

Arma 3: Desolation: Transforming a Military Tactical Shooter into a Survival Horror Game.

Arma 3 (2013) was originally an open-world military tactical shooter, featuring a wide variety of authentic military vehicles and weapons, in addition to an emphasis on content creation. Following in its predecessor footsteps (*Arma 2* (2009)), the *Arma 3* community has created a plethora of single-player and multi-player modifications. These modifications, or ‘mods’ “allow the creation of entirely new texts” (Bryce and Rutter, 2002, pg. 18). Mod developers have the ability to implement a variety of features around the base engine. This includes textures, altered physics and new mechanics. In this essay I shall be discussing how, through the community created mod *Desolation*, the genre of *Arma 3* transformed into a Survival Horror. Although *Arma 3: Desolation* (2016) may be considered a ‘Survival Horror’, it also belongs to the genres of ‘Western’ and ‘Role Playing Game (RPG)’. I shall be analysing the variety of genre codes and conventions that are implicit within the *Arma 3: Desolation* (2016) mod.

Horror & Survival Horror:

The ‘Horror’ genre is personified through the enemy zombies that roam the desolate cities of *Arma 3: Desolation*. The zombies present within the mod are a generic horror trope, used to instil terror within the player. They mostly spawn inside cities and villages, and are only triggered by a player entering the vicinity. Used as a deterrent, the zombies swarm the player depending on the spatial distance, as well as the level of noise in the surrounding area. The player is able to kill the zombies with a bullet through the head, a typical zombie convention.

The 'monster' archetype present within the 'Horror' genre relies on striking fear within the audience. Specifically, zombies represent the loss of agency as a human; you are unable to control yourself, becoming a mindless entity. Zombies highlight the distinct difference between the living and the dead. As supported by Wells, zombies are "literally embodying states of 'otherness' which are intrinsically related to humanity but are ultimately a parallel and threatening expression of it" (Wells, 2000, p.10). In addition, the main theme of death is apparent within the zombie's archetype; if the player is hit by a zombie, they are infected. Once infected, the player needs to search for antibiotics. If they are unsuccessful they will die, emphasising the fear of death ever-present in the 'Horror' genre.

The 'Horror' genre is not only apparent within the symbolism used, the audio cues also create a level of anxiety for the player. As the player ventures through levels, collects resources, travels the map and protects themselves from the player-bandits of the server, incidental music is played at random intervals. The use of an unnerving soundtrack, typical of the Horror genre, encourages a heightened sense of urgency as a player. Conventionally, the introduction of music within a game and or film warns the player/watcher that combat shall ensue. Using the players previous experience, as supported by Kromand "most players will be familiar with the culturally implied meaning of such a crescendo (a *leitmotif* for shocks), and thus they will be prepared for encounters, which may or may not take place." (Kromand, 2008, p.17). This leads to an increase in tension for the player, distinct of the 'Horror' genre's code and conventions.

The final example of thematic horror within *Arma 3: Desolation* is the use of Architectural Uncanny. This is defined by Ewans as "the role of architecture in staging the sensation [of the

uncanny] and in acting as an instrument for its narrative and spatial manifestations” (Ewans, 2009, p.2). This connotes that the player’s surroundings are a slice of the norm, what the player would be able to see in a generic city. However, there are elements of the obscure and the strange, in this case the zombies that wander the land. In addition, the sprawling maps of *Arma 3: Desolation* are a further indication of the Horror genre; the emptiness of the cities and the lack of human life indicate the player’s isolation from the ‘real’ world. Within a 225km² map, the only lifeforms players will come across are the occasional animal, or another player. Depending on the server size, the player may not encounter life for a long duration of game time. The emphasis of isolation and the uncanny demonstrates the ‘Horror’ genre, as it creates the fear of being the only human left in a large inhabitable world.

The ‘Survival Horror’ genre was coined by Capcom’s *Resident Evil* (1996) in 1996, due to the infamous introduction title “Welcome to the world of survival horror”. *Arma 3: Desolation* mod creator implemented a variety of generic survival horror mechanics, most importantly the psychological monitoring of your avatar. Summers defines the genre as giving “the player control of a character and challenges him to navigate an environment infested with demonic creatures (the genre borrows many tropes and clichés from the horror film).” (Summers, 2011, p.6). The player is challenged to navigate the landscape searching for weaponry, whilst managing the slew of vital signs, including blood, hunger, thirst, infection and body temperature. The management of the player’s vital signs is intrinsically linked to resource management, a characteristic of the ‘Survival Horror’ genre. The player would need to search for food, water, and medical supplies whilst having enough ammunition to kill zombies or players. In addition, the player has to be aware of their surroundings, as if they stay in the vicinity of zombies, the player’s hunger and thirst will increase quicker than usual. Moreover,

the player may encounter moral choices due to the resource management of the genre, as exemplified by the blood bag. To regain blood, which may have been lost through firefights or zombie combat, the player has to take blood from a living or recently deceased player. This, however, develops a moral dilemma for the player as to whether or not they should kill unarmed players for their own advantage. Instead, the player could eat food over a longer period of time and their blood levels will increase, but this method lacks the instantaneous nature of consuming a blood bag. The variety of factors the player needs to monitor validates the argument of the 'Survival Horror' genre employed by *Arma 3: Desolation*.

A distinctive feature within *Arma 3: Desolation* is the 24-hour day and night cycle. More importantly, the night cycle is vital in the 'Survival Horror' genre, as it produces the emotion of terror and the unexpected. Once night fall hits, the player is unable to see outside their immediate periphery (unless one has the flashlight item, but even this aid is limiting as it only illuminates in the direction the player is facing). If the player is lucky, they may be able to acquire Night Vision Goggles, which enables player's vision in the dark. If the player does not carry any peripherals, "without daylight, certainty and clear vision, there is no safe moment. Terror expands on a longer duration than horror does." (Perron, 2004, p.133). The player experiences a notion of terror, unable to see what is in front of them, only able to use their aural cues to sense danger. The terror notion is introduced by the survival element of the genre. Throughout the darkness, the player is terrified of death, unsure whether they will be hunted and killed by a player or swarmed by zombies; the dark unknown is frightening for the player.

The most attractive gameplay experience for players within *Arma 3: Desolation* is the encounters with fellow survivors. Horror films can be placed into distinct categories of viewership. This can also be applied to *Arma 3: Desolation*, as highlighted by Prohászková, “*thrill watching* – the viewer is interested in the emotion of tension and excitement evoked by a horror film. Typical features are high level of empathy and longing for adventure.” (Prohászková, 2012, p.141). Players can be defined as thrill seekers, as they enjoy the moments of tension and chaos through player-versus-player encounters. The need to preserve their own life, even if killing someone is a consequence, personifies the thrill watching category. The high stakes of losing everything they have worked so hard to achieve are ever-present (thanks to the permanent death mechanic implemented within the mod), and this may make the players cautious and uneasy at all times. The player begins to empathise with their characters, due to the dangerous scenarios they have encountered. Overall, *Arma 3: Desolation* consists of multiple codes and conventions that are apparent within the ‘Survival Horror’ genre, on both a thematic and mechanical level.

Western:

Although *Arma 3: Desolation* predominately consists of ‘Survival Horror’, there are additional genres that can be discussed, such as the filmic ‘Western’. Each playable map is located in a fictional Eastern European setting, consisting of small villages and cities located between large stretches of untamed land. On the surface, it is very different to the vast American frontier wastelands found in a majority of Westerns. Apart from the aesthetic alteration, however, the two settings are quite similar. Lenihan describes the setting of Western films as “stretches of untamed nature that separated settlements from each other and from the Civilized East.

The open spaces were fraught with peril, usually in the form of barbaric redskins and lawless whites.” (Lenihan, 1980, p.12). Equivalent in *Arma 3: Desolation*, the ‘untamed nature’ are the vast stretches of fields, mountains and forests that the player has to travel through, whilst surviving and monitoring their different vital signs. In contrast to the ‘barbaric redskins and lawless whites’, the ‘perils’ the player must face instead are the monstrous zombie and human-player threat.

Furthermore, additional similarities can be found in the player-character archetype. Not all Westerns employ the superhero model; some introduce the concept of characters having “flawed abilities and attitudes presumably shared by the audience” (Cawelti, 2014, p.40). This is done purposefully so the audience can empathise with the character’s struggle. Likewise in *Arma 3: Desolation*, you are a character with no name, building your story through your adventures. At the start of your adventures you are a flawed character with a lack of weaponry and resources. Through collecting weapons, equipment and resources, the character becomes stronger and more identifiable with the player. Additionally, Western protagonists adhere to a coherent moral code, forged through their experiences and beliefs. As in a Western, players in the mod go through their own moral dilemmas, accomplished through micronarratives. Within a Western narrative, the individual focuses on “overcoming obstacles and dangers and accomplishing some important and moral mission.” (Cawelti, 2014, p.39). In the same way, *Arma 3: Desolation* presents its players with moral predicaments, such as the previously discussed blood bag issue. Due to the emergent narrative that players can construct, there is always a sense of moral ambiguity. To summarise, *Arma 3: Desolation* contains a variety of Western film tropes that epitomise the setting and characters of the genre.

RPG (Role-Playing-Game):

The final genre that is implicit within *Arma 3: Desolation* is 'RPG'. Within Hitchens and Drachen article on RPGs, they categorise the genre in 6 distinct elements, consisting of: Game World, Participants, Characters, Game Master, Interaction, and Narrative. *Arma 3: Desolation* uses 3 distinct elements within its gameplay mechanics; Game World, Game Master and Interaction. As denoted by Hitches and Drachen, 'Game Worlds' offer players freedom "to choose how to explore the game world, in terms of the path through the world they take, and may revisit areas previously explored." (Hitches and Drachen, 2008, p.16). As previously mentioned, the map is large in size, taking an hour to travel from one side to the other. In addition, multiple map locations are available depending on the server administrator's choice. This also corresponds to the notion of a 'Game Master', who operates as the balance between players and the game; their roles are to "typically adjudicate on the rules of the game" (Hitches and Drachen p.16). In this case, the rules of the *Desolation* mod operate as the 'Game Master', but the server admin is allowed to adjust certain rules. For example, changing the varying loot spawns across the map, along with explicit rules such as 1st person-only or roleplay servers. The third component featured in *Arma 3: Desolation*, of Hitchens and Drachen RPG formula, is 'Interaction'. Players are "able to interact with the environment and other characters, thus enhancing the user experience" (Panzoli et al., 2010, p.3). Specifically, players are able to initiate in combat, communicate with players verbally or through console chat, create bases, and interact with objects in the world. The crafting system is the best example to demonstrate the 'RPG' genre, as players have to interact with the game world in several ways. There is a logical crafting system; if the player needs to build a base, they will

have to find a blueprint within the world. Once the blueprint is found, the player needs to collect a variety of resources, from chopping down trees to acquire wood, gathering of scrap metal and discovering adhesives. The ability to have a wide range of interactive options through your character encapsulates the defining genre features of an RPG.

To conclude, *Arma 3* has changed from a tactical military shooter into predominantly a 'Survival Horror' game, with the inclusion of other genres such as 'Western', and 'RPG'. The introduction of the monstrous zombie archetype, and the psychological monitoring of your avatar, emphasises the conventions of the 'Survival Horror' genre. The 'Western' filmic genre is highlighted, through the use of a desolate setting and morally-driven character narratives. Lastly, the 'RPG' genre is demonstrated through large map sizes, multiple game masters and varying environmental interactions. Thanks to the enthusiastic and dedicated modding community, the genre of *Arma 3* can potentially evolve outside the genres discussed today.

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