though best absorbed with some awareness of the originals, in fact, *TDE* is enjoyable even without prior knowledge of the stories, building a compelling case for a retrieval of classic literature in the medium of our age.

Notes:

[1] Other transmedia genre labels are sci-fi, fantasy, western. King and Krzywinska call them "milieus" to distinguish them from the traditional, mechanics-based video game genres.
[2] "In 'The Tell-Tale Heart' the narrator-protagonist displays typical symptoms of partial insanity or 'moral insanity,'" Shen writes (342).
[3] Shen, for instance, takes issue with critics not being able to accept that the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" actually heard the heart beating (331-ff).
[4] The game is currently playable at https://classicreload.com/win3x-dark-eye.html. Last visited 26/06/2025.
[5] Janet Murray defines proceduralizing as "a defining ability to execute a series of rules" (71). Ian Bogost uses this concept to argue that games express their rhetorical potential not only through plot but also through gameplay rules.
[6] To explore a room, the player can move left, right, ahead or backwards. Clicking in one of these directions to prompt a frame change will shift the player's perspective suddenly, not with a transition, making the movement very disorienting. The rooms also have similar layouts that make it difficult to find one's way around the house.
[7] Poe's original used the future simple in the second person: "Why will you say that I am mad?" (177).

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