An Elaboration Likelihood Model Analysis of Persuasion in Interactive Horror Games: A Literature Review

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Abstract

This literature review looks at how video games are more complicated than what are often discussed in terms of entertainment with a focus on interactive horror media. Their interactive structure uses high elaboration and low elaboration processing depending on the player's different choices and engagement with the content. The Elaboration Likelihood Model is used to explore how games can show different types of persuasion through different routes such as the central route which relies on story, the dialogue, and the decisions the player makes, and the peripheral route which is riven by the visuals, audio, and atmosphere. The goal is to emphasize how game elements can influence the player and their decision-making process more than just surface level entertainment. By analyzing the different environmental cues, narration, and player choice, the study highlights how interactive games can further encourage quick emotion-based responses, or a deeper though out cognitive elaboration. This work states that games can serve as a persuasion tool and gives groundwork for future research on persuasion theories in game design and storytelling that allows interaction.

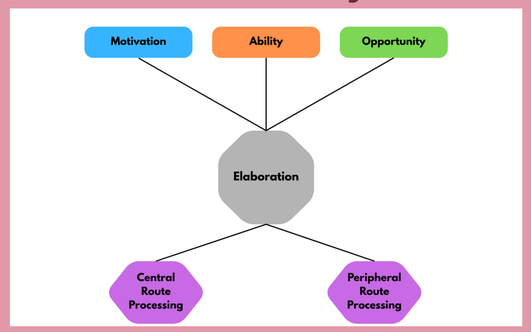
Introduction

Horror video games are an interactive genre of media in which a person's experience is shaped by intensifying cognitive engagement because players must constantly evaluate threats, interpret narrative cues, and decide how to respond. Current research on horror games usually focuses on the common fear responses from jump scares, since they lead to sudden spikes in arousal. But, there has been less attention on how commercial horror video games may work on the user persuasively through not just the common jump scare design, but also the complex narrative and other sensory designs. Horror games are perfectly positioned to be able to engage the player by forcing them to make decisions, creating an eerie atmosphere, storytelling, and immersive cues, all potentially relating to the central and peripheral processing routes at the same time.

Research Questions

1. **How does horror media utilize elements of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) to persuade and engage audiences?**
2. **To what extent do horror narratives encourage deeper cognitive engagement rather than simple emotional reactions?**
3. **How can gameplay events in horror video games be systematically coded to identify central and peripheral persuasion cues using the Elaboration Likelihood Model?**

ELM Theory

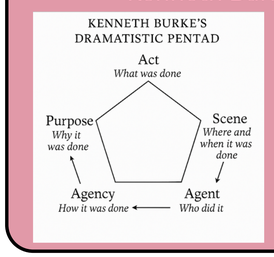


The ELM or Elaboration Likelihood Model states that persuasion is operated through the central route, which involves thoughtful processing, and the peripheral route, which lies on different cues and heuristics. The Elaboration Likelihood Model has been applied to many different types of media such as advertising, political communication, and movie media, but it is still limited in its application to interactive video games. Horror games are a perfect type of media to use for research because of its guaranteed emotional tension, arousal, and game design.

Methods

This study follows a qualitative content analysis using the Elaboration Likelihood Model approach. The coding framework used by Gabrielle Lamura will be analyzed to discover how she finds the persuasive elements within a horror game that affect our peripheral and central processing.

1. Qualitative Content Analysis
   - Analyze horror media by observing narrative events and gameplay moments to discover patterns related to persuasion and moral decision making.
2. Analysis of Gameplay Footage
   - The researcher analyzed commentary-free playthroughs of several horror video games to observe narrative elements without external interpretation influencing the analysis.
3. Coding Using a Theoretical Framework
   - Narrative events were coded according to themes from Kenneth Burke's Dramatic Pentad



Serves as an analytical tool for understanding how game designers stage ethical conflicts and foster emotional engagement in horror games.

Coding Using a Theoretical Framework

Gameplay segments were systematically analyzed and coded for features that require cognitive engagement, such as lore, narrative dialogue, and player decision-making, which represent central route processing because they encourage players to interpret information and engage with the game's story and ethical choices. In contrast, peripheral route cues were coded through atmospheric elements such as sound design, lighting, environmental visuals, and jumpscares. These primarily influence players through emotional and sensory responses. The framework also discovers existential horror themes, which can engage both cognitive reflection and emotional tension by prompting players to question ideas related to identity, consciousness, or existence. To maintain consistency and objectivity, coders used standardized numerical codes and brief descriptions to document observable gameplay events. This theoretical coding approach allows the study to systematically identify patterns in how horror games combine narrative depth, sensory design, and player interaction to shape cognitive engagement and emotional responses within immersive interactive environments. With enough coder reliability testing the framework can ensure that gameplay events are categorized consistently and objectively.

Discussion and Implication

While jump scares are commonly associated with horror media, the coding framework highlights that many horror games rely heavily on narrative elements, lore, and player decision-making, which require deeper cognitive engagement from players. These central-route elements encourage players to interpret story details, evaluate character motivations, and consider the consequences of their actions within the game world. At the same time, atmospheric features such as sound design, environmental visuals, lighting, and sudden threats create emotional tension through peripheral cues that shape player reactions without requiring extensive cognitive processing.

The coding framework developed in this study provides a systematic method for analyzing persuasive elements in interactive media. By categorizing gameplay features into central and peripheral cues, researchers can more clearly examine how game design influences player engagement and interpretation. This framework also expands the application of the Elaboration Likelihood Model to video game research, an area that remains relatively understudied compared to traditional media such as advertising or film.

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