I Love My Undead Family: Prosthetic Limbs and Homecoming in *Resident Evil 7: Biohazard*

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INTRODUCTION

Resident Evil 7: Biohazard (2017) was considered by fans to be a homecoming for the series, returning to its survival horror roots, and to the domestic space of the home. It was also the first entry in the series to adopt a first-person perspective, making Ethan (the player-character)'s hands the central visual element mediating our action on screen. Early on, the player-character has their arm chopped off, is incapacitated by a man enthusing "Welcome to the family, son!" and awakens at a family dinner, their arm reattached with a regenerative fungus that has also possessed the Baker family. This cutscene is the player's introduction to the game's home, their new limb, and their new family. I argue the homecoming scene is significant because it incapacitates us, and redefines future action in the game as an extension of our now undead limb. In this way, burial and resurrection of the player through their undead limb reveals how gameplay incorporates us into a process of *becoming undead*. I conduct a textual analysis of *RE7*, focusing on the way the game connects the home, the undead limb, and the family, and revealing the implications of the game's demand that the player adopt both the prosthetic limb and prosthetic home of the game system.

In *RE7*'s opening sections, my analysis demonstrates, homecoming, live burial, and resurrection are all part of the same process of preparing us for game*play*. Our homecoming is the moment of our resurrection, and this is the point at which we can explore the home, familiarise ourselves with our new family, and overcome the game's obstacles through the use of undead limbs. Participation in *RE7*'s undead play ultimately alerts players to the *unheimlich* embodiment of videogames, where we inhabit bodies not entirely our own, to enact a will that seems to come from somewhere else. Videogame embodiment is generally understood as an ambivalent phenomenon, as players are provided a cybernetic extension into the game-world through which they can act (Wilde 2018; Keogh 2018; Whistance-Smith 2022), while concurrently losing something of themselves in the process (Bown 2017; Galloway 2006; Giddings and Kennedy 2008; Mukherjee 2015). In play we are always bringing the outside in, and vice versa. Survival horror appears a genre particularly primed for such ambivalent encounters with embodiment: Bernard Perron (2009) argues it is an 'extended body genre' for the intensive embodied sympathy between player and virtual bodies, while Tanya Krzywinska (2002) has argued that players' incapacitation by the system – or their 'live burial' – is a seductive and quintessentially Gothic pleasure essential to survival horror games.

Posthuman accounts of videogame embodiment (Keogh 2018) welcome this ambivalence, insisting the compromised and extended agencies of gameplay threaten the notion of the player as an autonomous subject. In *RE7,* the undead limb becomes the locus of our action, an expressive actor on screen, and because of its sluggish feel and putrefied appearance, it obtrudes into play, drawing player attention to their now undead flesh. The sluggish feel of the undead limb, and the iconography of homecoming, work in tandem to make the player reflexively aware of their becoming undead in the game assemblage. Tom van Nuenen (2016) writes that games procedurally create ideal subjects out of players, and May and McKissack argue (2020) that the videogame home is a site that has players enact specific forms of 'everyday life', which we see happening in *RE7*. Due to scant resources in the game and the player-character's relative physical weakness, it is often more advantageous to run and hide from threats rather than to confront them directly. Thus as well as becoming familiar with their putrefied limbs at the sensorimotor level, players of *RE7* must learn to walk quietly indoors, close doors behind them, hide in their room when other family members are about, and internally map the space of the home as though it was their own. In other words: players are simultaneously trained to become an ideal son to the Baker family, and an undead extension of the game system. Through drawing attention to the undead limb and grotesque adoptive family, the *unheimlich* pleasure of horror, and videogame embodiment generally is revealed.

BIO
Max Coombes is a PhD candidate at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. His work explores videogame embodiment and the uncanny temporality of videogame systems.

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