

Deivisceris

Hannah Comstock

Thesis submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

In

Creative Technologies

Zach Duer, Committee Chair

Patrick Finley

Eric Standley

December 6, 2019

Blacksburg, VA

Keywords: art, illustration, tabletop games, role-playing, horror, body horror, cosmic horror,
storytelling

Copyright 2019 Hannah Comstock

Deivisceris

Hannah Comstock

ABSTRACT

Deivisceris is a four-player role-playing tabletop game that focuses on themes of horror. It looks into ideas from the horror genre as a whole while combining aspects from the body horror and cosmic horror subgenres to create a discomfoting horror experience. The game features illustrations and written events with a choice-based narrative that can have multiple outcomes depending on a player's decisions, stats, and items. Deivisceris utilizes randomness in order to create a new experience each time it is played through randomized characters and a randomized game board that is built up as it is played. The game reveals its narrative through clues within the gameplay, illustrations, and written text as characters enter the game's world blindly. Deivisceris is an immersive tabletop horror experience that can be further expanded on in the future with the possibility of a larger production.

Deivisceris

Hannah Comstock

GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

Deivisceris is a four-player tabletop game that looks into the ways horror can be created in a board game format. It examines various ideas from the horror genre as a whole while taking inspiration more directly from two subgenres of horror: body horror and cosmic horror, each of which has very different ways of evoking horror. The game includes a variety of full-color illustrations and written situations that give players a chance to make their own decisions.

Deivisceris utilizes randomness in order to create a new experience every time it is played. The game board is built up differently every time it is played and characters' stats, such as strength, intelligence, and endurance, may be different in each game. The game's story is revealed through clues within the gameplay, illustrations, and text. Deivisceris is a tabletop role-playing horror experience that can be further expanded on in the future with the possibility of a larger production.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Research and Inspiration	3
Conceptualization	10
Gameplay	14
Process	22
Future	34
Bibliography	36

Introduction

The horror genre fascinates me and draws me in through its concepts and visuals. Through various techniques and ideas, it aims to fill the audience with feelings of fear, disgust, or unease. Horror can be found in many forms of media and many different subgenres, ranging from those that may be more tame to things that might push the limits. I find the subgenres of body horror and cosmic horror to be particularly effective types of horror, as body horror excels in its disturbing visuals and cosmic horror excels in its dreadful concepts. This project, called *Deivisceris*, aims to combine ideas from these two subgenres, such as mutation, metamorphosis, the unknown, and the loss of sanity, and deliver a discomfoting but fascinating horror experience in a replayable tabletop format. Through illustrations, writing, and narrative, this game tries to fill its audience with unease while also working to bring a role-playing experience to players that incites them to search for answers about the game narrative. The game's components utilize both randomness and choice-based narrative to encourage replayability, as one playthrough of the game may be vastly different from another. It exists within a complex world filled with mystery and clues that may help players piece together what is happening in the horrific dimension they have been transferred to.

This paper discusses the entire process that has gone into the creation of this game, beginning with research into the horror genre to investigate what brings about fear and what makes body horror and cosmic horror effective. The narrative of the game and the process of creating the narrative are analyzed to illustrate the experience the game aims to deliver. The gameplay is discussed to give an idea of how the game works before further analyzing many of

the game's components and how they fit into the narrative. The overall process of how the game was brought to life through the illustrations, pieces, cards, and writing is then examined before reflecting on the project as a whole and considering where the game could go in the future.

Research and Inspiration

Horror can be described as both a human emotion and as a genre that aims to produce that emotion. The horror genre is designed to elicit fear in its audience, so horror-based media is usually experienced with that expectation. Fear is both a physical and psychological reaction. In those who are frightened, the sympathetic nervous system is aroused, causing an increased heart rate, a rise in blood pressure, decreased circulation to the organs, and an increased flow of blood to the muscles along with a fight or flight reaction. There is also a hormonal component to fear. Specifically, Corticotropin Releasing Hormone (CRH), cortisol, and adrenaline are hormonal triggers that are associated with fear. These hormones can be manipulated to produce more or less fear, as seen in lab mice who were more fearful due to the insertion of a gene that makes CRH (Asma, “The Biological and Psychological Basis of Horror,” 22). Stephen T. Asma explains that according to emotional neuroscience, mammals have been found to share seven major emotional systems. These are care, lust, panic, rage, seeking, playing, and fear. Each one of these has a unique pathway through the brain that enlists specific hormones and neurotransmitters. Fear specifically has a circuit that passes from the amygdala, the hypothalamus, the periaqueductal gray, the brain stems, and finally out into the spinal cord. This system has helped many vertebrates survive in a hostile world. As human fear is largely regulated in the amygdala, fear and memory work together. This creates conditioned learning where someone might fear something due to past experiences. Fear can also be looked at in a Darwinian perspective, as it is subject to evolution. For this reason, it has been speculated that

common human phobias, such as the fear of spiders and snakes, are connected to our prehistory (Asma, “Monsters on the Brain,” 942-947).

Beyond these phobias, there are many different ways to invoke fear, and the horror genre has explored these throughout its wide list of subgenres and media. One of the underlying causes of fear is cognitive mismatch, which occurs when the sight of something that may have both normal and abnormal attributes creates mental confusion (Asma, “The Biological and Psychological Basis of Horror,” 23). An example of this could be a monster that has both normal, human features such as a human body while also having abnormal features such as a face without the eyes, nose, and mouth. Philosopher Noël Carroll proposed a definition of horror based on the emotional reaction that is supposed to be brought to the audience when they are exposed to such abnormal monsters. This definition includes components such as emotions, monsters, and why we may have certain emotions when we are confronted by these monsters. In particular, emotions of fear and disgust (Carroll 1987). The term ‘category jamming’ was coined by Carroll as a way to describe these experiences where our own taxonomy of nature is violated or where our comfortable categories of animate and inanimate are disturbed and diluted. A horror monster is often seen as something both disgusting and threatening, as what may be considered impure is tied to the emotion of disgust. Often times, something ‘impure’ can be described as an indeterminate entity that exists between our normal categories of being. Blood, spit, feces, mucus, and vomit may be perceived as impure, as they blur the category of what is human or not human and what is even “me or not me” while also being potential carriers of disease and infection. The fictional monsters that succeed through the psychological exploitation of category jamming utilize these impurities, as they ooze slime and twist in uncanny ways. This

cognitive slippage that many monsters invoke can explain why some humans find them both repelling and fascinating, drawing many to horror media even though it may be repulsive (Carroll 1990).

Horror is more than just emotional reactions to monsters, however. Andrea Sauchelli argues that horror may be defined by a diffuse atmosphere that permeates the work, as there is an important relationship between horror and mood. While similar in many ways, moods and emotions are two different things. Sauchelli explains that emotions are typically characterized as being directed at an object, such as anger, while moods are affective states that are not directed at something specific, such as depression or elation. In addition, moods are known to last longer than emotions and can sometimes be described as background states of our minds. Moods can both influence emotions and be influenced by emotions in return. According to Sauchelli, it is the details that generate a certain atmosphere that enable us to characterize a certain work as horror, rather than just the features of monsters. A horror mood can be characterized by a feeling of tension that relates to a morbid inclination of our attention toward unpleasant aspects such as death and evil forces. The atmosphere can direct someone's attention to these unpleasant issues. The atmosphere in much of the horror genre is important, as it sets up the scares we might experience and tries to fill the audience with apprehension (Sauchelli, 41-44).

Following the idea that horror is effective by both evoking emotion and mood, this game derives a lot of inspiration from the horror genre as a whole. However, it looks closely at two horror subgenres in particular: body horror and cosmic horror. I find these two subgenres to be the most compelling and horrifying within the horror genre as a whole, each one for a different reason. Body horror deals with the grotesque manipulation of the human body, where insides are

turned out and anatomy is made impossible. Body horror often employs the idea of cognitive mismatch and category jamming by showing the human body in situations that confuse and bother the mind. While the ideas alone are rather terrifying, I find that body horror excels in its visual aspects. Seeing a normal human body become something incredibly inhuman is grotesque and impure, especially as we see things start to break and tear in ways that they should not. We might even feel queasy or uncomfortable by the thought of something like that happening to our own body, as our own fear of death and pain comes into play. Cosmic horror, on the other hand, excels in its conceptual aspects. This horror subgenre is full of existential dread as it explores the idea that we really aren't as important as we'd hope within the cosmos, in fact, we might be entirely insignificant within the greater scale. Cosmic horror creates a great mood of horror as the unknown intimidates its subjects. The visuals of body horror and internal dread of cosmic horror make them both especially effective types of horror, so this game leans into the idea of combining the two.

Body horror often showcases a complete disregard for the human body as it is graphically violated in a wide variety of ways. It is characterized by the manipulation of the body's normal state of form and function, going against what is considered normal anatomy and pushing the ideas of cognitive mismatch and category jamming. It is a type of biological horror that may delve into scientific ideas and accidents as a narrative means. It may be a way of rationalizing the existence of real horrific body manipulations that we would not normally see as part of daily life (Cruz, 161). A few works that are particularly influential to me with elements of body horror are *The Thing* (1982), *The Fly* (1986), *Alien* (1979), *Uzumaki* (2013), *Dead Space* (2008), and *Dead Space 2* (2011). *The Fly* is especially horrific as it brings together two biological groups,

specifically a human and a fly, that are supposed to be isolated from one another. This is an example of category jamming or confusion and is especially frightening as the monster is partly human. Just the uncertainty of what may be produced by this incredibly unnatural union is frightening in itself as our known taxonomies of nature are violated. The metamorphosis from human to 'Brundlefly' takes the character beyond his species into something that is now completely incompatible with humans, as he becomes of his own species. Nothing else is like him and he has become a biological dead end. He has become a corrupted abomination. During embryological development, there is a point where cells will commit to a particular set of tissues or organs. This is called differentiation. In *The Thing*, however, an organism exists that is made of perpetually undifferentiated stem cells. It is not a whole, unified organism, rather a mass of independent infective cells that is able to manipulate bodies into horrific, unnatural forms. This also brings about the fear of known taxonomic classifications being broken as an unclassifiable presence is created. It is something impure. The idea of mutation and metamorphosis is found throughout body horror as it plays on our natural aversion to any pain and damage to the human body. It is the destruction of the organic form to the point of complete unnatural evolutionary insignificance (Cruz, 162-165).

Then, there is cosmic horror. Cosmic horror's ideas and elements mainly stem from the works of H. P. Lovecraft, as the genre may even be referred to as Lovecraftian horror. Along with Lovecraft's stories themselves and other forms of media based on them, a few works that are particularly influential to me with elements of cosmic horror include *Bloodborne* (2015), *Dead Space 3* (2013), and *Uzumaki* (2013). Cosmic horror can be described as the fear and awe that we feel when confronted by phenomena beyond our comprehension. The scope of this

phenomenon extends beyond the narrow view of our own human affairs and instead boasts cosmic significance. This forces us to recognize our own limitations as humans and the relatively insignificant place that we have in the cosmos. It's a violation of our sense of self and identity and destroys the very foundations of our culture. This leads the human subject toward insanity, death, or the embrace of a no longer human condition. The term 'cosmic indifferentism' describes the awareness of the vastness of the universe in both space and time as well as the awareness of the insignificance of human beings within the realm of the universe. Much of what cosmic horror evokes is the fear of the unknown. Characters are faced with an unexplainable dread from unknown forces as phenomena overwhelm the senses and cognitive faculties (Ralickas).

Within Lovecraft's works, it is implied that humanity is what renders us vulnerable and alone in these otherworldly domains. When put into an environment that is dominated by beings who are both superior to us in many ways and completely indifferent to us, human characters may begin to perceive these greater beings as gods, but in reality, the beings have a complete disregard for humans. In these stories, it was by chance, not divine grace, that brought humans into existence. In a display of psychological regression, the human's worship of these beings leads to the subject's descent into the abyss of the id and religious rituals become barbaric and sadistic. Cosmic horror displays religion akin to an infection in this way. These indifferent, powerful beings are shown to treat us in the very way some humans treat some of the beings on earth, such as reptiles, insects, and sea creatures. Destroying them for the mere joy of killing and seeing them as lesser life forms. Interestingly, the forms of reptiles, insects, and sea creatures resemble that of the greater cosmic beings in Lovecraft's stories (Ralickas).

The sublime is something that we may feel when inspired with great admiration upon seeing something with such excellence or beauty. It's something awe-inspiring and out of this world. In Lovecraft's work *At the Mountains of Madness*, the landscape of the Antarctic mountains and the sound of the wind may be something that is initially met with a sublime experience of natural phenomena. However, it is later revealed that these very elements are a part of the cosmic horror themselves and are not truly sublime natural phenomena at all. In cosmic horror, the possibility of a sublime turn to what the characters experience is rendered impossible and the conception of nature and nature's laws are proven false. There is nothing here that directs the character back into themselves, instead, the observation of new phenomena acts as a vehicle for that individual's psychological unhinging. The human cannot anchor their experience within their own context of the rational universe that they had belonged to prior and they are forced into the alienation of both themselves and their own world. Cosmic horror diminishes its subjects by forcing them to confront something that they cannot explain. There is no safe vantage point for witnessing the spectacle of cosmic horror. (Ralickas)

Conceptualization

The aesthetics and ideas that can be found in the body horror and cosmic horror genres influenced both the look and the story of this game. The game uses components of cosmic horror, such as mystery and the unknown, and components of body horror, such as helplessness and lack of clarity, to affect the players' psyche from the beginning of the game. The game attempts to both confuse the players as well as spark their curiosity by teasing them with a narrative preface. At the same time, the fundamental nature of the world they are being thrown into is left as a mystery. It is through the imagery and text that clues are given to help the player piece together an idea of what is happening. One of the most commonly encountered things in the narrative is a strange growth of flesh that is referred to as the Viscera. The Viscera is constantly growing and taking over things like an infection. It can change non-living material into flesh as well as mutate and metamorphose living tissue, including the bodies of humans who have unfortunately been transferred to this land of horror. The location encountered in this game is only at the beginning of an infection. As the infection spreads, the world will be entirely taken over and turned into landscapes of flesh with horrifically twisted residents.

The Viscera plays heavily on the idea of category jamming, as our existing ideas of what is living are disrupted by the disgusting, pulsating growth of flesh that exists in areas where flesh should not be. It can also bring about the confusing mix up of animate and inanimate as an organ laying alone on the ground should not still be alive and an inanimate object, such as a rock, should not be turning into living tissue. Displacing or rearranging the inner workings of our bodies in a new context can evoke feelings of fear and discomfort due to these ideas. While

utilizing category jamming, the Viscera also often takes inspiration from common phobias such as trypophobia, which is an aversion to the sight of clusters of small holes or bumps and irregular patterns. As the Viscera is constantly growing it is also turning every object it encounters into flesh, whether it be in the form of a grossly textured muscle-like cover, a huge collection of intestines, or many functionless eyes sprouting from an infected rock.

While these infections themselves rely heavily on concepts of body horror such as cognitive mismatch and category jamming, their narrative origin is cosmic. The Viscera is the work of incomprehensibly large interdimensional beings known as the Deivisceris. The infection of the flesh is actually an extension of these ever-expanding beings, as they bring entire worlds into their grasp through mutating and destroying the land itself and the residents of those worlds. Something that has been metamorphosed by the Deivisceris will become a part of them, no longer having total control of its own mind as it is slowly captured and taken away. While the Deivisceris eventually physically abduct their victims, they begin by influencing the weak minds of these lesser beings. This can be seen in multiple situations where the players might discover other lifeforms who appear to be worshipping something. Shrines sprout up throughout the barren landscape, all depicting a being that is placed in a position within the shrine that implies worship and holiness. Elements of real-world religions were considered and incorporated into the designs of both these shrines and their followers in order to push the implication that these are holy things. Both the players and the people in the narrative are led to believe that these beings are some sort of god, but the truth is that they are only a pawn of the Deivisceris, in fact, they are a part of the Deivisceris too.

The name 'Deivisceris' comes from a mix of Latin words *Dei* (divine being, god) and *visceris* (entrails, flesh). The Deivisceris are "Divine Flesh." So inconceivably expansive and powerful that they may be seen as gods to some. The false worship of the First Messengers, which are the beings that the brainwashed have depicted in the shrines, is, in actuality, the worship of the Deivisceris. Indoctrinated individuals are led to worship this holy flesh and anticipate the purification of all being. Anyone who has been infected by the Deivisceris mind control will eventually be led to willingly combine their body with the Viscera. These ideas of false gods and worship go back to many of the ideas found in cosmic horror. When met with these beings beyond their comprehension, the lesser lifeforms are led to believe that they must be gods. Here, religion is used as a form of infection on the minds of what the Deivisceris consider lesser beings. As they continue to worship they experience psychological regression and a descent into madness. Meanwhile, the physical infection of body horror continues to act alongside this mental infection.

The idea of sanity and someone losing their mind is particularly important in the game, just as it is in much of the cosmic horror genre. Individuals are forced into the alienation of themselves as their world views are forever destroyed. They have found themselves in a world that is horrifically unlike theirs with nowhere to go. While the idea of discovering an alien world might sound great, here characters are barred from having any sublime reaction as they have been thrown into this place with no mental preparation. As characters witness things that they cannot comprehend, their mind slowly begins to break apart. In addition to just witnessing the horrors, the mind is also lost as the Deivisceris expose it to the Light. The Light of the Deivisceris is a form of communication that can hypnotize and influence the mind of a lesser

being. This causes indoctrinated individuals to begin to worship the First Messengers and the Viscera to unspeakable lengths. The Light is encountered in many different situations in the game, leaving the character with a negative effect when directly witnessed. Characters' sanity will continue to lower as the game goes on, opening up the chance for players to be out of control of how their character reacts to a situation and instead be forced to hear the disgusting actions that their character engages in.

Gameplay

The game is made up of multiple physical components: a set of game board tiles, game tokens, whiteboards and markers, various types of cards, the guidebook, and the rulebook (see figure 1). The gameplay starts with an introductory passage to set up the story and explain how the characters have found themselves in their situation. In this four-player game, each player will create their own character before starting on one tile called the Infection Point. The Infection Point is where the characters entered the world and where their exploration will begin. Players can then move forward one tile during each of their turns. This first stage of the game is called the exploration phase. When players move to an area where no tile yet exists, they will draw one

and place it on the table, connecting it with the previous tile they were on. As exploration continues, players may be met with situations where they have to look into the guidebook for narrative passages that give the player a chance to choose how to react. After meeting specific

conditions, the second

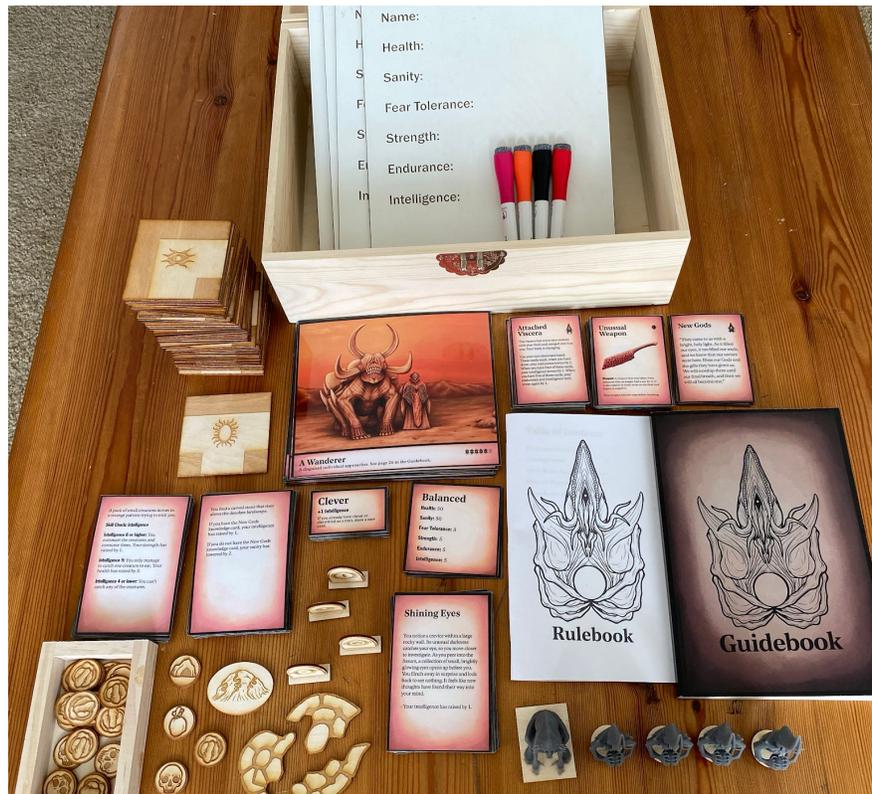


Figure 1. All of the components of the game.

stage of the game, known as the scenario phase, will be triggered. In the scenario phase, one player will be chosen, based on a list of given conditions, to transform into a monster. The game then evolves into a fight for survival as the human characters try to stop the monster and the monster tries to kill all of the humans.

At the start of the game, the game tiles are meant to fit with one another and build up the game board as the players explore (see figure 2). Tiles are drawn randomly from a stack before being placed on the table, so each tile has different paths that can connect with the other tiles around it. Each tile has the possibility of triggering an event or moment for the player. This alludes to the idea that the characters are exploring this world and with each new area they enter, there is a chance that they may find something of significance. With the randomized tiles, the game board is built up differently every time the game is played, adding a further variation of

play which is especially important in the final scenario phase of the game.

There are multiple tokens that may be placed on the tiles as players experience the game. Each player has their own unique character



Figure 2. The game board being built up during the exploration phase.

token to represent their character's location on the board. Markers may be needed to point to an area of interest that has been discovered in an event or a moment. These markers come in the form of wooden tokens that are decorated with various images. They will change how a player may interact with a tile in both the exploration phase and the scenario phase. Viscera tokens mark a tile where a large amount of growing flesh has been encountered and can be identified by the image of an intestinal pile. Danger tokens mark a tile where there might be something dangerous that a player should keep away from. These tokens are identified by the image of a skull. Cave tokens may be placed when a character has discovered a cave that they can move through. These tokens, identified by the image of a cave, allow players to move their characters freely between two tiles if Cave tokens are found on both. Trader tokens, marked by the image of a bag, indicate that the player has found someone who is willing to barter with their character. A player may return to a tile with a Trader token to give and receive items.

Cultus Clue tokens are a bit different than the previously discussed tokens. These markers are placed on the board when a clue about what is happening to this world has been found. The Cultus Clue tokens are identified by a 3D printed piece that depicts the First Messengers, which are the beings that people have been led to worship. The image of the First Messengers is seen in various components of the game. These tokens are larger and more impressive than the others as they indicate an area that will be very important for the human characters in the scenario phase. The scenario phase also has two unique tokens: the Cocoon token and the Devoratus token. The Cocoon token is marked by the image of a fleshy cocoon and is intended to signify that one human is being metamorphosed into something else. This token will remain on one tile as it incubates until the monster is ready to hatch. Once it hatches, the Cocoon token is replaced with

the Devoratus token. Like the Cultus Clue tokens, the Devoratus token is identified by a 3D printed piece (see figure 3). In this case, it is a model of the monster, which is called the Devoratus. The Devoratus is larger than any of the other tokens that may be found on the game tiles, as it is an imposing creature that the humans will want to keep an eye on.

While the tokens that are left on tiles may change how players interact with that tile, these tokens may also have different uses once the exploration phase ends and the scenario phase begins. For example, Viscera tokens do not have any effect during the exploration phase, however, when the scenario has begun, they are useful to both the humans and the monster. The monster may seek out the Viscera tokens to consume the Viscera found at that tile in order to



Figure 3. The Devoratus token (left) and the Cultus Clue token (right) are identified by 3D printed models.

raise one of its stats. Humans may also seek the Viscera tokens to attach the Viscera to their bodies, which will raise one of their stats while also adding a negative effect.

Because each character's stats will be constantly changing as the game continues, players are given whiteboards and markers to easily keep track of these changes. Each whiteboard is engraved so that the players

know what stats will need to be monitored and where to put their numbers. The whiteboard will list character name, health, sanity, fear tolerance, strength, endurance, and intelligence.

The game cards make up a large portion of the game's components. There are eight different categories of game cards: character cards, trait cards, event cards, moment cards, item cards, effect cards, knowledge cards, and scenario cards. Character cards are chosen at the beginning and give the player information about their character's stats. Character cards contain the details of what the character's health, sanity, strength, intelligence, endurance, and fear level are. Each of the four character cards has slightly different stats where one skill may have more points than another. Trait cards are also drawn before the game begins, as they give effects to the characters that might lower or raise specific stats. Players choose two trait cards and update their stats on the whiteboard as a result. The trait cards can affect any of the character's stats. Event

cards are the largest type of card, as each one has a unique illustration depicting the event that is about to be encountered (see figure 4). Event cards direct the player to a specific page in the guidebook where they can follow the event and make choices based on the situations they are given.

Moment cards give the player a



Figure 4. The card design for the event "A Horrific Being."

single situation that their character has encountered, however, they are not choice-based like the events. Moments may result in the changing of stats or gaining an item among other possibilities. Both event cards and moment cards are encountered when tiles are placed, as the tiles indicate which type of card is to be drawn.

Item cards are what represent an item that a character may find in the game (see figure 5). Item cards are separated into three different categories: weapons, distractions, and valuables. Weapons and distractions may be used in certain event situations for offense or defense, while valuables may be traded or may become useful in certain events and the scenario phase of the

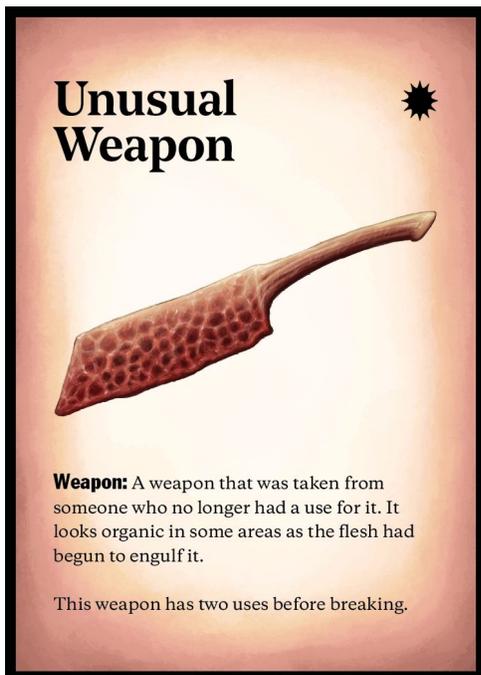


Figure 5. The card design for the item “Unusual Weapon.”

game. Effect cards are received based on certain outcomes in events. An effect card is given when a player has encountered something that has changed their mindset, a sign that the character is diving into insanity. Effect cards are unique because they provide the human player with instructions on how they should act in person during the gameplay. An example is the effect card “Consumed the Flesh” where the player is instructed to whisper whenever they speak. These are meant to bring the gameplay outside of the restraints of just the table, forcing the players to take the role of their character and

act as if their sanity is also draining. This can lead to feelings of unease if the players choose to embrace their roles, as the other players may begin to act strange. Knowledge cards are simply informational and are given when the character has learned something in an event. These cards

give players insight into some of the lore of the world. Finally, scenario cards are used only in the scenario phase of the game. These cards are split into two categories: the human deck and the monster deck. These cards give situations unique to the human players and the monster player that may result in a change of stats, the discovery of an item, or even a skill or sanity check that determines what happens based on the character's stats.

The exploration phase's largest component is the guidebook. The guidebook contains all of the text for each event that can be encountered in the game. After a player draws an event card, they are instructed to go to a specific page in the guidebook. Here, they will read an introduction to the event they are experiencing and will then be given the option to make a choice. The choices that a player may make are listed in the guidebook and will refer the player to a new page where the event will continue. Events may consist of many choices or only a few, as it depends on what the player decides. Certain choices may lead to skill checks where the outcome of a decision is determined by the player's strength, endurance, or intelligence stat. Some events even have sanity checks, where if the player's sanity is low enough, they will not be able to make a choice and must instead refer to a specific outcome, as their mind is deteriorating and causing them to do things against their own will. With all of these choices and consequences within the guidebook, players should be curious to see what might happen if they had made a different decision or had a different stat level, thus encouraging further replayability.

Finally, the rulebook provides the players with all instructions on how to play the game. It also sets up the story with an introductory piece of the narrative that explains how the characters found themselves in such a situation. The rulebook suggests that the players read and learn the rules of the exploration phase then begin to play. It gives them the conditions in which

the scenario phase will begin but suggests that players do not read about the scenario phase until it has been triggered, as not only will reading the scenario phase's introduction and rules potentially give spoilers, but it would also be too much on the players to have to read through and learn two very different sets of gameplay at once. Lastly, the rulebook contains conclusion text for each of the different outcomes that the game may result in. These pieces of the narrative close out the adventure that these characters have just experienced while still leaving room for speculation that can possibly be expanded upon in additional playthroughs of the game.

Process

Throughout the gameplay and narrative, this game aims to make people feel uncomfortable. In the format of a collaborative tabletop game, it is difficult to truly evoke the feeling of fear. Watching a horror movie or playing a horror game alone with the lights off sends direct fear stimuli to the audience. They watch the realistic action as a body splits open and morphs into something new. They hear the grotesque sounds of bones snapping, muscle tearing, and distorted screaming. So, how can similar feelings of disgust and discomfort be evoked through a tabletop game? Imagery is a dominant form for communicating horror and images featured in the game are meant to evoke some of these feelings, however, another of the most important aspects of this game is the writing. The game's events are full of descriptive moments as the players make choices and hear their consequences. Reading is a huge component of the game and helps bring the mood of horror to the players. In order to progress in the game, players must read a detailed account of what is happening to their character in order to hopefully lead to an empathetic response in which they imagine themselves in that situation. The text evokes imagery in the mind of the reader, and the more detailed and uncomfortable the descriptions, the better the image. The Viscera is described in the text as an impurity, as it secretes foul oils and plays on ideas of category jamming. Vivid illustrations for each event in the game add an extra level to the imaginary situation. They give the players a chance to react and begin to wonder what might unfold during the event they are about the encounter. By using both the illustrations and the descriptive text, the game aims to immerse playings in the world they are visiting, keep them curious about the situation, and ultimately bring them discomfort.

The game incorporates a significant amount of reading, well beyond what is typical for a table-top board or card game. The game's target audience is someone who seeks an immersive role-playing experience in a tabletop format, particularly in the horror genre. It forces players to react to situations that are sometimes horrific and sometimes seemingly benign, which will then decide the fate of their character. What kind of character they choose to role-play is up to them. If they wish to play a reckless character who doesn't care for their own well-being, they may do that. The choice is there for them and the consequences of their choices will differ depending on the type of character they choose to play. For example, the player finds an eyeball on the ground and they have the choice to either grab it, secure it, or leave it be. However, there are many moments during the game's situations where the players do not have agency. If the player chooses to grab the eyeball in the above example, the player is not given a choice in what their character does next. The text reads, "You take the eyeball and hold it in your hand. The slimy fluid coating it rubs off onto you, making your palm feel wet. Something brings you to squeeze your hand into a tight fist, easily crushing the eye. You then bring the mashed remains to your face, rubbing it onto your forehead. Parts of the substance latch onto your skin, quickly merging to become a part of you. Your forehead now looks off, but you feel as though something has entered your mind. Perhaps it is knowledge for the future." While the player has some control over what their character does, they do not have full control. These moments happen throughout the game, such as the character approaching things that begin the game's events. The player sometimes lacks agency, especially at times where the cards say that the character feels compelled to take certain actions. This is one part of the game's storytelling devices. While it is never explained directly, it is frequently implied that the malicious beings of this bizarre world

are influencing their characters through mind control. Players are thrown blindly into this world, and it is only through clues in the text and images that they may begin to piece together what is actually going on and what the story is. The mind control of the Deivisceris is a central part of the game's story, as they work to take over worlds and force lesser beings into worship.

As soon as the game has begun, the players' characters have been exposed to the Deivisceris mind control. After the characters discover and explore a hidden cave, they are drawn to entering a mysterious portal within. Upon making contact with the portal, the characters are transported to another dimension. The mind control starts with intrusive thoughts, some that the victim may even act upon. As the characters' sanity lowers, the Deivisceris begin to have more access to their minds. They will soon be able to briefly control the lesser being, bringing them to do something that they would never have done.

The portals and how they work is a narrative directly incorporated into the gameplay, but the characters' identities and personalities are left to the players' imaginations. None of the characters are given names and there is no provided imagery of their physical appearance. On the whiteboards used by the players, a name slot is left open at the players' discretion. The randomized trait cards will provide the players with information about the initial physical and mental status of their character. The players are then forced to create the identity of their own characters, whether that character is a mirror of themselves or something entirely different. With the randomized stats, every character played in every round of the game is someone new. The randomization of the characters alludes to the narrative that once a human being enters through the portal and is transported to another world, there is no going back. Even if they try to re-enter the portal, it will bring them to another random world in some other dimension that is also being

infected by the Deivisceris. The chances of actually returning the character to their homeworld are extremely unlikely. There is no hope once a character has found themselves in the grasp of the Deivisceris. So each time players play the game, it's not just the same characters re-entering the world over and over each time the game is played; it's new characters being unwillingly brought into this world each time. The introductory story where a group explores an unknown cave and comes across the portal is the same each time, but in this world, there are infinite dimensions that the Deivisceris are taking over. Theoretically, according to the narrative, while one group of fictional characters within the world may be discovering the cave in their world, an entirely different group may be discovering a cave in another. There are infinite worlds where alien beings may be discovering portals and caves on their world, but this game tells the story of when a group of humans finds themselves lost in one of the Deivisceris' worlds of horror.

This game aims to horrify the player in part by delivering an immersive storytelling experience. If players want to learn all that they can about the game's world, they may have to play through the game multiple times, learning something new with each round. This is another goal of the game: replayability. With randomized character traits, randomized tiles that build up the game board, and randomized order of events, no two playthroughs of the game will be exactly alike. This design is intended to encourage players to replay the game and seek out further information about the story, because making different choices may reveal information about the world that was not discovered the first time playing the game. The game creates a bizarre world rich with lore that draws players in and leads them to search for answers.

One of the biggest problems that was encountered during the game design phase was figuring out how the game would end. This was made especially difficult because of the

variability of the randomized gameplay. How is the exploration completed? How does the game then end? One could suggest that once the characters discover the truth about their situation, they have won. Or perhaps once they have explored everywhere they have won. Neither of these ideas worked, however. Following the elements of cosmic horror, there is meant to be a feeling of hopelessness and dread for the unfortunate individuals who found themselves in this situation. As their minds slowly deteriorate, there is no coming back from it. Overall, this world is horrific and there is no happiness to be found there. So how can players win in a hopeless world?

These questions led to the game being split into two parts: the exploration phase and the scenario phase. Once at least three Cultus Clue tokens have been placed and at least 30 game tiles are on the board, the exploration phase will end when the scenario phase is triggered. This means that the characters have encountered multiple areas of significance and have been exposed to enough anomalies so that one of them is about to turn into a monster. With heavy influence from body horror, the chosen player will metamorphose for a couple turns in a cocoon before emerging as a monster. At this point, the players are pitted against



Figure 6. Concept art of the Devoratus.

themselves as the group of players' characters is up against the monster character, who is also controlled by a player. If the monster succeeds, the humans will all have been devoured. If the humans win and successfully kill the monster, the characters will have a moment of relief that they have succeeded. However, there is no happy ending because they are still stuck in this strange world with nowhere to go.

Looking closely at the player-controlled monster, or the Devoratus, its design relies a lot on the ideas of cognitive mismatch and category jamming (see figure 6). This creature has many forms that are rather humanlike. At first glance, it may seem to have humanoid hands, arms, feet, and legs, but on closer examination, it becomes clear that things are not as they should be, as there are far too many fingers and toes. Seeing what looks to be a normal human hand and then realizing that there are more than five fingers present leads to a feeling of cognitive mismatch as this creates a mental confusion for the viewer. The beast's head is also reminiscent of a human skull, but it is twisted and morphed. The goal of the Devoratus was to create a creature that still has human-like features, as this being was once a human, but to them add in elements of cognitive mismatch to make it unsettling to observe.

The illustrations found on the event cards seek to utilize ideas of cognitive mismatch and category jamming as well while also aiming

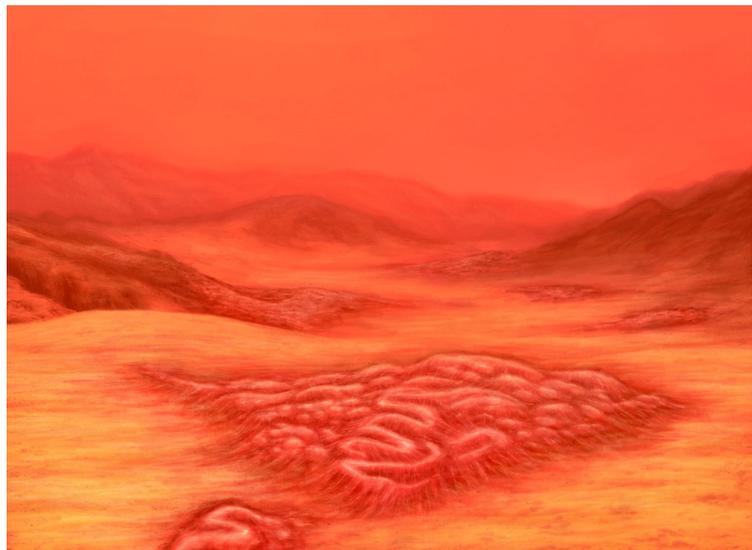


Figure 7. Illustration for the event “A Mass of Flesh.”

to set an overall mood of horror.

The illustration for the event “A Mass of Flesh” depicts a landscape as it is being taken over by the Viscera (see figure 7).

Around the center is a large growth of intestines and even larger patches of flesh are seen in the distance. These misplaced organs may confuse the mind with

category jamming while the overall atmosphere of the illustration is meant to depict a strange, otherworldly setting that can allow a mood of horror to grow. In the illustration for the event “An Ambush,” a dog-like creature has found the character (see figure 8). This beast stares with multiple beady eyes and drools from an excessive mouth. It has an overall form that makes it



Figure 8. Illustration for the event “An Ambush.”



Figure 9. Illustration for the event “A Chance Encounter.”

recognizable as some sort of animal, but it is so disfigured and abnormal that it may bring unease and mental confusion. In the illustration for “A Chance Encounter,” a cloaked humanoid figure is shown (see figure 9). There are clearly human features on this being’s face, but the abnormal attributes overpower them. This looks like

a recognizable human in some ways, but the cognitive mismatch brought about by the bubbly, disgusting flesh and strange black eyes tell the viewer that there is something wrong. Finally, the illustration for the event “Remains of Another,” a humanoid body is depicted entirely covered by a fleshy material, so much so that it is embedded into the wall (see figure 10). The ideas of metamorphosis in body horror are brought about here, exploiting cognitive mismatch as the situation itself shows a body that is undergoing such a change, with both normal and abnormal features. Forms that were previously part of the original body are now being changed into something new, as the mouth has given way to a long tube and the torso is beginning to split into tentacle-like protrusions. Even with these transformations happening, viewers are meant to still recognize the humanoid features in order to understand that what may have once looked like us is now being turned into something else. This was mainly done in the facial area, as the sunken eyes and nasal opening are relatively humanoid.

Each of the event illustrations is a digital painting, but the process in which these paintings were created varies. Many of the illustration processes used were experimental as different ways of

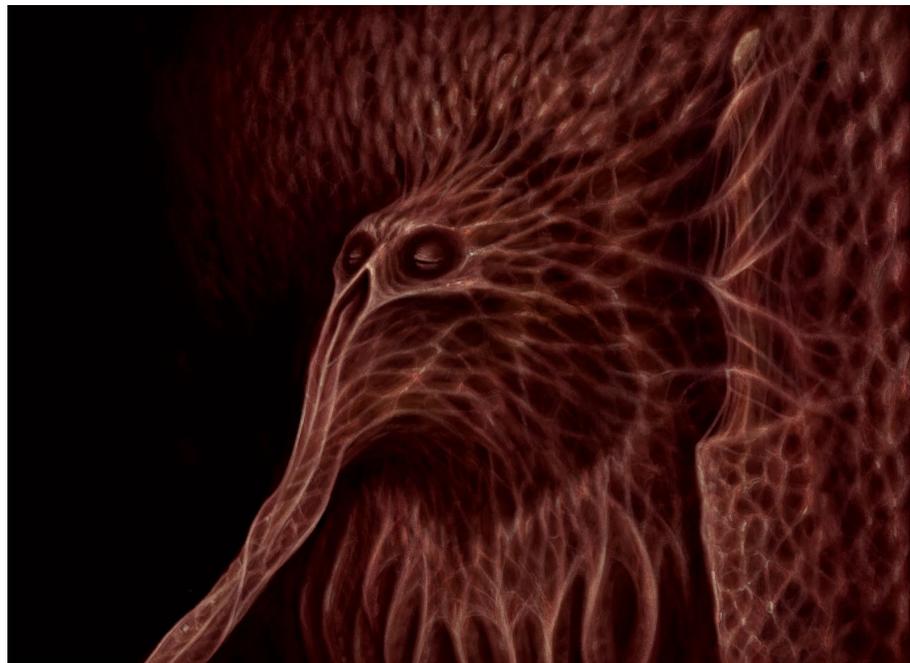


Figure 10. Illustration for the event “Remains of Another.”



Figure 11. The process of creating the illustration for the event “A Wanderer.”

process is like sculpting on a two-dimensional plane in a way, as it begins with loose, basic forms emerging from the darkness and slowly evolves to take on more detail as the painting is completed.

putting together a final piece were examined. While some started as pencil drawings that were brought onto a digital canvas, others began with a render of a 3D model (see figure 11). The process of starting with a 3D model, in particular, was used in multiple illustrations. The process begins with a low polygon model in ZBrush that sets the forms of the piece’s focal point, such as the shape of a shrine or a large, imposing creature. Once the ZBrush models are satisfactory, they are brought into Maya, where a render is created using light simulation that mimics the sun and sky. The render is then brought into a digital illustration program, in this case, Procreate and Photoshop, where this base is painted over and eventually turned into a full digital painting.

Multiple illustrations were also created by starting with only a black digital canvas. This

Alongside the event card illustrations, each item card has an illustration that depicts that item. The images for the items “Mysterious Statue,” “Carved Amulet,” and “Holy Blade” (see figure 12) have similar forms to the statues that are depicted in the



Figure 12. Items showing similar forms of an unknown being.

events “A Lone Shrine” and “An Infected Church” (see figure 13). All of these show imagery of the First Messengers. These common visual elements in the world aim to help the players contemplate what this figure could be and what its importance is to the game world. By using the repeated imagery of these figures and their glowing orbs, the goal is to convince the players that



Figure 13. Illustrations for the events “An Infected Church” and “A Lone Shrine” show similar sculptures with glowing orbs in their possession.

what they are seeing is important. Whether the players choose to believe that these beings are gods is up to them. The game's illustrations are all meant to help give clues about the narrative while also bringing unease to the players.

Beyond conceptualizing the game, writing the events, and creating the illustrations, playtesting was another important part of the process. In place of the printed, illustrated cards, which were not yet complete, playtests used cut pieces of printer paper to make up every part of the game. I sometimes played along with three other participants, and sometimes observed a full group of four as they read through the rules and played through the entire game. This gave me the opportunity to make sure that the game worked as I intended and made sense to the players. Playtesting brought up balance concerns, such as players not losing as much sanity as intended or sanity check levels being too low, so no players ever met the requirement. With playtests came iterations of the game. Gameplay elements continually evolved as the development of the game continued. For example, initially, the idea was that characters would all move together and share every turn during the exploration phase of the game. In this iteration, events were either group or individual events, where one character might be singled out or the entire group might have a say in what choices are made. But this caused systematic problems in the narrative and gameplay. In the narrative, what was to stop the other characters from interfering with a strange action that an individual took? When events involved all characters at once, holes arose in the narrative. In the final iteration of the game, players move independently of one another and events are exclusive to the individual. Not only did this fix some of the problems with how the gameplay systems interacted with the narrative, but it also allowed for and inspired other mechanics that help

support a narrative based on player choice, loneliness, and fear, such as the game board growing in more directions and paths as different characters explored different routes.

Fabricating both the game pieces and the cards was the final step in the process. A Universal Laser Systems (ULS) laser engraving machine was used to create the game pieces. The game tiles and certain tokens were made from wood that was both engraved and cut using the laser machine. The game cards also utilized this machine. They were first printed front and back on large sheets of paper then brought into the laser system, where the laser could be directed to cut each rectangle out from the sheet, resulting in individual cards. The cards were then laminated to give them a sturdier feel and to protect the images and text on the cards. Using wood for all of the game pieces helped to create a unified feel for the game. Even the 3D printed tokens were mounted onto a wooden base to keep them fixed and to help keep the overall look of the game pieces consistent.

Future

Creating this game has been a learning process in many ways. Through the illustrations, I explored new ways of working and grew more comfortable creating full illustrations of scenery and landscapes. Through the game design, I learned how to put together a concept of a tabletop game and see it through by playtesting and making iterative game versions. There is definitely a lot of room for this game to grow in the future. I had to make sure the scope of this prototype was doable given the amount of time I had to put it together, so certain ideas were cut out for the sake of time. I would like to continue to expand the game in many ways. I would like to add even more events and moments, as right now there are 15 events and 20 moments. I also think that I could dive back into some events and give them even more choices and consequences for the players and expand the range of items that can be found. The biggest addition I would like to add is more stories and monsters for the scenario phase. Currently, there is only one scenario that can happen and therefore only one monster. Certain events lead to the placement of specific clue tokens needed to trigger the scenario, so I would like to eventually add different clue tokens so that there is a chance of triggering multiple scenarios with different monsters and different gameplay rules. Multiple factions exist within this world that have come to worship the viscera in different ways and I was only able to really focus on one of them for this prototype. I'd like to add more information, events, moments, and clues about these other factions and eventually create scenarios for each of them, as the scenarios and the monsters relate directly to the factions. As a tabletop game, once more features are added and fleshed out, looking into actually producing and selling the game would be ideal. This would involve finding manufacturers who

could cut and print the cards and game pieces for mass production and finding the funding to do so via a crowdfunding source such as Kickstarter. There is a lot more I can do with this game and I'd like to see it continue to grow beyond the prototype that it is now.

While creating this game, I looked into the horror genre as a whole and what makes a monster scary, particularly the ideas of category jamming and cognitive mismatch. I looked closer at the subgenres of body horror and cosmic horror. I contemplated what makes these subgenres so effective to me and why I am drawn to them with the horrific visuals of body horror and the unsettling concepts of cosmic horror. I created a story and world that reflects on many aspects of these subgenres. I was faced with the challenge to figure out how to bring a horrific mood and feelings of unease to the players in a tabletop format. Through the detailed illustrations and written text, I feel like I have accomplished that. Of course, there is still a lot of room to grow the game and deepen it further, but this prototype aims to deliver a unique horror role-playing experience that brings people into the world and leaves them hoping to learn more.

Bibliography

Asma, Stephen T. "The Biological and Psychological Basis of Horror." *Skeptic Magazine*, 2015, pp. 22–23.

Asma, Stephen T. "Monsters on the Brain: An Evolutionary Epistemology of Horror." *Social Research*, 2014.

Bloodborne. Playstation 4, FromSoftware, 2015.

Carpenter, John, director. *The Thing*. Universal Pictures, 1982.

Carroll, Noel. "The Nature of Horror." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 46, no. 1, 1987, pp. 51-59.

Carroll, Noel. *The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart*. Routledge, 1990.

Cronenberg, David, director. *The Fly*. Twentieth Century Fox, 1986.

Cruz, Ronald Allan Lopez. "Mutations and Metamorphoses: Body Horror Is Biological Horror." *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, Dec. 2012, pp. 161-168.

Dead Space. Xbox 360, Electronic Arts, 2008.

Dead Space 2. Xbox 360, Electronic Arts, 2011.

Dead Space 3. Xbox 360, Electronic Arts, 2013.

Itō Junji. *Uzumaki*. VIZ Media, 2013.

Ralickas, Vivian. “‘Cosmic Horror’ and the Question of the Sublime in Lovecraft.” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 2007.

Sauchelli, Andrea. “Horror and Mood.” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Jan. 2014, pp. 39–50.

Scott, Ridley, director. *Alien*. Twentieth Century Fox, 1979.