

The early 1990s saw a kind of crystallisation in gaming aesthetics, centred on games that either squinted towards Gothic or outright claimed a place in the culture and tradition: *Warhammer 40,000* and *Vampire: the Masquerade* on the tabletop, *Alone in the Dark* and *Wolfenstein* on the PC.

These games are genre-defining, persistent, and - to varying degrees - pretty damn Gothic. They've lasted for twenty, twenty-five years, and have carried their fin-de-siecle aesthetics into the twenty-first century. Each has been remade time and again - *Warhammer 40K* is on its eighth edition, *Vampire's* fifth is currently in alpha testing, and both video games have received several relaunches and instalments, including mainstream triple-A releases within the last decade.

Why? What is it about the Nineties 'grimdark' aesthetic that makes it last so long? To answer that question I have to look at each of these titles and establish its core aesthetic, establishing how Gothic shaped gameplay during the early 1990s and beyond. To do *that* - well, I have to start with a bit of theory. Just a splash.

## A Little Bit Of Theory

I'm going to use the word 'aesthetics' a lot in this presentation, so I want to establish exactly what I mean by it. According to Graeme Kirkpatrick (in *Aesthetic Theory and the Video Game*, 2011),

In ordinary speech this term [aesthetic] is often associated with visual properties of objects and it tends to be used when we want to highlight the fact that something is pleasing to the eye... Often missing from such analyses is any sense of what actually makes a visual effect pleasing to the human eye.

For Kirkpatrick and the tradition underpinning his work, 'aesthetic' is about more than appearances. It's about feelings and experiences and how 'texts' or 'art' or whatever objects we're discussing make those feelings and experiences happen.

In game studies terms, it's about the feelings and experiences that are brought to light during play. In *Game Feel*, Steve Swink suggests this sort of thing constitutes a hidden language in game design that nobody's yet quite articulated. He said that in 2008, and only the other day I saw a Twitter thread talking about how players 'get' feel, developers know about it, but everyone sort of... hopes it works. *Feel* is poorly understood - but I think aesthetic theory helps us grasp it more clearly and relate it back to specific examples of technique.

Anyway, although I *am* going to talk about visual art - game graphics and illustrations - along the way, I'm following Kirkpatrick and the aesthetic tradition in tunneling down, looking for the formal elements that make feel and feelings come upon us. The idea is - and this is Kirkpatrick again - that:

Formal structure in an experience - what Raymond Williams called its 'structure of feeling' - remains a vital ingredient when we encounter objects that take us out

of ourselves in order to affirm something important that, perhaps, daily life puts us in danger of forgetting.

So let's talk Gothic. Gothic is an aesthetic project. The literary genre broke through at roundabout the same time as the founding document of modern aesthetic theory, Kant's 1790 *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*. They're of the same time and they're deeply intertwined. Gothic concerned itself with a specific challenge to, maybe even attack on, the kind of natural forms which our boy Kant and co. insisted were the only ones 'pleasing to the eye'.

Fred Botting (*Gothic*, 2013) calls Gothic a genre of 'negative aesthetics'. 'Gothic texts', he says, 'are not good in moral, aesthetic or social terms.' Instead, the Gothic is a societal and personal coping strategy of sorts, in which 'the experience of loss and negativity which is initially overpowering is reconfigured through an imaginative and active process'.

Botting compares Gothic to Freudian trauma theory and exposure therapy - essentially, he says it's a kind of cultural healing process. That process is all about evoking and reliving and exploring transgression, excess and monstrosity through objects and texts that appear 'ugly' by conventional standards - but it depends on a relationship with convention and formal structure for its impact. Someone has to draw the line in order for Gothic to push it. As Botting puts it:

Transgression and excess, the excitement they generate, can be enjoyed as ends in themselves. But if borders and norms are not clear or too weak, the intensity is also diminished.

So where does that leave us Gothicists? It leaves us with a genre that plays with, challenges and tests the limits of formal structure, but is dependent on them for its

impact. It also leaves us with at least two ways we can look into that impact. There's the 'pure aesthetic' approach which Kirkpatrick champions, and the traditional 'search for meaning' approach of the academic humanities, which is where Botting's coming from.

I'm going to try for both - looking at some aesthetic objects on their own terms and talking about how they make us feel - literally *how they make us feel*, the methods and techniques involved in producing or evoking some feelings. I'm then going on to the cultural context for those objects, to establish why they've stuck around so hard and for so long.

## A Few Examples

I'll start with the computer games, to make that point about aesthetics and 'feel' and design concrete. Specifically: [Wolfenstein](#). Currently making headlines for its unabashed commitment to Nazi-punching, *Wolfenstein* has historically exploited a Gothic *visual* aesthetic as best it can with the graphics tech of the time, but it doesn't quite manage a Gothic *feel*.

This elusive quality is found not in how a game looks but in how it plays, and while *Wolfenstein* places us in a promising set of Gothic co-ordinates - alone in the titular Castle, surrounded by enemies - it's the 80s original that really delivers on that "initially overpowering feeling of loss and negativity" which Botting describes as essentially Gothic.

*Wolfenstein 3D* is too fast for that, too focused on doing unto others before they do unto you. Its 'structure of feeling' falls foul of something Kirkpatrick identifies as a systemic problem of video game aesthetics - the way in which mechanical prowess, playing the game *well*, sooner or later edges out other concerns. First person shooters - real time games which exert a demand in terms of reaction speed and dexterity - are particularly prone to this sort of thing.

[Alone in the Dark](#), another first-in-the-genre entry, is better suited to its Gothic co-ordinates. It's slower - frustratingly slow to modern eyes - and its boggy interface makes us *feel* less competent, more at the mercy of our environment, more hopeless. Subsequent remakes have become more graphically sophisticated - here's 2001's [Alone in the Dark: The New Nightmare](#), which maintains the somewhat sluggish combat of the original, and here's 2015's [Alone In The Dark: Illumination](#), which has adopted a more conventional shooter perspective and pacing, but is still recognisably pursuing the same general feel - the same aesthetic.

Now let's talk tabletop. [Warhammer 40,000](#), second edition, released in 1993. Although not the only example of 'Nineties grimdark' - the aesthetic and cultural tendency which simmers through the geek culture of the decade - it is in one way the ur-example. This portentous claim "IN THE GRIM DARKNESS OF THE FAR FUTURE THERE IS ONLY WAR" is the origin of the bloody stupid word 'grimdark', which seeped into comics and television fandoms and from there into the broader lexicon.

This claim is rubbish if read in the literal way that two generations of spods have done, hopefully for laughs. **Obviously** you need people growing food and producing bullets and making babies that the war may continue to be fought - but the claim does indicate what the game's setting and story and aesthetic drive are all about.

Unending conflict. Enemies everywhere. Society aligned absolutely to armed conflict as the prime reason for its existence. That's the grimdark aesthetic, the particular negative which *Warhammer 40,000* does so well, in a nutshell. Unending, unyielding, unadulterated unpleasantness. If there's a shaft of light in the darkness it's only there to illuminate something 'orrible. It can be bright and colourful - throughout the 'Red Period' of the 1990s it was obnoxiously so - but it can't ever let up and give us something nice.

Let's have a look at this image, because while it depicts these distorted figures in an example of ceaseless and colourful conflict, while it's busy with little monstrosities, there are principles of flow and form at work here.

The eye is guided to the central figure who is more or less human looking - he's not human, as the game will take pains to explain to us throughout its various manuals - but he is On Our Side, a superhuman defender of humanity against the barbarian hordes arrayed to either side. Especially this geezer on the left.

They're Goff Orks, by the way. Games Workshop has never been shy about wearing *some* of its influences on its sleeve, in a general and no-trademarks-were-violated kind of way. Here Tolkien's monsters are transported into space, given this gear that's shorthand for the Viking raider, the Gothic tribesman who sacked Rome, the imperialist German of the First World War and a certain post-punk chunkiness - and clustered around the edges of this image, piling in and piling on ceaseless pressure. The eye is guided through the visual chaos to a sense of conclusion and understanding in exactly the way aesthetic theory says it should be.

What's it like to play? Well, *Warhammer 40,000*, in this edition at least, is baroque and detailed and complicated. There's a lot of nostalgia for it, and it does manage to evoke some sort of feelings - some sense of a last desperate struggle against an inimical foe that has worn us down almost to breaking point and against whom we are almost certainly doomed to fail.

Does when I'm playing, anyway.

Mostly, what the second edition of 40K makes you feel is... tired. Tired of calculating and tracking weapon jams, hidden states, cover and so on for individual models, who are still moved and operated discretely even if they're part of a defined squad or unit and have to stick together on the tabletop. It's a clumsy game, in this iteration, with high cognitive load often overwhelming its actual aesthetic goals.

It takes a few goes around, usually, to get a tabletop game *right*, and the nature of the industry is such that further tinkering and reissuing is a business necessity. That's something to bear in mind when we move on to our next case study...

*Vampire: the Masquerade*. First edition. 1991. Another tabletop game - this time role-playing a single character rather than shoving armies of toy soldiers around - and another 'grimdark' setting, but one with a good deal more latitude. External conflicts, puppeteered by vampire elders scheming out the end of the world, sit alongside internal internal ones - character vs. self is as important as character vs. enormous permanently hostile universe.

This aesthetic is curated reasonably well in the game's rules - although I don't have time, and this isn't the time, to really dig into *how* well and why not perfectly, nor why the alpha test for fifth edition is really nailing it. Not if I want to talk about the Nineties.

*Vampire* has always done its best aesthetic work in the visual and the breadth of referential materials in the rulebook. As it becomes more closely associated with the overlap between Goth and gamer cultures, *Vampire* allows students of one BEAT a kind of lens through which to view the other.

A tour through the first few pages of the first *Vampire* rulebook should establish its credentials pretty well. That cover, for one thing, is straight from the sepulchre. Then we have the callout on the credits page:

Vampires are not real. The extent to which they may be said to exist is revealed only in what they can teach us of the human condition, and of the fragility of the splendour which we call life.

Overwrought and in dire need of line editing, but it has that air of pedagogy that the aesthetic project demands. We play make-believe at the edges of our morality, but it's *all make-believe*, it's there to make us better people.

Even the chapter layout - the careful bookending with fiction, the three-volume novelistic layout of the rules material itself - is aligning itself with a Gothic literary tradition. That the introductory fiction is Count Dracula's expository apology to Mina Harker seems like going a bit too far, but... there's no such thing as 'too far' for *Vampire*, as a product line.

We have *Nosferatu* here, then the aforementioned exposition... and I'm just going to come down here and look at the quotations. *Vampire* comes in for accusations of pretentiousness, but its lunging from *The Pilgrim's Progress* on one page to the Indigo Girls two pages later indicates the kind of free-ranging erudition that informs *Vampire's* aesthetic.

Films and songs and books and poems are all swept up to create a library of references that extend the game's aesthetic and themes. Here, we see references gathered because they some way illustrate the content - the Bunyan quotation as a cautionary sign-off to the exposition from Dracula.

Later editions of the game would rarify this, closing in on a more explicit and defined set of touchstones that resembled a turn-of-the-millennium "what is Goth?" website FAQ. By the revised edition of 1998 they'd be calling it 'Gothic Punk', aligning the game much more closely to subcultural movements and styles.

This may be why - despite its being in and out of print and continuously played and discussed for decades - *Vampire* has struggled to get out of the 1990s. It's seen three video game adaptations - *Redemption* in 1999, *Bloodlines* in 2004, and *Preludes (We Eat Blood And All Our Friends Are Dead)* in 2016.

*Bloodlines* fascinates me, for a number of reasons - the one that's germane here is its weird timelessness. Although it's set in 2004, and the vampire characters are aware of

mobile phones, cameras in your pocket and Internet access, the computers with which your character can interact all look like [this](#).

It's 2004, we're still messing around with MS-DOS, and our characters' fashion sense and weaponry are rooted in Nineties comics too. *Bloodlines* is all katanas, Dragonsbreath rounds and wearing sunglasses indoors. Despite its claim to a twenty-first century setting, it's closely tied to its Nineties roots.

The last edition of the tabletop game - 2011's twentieth anniversary edition, dubbed *V20* - made a partial step forward by depicting characters with smartphones etcetera, but the jury's out on how well it handles the practical difficulties posed to secretive vampires hiding amongst humanity in the age of YouTube.

*Preludes*, by contrast, is almost aggressively modern - it's a mobile game with a PC port that's basically a simulated smartphone. It's a glimpse into the aesthetic priorities of the new *Vampire*, and it remains to be seen how well *Vampire* reinvents itself away from the nostalgia factor that has kept it sustained as a property for the last decade or so.

## Why The Nineties?

So. What is it about the Nineties? I think it's something about the Gothic. It has this habit of reaching a peak when centuries turn.

In the 1790s, the French Revolution had Europe reeling, and Europe became the location for novels of terror and horror - I'm thinking of Anne Radcliffe's novels and, of course, Matthew Lewis' *The Monk*, the scandalous flowering of Gothic as a literary genre.

In the 1890s, the Victorian period's flirtation with medieval Gothic coupled with fin-de-siecle apprehension, taxonomical uncertainty and increasingly entrenched fear of the homosexual man, the New Woman and the foreigner. Their union produced texts like *Dracula* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and a decadent art style which bled into some of the material we've looked at today - for instance, I think there's absolutely an influence, and a continuity, between Aubrey Beardsley and Leif Jones.

In the 1990s, the long simmering of economic recession, the Cold War, the slow drift towards European federalism, accelerating technical progress and what I can't call anything but pre-millennial tension all came together to create a cultural moment.

All the games we've considered today germinated in the 1980s, but they all *broke through* in a moment where the Anglosphere seemed to take a deep breath.

Reaganomics was over; Thatcher was out; perhaps we had a moment in which to breathe and take stock and think about the future and our recent past.

It's no accident that both *Vampire: the Masquerade* and *Warhammer 40,000* look ahead to an any-day-now eschaton in which buried ancient evils return and the rule of millennia finally crumbles - or tightens its grip for all eternity. *Wolfenstein* sites itself in what, for the Anglosphere, is the military high point of the twentieth century and perhaps

its last moment of righteous certainty - the Second World War - the game setting its feet on the most solid cultural ground it could find. *Alone in the Dark*, meanwhile, beds in on a cocktail of contemporary conspiracy theories (one shot Hollow Earth, one shot Reptoids, shake over ice, then put a bullet through the glass).

All these games - and the 'franchises' they spawned - are feeling their way through the late twentieth century and coping with the prospect of the twenty-first. They're doing the work that Gothic texts did at the turn of the last two centuries. As to why they're still popular well into the twenty-first century, in the form of reissues and new editions and collectors' movements for the originals... well.

We could talk about the slow decline of the triple-A gaming industry and the safety of an expensive 'soft reboot' of an old, proven title - Gothic as a product of a cultural industry which is investing in something that'll pay off.

We could suggest that maybe Gothic gameplay is slowly on the out again, that it's already a niche and will soon dwindle - as the literary genre dwindled - into clichés and pastiches for a decade or several, continuing the cycle.

We could observe that at least two of these textual products are afloat on a sea of many whales - fans who'll buy new product indefinitely, who are culturally and psychologically locked into a relationship with the object of their fandom.

We could talk about increased literacy and the existence of a mass market that wants more of that thing it likes, we could talk about commodity fetishisation and the collector's impulse.

We could talk about disruptive innovation making it feel like the eschaton will immanentise tomorrow, dragging out our tension and concern about the future indefinitely.

We could talk about the culture wars and how that back-in-the-day moral righteousness of Nazi punching has become weirdly compromised and charged and relevant, how fears of enemies within and without have lingered to create ongoing cultural uncertainty and un-safety.

You'll notice, though, that a lot of our potential options are to do with *feelings*. In the expanded sense of the word 'aesthetics' which covers how it *feels* to live and play in the worlds we experience, we perhaps find an answer to why we're still living in the Endless Nineties. Our fears, our concerns, our suppressed desires haven't changed that much since 1991. They remain, as ever, there to be explored, in the relative - and now interactive - safety of the Gothic text.