



Scary Levels: Designing Fear in Games and Interactive Media

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Space and place continuously serve as sources of inspiration in video games and various other interactive media, within which they have a specific way of representing and operationalizing fear and dread. Interactive works can turn fear into a set of narrative and game design sequences that are problems and solutions for the experience of playing and reading. For example, how to structure attention, limit knowledge, choreograph movement, regulate pace, and distribute safety and danger. In doing so, they transform levels, localities, and arenas, big or small, into affective machines: corridors become arguments about vulnerability, checkpoints become politics of relief, maps become instruments of control and disorientation, and environmental cues become a language of dread. **This focus invites contributors to treat “levels” not only as discrete segments of gameplay, but as cultural forms** where historical imaginaries, cultural memories, destroyed or reimagined urban landscapes, and social narratives are translated into navigable worlds. Urban and architectural imaginaries are especially relevant here: streets, housing blocks, subway areas, transit corridors, basements, ports, underpasses, stairwells, ruins, and liminal zones recur across games as design resources for unease. Such spaces are never purely physical; they are also symbolic (loaded with cultural meanings) and imagined (produced by rumor, folklore, news, cinema, and online circulation).

A central thread of the collection is the relationship between fear, space, and cultural memory. It starts from a simple but far-reaching premise: interactive media do not merely represent fear, they operationalize it.

We invite chapter proposals for *Scary Levels: Designing Fear in Games and Interactive Media*, an edited volume that examines how fear is designed, staged, and negotiated through interactive systems. Moving beyond approaches that treat horror primarily as narrative content, this collection foregrounds fear as an experiential, spatial, and cultural phenomenon - one that is produced through playable architectures (levels, routes, thresholds), procedural constraints (scarcity, pursuit, uncertainty), perceptual regimes (visibility, sound, interface), and the interpretive labor of players navigating environments saturated with implication, memory, and threat.

Particular attention is given to environmental storytelling and indexical storytelling: the ways games communicate fear through traces rather than exposition. Documents, recordings, photographs, residual sounds, stains, broken objects, worn paths, abandoned rooms, and environmental micro-details function as evidence of unseen events and absent bodies. These elements invite players to reconstruct a world through inference, turning interpretation into a form of vulnerability. We welcome contributions that theorize indexical storytelling as a narrative design technique of fear and connect it to environmental storytelling, spatial history, and affective play.

Methodologically, the volume encourages interdisciplinary work that links game studies with approaches from human geography, cultural studies, urban analysis, architecture, memory studies, and the digital humanities. Chapters proposing or demonstrating innovative ways of analyzing fear in interactive media are encouraged - through spatial annotation, route analysis, critical cartography, archival reconstruction, interface analysis, sound studies, production studies, player reception, or practice-based research. The goal is not only to interpret horror, but to clarify how fear is built across design layers and how interactive spaces can be read as cultural and historical formations.

As fear and anxiety come in different forms, may be subjective, and are highly interpretative, this collection is interested in various unconventional genres and narrative forms in which these issues appear -from RPGs and romance visual novels to stealth games, walking simulators, VR experiences, action-adventures, and multiplayer games. Thus, **while chapters may focus on horror titles, we also welcome work on non-horror games and interactive media** where fear, unease, anxiety, threat, or insecurity are central to the experience.

Essays may explore, but are not limited to, the following topics:

- Representation and perception of fear in digital literature, interactive media, or video games
- Perspective and camera as fear machines
- Vulnerability and safe spaces
- Designing fear through space and movement
- Save points as politics of relief
- Maps as instruments of control and disorientation
- Narratological structures of fear
- Structures of feeling and structures of fearing
- Heterotopia in video games
- Hermeneutics of suspicion in digital narratives
- Fear/anxiety in stealth games
- Fear in multiplayer games
- Ruinophilia and ruinophobia
- Level design in affective play
- Indexical storytelling in fantasy video games
- Indexical storytelling and architecture in video games

We invite all interested scholars to send their proposal (400–500 words) and a short bio (max. 200 words, including the author’s academic affiliation) by **July 1, 2026**, to

scarylevelsbook@gmail.com. Authors will be notified of acceptance by **August 1, 2026**. The deadline for full essay submissions is **December 1, 2026**.

Full essays should be **7,000–8,000 words** (including references, notes, and citations) and follow the **Chicago Manual of Style**. The collection will be published with an established academic press, **with Routledge expressing preliminary interest**.