

Raving Mad Masercola: Is Survival Horror coming to an end?

Written by Nick Masercola
Friday, 23 July 2010 15:57



After watching this rather dismal E3, I've come to terms with something I've been denying for several years: survival horror—my favorite genre in all of gaming—is on its deathbed, and despite all of my false hope, I realize the time has come to write the eulogy.

It hit me when Sony showed the trailer to DEAD SPACE 2. Now, unlike most people, I wasn't a huge fan of the original (I know, sue me) precisely because I didn't find it scary. Creating a loud, bombastic soundtrack and covering the walls in entrails does not make something frightening, and neither is the old trick of "enemies who play dead until you get close to them." To truly unnerve someone you have to understand pacing and mood, and that in horror, quiet moments are an absolute necessity (if not the most important part of the experience). You can't—as DEAD SPACE did—throw me into wave after wave of baddies with a buzz saw that dismembers them in two seconds and expect to get under my skin.

All that being said, the game showed promise, and I wondered how the developers would approach the scares in the sequel—and after watching the demo, it looks like they decided the best approach was to totally eliminate them. The video showed main character Isaac Clarke in a space station running into a room only to—HOLYSHITWTF!!!—start getting shot at by some futuristic helicopter. He escapes only to—HOLYSHITWTF!!!—get attacked by a huge monster that tries to swallow him whole. Then he takes off running down a hallway only to—HOLYSHITWTF!!!—get attacked by the 'copter and the creature at the same time, exploding out of the airlock into space, now having to fight the creature ON the helicopter. Exhilarating? Yes. Fun? Probably. Scary? Not in the least. It is an action game in the guise of horror, and this is what's supposed to be "leading the charge" in the genre.



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When did survival horror stop being scary? In the early 2000s, the genre was doing great—RESIDENT EVIL and SILENT HILL were ruling the roost, pushing the technical and (in the case of SILENT HILL) narrative abilities of videogames further while scaring the hell out of players worldwide. The great FATAL FRAME series was pulling up the rear, and we even had some amazing one-hit wonders like ETERNAL DARKNESS and HAUNTING GROUND. Most were critically acclaimed and a great majority sold very well. Now we have HEAVY RAIN (more thriller than horror), ALAN WAKE (an absolute mess) and SILENT HILL: SHATTERED MEMORIES (which, while great, wasn't scary).

What caused this to happen? Well, for my money it comes down to the increasing expense of game development this generation, as well as a growing lack of patience among gamers (I'll come back to that in a bit). But what do I blame more than anything else?

RESIDENT EVIL 4. God, I hate this game. Like, I will have major knock-down, drag-out brawls over it. Why? Because it was never a horror game, yet every developer since its release has tried to use its formula to create one. You see, RESIDENT EVIL 4 was an action title. Sure, you may have been fighting creepy enemies speaking in vaguely-unnerving broken Spanish, but it wasn't scary at all, nor did it ever really build tension and fear. You were heavily armed throughout most of the journey, and the gameplay mainly involved learning the most effective way to shoot through the opposition. It sold millions. It changed third-person action games forever. It also killed survival horror, and I'm still not sure why.



I've heard developers talk about how survival horror is a genre built on bad design to scare the audience, i.e. tanklike controls, fixed camera angles, broken combat and extreme difficulty. Therefore, when those things were changed and taken out of RE 4, the evolution in gameplay destroyed the traditional survival horror, as no gamer would accept anything less.

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Bullshit. As a staunch horror fan, I will definitely say that rigid controls and broken combat should be done away with. Gameplay flaws are flaws, no matter what. My issue is the idea that these things somehow contributed to games being scarier and that somehow the genre itself is flawed. That's not at all what made these games so terrifying: it was the feeling of helplessness, of being underpowered, and the idea that you were never quite sure what awful thing was going to happen next. The fact that many people believe poor controls and camera-work lead to that is almost offensive, and would be like someone saying your favorite horror movie was scary because it ignored the basic rules of good filmmaking.

Since RE 4, developers have failed to grasp how to make something frightening while not compromising the design of the game, leading to the identity crisis the genre faces now. This confuses me, because I don't think it's that difficult an endeavor. In fact, two great examples of this are in nonhorror games: MANHUNT and HALF-LIFE 2. MANHUNT is a gruesome stealth-action hybrid set in the world of snuff films, with protagonist James Earl Cash—a death row convict—being forced to murder and mutilate in front of a psychotic director's camera lens in order to gain his freedom. Although competent, it was generally considered pretty average by those who played it.

Except for one scene.



If you ask anyone the defining moment in MANHUNT, they would all tell you the same thing: the final level where you, weaponless, defenseless and directionless, are stalked in a dark, mazelike attic by Pigsy—a naked madman wielding a chainsaw with a cut-off pig's head stapled to his own. When you heard the roar of his saw, the only thing you could do was run and hide. In short, it was absolutely terrifying. Why? Not because of poor design, but because it robbed you of your usual skills (weapons, stealth, surprise) and forced you to make due with almost nothing.

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Another great example is the Ravenholm section of HALF LIFE 2. Most people find this area—which is nerve-racking romp through a town completely overrun with the dead, your only aid coming from a crazed preacher—incredibly tense and scary. Why? Because, in a game all about shooting, it gives you almost no ammo and nowhere to hide, forcing you to find new and creative ways to outthink your enemy. It under-powers you against your threat, and then tells you to deal with it, while rewarding you for coming up with new ways to get around these disturbing denizens. Neither of these games required outdated gameplay mechanics to work so beautifully, proving that if you take away a player's power and force them to outthink their foes, the game becomes scary by the sheer nature of them being more capable than you.



“But wait,” the developers cry, “players don’t want horror games anymore!” Once again I don’t believe this is true, as there is (based on sales) obviously a large audience who supported survival horror that I believe are simply waiting for the next great game to hit. However, I will say that this argument does have some merit in the fact that I believe gamers as a whole have lost a bit of their patience. How many games this generation feel the need to start out with a whiz-bang, absolutely insane action scene for fear that players won’t get interested? Despite the fact I love the GOD OF WAR series, I’m angry that it’s causing many developers to follow its trend of opening with a massive, unbelievable action set-piece—forgoing a slow, steady build-up over the course of the game. Horror requires methodical, pitch-perfect pacing in order to truly get under your skin, and it needs to build slowly to truly draw you in and make you afraid. Many gamers have problems with this, wanting to eat their cake the moment it lands in their system. That, coupled with the growing expense of game development, is making developers balk at the idea of a traditional survival horror experience.

Is there any hope? A little, though I’ve seen my hopes get dashed before. Sooner or later game developers will learn what Hollywood did many years ago—horror is cheap. Seriously, the creation of a survival-horror title is far less expensive than nearly any other genre, not requiring the scores of programmers and designers needed to build massive setpieces and worlds. Hell,

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most of the time you just need good graphics (the more realistic, the better), a good script and simple, nerve-wracking gameplay. You're not going to be fighting on the back of a Titan, or on a shootout in a train speeding through the jungle. It's a low-cost, high-profit product—if you do it right.

I'm just hoping there's a developer smart enough to step up to the plate.

{comments on}