

Procedurality of Fear: Ludic Rhetorics of Gender-Based Violence in Haunting Ground

Matteo Jacopo Zaterini

Università del Salento. Matteojacopo.zaterini@unisalento.it

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Abstract

Aim: This article analyzes the survival horror video game Haunting Ground (Capcom, 2005) to investigate how interactive media reflect and problematize gender-based violence and female vulnerability. The primary aim is to explore the tension between the protagonist's sexual objectification and the emergence of female agency within the game's narrative and mechanical structures.

Method: Adopting a socio-semiotic approach and utilizing theoretical frameworks from Game Studies and Sociology of the Body, the study examines the game's specific "procedural rhetoric." The analysis focuses on the "Panic Mode" mechanic as a form of radical embodiment and the interspecies alliance with the dog companion, interpreting them through the lenses of biopolitics, the male gaze theory, and post-human philosophy.

Results: The results indicate that Haunting Ground functions as a "problematic object": while it reiterates the male gaze through visual sexualization, it simultaneously subverts traditional power fantasies by forcing the player to experientially navigate social fragility. The game suggests a model of resistance based on care, negotiation, and interdependence rather than brute domination, challenging the biopolitical exploitation of the female body represented by the antagonists.

Conclusion: In conclusion, the article argues that video games can serve as complex sociological tools for deconstructing gender norms. By placing the player in a position of situated vulnerability, the medium fosters a critical and affective awareness, highlighting the potential of video games as spaces for social resistance, ethical reflection, and educational transformation regarding gender dynamics.

Keywords: Game Studies, Gender-based Violence, Survival Horror, Embodiment, Procedural Rhetoric.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the growing academic attention toward video games as cultural objects has led to a deeper exploration of their narrative and representative dynamics. Video games, far from being mere entertainment products, now constitute a significant form of cultural and political expression, capable of conveying values, norms, and ideologies. In particular, the issue of gender-based violence in video games is crucial for understanding how interactive media reflect, reinforce, or challenge pre-existing social structures.

The present article intends to analyze Haunting Ground (Capcom, 2005), a third-person survival horror game, as an emblematic case of the representation of female vulnerability and gender power dynamics. Through a socio-semiotic approach, this

study seeks to show how the game portrays a constant tension between objectification and agency, control and resistance, fear and power, offering a paradigmatic example of the ambivalences inherent in the representation of female subjectivity in digital media.

1.1 Video games as a source of sociological knowledge

The analysis of video games is not limited to the interpretation of a cultural product but opens spaces for broader inferences about the society that produces and consumes them. As complex symbolic environments, video games function as containers for narratives, norms, and social conflicts, and constitute valuable sources for sociological reflection. As Adrienne Shaw (2015) states, video games are not just mirrors of culture, but also active instruments for negotiating identity and social experience.

From the perspective of Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter (2009), the video game is a form of cultural production situated at the intersection of cognitive capitalism, biopolitics, and participation. This makes it a privileged object for investigating contemporary tensions, such as those of gender, class, and race. Furthermore, the interactive nature of the medium allows for the observation of how the user internalizes, modifies, or resists certain symbolic structures.

Gender studies on video games have developed since the 1990s, alongside the establishment of the medium as an object of academic inquiry. One of the early criticisms directed at the industry concerned the poor representation of women, both in terms of content and the target audience. Researchers such as Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (1998) highlighted the importance of designing games that include non-stereotypical subjects and modes of interaction, while the work of Brenda Laurel emphasized the role of design in constructing the gendered ludic experience.

In the 2000s, with the emergence of game studies, authors such as Helen W. Kennedy (2002) and Mia Consalvo (2003, 2009) emphasized the sexualization of female protagonists and the imbalance in the representation of desire. Subsequently, scholars such as Kishonna Gray and Soraya Murray further explored the issue of intersectionality, linking gender dynamics to those of race, sexual orientation, and social class.

1.2 The video game as a medium: definition and specificity

To fully understand the sociological implications of video game analysis, it is necessary to question the nature of the medium itself. Espen Aarseth (1997), in *Cybertext*, defines video games as ergodic texts—that is, texts that require an active investment from the player to be traversed. Unlike traditional narrative, where the reader receives the text linearly, in video games the user constructs the experience through interaction with a system of rules.

The video game experience is the sum of three fundamental components, namely: the human-machine interaction system (the set of specific ways in which the user relates to the work), the narrative, and Game Design. Game Design is understood here as the

system of relationships between the elements that make up the ludic structure and the set of ludic mechanics. For McLuhan (1994), transitioning from traditional media to new media means that the elements composing the medium are no longer ordered and connected sequentially, but rather connected in structures and configurations.

The video game medium lends itself well to this definition because the elements of which it is composed can be understood in a reciprocal rather than sequential relationship (McLuhan uses the example of cinema and how a film is more than the sequence of frames that compose it). While we can therefore consider the video game medium a non-linear medium in relation to its components, it is necessary to specify the form of the configuration and how it can change as each component varies. The author uses the example of Cubism and how painters, by abandoning the goal of faithful perspective representation, succeeded in transmitting a message through the intersection of planes, chromatic patterns, and geometric figures.

“In other words, cubism, by giving the inside and outside, the top, bottom, back, and front and the rest, in two dimensions, drops the illusion of perspective in favor of instant sensory awareness of the whole. Cubism, by seizing on instant total awareness, suddenly announced that the medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1994).

This intersection between different planes, which in the video game medium are represented by the fundamental components, provides the user with the total experience—an experience that is not fragmented or conveyed by individual components but constitutes a single interpretive space shaped by the user. Therefore, returning to what was previously explained, the video game medium is configurational and instantaneous, in the sense that the various components combine to generate specific forms experienced simultaneously by the user, who organizes them to make sense of what occurs on the screen.

The ludic work thus takes on specific forms depending on how the three components are organized: it is useful to specify now that, based on how the medium has been defined, it is difficult to identify a work in which one component is completely absent. This characteristic distinguishes the video game medium from other forms of representation, making it particularly interesting for the study of social and cultural practices. As Aarseth states, the game is a process, not a static object: it is in the dynamics between the subject and the system that meaning is produced. Such interactivity has important implications for gender studies, as it forces the player to actively confront the identities and structures represented.

2. Intersections between Haunting Ground and classical gender studies

Haunting Ground follows the story of Fiona, a young woman who wakes up imprisoned in an unknown castle after a car accident. From the very first moments, the game emphasizes her vulnerability: Fiona is alone, disoriented, and incapable of defending herself. The direction, close-up shots, and sound design all combine to build an atmosphere of claustrophobia and helplessness. Her only resources are flight and her

alliance with Hewie, a dog who becomes a tool for support and, symbolically, for agency. The relationship between Fiona and Hewie evolves throughout the game, and the trust that the protagonist manages to build with the animal becomes the key to her survival.

However, *Haunting Ground* does not represent an isolated case in the video game landscape; instead, it is situated within a specific genealogy of survival horror often defined as “run & hide” or stalker horror. This subgenre, inaugurated by the *Clock Tower* series, is distinguished by the systematic deprivation of the avatar's offensive power, forcing the player into flight rather than combat. While contemporary titles such as *Silent Hill 3* (2003) had already introduced complex female protagonists dealing with themes related to the body and reproduction and works like *Rule of Rose* (2006) would soon explore the cruelty of female social hierarchies, *Haunting Ground* occupies a pivotal and specific position. Unlike *Alien: Isolation* (2014) or *Amnesia* (2010), where vulnerability is primarily a tension mechanic, in *Haunting Ground* it is inextricably linked to gender and sexualization.

The choice to analyze *Haunting Ground* as a privileged case study lies precisely in its nature as a “problematic object”. The title exemplarily crystallizes the tension between two opposite poles: on the one hand, the hyper-sexualization of the protagonist, constructed according to the canons of the male gaze for the player's visual pleasure; on the other hand, the implementation of mechanics of radical embodiment (panic, heartbeat, stumbling) that force the player to experience, and not just watch, the terror of victimization. Furthermore, compared to its counterparts, *Haunting Ground* introduces the variable of interspecies alliance as the only possible form of agency. This makes it a unique text for verifying our research hypotheses: demonstrating how the video game can simulate the social vulnerability of the female body and, simultaneously, suggest models of resistance based not on masculine brute force, but on care and relationship.

At the time of its release in 2005, *Haunting Ground* received a mixed reception from video game critics. While on one hand, the atmosphere, sound design, and the originality of the gameplay system centred on flight and the alliance with the dog Hewie were appreciated, on the other hand, the narrative choices and the repetitiveness of the dynamics were criticized. However, a consistent part of the reception did not fail to highlight the disturbing and hyper-sexualized character of the game, with particular attention to the way in which the camera and the protagonist's clothing contributed to her objectification. Over time, *Haunting Ground* has become the subject of a critical re-evaluation by scholars and players interested in gender representations. Some fans have interpreted it as a pioneering title in thematizing the female condition through the very mechanics of gameplay, placing the player in the position of having to face vulnerability in the first person. Subsequent forums, articles, and academic essays have placed the game within an alternative genealogy of survival horror, alongside cult titles such as *Rule*

of *Rose* and *Clock Tower*, which can explore social themes through psychological horror and environmental tension.

In particular, the LGBTQ+ and feminist gaming communities have found the game to be fertile ground for critical reflection, despite its limitations. The tension between stereotypical representation and emerging agency has allowed for a layered reading of the ludic text, highlighting how the medium can, even unintentionally, prompt a counter-hegemonic reception.

The analysis of *Haunting Ground* aligns with several foundational assumptions of gender studies, particularly regarding the cultural construction of female vulnerability and the representation of the body as a space of symbolic conflict. In line with Susan Brownmiller's (1975) arguments in *Against Our Will*, the control of the female body through fear and intimidation is a pervasive social device also found in media languages. Fiona, the game's protagonist, embodies this dynamic: her fragility is not merely a ludic condition, but a narrative construction that reflects forms of female subordination in both public and private spaces. At the same time, the game departs from purely passive representations by offering a glimpse of agency, recalling the concept of "feminine resistance" developed by bell hooks (1984), according to which marginal subjectivities can find modes of affirmation even within oppressive structures. Fiona is not a heroine in the classical sense, but her ability to survive and forge an affective alliance with Hewie represents an alternative form of power, based on care and interdependence rather than domination. Furthermore, the use of interactive dynamics such as the panic mechanic and the management of fear refers to the notion of embodiment theorized by Elizabeth Grosz (1994), whereby the female body is not only represented but lived in a situated and performative manner. *Haunting Ground* prompts the player to directly experience this vulnerable corporeality, generating an affective awareness that goes beyond the detached view of the body-as-object

The original contribution of *Haunting Ground*, therefore, consists in offering a complex representation of gender-based violence that is not limited to mere denunciation or the restatement of stereotypes, but explores the ambivalences of female identity through the specific language of the video game. Interactivity, the asymmetry between player and avatar, and the construction of intra-ludic relationships become tools to problematize subjectivity and critically interrogate gender apparatuses.

3. The Procedurality of Fear: Embodiment and Gameplay

Procedurality of fear refers to the way a game's rule system operationalizes situated vulnerability: fear is not only represented audio visually but enacted through constraints and feedback that modulate what the player can do, perceive, and endure. In this sense, fear emerges from a recurrent configuration of mechanics that introduces loss and "noise" in control, produces embodied feedback that turns the avatar into a fragile interface, structures survival around relational dependence (e.g., on Hewie), and frames

space as surveillant and coercive (the castle as a panoptic ecology of pursuit). The following grid specifies these dimensions as analytic levers, linking system features to player experience and to interpretable effects on agency.

- Control loss / input noise: *Rule leverage*: limited mobility, forced states, interruptions, instability of action. *Analytic cue*: when and how the game prevents mastery or smooth execution.
- Embodied feedback: *Rule leverage*: stamina/health pressure, audiovisual stress signals, punitive loops that “teach” vulnerability. *Analytic cue*: how the body becomes the primary site of threat and learning.
- Relational dependence (Hewie): *Rule leverage*: companion mechanics as resource, delegation, and moral/affective commitment. *Analytic cue*: how agency is redistributed across human–animal coordination rather than individual autonomy.
- Surveillant spatiality: *Rule leverage*: pursuit-friendly architecture, bottlenecks, visibility/exposure, routes that discipline movement. *Analytic cue*: how space functions as an active apparatus that produces anticipation and capture.

The video game does not only narrate through the plot but “argues” through rules (Bogost, 2007). In *Haunting Ground*, two mechanics embody this rhetoric: Panic Mode and the relationship with Hewie.

3.1 Panic Mode as a “Disempowerment Fantasy”

The central mechanic of the game, Panic Mode, represents a radical subversion of the power logics typical of video games. While most titles offer power fantasies, *Haunting Ground* simulates the loss of sovereignty over one's own body. When Fiona is subjected to excessive stress, the screen distorts visually: colours saturate, the image becomes grainy, and the audio is dominated by an accelerated heartbeat. In this state, the player loses direct control of the avatar: Fiona stumbles, runs into walls, or curls up on the ground.

Bernard Perron (2018), in his *The World of Scary Video Games*, analyzes these dynamics, defining them as crucial for horror. Fear arises from the threat to “ludic competence”: the inability to act is not a defect but a procedural dramatization of fragility. Panic Mode refers to the previously mentioned notion of embodiment (Grosz, 1994), forcing the player to physically experience the protagonist's condition of precariousness through the vibration of the controller and the frustration of the commands.

3.2 The interspecies alliance: the post-human turn

The alliance with Hewie can be read as a metaphor for the capacity for care and relationship. Unlike traditional weapons, Hewie is an autonomous agent who requires negotiation (commands such as “praise” or “scold”). This mechanic recalls Donna Haraway's (2003) *Companion Species Manifesto*: the relationship is not one of dominance, but of significant otherness. Fiona depends on Hewie for physical strength, and Hewie depends on Fiona for strategy. This interdependence challenges the individualism of

the male hero typical of video games. Unlike the cinematic Final Girl analyzed by Carol J. Clover (1992), who often survives by “masculinizing” herself and wielding phallic weapons, Fiona survives by extending her subjectivity through an empathic relationship with the animal.

4. The body as a space of symbolic conflict

The analysis of female subjectivity in *Haunting Ground* can be further enriched considering the sociological theory of the body. Zygmunt Bauman (1998) argues that in contemporary society, the body is configured as a “project” that must be controlled, managed, and made to conform to social expectations. Fiona represents an “excessive” body, difficult to fully subdue, and for this very reason, she becomes the target of coercive practices by the antagonists.

Bryan S. Turner (1996) also highlighted how the body is a point of intersection between biology and social structure: *Haunting Ground* shows how this intersection can be instrumentalized in gameplay to generate anxiety, control, and resistance. Vulnerability is not merely a biological or ludic condition, but a social construction conveyed through the video game space.

In this sense, the castle space can also be read as a form of Foucaultian panopticon, an environment in which surveillance is constant, and the discipline of the body is the primary objective. Michel Foucault (1975) demonstrated how architectural space can be used to exercise power: *Haunting Ground* adopts this logic in its mechanisms of vision, movement, and control, where every room can transform into a trap or a place of resistance.

Furthermore, according to Arlie Hochschild (1983), emotions are socially regulated through what she defines as “emotional rules”: the emotional reactions that Fiona expresses and that the player is called upon to manage are not neutral but are culturally encoded. The panic mechanic becomes an interactive dramatization of how fear, anxiety, and vulnerability are socially shaped. For Longo (2019), emotions represent a privileged way to access the cultural codes of a society. They should not be understood merely as individual reactions, but as socially constructed phenomena capable of expressing collective norms, expectations, and values. In this perspective, the study of fear, anxiety, and panic in *Haunting Ground* becomes a way to analyse how female vulnerability is encoded and made experiential through the video game medium. Fear is not just a narrative or ludic effect: it is a form of social learning, a cognitive device that guides behaviour and structures the player’s experience

4 Biopolitics of the Azoth: the body as alchemical capital

If Bauman helps us understand the social control over the body, it is through the lens of biopolitics and Marxist feminism that we can decode the profound nature of the threat in *Haunting Ground*. Fiona's persecution is not motivated solely by sexual desire or sadism, but by a precise economic and biological reason: she is the bearer of the

Azoth, the alchemical quintessence necessary for the antagonists to obtain immortality or perfection.

In this perspective, Fiona's body ceases to be a subject and becomes, literally, a natural resource to be extracted. Silvia Federici (2004), in *Caliban and the Witch*, argues that the establishment of capitalism required a transformation of the female body into a machine for the reproduction of labor power, a process of "primitive accumulation" implemented through discipline and violence. In the game, this dynamic is pushed to the extreme: alchemy serves as a metaphor for predatory capitalism. Fiona is hunted because her body contains a biological surplus value that the lords of the castle (the old patriarchal order represented by Lorenzo) cannot produce autonomously but must expropriate by force.

Michel Foucault (1976) defines "biopower" as a power exercised over life itself, managing, enhancing, or exploiting it. The enemies in *Haunting Ground* exercise exactly this form of power: they do not simply seek Fiona's death, but the management of her vitality for their own purposes. Riccardo wants to use her womb/DNA for a perfect genetic rebirth; Lorenzo wants to cannibalize her youth to extend his own gerontocratic life. The terror the player experiences, therefore, is that of total reification: the fear is not just that of dying, but that of being reduced to pure raw material, to "alchemical capital" devoid of self-determination. Fiona's flight thus becomes an act of radical resistance against the biopolitical appropriation of the self.

4.1 The taxonomy of the gaze

The construction of the protagonist's identity can also be interpreted through Paul Ricoeur's (1991) concept of narrative identity and Anthony Giddens' reflexivity (1991). Fiona reconstructs her subjectivity during the game through a transformative journey, made possible by interaction with the environment and with Hewie, a symbol of trust, affection, and support. The player participates in this process, continuously negotiating the meaning of identity in a hostile context.

Finally, Guy Debord (1994) and John Berger (1972) emphasized the role of the image and the gaze in the society of the spectacle. The shots that sexualize Fiona are not just manifestations of a passive male gaze but are part of a visual system that organizes desire and power. However, precisely because they are experienced in the first person, these gazes can be problematized, generating a critical consciousness on the part of the player. As Laura Mulvey (1975) argues, classical cinema tends to structure vision according to a logic of the male gaze, the masculine gaze that objectifies the female body. *Haunting Ground* partially inherits this setting, with shots that emphasize the sexualization of the protagonist, but at the same time destabilizes this perspective: the player, while observing Fiona, must empathize with her vulnerability. In this way, the gaze becomes uncertain, ambivalent, and critical.

In *Haunting Ground*, the castle is inhabited by specific incarnations of this oppressive gaze. Each antagonist exercises a distinct variant of gender-based violence:

- Debilitas and infantilization: He represents brute and pre-Oedipal violence. His obsession with Fiona is not sexually sophisticated but objectifying: he perceives her as a “dolly,” reducing the woman to a toy devoid of will, threatened by a destructive “affection.”
- Daniella and the Monstrous-Feminine: The only female antagonist, Daniella, can be read through Barbara Creed’s (1993) categories as a figure of abjection. Daniella is an incomplete mannequin who envies Fiona’s fertility and vitality (the Azoth). Her hatred represents intra-gender violence and the competition imposed by patriarchy: Daniella is monstrous because she transgresses boundaries (she is female but cold, domestic but lethal), and she attacks Fiona using mirror shards, a symbol of vanity and of the image that kills.
- Riccardo and Lorenzo: Riccardo introduces armed and phallic violence (the gun), cold and modern. Lorenzo, finally, embodies gerontocratic patriarchy: the old man who literally wants to consume the woman’s youth to extend his own life.

From a sociological perspective, *Haunting Ground* represents an emblematic example of how video games can thematize and problematize gender-based violence. The choice not to arm the protagonist, but to place her in a position of constant danger, reflects an imaginary in which the woman is prey, yet also suggests the possibility of agency through alternative forms of resistance. In this sense, the game is situated in a liminal zone between the reproduction of the stereotype and its deconstruction.

The alliance with Hewie can be read as a metaphor for the capacity for care, relationship, and non-human alliance. The animal, often a marginal figure in media, here assumes a central role in the construction of female subjectivity. Furthermore, Fiona’s progressive acquisition of trust and decision-making capacity represents a path of subjectivation that challenges dominant models of the woman-victim. The game thus allows us to envision a different form of power, based not on force but on relationship, situated intelligence, and empathy.

5. The video game medium and the perception of gender-based violence

The video game, as an interactive medium, radically alters the mode in which narrative and symbolic content is experienced. Unlike cinema or literature, where consumption is linear and mediated, the video game compels the player into active participation, which translates into affective and corporeal engagement. When the subject matter is gender-based violence, this type of engagement opens new and potentially problematic scenarios.

In the case of *Haunting Ground*, the perception of female vulnerability is amplified by the fact that the player cannot simply observe they must live that vulnerability, manage it, and turn it into a concrete gameplay experience. The work, therefore, appears to construct a discourse on violence and the female body not only through the plot, but through the possibilities and constraints imposed upon the player.

This experience can generate empathy, but also discomfort, raising ethical questions: is it possible to represent violence without reproducing it? What are the limits of immersion when dealing with sensitive subjects? The answer is not unequivocal, but the strength of the video game lies precisely in its ambivalent character: it can reinforce stereotypes, but also allow for their deconstruction from within, placing the player in the position of one who endures and resists.

6. Conclusions

Haunting Ground uses the potential of video game language to stage a complex representation of gender-based violence. While on one hand it perpetuates certain stereotypes (sexualization, damsel in distress), on the other it offers spaces for reflection on power, the body, and the capacity for reaction. From a sociological perspective, the game configures itself as an ambivalent space, in which meanings are constructed in the interaction between text and player, between representation and ludic practice.

Future studies could extend the analysis to a comparison with other similar titles (*Rule of Rose*, *Clock Tower*, *Remothered*) or investigate player reactions through interviews, focus groups, or the analysis of online content (forums, reviews, gameplay). This would allow for a better understanding of how video game representations influence the collective imaginary and how they are negotiated by diverse audiences.

Analyzing a video game like *Haunting Ground* from a sociological point of view is not just an academic exercise: it has relevant educational and political implications. Video games are among the most influential media for new generations and often constitute the first form of exposure to themes such as gender, sexuality, and violence. Precisely for this reason, it is fundamental to equip oneself with critical tools to decode their implicit and explicit messages.

The inclusion of video game analysis in educational curricula can contribute to developing critical thinking regarding media representations and promoting a more conscious affective and relational education. Furthermore, the recognition of the video game as a political object paves the way for alternative game design practices, in which female subjectivity is not reduced to clichés, but can emerge in all its complexity. Studies on *Haunting Ground* and related titles can engage with cultural policies, suggesting guidelines for the responsible and inclusive production of digital content. In an era marked by cultural tensions and returns to regressive models, the video game can become a space of resistance, education, and social transformation.

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