

A Pretty Terrifying Project: Examining Feminist Theme Co-Occurrences Across Horror Video Games

Naila Butt

Truly Johnson

Michael Nieves

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Project Narrative

The horror video game genre, a male-dominated industry, has historically centered masculine perspectives in both production and representation. Women and LGBTQ+ people remain underrepresented as developers and designers, and game content frequently relies on harmful tropes such as “damsel in distress”, hyper-sexualization, and female monstrosity. Horror scholarship has been prevalent in film and literary studies; horror video games remain underexplored as cultural artifacts worthy of feminist critique.

This project builds on an earlier phase of work in which keywords were web-scraped from [Wikipedia's Category: Horror video games](#) tree using Python and BeautifulSoup to identify recurring feminist themes across the genre. That constructed dataset, [horror_games_feminist_themes](#), serves as the foundation for the *A Pretty Terrifying Project*, which refines and transforms the data into a public-facing website featuring interactive visualizations and close reads that make emergent patterns visible and analyzable.

A Pretty Terrifying Project addresses two interconnected gaps in media studies. First, there is a lack of datasets that document horror video games. Second, existing feminist frameworks, such as Barbara Creed's theory of the Monstrous-Feminine, offer powerful concepts for analyzing film and texts and should also be applied to video games in the horror genre. This project asks what becomes visible and analyzable when those frameworks are applied at scale.

The interactive visualizations developed here are designed to bridge academic analysis and broader public engagement, making findings accessible to educators, students, researchers, and gaming communities alike. The methodology and artifacts produced are intended as reusable resources for ongoing work in feminist game studies.

Theoretical Frameworks

Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993) served as the primary theoretical approach to this project. Creed identifies a set of archetypes that the horror genre defines as the female subject. These archetypes are the Archaic Mother, the Monstrous Womb, the Witch, the Vampire, the Possessed Body, the Femme Castratrice, and the Castrating Mother. These tend to be viewed as negative representations of women, but also cultural assumptions about fear, femininity, reproduction, and sexuality. It defines what power is given and what power is controlled/manipulated. The original proposal for this project was to apply these concepts to further research.

Audience

A Pretty Terrifying Project is primarily for scholars and students working in adjacent fields, including media studies, game studies, and feminist studies, who are looking for an entry point into the feminist landscape of horror gaming. For researchers, the dataset and visualizations offer a bird's-eye view of how feminist themes cluster and co-occur across the genre, surfacing patterns that might otherwise require extensive close reading of individual texts. Video games are a complex medium to analyze, combining narrative, mechanics, visual design, and interactivity in ways that make examining them

particularly challenging. For students newer to the field, the tool provides a sense of the terrain: which games engage which themes, where the density is, and where the gaps are, making it easier to identify texts worth examining more closely.

Beyond the academy, the project welcomes horror enthusiasts and members of the gaming community who are curious about the cultural dimensions of the games they play. The interactive visualizations are designed to be accessible to non-specialist audiences, inviting anyone interested in horror to look beneath the surface of the genre and engage with the feminist themes long embedded in it. Ultimately, we hope this project shifts how people encounter horror video games, not just as entertainment, but as cultural texts with something to say.

Project Activities

The project used interdisciplinary methods for analysis. The quantitative approach was based on the collection of games and was produced through the dataset. Technical development included web development and the production of interactive visualizations. The qualitative aspect consisted of four close readings that explored feminist themes in each game.

Current feminist game studies were developed based on early stereotyping and underrepresentation within play and design. This project challenges those traditions by testing whether the identified patterns can be applied at scale. The original dataset contributes to this research through a qualitative approach, while the close readings

demonstrate how quantitative findings can be explored for critical analysis during project development.

The project development was divided into three main phases, with continual web development also occurring throughout. The first phase consisted of curating the original dataset, a selection of approximately 95 horror video games released from 1993 to 2024 based on Wikipedia information. The dataset consists of over 20 variables scraped from web pages and manually reviewed/coded for accuracy. Variables for the feminist themes were coded as TRUE/FALSE values tied to the presence of each theme and manually reviewed by team members for accuracy. This process included analyzing gameplay footage, published Wikipedia pages and basic general player ratings. During the manual review, team members also added additional columns to the dataset, including which of Creed's archetypes fit each game, and whether a female antagonist was present.

The second phase of the project was the deployment of the website and development of the interactive visualizations. Four visualizations were produced: a theme prevalence bar chart, a network graph, a co-occurrence heat map, and a data filter visualization. Each visualization was designed to engage with the dataset through different experiences and perspectives. Each was created as a standalone HTML file for later web deployment on the project website.

The third phase was a qualitative close-reading analysis of several games in the dataset. Four games were selected as case studies: Doki Doki Literature Club, Outlast 2, Bloodborne, and Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice. These games were chosen based on team members' familiarity with each game and the amount of material to analyze within them. Additionally, four of these games cover various feminist themes of the dataset, each offering unique perspectives.

Once each element was completed, they were all integrated into the main site, the design and continued development of which occurred in parallel to the creation of the dataset, visualizations, and close readings. Finally, after finishing the site, the project was presented to an audience at the GC Digital Showcase.

Accomplishments

This project resulted in:

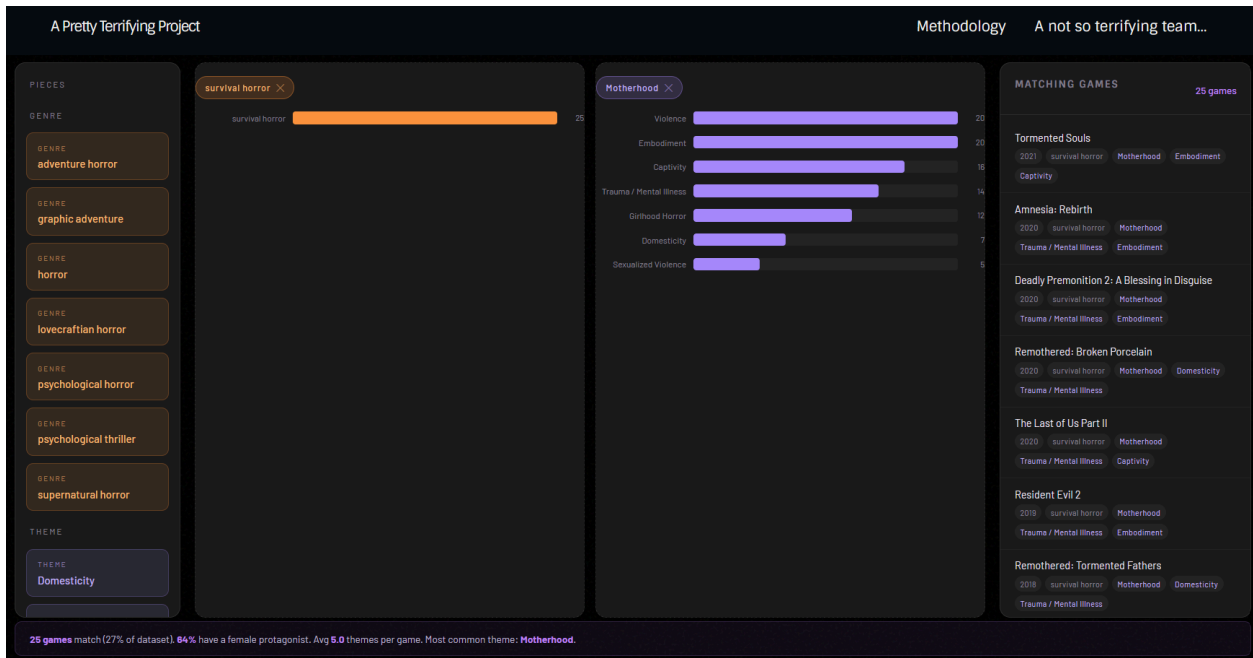
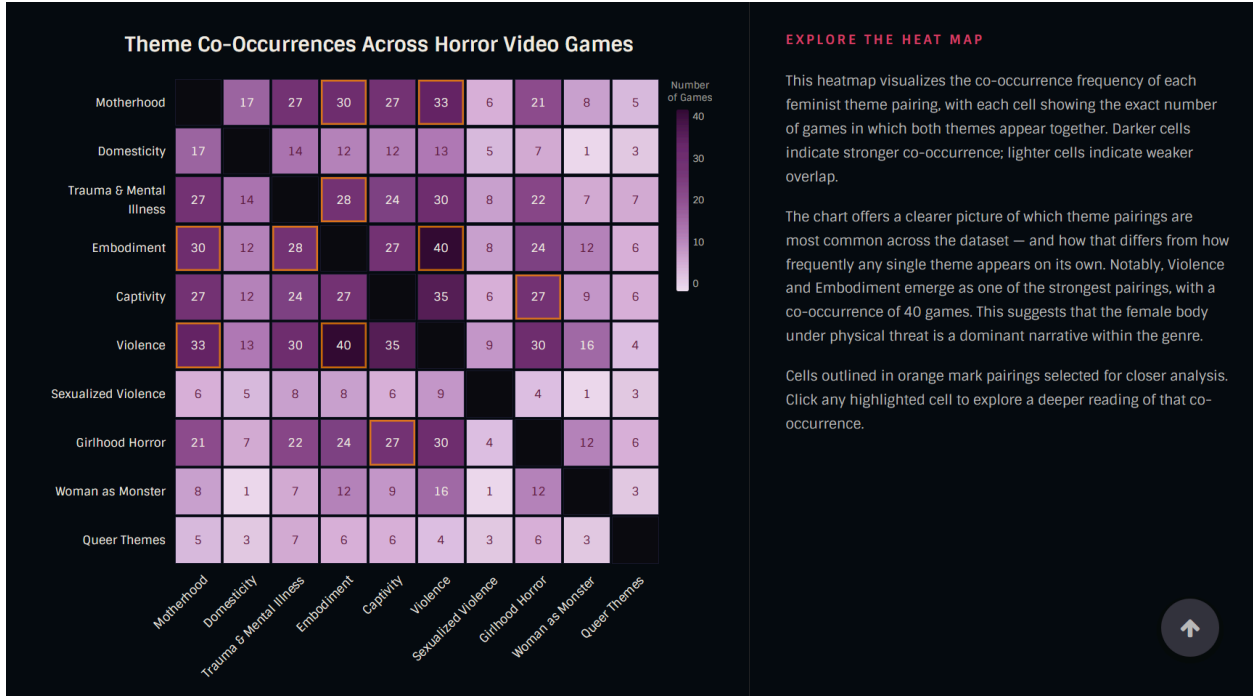
1. A revised version of the horror game dataset we started with
2. various analytical products created using the dataset, including visualizations and close readings
3. a public website that presents this analytical work in an engaging, interactive way.

All of these outputs contribute further to feminist horror game studies. The addition of more attributes and even a few more games to the dataset opens up more avenues for exploration for anyone using the data. The visualizations and close readings led us to a number of findings (described in more detail in the findings section below) on the topic, which again can promote further scholarly thinking in this area. Finally, the website itself

goes a long way in making this relatively under-researched intersection between horror, feminism, and game studies both visible and accessible to a wider audience. The main page, with its interactive charts and concise explanation of the project, is easy to just jump into even for those without much context on any of these three areas. Side pages like the close readings and the methodology tab are not pushed at the user immediately because that would make the site overwhelming and harder to engage with. But they are there for those who want to further delve into our theoretical and methodological framework. This structure makes our site a useful tool for students new to these topics and more experienced researchers alike.

Below are a few screenshots of the final website:





Findings

Theme Prevalence

Violence is the most frequent feminist theme throughout the dataset, appearing in 63 games, followed by embodiment with 54 games. The five themes of motherhood, captivity, girlhood horror, and trauma/mental illness appear between 44-47 games. The remaining themes of domesticity, woman as monster, queer themes, and sexual violence account for 10-220 games. The distribution of these themes indicates a dominant recurring pattern across horror video games. Violence and embodiment are presented as a nearly universal theme within the genre.

Co-occurring Themes

The strongest thematic pairing is violence and embodiment, containing 40 games within the dataset. Violence and captivity contained 35 games, and the last major pairing of embodiment and motherhood contained 31 games. The pairing of these themes highlights how the genre most commonly designs the idea of feminist horror. It is designed heavily around the theme of physical threat, bodily experiences, or maternal contexts. Queer themes consistently appear the lowest. This could be a result of how trends of queer identity have shifted over the last few decades.

Close Reading Insights

Within the close readings, we were able to derive further insights by using the themes from the dataset as a guide to dig deeper. We were also able to apply some of our theoretical framework from Barbara Creed's book and other related readings. For

example, examining the 2015 game *Bloodborne* showed many of Creed's archetypes in action, but also pushes back against whether the concept of motherhood is inherently a site for horror, as is the case for many of Creed's mother archetypes, by exploring the horror in failures of motherhood and parenting, but also presenting motherhood as something that can hold hope and be reclaimed. Similarly, a close reading of *Doki Doki Literature Club* examines how the game goes beyond a typical captive damsel-in-distress narrative through its meta-commentary on the player character's complicity in a culture that keeps girls metaphorically captive. Overall, through our four close readings, I'd say a major throughline was the power that games have to play with stereotypes.

Horror as a genre is about defying expectations in ways that scare the audience. But that exploitation of the unexpected can also allow players to see from a different perspective, as in *Hellblade*, for example, where the horror and shock of the constant voices Senua hears also serve to give the player a way of empathizing with a character experiencing psychosis. And in *Outlast 2*, the consistency of violence toward female bodies emphasizes how structurally embedded violence against women is. Far from all these games simply leaning into common misogynistic horror tropes, many use their narratives - or even the gameplay itself - to turn these tropes on their head, or at the very least, get us to question them and what perspectives they may be obscuring.

Technical Specifications

The project consisted of the original CSV dataset and four interactive HTML visualizations. HTML files are self-contained and load external JavaScript libraries from Observable D3.js and Chart.js. The website is hosted on GitHub Pages.

The data puzzle visualization was developed using vanilla JavaScript with no external dependencies. All dataset variables are embedded in the HTML, allowing the visualization to be self-contained.

The site itself is built with Jekyll and deployed publicly at <https://a-pretty-terrifying-project.github.io/feminist-horror-co-occurences/>. In addition, the code for the site can be accessed and downloaded on GitHub. Jekyll allows developers to make simple, stable websites without the need for a database or recurring maintenance (*Jekyll*). Using this easily maintainable framework and making our code freely available enables public exploration and long-term preservation of the project. Anyone interested can grab a copy of the site that they can run and explore locally, even digging into the code if they're interested in how we did things. This also makes the entire project easy to back up locally - a lightweight static copy of the website can be downloaded from GitHub, stored on drives or personal computers, and distributed that way.

While this version of the project may lose some of the ease and interactivity of a fully online version, it will also be easier to preserve, as it will not be at the mercy of

changing technological standards and can be viewed by people without stable internet access. This way, a record of the scholarship remains, even if the online version itself is quickly left behind by technological development in a way that makes keeping it up untenable. The project is thus both more accessible in the present and accessible to future generations.

Digital Manifest

The following inventory lists all digital components created and part of this project development.

Item	File Type	Description	Notes
Primary Dataset	CSV	Dataset with 97 coded with 20+ variables, including feminist themes, Creed archetypes, and narrative explanations	
Theme Prevalence Bar Chart	HTML	Interactive bar chart ranking feminist themes by frequency color-coded	
Network Graph	HTML	D3.js network force simulation mapping relationships between co-occurring themes	
Co-Occurrence Heatmap	HTML	Interactive visualization coded to show the number of games where two themes intersect.	Prominent themes are outlined in orange, and some of those themes link to close reads of a game in the pairing.
Data Filter Visualization	HTML	Drag and drop filtering interface to allow viewers to organize dataset based on variables	
Whitepaper	Docx	Current document	

Acknowledgment of Use of AI

This project used GenAI and ClaudeAI to support visualization development and code debugging. Work was created manually and revised/reviewed using AI to assist in formatting code. The final output was again manually reviewed and edited by team members before being uploaded to the project webpage.

Evaluation

Based on feedback we received throughout the process, the main draw of the project for people was the data visualizations. People really enjoyed looking at them. During our various presentations, eyes were especially drawn to what we called the “choose your own adventure” visualization that allows users to interact with the dataset themselves. Viewers enjoyed just watching us play around with it, and seemed eager to try it themselves. This means our project was successful in catching people’s attention and igniting their own interest in the topics and trends we discussed. People also seemed to recognize that this project was important to us, a labor of love for games as a form of art and culture worth analyzing. I’m glad this came across, because I think showing our own passion makes this a more effective teaching tool. If we’re excited about this, it’s easier for learners to latch onto that and find their own ways to be excited

One weakness of this project was that we did not engage in heavy outreach. This is in part due to the very specific audience our project seeks to reach. Thus, using a standard social network such as Instagram or Bluesky didn’t seem like it would be very

fruitful in reaching our primarily academic audience. In addition, throughout the early stages of the project, a lot of our reluctance came from the fact that our site was deployed but unfinished, meaning people could stumble upon a messy version, undermining our project. Due to these factors, we stuck to word-of-mouth communication through our individual networks over the course of our work on the project. This is certainly better than nothing, but our project likely could have reached more people interested in it had we found some way to reach our intended audience through social media. Something we could have done differently was either not deploying an unfinished site that early (though that would limit our ability to test and collaborate on the site), or taking the time to craft publicity posts less focused on the project in its current state and more focused on getting people excited for its eventual release. Even with our relatively small early outreach efforts, we did manage to address this later on by ramping up our presence toward the end of this semester's process. Specifically, we posted in multiple groups on the CUNY Academic Commons after presenting at the showcase to capture the momentum from the presentation. And this is definitely something we can improve upon while further developing the project especially now that the main content and structure of the website is finalized.

Meanwhile, a big strength of this project was our sweeping exploration of the themes and games we look at. The analysis we present explores both the breadth and depth of the topic. And the design of the site supports these different goals. To show the breadth of our topic, we crafted data visualizations which aim to show the full ecosystem of the games we're looking at and how their themes connect. In addition, we made a point to

make most of these visualizations interactive- using gamification as a practice while discussing games as a topic both fit our project thematically and made the site more engaging, full of things to click on and drag around. Then, for exploring the depth of ideas in the particular games we selected for close reading, we shifted to a more traditional format- a simple page with text and images. While less flashy, the close reading pages provided an important balance to the wide-ranging visualizations. We hope that our analysis of the wider field of feminist themes in horror video games encourages our audience to be curious, using what we created to come up with their own thoughts and theories about the trends we expose. And from there we hope our close readings satisfy a little of that curiosity by demonstrating how those trends work in practice while also further fueling that interest and motivating readers to apply similar kinds of thinking to the games they play. This two pronged approach of distant and close reading is a major success of our project, as it allows us to reach out to our audience in multiple ways and explore the fullness of our subject area from wide to small scales.

Future of the Project

A Pretty Terrifying Project team envisions the project as a living resource. We hope to open the project to contributors who are interested in expanding the dataset by adding horror games not yet represented, or in writing close readings of individual titles that engage with the feminist themes the visualizations surface. Contributions of either kind would deepen the project's analytical reach and bring more voices into the work.

We also plan to use the [Internet Archive's Wayback Machine](#) to preserve earlier stages of the project and maintain a record of how the dataset and site have evolved over time. Ultimately, we hope this project finds a community of people who care about these questions and want to keep asking them.

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