

Bram Stoker's Dracula and Video Game Narratives: Pandemic Themes in Covid Times

VANESSA L. HADDAD

Abstract. This article explores the relationship between Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and its influence on video game narratives. Video game sales have increased significantly since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. The influence of Stoker's *Dracula* and the narratives of vampire and pandemic video games is important, since some popular games are explicitly centred around pandemics and vampires, and are being played during the Covid-19 pandemic. The article explores the historical connection between epidemics and the vampire myth, and how that influenced the narrative of *Dracula*, especially the connection between the influence of cholera and his upbringing in Ireland. It then examines how the narrative has been influential in video game narratives. Finally, the article touches on how video games with pandemic themes may be used by a player to find a sense of control, explore difficult narratives in a structured environment, and explore various points of view and catharsis.

Keywords: *Dracula*; vampire; plague; video games, narrative

Introduction

Video game sales have increased globally by 63% since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic (Gauth, "Covid-19 Global Sales" 2020). Video games provide the opportunity to socialise virtually, and to escape to another world in difficult times (Zhu 2020). With video game playing increasing while people around the world have been modifying their lives during the Covid-19 pandemic, it is important to consider the narratives that are being consumed through games, and what has influenced those narratives.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic began, video games specifically tied to pandemic narratives, have increased in popularity. *The Last of Us Part II* was released in June 2020, and its story is centred on a brain infecting fungus. This game sold the most copies of any PlayStation 4 exclusive game at over 4 million on its release weekend (Lempel 2020). *Plague Inc.* (2012), has seen an increase in downloads of 123%, and a 201% increase in revenue since the beginning of the pandemic (Gauth, "Covid-19 Plague Inc." 2020). *Plague Inc.* is a simulation

game that gives the player the goal of infecting and killing the world through an infectious disease. The game includes scenarios of disease spread through vampires, as well as a zombie virus.

The foundation of zombie and pandemic stories in gaming can be traced to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), a novel about a vampire who moves from Transylvania to England to spread vampirism through bites. This paper will explore the links between pandemic video game narratives, *Dracula* (1897), and its influences. This paper addresses how *Dracula* has influenced narratives in video gaming, and how video games influenced by *Dracula* are used by players.

The Connection between Plagues and Vampires

In order to understand how *Dracula* emerged, the historical origins of the vampire need to be considered. Vampire myths have existed for thousands of years (Beresford 2008); however, in Europe, the myth of the vampire became more prevalent as epidemics occurred during the Middle Ages. Those who were alive then looked for supernatural explanations to make sense of the world around them. Without scientific understanding or knowledge of microbiology attributing disease to invisible pathogens such as viruses, bacteria, or fungi was not possible. We now understand historically what caused various outbreaks throughout Europe. Bubonic plague, pneumonic plague, cholera, and influenza caused millions of deaths from the 6th century to the 20th century. The Plague of Justinian, which occurred during the 6th century, is estimated to have wiped out up to 100 million people, or 60% of the population of Europe. The Black Death, which was part of the second wave of bubonic plague, occurring between 1346 and 1353, is estimated to have killed up to 200 million people, or again about 60% of the European population (Aichon 2003: 21).

Bubonic plague is caused by a bacteria called *Yersinia pestis* that is spread by infected fleas or through fluids from a plague infected animal (Aichon 2003: 28). The bacteria infect the lymph nodes, which cause swelling and sometimes causes them to rupture, and cause fever and other flu-like symptoms. If bubonic plague progresses to pneumonic plague, haemoptysis, or the presence of blood in the respiratory tract, could develop and cause blood to flow from the mouth (Dezube 2021). According to Di Cicco (2013):

During the Middle Ages, the lack of scientific knowledge of the plague, determined the frantic search by the populace of "carriers" of the disease, which in turn were identified in weak subjects and especially among women. Therefore, those of them who died uttering a stream of blood from the mouth (hemoptysis), a feature of the pneumonic form of plague, were considered "vampires."

Another epidemic illness that may have fuelled belief in vampires is cholera. Cholera is caused by the bacterium *Vibrio cholerae*, and is typically spread through contaminated water. Cholera causes severe dehydration, and can cause death quickly as a result (Merck 2021). Matthew Kratter (1998: 35) states, “even as late as 1855 a cholera epidemic in Danzig resulted in mass hysteria and the widespread belief that the plague had been spread by vampires.” According to Stanley Stepanic (2020):

The vampire was used as a way to explain away mysterious deaths caused by then-unknown diseases, thereby becoming the thing that caused disease. In fact, almost any disease could have been connected to vampires, and a particular period in the 18th century led to a literal and figurative “Vampire Epidemic”.

While there is evidence that Stoker was influenced by Romanian folklore through studying *The Land Beyond the Forest: Facts, Figures, and Fancies from Transylvania* by Emily Girard (1888), it is also likely that he was inspired by his own upbringing in Ireland, and cholera specifically. His mother, Charlotte Thornley, had written a first-hand account of what she observed growing up in Sligo, where over 1,500 people passed away, called *Experiences of the Cholera in Ireland in 1832*. She had observed gaunt, malnourished people who were dying from a communicable disease, and there is speculation that Stoker's *Dracula* character was partly inspired by these stories. Charlotte had told Bram stories of this time when he was a child and quite sickly with an unexplained illness (Hughes 2000: 24).

There is also a strong connection between Stoker's work and cholera in Ireland. Stepanic (2020) states that:

Cholera had a direct influence on Bram Stoker while writing “*Dracula*” and, in fact, there was an epidemic of the disease in the 1890s as he was writing it. Such diseases can certainly be linked to vampire folklore by reading it as such, but that is the case for any disease on the planet. What is more important is what disease or diseases could be epidemic and thus cause a multitude of deaths that would be in need of an explanation in a time when medical knowledge was primitive. This is key to the vampire's function as a symbol of disease in original folklore; it provided an answer when science was lacking.

A Brief Overview of the Narrative of *Dracula*

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is much more complex and in-depth than can be described in a summary; however, for context, a brief synopsis of the novel is presented below. This synopsis is a condensed version of one written by Kate Lohnes (2018):

Dracula begins with Jonathan Harker, a young English lawyer, as he travels to Transylvania. Harker plans to meet with Count Dracula, in order to finalise a property transaction. When Harker meets Dracula, he acknowledges that the man is pale, gaunt, and strange. Harker becomes further concerned when, after Harker cuts himself while shaving, Dracula lunges at his throat. Soon after, Harker is seduced by three female vampires, from whom he barely escapes after Dracula tells them that Harker belongs to him. He then learns Dracula's secret – that he is a vampire and survives by drinking human blood. Harker correctly assumes that he is to be the count's next victim. He attacks the count, but his efforts are unsuccessful. Dracula leaves Harker trapped in the castle and then, along with 50 boxes of soil, departs for England.

In England, Harker's fiancée Mina is visiting a friend named Lucy, who has recently become engaged. One night Mina must search for Lucy, as she has fallen back into her old habit of sleepwalking. When Mina finds her outside near a graveyard, there appears to be a shape hovering over her for a split second. Mina notices two small red marks on Lucy's neck and assumes that she must have inadvertently pricked Lucy with a pin. Lucy falls ill and is at times seen through a window next to a bat. Mina is worried, but she is called away when she receives correspondence from Jonathan. Lucy goes into the care of Dr Seward and Dr Van Helsing, who, after a number of failed blood transfusions, decide that further action is needed. Lucy, however, soon dies.

After her death, there are reports of a creature attacking children in the area. When Jonathan and Mina return to England, Jonathan's accounts of Dracula lead Van Helsing to believe that Lucy contracted vampirism from the count and is the one tormenting the children. In order to prevent her from further killing, they unearth her corpse, drive a stake through her heart, cut off her head, and stuff her mouth with garlic.

The group sets out to track Count Dracula and the 50 boxes of soil he brought with him. According to lore, Dracula needs the soil of his home country to remain healthy. The group attempts to destroy the boxes so that Dracula has no means of regeneration. One night, amid feelings of uneasiness toward Mina's recent behaviour, Van Helsing and Seward break into her room to find Jonathan unconscious and Mina drinking blood from a gash in Dracula's chest.

The vampire disappears and returns to Transylvania only to be followed by the determined group. They find him buried in the final box of soil and promptly cut off his head and stab him through the heart. Dracula crumbles into dust.

One key question is, why did Dracula want to move to London to begin with? Jonathan Harker speculates:

I shuddered as I bent over to touch him, and every sense in me revolted at the contact, but I had to search, or I was lost. The coming night might see my own body a banquet in a similar war to those horrid three. I felt all over the body, but no sign could I find of the key. Then I stopped and looked at the Count. There was a mocking smile on the bloated face which seemed to drive me mad. This was the being I was helping to transfer to London, where, perhaps, for centuries to come he might, amongst its teeming millions, satiate his lust for blood, and create a new and ever-widening circle of semi-demons to batten on the helpless. (Stoker 1997: 56)

While there is no definitive explanation given as to why Dracula is moving to London, it appears to Jonathan that with a much larger population, Dracula will be able to create more vampires by feeding on humans and spreading vampirism throughout the population in an attempt to gain power. It is this motivation that is key to understanding the appeal of pandemic narratives. Dracula possesses, and is the embodiment of, a plague. He is portrayed as nefarious, and as such the reader will probably feel a sense of control and catharsis at his defeat. Those who are affected by an epidemic feel helpless to it, just as a victim of Dracula would feel helpless. Through Dracula's death, the reader, who feels helpless and without a sense of control, may regain a sense of control. According to Merriman (2020),

reading about someone who has had a similar experience can be a cathartic experience and help alleviate their stress and anxiety. During the COVID-19 pandemic, heartwarming stories of communities coming together can serve as a source of hope. Literature can be a source of distraction, catharsis, and hope when we are faced with adversity.

The Influence of Dracula in Video Games

Dracula is still influential and relevant in popular culture, and has been particularly influential in video games. Video games provide a newer form of storytelling that is more interactive than books or movies, as they rely on player input and decision-making to progress the narrative. Henry Jenkins (2004) argues that games tell stories in their own unique way, and that their narratives are

not equivalent to the linear data of a story of the type found in films or novels. Jenkins states that game stories are spatial, and environmental, and allow a player to explore. Video games provide another layer of depth emotionally through this way of interacting with an environment that films and novels do not. According to Bown and Gackenbach

Video games are three-dimensional because they give the player another layer of experience with the story: control. The sense of being a part of the world and influencing it achieves a level of immersion that cannot be attained with traditional storytelling and ultimately evokes an emotional response unobtainable by any other means. (Bown and Gackenbach 2016: 2)

It is this sense of control that is key to exploring the influence of Dracula in video games. Additionally, video games provide a sense of structure and clear rules that real life does not (Granic, Rutger and Engels 2014), which contributes to a sense of control when playing a video game.

While many more vampire video games have been produced, below are a few notable examples of Dracula in video games. The first video game about vampires, and Dracula specifically, is called Dracula, and was released for Intellivision in 1983. In this game, the player takes on the role of Dracula and teams up with a zombie to bite as many people as possible in the streets at night, while avoiding a constable who throws wooden stakes. The game is timed, and Dracula can only bite people from midnight to 6 am, after which he must go back to the graveyard to rest. The goal of the game is to infect as many people as possible, giving the player his or her score.

Another vampire title is Dracula, created for the Commodore 64, Amstrad CPC, and ZX Spectrum home computers in 1986 by British video game developer CRL. Dracula is a text adventure game that closely follows the narrative of the Dracula novel. Henry Jenkins would refer to this type of video game narrative as an evoked narrative, i.e.

[...] when video games reproduce a world that is known to players through other works of fiction, so that the games are part of an encompassing system of meanings.

Castlevania, released in 1986, was the first Nintendo game about vampires, and Dracula, specifically. In this series, the player takes on the role of a vampire hunter, progressing through multiple stages to find, and ultimately defeat, Dracula. This series has been immensely popular since its release, and has multiple titles released even to the present day. Most recently, Netflix has

developed an animated series, released in 2017, that explores the story of the game in more depth.

Vampire and Pandemic Video Games

There are two notable games that combine the elements of vampires and pandemics: *Vampyr*, and *Plague Inc.* *Vampyr*, released in 2018, combines the Dracula vampire role with that of a doctor during the 1918 flu pandemic. The game description reads,

London, 1918. You are newly-turned *Vampyr* Dr. Jonathan Reid. As a doctor, you must find a cure to save the city's flu-ravaged citizens. As a *Vampyr*, you are cursed to feed on those you vowed to heal. (Focus 2021)

The player, as Dr Jonathan Reid, must strategically decide who to heal, and who to feed on. Ultimately, the decisions made by the player will also influence the behaviour of the citizens of London. This game simultaneously explores life during a pandemic, while also embodying a plague within the main character.

Plague Inc. was initially released in 2012, and was inspired by a flash game called *Pandemic*. The player takes on the role of a bacterium, virus, fungus, or other type of pathogen with the goal of mutating, infecting the population, and killing every single person in the world. The pathogens in the game can be given characteristics that can boost infectivity or evolution based on climate, urban versus rural environments, and other factors.

The popularity of this game increased significantly when the Covid-19 pandemic started. Why? Games like *Plague Inc.* provide a safe simulation of a worst-case scenario for a reality that the world is still undergoing. Humans have a need for such experiences.

In January 2021, *Plague Inc.* added an anti-pandemic mode, called *Plague Inc.: The Cure*. The creation of this new mode was in direct response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Instead of playing the role of a pathogen, the player takes on the role of a global health expert. In this reversal of the game, the player needs to manage world affairs while trying to eradicate the disease. The player must invest resources into things like disease research, field workers, contact tracing, public awareness, vaccine research, and supporting treatment and healthcare infrastructure. The player must also balance efforts to reduce infections, such as lockdowns, closures of ports, restricting air travel, closing land borders, and targeted lockdowns. While these measures restrict the number of cases in the game, they also reduce authority. Once a player loses his or her authority in the game, the game is over. While *Plague Inc.* can give a player an understanding

to a degree of how pandemics happen and spread, *Plague Inc.: The Cure* can give a player an understanding of the challenges of managing Covid-19. This game may also provide catharsis for those who are distressed at the Covid-19 pandemic.

Plague Inc. is a simulation game that also has scenarios that can be played, such as: fake news, in which the player can create their own fake news story to manipulate the population; science denial, a scenario in which people no longer believe in science, and try to use alternative cures to overcome the pathogen; black death, a scenario in which patient zero is infected with a dormant strain of *Yersinia pestis*; who cares, a scenario in which people in rich countries are distracted by reality television shows and stop caring about what happens in poorer countries, reducing funding to identify and assist poor countries with outbreaks of xenophobia, a scenario in which people are angry about immigration and globalisation and trigger hostility towards foreigners worldwide, resulting in fortified borders; necroa virus, a scenario in which zombies and zombie hordes infect the world.

There is also a shadow plague scenario, which is particularly noteworthy as it has two hosts: vampires and humans. At the beginning of the shadow plague scenario, only one person is infected, a person who can be moved to any country to begin infecting others. To win when playing this scenario, the player can either wipe out, or enslave, humanity by evolving the 'shadow slaves'. The player begins the scenario with one vampire that he or she can place anywhere in the world. From there, the vampire will infect others with the shadow plague; the player can evolve the symptoms to be more infectious, and more fatal. The player must also have the vampire travel from country to country, with the vampire transforming into a bat to travel. The player must also evolve vampire traits to avoid detection.

What is unique about *Plague Inc.* is that it provides players with a number of options to explore. They can become an epidemic, a scientist focused on curing an epidemic, or even a vampire spreading an epidemic. The popularity of the game has increased since the Covid-19 pandemic began, probably because it provides a space for people to explore their fears, feel a sense of control, and process the emotions they might feel in a situation in which they feel helpless.

Why Might We Engage with Pandemic Stories in Gaming?

Video games are structured environments with clear rules, unlike daily life. Especially in the context of on-again, off-again lockdowns, economic uncertainty, health vulnerability and losing loved ones, the structure that video games provide is important in managing and processing difficult emotions.

Additionally, video games provide catharsis (Bourgonjon 2016), experiencing difficult scenarios in a safe form of simulation that we wouldn't be able to otherwise where we can explore the dark narratives that we now face in our daily lives, providing a sense of control in a situation where we have little agency. Video games can provide knowledge and understanding where we do not have it.

Finally, video games allow players to experience a scenario from different points of view. In the video games outlined above, players can be heroes, villains, or an anti-heroes. Experiencing spreading a plague as a vampire will provide a different experience from attempting to vanquish a plague, or being the villain spreading the plague. This experience can deepen a player's understanding of various points of view of events that they may not have had otherwise.

This paper explored the connection between *Dracula*, and vampire and pandemic video game narratives. As the world is experiencing a pandemic at the time of writing, it is important to consider how in the future games could be designed to educate, and to provide further understanding, of how pandemics function. In addition, game design with the explicit intention of providing stress relief in times of global crisis is an important consideration for the future.

Vanessa L. Haddad

haddad@ecc.edu

State University of New York (SUNY) Erie

U.S.A.

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