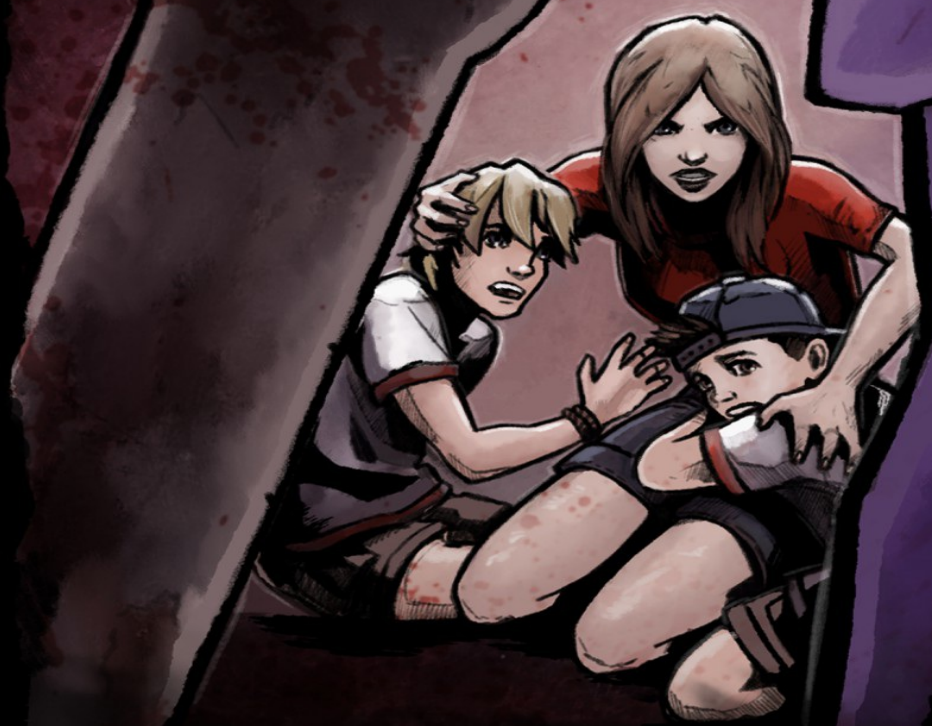


YOU AND YOUR FRIENDS ARE DEAD.

An Unofficial Analysis Of LJN's Friday The 13th



Joel Couture

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An Unofficial Analysis of LJM's *Friday the 13th*

By Joel Couture

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For Julia & Ellie

This book is also dedicated to Hideyuki Yokoyama, Hirohiko Takayama, Tsukasa Masuko, Yamaguchi, and any of the other developers of Friday the 13th I have missed.

Thank you for your groundbreaking work in horror. This genre would not be the same without you.

Introduction

“It all takes place out at Crystal Lake. That pleasant little camp where happy children of all ages go to spend a fun-filled summer...but this summer will be different. The fun will have to wait. Jason has decided to come to camp and terror is the only game they’ll be playing.”

Maybe you know those words from the back cover of *Friday the 13th* for the NES. Or maybe you’re more familiar with:

“YOU AND YOUR FRIENDS ARE DEAD. GAME OVER.”

Friday the 13th is a unique NES title. Back when we were shooting robots, stomping turtles, and whipping medusa heads, *Friday the 13th* had us throwing rocks at zombies and bats. Well, that and scrambling around a campground as we struggled to keep our friends alive, fighting for whatever weapons we could find, and dying at the hands of a familiar slasher movie villain.

Jason is not exactly known for his gentle hand and kind heart, is he? The killer often made short, gruesome work of a bunch of teenagers before each of his many movies were done. So, when the time came to make a video game out of the films, what do you think the developers were going to do? Make an action game where you fought spooky things at the end of each level until you finally faced down the killer in a brutal showdown (The NES *A Nightmare on Elm St* did that, actually. I like that game a lot, too!)?

Friday the 13th didn’t go down that road. Instead, it placed the players in a sprawling campground and asked them figure their way around. It had them rushing around it as their fellow counselors found themselves under attack in their own cabins, or running to save the young children who were in danger in their safe haven on the lake. It had them plunging into caves and woods to find items they could use to keep themselves alive while under siege from a relentless killer.

And when you finally found Jason (or, more likely, he found you), he was far more than most would be prepared for. He hit hard, downing even the

strongest counselors in a few blows. He hit like a final boss, except he might just run up to you about a minute into the game and stomp you flat. He could come at any time, and only grew more powerful as you beat him.

He was everywhere. You were never safe. And you had no idea how to find weapons, or what you were supposed to be doing. You were just struggling to survive, praying that you found some means of doing so. You were fighting to just think for a minute. To find some way of overcoming his overwhelming power. But he never let up, and even if you fought him off, within moments you'd be dealing with another attack.

Friday the 13th captures the spirit of being a teenager in one of the movies. It seeks to give the player that feeling of vulnerability a teen in a horror movie would feel.

This was new to the NES at the time. Many of the great games during this period were sidescrolling action titles (although there was some truly wonderful experimentation done on the console), so they seemed like the smart product to make. A lot of movie tie-in games from the late 80's and early 90's went down this road. *Total Recall*. *Robocop*. *Karate Kid*. *Ghostbusters II*. *Batman*. *Wayne's World* (shudder). The list goes on. While there was some neat innovation in some of these, most of them were straightforward action games, seeming to draw upon what players enjoyed at the time.

Friday the 13th wanted to be different. It wanted to explore the feeling of being under attack from a killer you have almost no chance of beating. It didn't want to make the player into another movie hero in a sidescroller, having them fight enemies and bosses until the game's end. It wanted them to experience the kind of fear that comes from being underpowered and faced with overwhelming odds. It wanted you to soak in the sensation of being attacked by an unfair opponent. To feel the despair settle in when it all seems hopeless.

This unique sensation didn't exactly go over well with everyone who played it. It does run counter to the power fantasy that fuels many sidescrollers. Many come to games to be the tough hero, and even if the play itself is challenging, you want that sensation of strength. You want to be powerful

and overcome, or at least get the sense that you could overcome if you'd only start playing a little better.

Also, *Friday the 13th* is not afraid to confuse you. Make you feel small and insignificant. To grind you up whether you've had enough time to prepare or not. It does not care if you know how its items work, where to find them, or if you know how to get around. It doesn't worry about what the player feels, or if they know what to do or where to go. It just throws them into an unbalanced situation and tells them to deal with it.

This feels unfair, and counter to fun, but should horror always be a great time? Would you say that you enjoy being stalked and gutted? That you love hiding out in a closet, frightened out of your mind? Horror, sometimes, isn't fair, and it isn't fun.

Should a game that emulates being stalked by a slasher villain be fun, though? If a game were to truly capture the spirit of being chased and attacked by supernatural killer Jason Voorhees, would it be a ripping good time? Or, to actually emulate the movies, would it have to sow panic and confusion, keeping the player off-guard, afraid, and unsure what to do?

Except, it is fun. If you're willing to give yourself over to it for a while, *Friday the 13th* offers a compelling horror experience, especially for its time. It offers an emotional journey, and the kind of satisfaction one can only find from cracking a mystery while someone keeps knocking the clues out of your hands. It demands perfect reactions, a clear mind under stress, and an ability to deal with the constant trouble it throws your way. It's a challenging, ruthless game that isn't built to guide you to victory in any way. It just tells you to light some fires in some cabins and get to work.

And modern horror owes it a debt. Its groundbreaking work in setting up how a stalker style villain would work in a horror game, how it can create player tension through surprise and shock, how mysteries can keep an unsettling mood going, and many, many more elements would work well in video game horror, as we would see in games like *Resident Evil*, *P.T.*, *Fatal Frame*, and more. It built all of this back in 1989, too, becoming a work far ahead of its time.

Friday the 13th, unpleasant, frustrating, and irritating as it may seem to many, is where I feel horror in games truly began. Many would argue that it was a clumsy beginning, but sometimes, the greatest experiences in video game fear come from not playing fair, and being unafraid to bewilder and overwhelm the player.

1.

A dusty path lies before you, trampled weeds pushing through the dirt. Lush grass and bushes run along either side, a fence lining the trail. Trees loom in the distance. We are in the woods, but the tamed version of nature. Safe from the dangers that lie within the trunks and shadows. It feels warm and inviting, bright blue sky above us as the sun beams down. We have carved out a place of safety. No danger can reach us here.

Friday the 13th seems a bit strange right from the start, beginning on sunlit paths within a bright campground. It feels safe within these first few moments of its existence. It creates this odd sense of comfort, taking us to a beautiful Summer's day in the calming quiet of a family camping trip.

It's not a particularly weird beginning for a video game, though. Mario has been having an awfully hard time dealing with bloodthirsty mushrooms and cranky turtles in environments that look idyllic, if a bit unyielding (pipes and all the bricks give it this strange tactility) and surreal (again, mushrooms wanting to eat you is kinda odd). Trouble sometimes rears its head even as the sun is shining in video game land.

Still, for horror, this is strange. Many modern horror titles have us bathed in perpetual darkness, the gloom cloying and all-enveloping. Games like *Outlast* live in endless night, having the player use a camera with a night vision function to see into the gloom. Since that camera runs on batteries, it adds a nice tension to simply being able to see, as sight comes with a cost players can run out of. And when some big, gross, scary, naked things are lurking in the dark, it's hard to decide when you do and do not want to be able to see.

Not that this is the greatest idea for a horror game in the 80's, as some may have discovered playing games like *Haunted House* on the Atari 2600. In this title, players have to navigate a pitch-black building to find an urn and escape with it, preferably without being devoured by bats, spiders, and hungry phantoms. For the most part, players can only see a pair of eyes floating, cartoon-style, through the darkness, although they can light a match to illuminate a small area around their body.

The results were eerie, in their own way. Being surrounded by little besides darkness and the sound of your footsteps made for an experience that was uncomfortable, but its menace was eroded by being able to see the monsters outside of your circle of light. You wouldn't be able to see the items you needed to pick up without a match lit (although you had as many matches as you wanted, so no need to feel nervous about running out), but monsters were always visible. It made the darkness feel pretty pointless after a few minutes.

I can't blame them for going down this road, though. If the player couldn't see the monster until it had entered the circle of light, it would leave almost no time to react. Players would be blundering around blind and likely getting hit constantly. It would feel unfair. Not that this is always a bad thing for a horror game (getting chased by a powerful killer is kind of an unfair experience), but it runs a high risk of alienating and irritating your audience. You have to dance a fine line with being unfair in a horror game, seeking that perfect amount where you scare someone more than you annoy them. But more on that later.

Haunted House never really found this balance, creating an experience that wasn't all that scary, although it had an impressive atmosphere for one of the earliest horror titles. Googly eyes and bats that look like bananas just aren't enough for my weak imagination, I guess. Still, stumbling around looking for items while avoiding danger does have a certain tension about it.

That said, the darkness made navigation a challenge, which in turn enhanced the tension around avoiding spooky critters. It did help the game create its atmosphere through obscured vision, but lacked that fearful feeling that something was lurking within it. I still knew where the danger lay.

As we see with *Haunted House*, darkness in horror games can make it hard to convey what we're supposed to be seeing. Even in modern games, this can result in some real aggravation (navigating any super-dark horror game often becomes an exercise in frustration over this element) that needs to be dealt with in some way. You need the player to see enough to make informed decisions, while also shortening the available time they're able to work through them. It also limits the range in which players can have a clear picture of what they're walking into. Both of these elements are why darkness matters in horror, and what makes it an effective tool, but also how

it can utterly break the game.

Darkness makes it hard to see things until they are almost on top of you. This naturally cuts down on your available reaction time, resulting in those oh-so-delightful jump scares and moments of sudden terror. But it can be unfair for those same reasons, making it impossible to react to something that's rushing your way because you simply can't see it. And if you're getting ganked like this all the time, how long will it take before you feel like there's little you can do to stop it? If you never know where the danger is coming from, you start feeling like your input in the game doesn't matter, as the results are the same. I cannot deal with danger because I never know when it's coming. That's when we find ourselves getting irritated.

So, getting darkness in a horror game right isn't easy, and I imagine it was far, far worse in the eras before 3D, if only because you can only communicate so much distance in these games. By using perspective in 3D, you can create the illusion of distance that goes far beyond the edge of your tv. The monster can pop out of the shadows close to you, but with some good ol' 3D distance between you.

In this pixel era, you can't really do that (or at least not when tied with an element of darkness). The most distance you can obscure is right at the edge of your screen. So, any attempt to create darkness would need to work within the confines of the screen.

What does that mean for most games seeking to scare folks in the 80's? Creating a bubble of light around the player. While this would have all those nice, scary benefits of creating a narrow field of vision, lowering possible reaction time, and creating a tension surrounding what lies in the dark, it runs that high risk of being extremely annoying. You end up well into cheap hit territory, as you have little time to see what's coming your way before it hits you, which is a quick road to Irritation Town. Which is a less itchy (tasty) place than it sounds.

And if you make it too big? POINTLESS.

Friday the 13th's visual design seems disinterested in lack of clarity, as well. The game goes through several stages of day and night, taking the player

through the campground at various times of day. Rather than make evening and nighttime more difficult to see (and I don't even know how they would manage a lack of clarity during this era, as seen from our light bubble example), it instead uses varied color palettes to communicate day and night, but with the player still able to see everything perfectly.

A lot of *Friday the 13th*'s visual design seems to indicate that offering clear information to the player was an important thing for the developers, according to Wayne Kubiak, a pixel artist who is currently working on *Lore Finder*, a cosmic horror Metroidvania. "While I couldn't say the art was groundbreaking, I have an appreciation for how clear and deliberate the sprites are. There's an extra attention to detail for some of the larger set pieces and important sprites like Jason and his Mother's head (I might be foggy on the *Friday the 13th* lore here, but is this canon in any of the movies?!?). Also, I want to send with a special shout out to the trees in the forest for looking great."

"It's also worth mentioning that, despite the UI taking up a good hunk of the screen, especially in the first person segments, it's wonderfully clear and easy to read at a glance. Even the map, despite the direction issue, is good at showing you where you'd like to go."

Obscuring the player's vision can be a way to help horrors sneak up on them, but clarity seems to be a key element of the game's visual style. Beyond the limitations of the era, this is also a smart design decisions as it works to keep aggravation at bay. The game could have a killer leaping right on top of you out of the darkness, but instead prefers to give you a great deal of visual information so that you can know what's coming and prepare for it. Jason (or the game's other monsters) can still surge onto a forest path out of nowhere, but you are given a handful of milliseconds to process his appearance.

Which might not seem scary, but is still an important part of making the play feel fair. Horror can often be a balancing act between fear and annoyance, and this clarity of vision, and this sunny day, is taking steps to tip things toward fair play before the game really starts stabbing you in the back.

Darkness might have made these chases a bit more chilling, but having a near-unkillable beast of a man dogging you every step gets so much worse

when you can take a single step and have him right on top of you anyway. There are other ways to make his presence terrifying that are far more effective given hardware limitations of the time.

Besides, this bright, sunny exterior also serves a different purpose. *Friday the 13th*'s environments are setting the player up with a certain expectation. They want players to feel that comfort, even if only for a few moments, so it can be eroded right out from under them. This peaceful campground is meant to evoke feelings from the player that the game intends to play around with. It gets them thinking of soothing nights spent camping, of rising with the sun on your back and a day of play within the refreshing forest air.

It's all quite pretty and striking to take in, both in its clarity and in how it takes the player to a peaceful wood, a sunlit path, or mysterious cave. "Where the art shines, for me, is the color work. The enemies and interactive objects are bright, colorful, and easy to read, while the backgrounds have a nice low contrast with some appropriately-styled and textured areas to complete the separation," says Kubiak.

"Then, getting into the day/night cycle, forest, and cave areas, it uses palette swaps and a masterful use of the NES palette with bright oranges, purples, and blues to really draw out the perfect feelings for that time of day. It's definitely something that feels unappreciated and forgotten whenever I hear anyone talking about the game," he continues.

Then, some lump of grossness (the game's basic zombie enemy) creeps out of the ground and starts shambling toward you (Stupid outdoors. Why is everything so much more disgusting outside?).

It happens very, very fast. Usually within a second of getting into the main game. Likely so fast that you've barely taken in the scenery around you, your mind turning to peaceful places just to have those wrenched away. It makes for a jarring moment – the lovely campground juxtaposed against this ghastly, misshapen figure lumbering forward.

It happens so quickly – you're taking in this lovely scene, only scarcely beginning to process it when some sickening thing bursts from the ground and rushes toward you. You scramble to start hitting buttons, hoping one of

them gives you some form of offense or jump to get out of the way. Maybe you try to run.

In this moment, you're thrown into a panic, whether the game actually scares you or not.

Most games, when presenting the player with these delightful seas of green, give them a few moments to get their bearings. They have a minute to kind of fiddle with the buttons and walk around before things kick into gear. Games like *Slender*, *Resident Evil*, *Silent Hill*, and many, many others all give the player a few minutes to understand how to play, or at the very least, how to move. *Resident Evil* may throw you into the first zombie fight with uncomfortable swiftness once you've found the gruesome creature, but you've still had a few screens to putter around getting its unique control scheme down.

Friday the 13th is having none of that. You've been given a short explanation on lighting fireplaces (which is definitely, totally the most important concern to have when the game starts), and have blindly chosen one of six camp counselors to start the game with (and who you choose will turn out to be very, VERY important), and that's it. You might have had a moment to find out that directional pad moves you forward. I'd argue that, on average, you maybe had enough time to figure out a single input, and movement was likely the first.

The result is a panicked scramble to figure out which buttons do something. There are only two buttons on the NES control pad, so it's not as if this was an unfair challenge, sure, but you have to choose, with no prior knowledge of how the game works, which button you intend to press right now. Do you flee or see if one of the other buttons does something? It's the NES, so one button is probably a jump and the other is an attack, but which is which? Sometimes devs switch them up. And besides, what even IS my attack? You don't know, yet.

If you're thinking "You'd know all of this if you read the manual", my reply is "Who reads the manual?". More likely, in the era of rentals and borrowed games, "Who still has the manual?" The manual is a good place to start, though, honestly. You can learn which button does what, and also that the

camp counselors all have different strengths. Super useful stuff to make those first few moments of play a little more bearable.

Except...there's still a lot of discovery during that single second of play. One thing is that your starting weapon is a rock, and it gets hurled in an arc. That's not a huge issue when something is rushing you (as they're moving into your striking range), but it's still a surprise. It takes three hits from a rock to down a zombie as well, which is another unpleasant surprise. This is less of a problem as, if panic is taking hold, you'll probably be hammering the button anyway. It's still another thing added to this temporary chaos you're going through, though.

The final thing here is that, while the player may know the six playable counselors are all different, they're not given an explanation beyond that from the manual. They're told that they can swap between them in certain types of cabins, and that they behave in their own ways, but that's it. So, without knowing the game well, they'll likely just grab any one of them. Possibly randomly, but likely, as they have no reason to pick one or the other, they might go for the first person on the list.

This is George. George is slow. George can't jump. George is arguably the most worthless character in the game. And he occupies the spot most players will pick on their first try.

This results in a rough learning experience as players find out how their counselor works, possibly finding that their abilities are not so great. Maybe you picked one of the better ones who can leap over zombies, or who throws so fast that you escape your first encounter unscathed. It doesn't really matter because you're forced to learn and adapt so quickly that you cannot help a moment of fearful panic.

Friday the 13th has already terrorized you in broad, beautiful daylight simply by playing around with mechanics and how long the player has to learn them.

This is an extremely clever thing to do when you're forced to try to frighten the player in a well-lit area. Creating a fearful situation in a horror game can often work by surprising the player. This can be done by having something scary surge out of the darkness, or it can be done by using the player's

ignorance of mechanics to create the same effect. It's a moment where the player must deal with something bad that is happening quickly, and creates that moment of mental paralysis where you have no idea how to cope. It's about calling up that survival instinct – about making you figure out how to survive when you are absolutely unprepared to do so.

Let's take the dog attack from *Resident Evil* and examine that to make our point. There is a famous moment in *Resident Evil* when dog enemies will come crashing through the windows and attack the player. Up until this point, all opposition in the game has always been present in an area when it initially loaded. If a zombie is present, you'll know it for some time due to their moaning and shuffling. Enemies do not get put into an area after you have entered it. At least, this is what the game has taught you so far.

Then, dogs come leaping in through the windows.

In this one moment, the developers upend what many players have taken as rules of the game. They've internalized these rules, and are using them to carve out moments of comfort from the game. If a room is empty, it will star empty. If there are foes around, I will hear them.

When these dogs come crashing into the room, they break these rules, destroying any sense of safety the player may feel in an empty room for the rest of the game. It teaches you to never feel safe, especially when it's quiet.

Friday the 13th was doing this years and years before *Resident Evil*, though. Instead of having players expect that safety due to something in the game, though, it does so through the general play of sidescrollers instead.

The average sidescroller of the era – your *Contras*, *Castlevanias*, *Mega Mans*, and Mario games – all begin with a few moments of quiet. There are very few games of the time that would throw the player into danger so quickly (*The Immortal* is a fun exception, if you like gruesome pixel deaths). Unless this is your first game, you've likely come to expect a little grace period to figure out your character (and if it is your first game, you're probably still in a shocked panic).

Friday the 13th uses this expectation to throw players off of their

expectations and feelings of comfort in play. They're already on the defensive and scrambling before they can hope to get their bearings. As *Resident Evil* would do years later, it uses player expectations against them, setting them up for a moment of fear.

It's also a fear born of learning new mechanics in a hurry as well. When the dogs attack you for the first time, after already bashing through a window and sending your brain into a panic, they need to be fought differently from all other enemies you've met until this point. Dogs are low to the ground, so you need to aim downward to hit them at certain ranges. You can wait to shoot them when they're jumping at you, taking a huge risk for a shot that's easier to aim (which you'll probably figure out based on dumb luck). They skitter around and circle your character in a hurry, moving different from the zombies so far and making the player adjust how they fight.

You have to deal with your broken sense of safety AND learn how to fight a complex enemy all at once. While panicked.

This exact tactic is what is used on players of *Friday the 13th*. Years before *Resident Evil* did it, *Friday the 13th* was using this form of mechanics paralysis to throw players off of their game, keeping them from getting their bearings and learning how to counterattack. *Friday the 13th* tosses the player into a situation and demands they survive it, doing so while learning how the game plays and how to deal with this oncoming threat in seconds. Both games use that shock to scare, or at the very least panic the player and force them into a frightening situation.

But wait, Joel. You said that it would feel unfair to have enemies pop up right on top of the player if the developers had used a field-narrowing darkness. Why is it suddenly fair to surprise the player with a monster popping out of the ground so close? Isn't that the same thing? YOU IDIOT?!

Well, yes. But not entirely. *Friday the 13th*, in another show of clever design, doesn't do this to the player often. Typically, they're given a fair amount of notice that an enemy is coming, with the zombies popping out at distances where the player can manage their new presence. They also appear close enough that the player can't dismiss fear outright, as they might be able to if the zombies only appeared at the edge of the screen.

The game is careful about when it throws something right on top of the player, as it intends to use that sparingly to keep irritation from settling in. It's very careful to space out its jump scares, something it could teach many modern horror developers. Its pacing is razor sharp.

To circle back to our initial point, there's also something unsettling about seeing these creatures during the day. Yes, a monster creeping out of the dark is scary. But so is the idea of something monstrous feeling at home in the daylight sun. So much horror draws power from our natural fears of the darkness and night, but *Friday the 13th* comes right out and tells players, immediately, that they will never, ever be safe. This comforting space is already poisoned, so expect danger at every step throughout your time here.

And you're fighting with rocks. Not whips, not blasters, not crushing jumps, not a spread gun. You're throwing rocks at your foes. Yeah, three rocks might down a zombie, but what good will that do when Jason shows up? The game hasn't even tipped its hand with its most powerful foe yet, and you're left wondering what you'll be able to do to defeat him.

A rock is a desperate weapon. It's a thing you grab when there is nothing left to defend yourself with. It takes the player back to our primitive moments when we had little we could use to survive. It conveys a hopelessness against the enemy, right from the start. Also, it flies in a funny throwing arc, which is video game shorthand for "You're in trouble." Having a weak weapon only makes this moment that much more unsettling. The player is made to feel truly vulnerable against the dangers that are to come, here.

Friday the 13th's developers knew that clarity of vision could allow them to create an effective fear, and seemed aware that the technology simply wasn't in place for them to use darkness properly. As such, they played upon the player's lack of familiarity with the game to create an unease in its world. They used the quick appearance of a single zombie to set the player up to feel uncertain what to expect at any step. They used that moment of panic to teach them that they needed to be afraid here. That they would be vulnerable through the weapons they had.

A rock against an unkillable murderer.

Right.

Within that first screen of play, despite all of its comforting blue sky, we can already see some incredible use of mere moments of gameplay. We've already had our expectations played upon, our confidence shaken, and our vulnerabilities laid bare by the weakest opposition we'll face throughout our journey.

And *Friday the 13th* has only just begun.

2.

Beyond that initial moment of panic and uncertainty, *Friday the 13th* continually preys upon player confusion, using that sense of the unknown and unexplained to keep players from feeling safe within its world.

The first part of this is the layout of Camp Crystal Lake. This sprawling campground covers a large space filled with cabins, caves, lakes, and forests. It takes a good long time for the player to get from one end of it to the other.

Honestly, though, it's quite small in comparison to many other game worlds. It only feels large because of the game's play style: you're tasked with saving counselors and children under attack from Jason. Jason is stalking the campground, wandering into cabins and killing whoever he finds inside. And Jason can be just about anywhere (at least, it feels that way at first).

Instead of playing through strict levels where players fight a string of enemies and battle a boss at the end like many other games of this era, *Friday the 13th* has you continually seeking out the masked killer, trying to catch him before he can eliminate his target. You're constantly racing all over the map to stop his next kill, which takes this tiny space and makes it seem colossal.

"I've always enjoyed the fact that you had multiple characters across a huge map, so you had to protect something that you weren't always able to protect. The tension was unreal for an NES game," says Roope Tamminen, developer of *The Lakeview Cabin Collection*, a series of short horror games where you have to avoid some persistent killers in an open world filled with weapons and puzzles you could use to undermine them. Although good luck ever defeating the killer (is this seeming familiar yet?).

This creates an interesting form of dread, one where the player feels like they are playing catch-up at all times. They're perpetually behind, hurrying to keep someone else safe, so they can never feel they've reached a point where they are so strong they don't fear Jason. It's a useful tool to keep the player from feeling too powerful, which in turn staves off the erosion of fear. We're

just getting started, though.

It seems like *Friday the 13th's* map is straightforward, which would give most players a little shot of confidence. It's just a large circle with a few offshoots, caves, and woods. Not too tough, right? How complicated is one big circle and a few side paths?

You learn, pretty much instantly, that following this map isn't as easy as you'd imagine. The main reason for this is that it's difficult to create a circular map when the player can only move through it from left to right. So, when you're going right, you assume you are always moving right on the map, which often catches first-time players by surprise. Instead, you have to think of your movements as being clockwise and counter-clockwise in order to make proper use of the map, which is something that takes a little time to figure out, and even more time to get used to.

“The map is frustrating to navigate, but perhaps an unintended side effect of this is that it's easy to become completely disoriented. You can go in circles, get lost in the woods or the cave, end up clear across the camp from where you want to be. Meanwhile, Jason is in a cabin somewhere murdering children—murdering children! That's a video game taboo to this day. While it was all done offscreen in *Friday the 13th*, it's still shockingly subversive for an NES game to go there,” says Stacie Ponder, a games journalist behind some excellent studies in horror for Kotaku, and who also delves into horror films and media at FINAL GIRL.

As Ponder says, the resulting thing, which will likely irritate many players for the first bit, as you have little sense of where you are going. You are lost, even though the paths are straight. It's another aspect that strips away that confidence that makes fear go away in horror games. Knowing where to go, or at least understanding the path in front of you, gives you a small tool to feel better when the monsters come knocking. At least you know where to run to when they show up.

Here, even though there IS a correct way to go, it's hard to pin it down for the first little while. This means that when the old Jason alarm starts up (a lovely beep that tells you he's out adding new holes to someone's face), telling you

that someone is dying in a cabin on the other side of the camp, you stress just a little bit harder about it. You likely have to move left or right and keep checking the map for the first few tries, seeing which direction you're walking in before you find you're going the right way. It forces you into a panicked scramble of sorts, your character rushing from one direction to another as you try to find the source of the alarm.

It's an interesting touch, one that the mechanics of sidescrolling play demanded. How do you make a complex space when you can only walk left or right? How do you create that feeling of exploration when you can only go in two directions? A circular map is a neat idea, as otherwise you end up with sprawling worlds like *Castlevania II: Simon's Quest*, or a mixture of top-down exploration and sidescrolling like *Zelda II: The Adventure of Link*. Both offer deeper worlds, but *Castlevania's* is too spread out for the kind of desperate search *Friday the 13th* puts the player through. The scramble necessitates a tighter map.

What about the *Zelda II* example, though? *Friday the 13th* already mixes sidescrolling and third person, so why not add one more viewpoint? The developers could have made Camp Crystal Lake one huge, top-down forest and campground, but I feel like if they'd done that, they might not have been able to capture that feeling of getting lost quite as well without making a huge campground, which may have been beyond their budgets. Also, several elements would have needed to change, and the look of the game may have suffered as a result.

Part of *Friday the 13th's* horror comes from its visuals, and doing a top-down horror game might have added more challenge to capturing a certain look than its creators were prepared to do. I'm not saying it's impossible, but much more difficult. It's hard to communicate Jason's presence by looking down at his head and shoulders.

Not that a purple and teal Jason captures him entirely, either. BUT STILL.

Friday the 13th's play asks the player to seek out kids and counselors who are in danger all over the camp. Rather than have the player seek out where the trouble was, though, the game indicates exactly which cabin is being

attacked by having it blink on the map. The developers don't want you to have to look around for trouble, but to know its source and get right up in the danger's face. This idea is compounded by letting you switch counselors if you go into small cabins. The developers wanted you to be able to move around and get to Jason in a hurry.

If this is the case, the sensation of being lost would have to be a quick, temporary thing. If they wanted you to freak out and not know the way, they would not have wanted you to feel that way for long, as there are so many tools to tell you where to go. This makes the sidescrolling viewpoint very effective for what they're striving to do, as it is just confusing enough that you will lose your way the first few times, rushing off in the wrong direction before realizing it. Also, it will be just confusing enough that you might screw it up here and there, wasting precious time and increasing tension as you run after Jason.

It's a mechanic I initially thought was irritating, but a part of horror is in feeling lost and unsure what to do. It's about small mistakes having catastrophic consequences, especially when capturing the feeling of being under attack from a slasher villain. Choosing the wrong door, going upstairs when you should run, or lingering in the haunted house when you shouldn't have ever come inside are all hallmarks of horror.

Things grow worse in horror movies because a character makes an error in judgment, and you see more of that here with the way the walking path is set up. It's designed to mess players up a bit when they first start to play, forcing them to take time to figure out how to work the map. The game is paused while you're on the map screen, so you're honestly not in any real danger, but a starting player doesn't know that. Instead, they're left to simmer in their fear as they try to figure out where to walk.

When we move out of that phase and the player gets more familiar with how to get around in *Friday the 13th*, the game starts to prey on them making small mistakes as they rush. It plays to the horror movies the game was designed around, where a single mistake can have a high cost. That extra few moments going the wrong way while not paying enough attention, and how that can make a life or death difference for a character.

The walking paths of *Friday the 13th* may be a point of contention for some, but they let the developers play around with tension and terror in some interesting ways. Not unlike modern games like *Slender: The Eight Pages*, which uses darkness and an open wood to disorient its players. Here, you're looking for eight pages somewhere in the gloom, and you have a sprawling area to look for them in. It's a challenging task, especially when you cannot make eye contact with the monster or else you take damage.

Slender: The Eight Pages uses its huge level size to keep the player guessing at where they need to go, and a constant darkness and endless sea of trees to make it hard to tell where you're walking. There are landmarks that players will steadily learn to use that will help them along. However, run-ins with the monster mean you'll have to look away and run in order to stay alive. This forces the player to tear off in an unknown direction, and unless they're intimately familiar with where they are, it leaves them lost and afraid. Most often, you get to truly feel that fear and confusion in these moments.

Friday the 13th was playing around with that feeling of disorientation over twenty years before *Slender: The Eight Pages*, doing so simply through its sidescrolling map. It's quite a feat, and one that has a powerful effect on making the player uneasy, or at least keeping them from feeling too confident in their sense of direction. Or encouraging those fatal mistakes that make for some lethal twists in a horror story.

This isn't even factoring in the areas that ARE built to confuse the player. The woods and caves are mazes built within the game's world that hold some extremely useful goodies for the player to find. The thing is, they're both extremely challenging for first time players to deal with, as their layout needs to be explored to be understood. You have to sit down and make your own maps of these areas, rather than rely on the game to help you out. So, expect to take some time to figure these places out.

Thing is, Jason isn't the patient type. While you're off gallivanting around the caves seeking bottles of barely-useful medicines, he's still out stomping on your friends' heads. Taking time to figure out the caves or woods is extremely stressful, as you still have to deal with fleeing back to camp to deal

with Jason's attacks. If you've been doing a poor job of mapping these places, expect this to be a terrifying, stressful trip. One where you'll take excess damage, or possibly get your character killed while you hurry, which makes this even more panic-inducing.

However, as I said, these labyrinths hold useful treasures. When your characters are hurting, the medicines and special weapons contained within their winding halls can turn your whole game around. You just have to decide if the risk is worth it, or if it's safer to just slowly die while using the basic items you can find around the easier-to-navigate campgrounds.

This causes players to have to consider taking some dangerous paths in order to get the tools they need, willfully throwing themselves into areas that confuse them in order to have a better chance of winning. Like waiting for that mid-leap shot to stop a dog attack in *Resident Evil*, you have to put yourself in danger if you want to have the greatest effect on your foes. Except here, the risk is a lot greater than just wasting a shot or taking a single hit. Here, you'll probably die, or get another character killed.

It's interesting that these somewhat-optional mazes are present in *Friday the 13th*, as they represent a choice for the player to make (sometimes a bit more forced than others). You don't really HAVE to go in these places, but they offer some of your best chances of beating Jason. To overcome them, you'll have to throw yourself into an unknown area that is designed to get you lost (don't expect anything like *Slender: The Eight Pages*' landmarks here). You might waste precious time trying to map the areas, or waste health trying to get in and out of them as Jason mauls one of your pals. You have a slim chance of finding something useful without a ton of research and work.

For some, this means avoiding the woods and caves altogether. Still, you can feel that call coming from them, can't you? The promise of more power as Jason beats you again and again? Surely you can overcome it in some way. The pull of these areas will always be there, and sooner or later, you'll likely succumb to it, dealing with the dangers within, or deal with the hopelessness that comes from knowing you will have to beat Jason with weak tools so you can stay out of the woods.

Not that he can't be beaten with the stuff you find on the regular paths. Skilled players can totally do that. It's just...a lot harder. Until you know a whole lot about the game, that is.

Most often, this draw will encourage the player to take some big risks, willfully throwing themselves into danger. They'll need to face their fears, and even if they're comfortable with their skills in the game at this point, they'll be entering a situation where those skills will be tested. The challenge is far greater in these areas, which increases the tension of the experience. You may not be the jumpy kind of scared, but you're likely feeling a little bit nervous. Or the developers at least hope you are, preying on a fear of sorts, even if it is only the fear that you'll lose and have to restart again.

Again, it's impressive to see the developers preying on the player in this way. They're using feelings of weakness and inadequacy to make players do dangerous, foolhardy things in order to win. They're getting them to willingly walk into that haunted house in hopes a better weapon lies inside. They're getting players to run where they know they shouldn't because there's a chance it will work out for the better and protect them.

It'll eventually work. But unlike your average horror movie victim, you have a lot more lives to throw away on attempting to do it.

Simply getting around in *Friday the 13th* is an exercise in confusion, and I don't mean that as a bad thing. You're made to feel lost, like a protagonist in a horror movie. You're made to feel like you don't know where to go (to varying degrees), drowning in that sense of disorientation and fear that someone being stalked by a killer might feel. You're pushed to mistakes and risks by the environment, preyed upon by the land itself. You can't even trust the ground beneath your feet to take you the right way.

3.

While the land itself is causing you trouble, your six playable camp counselors are here to help. Some far more than others.

We brought up the six camp counselors before, but let's take a look at how their abilities immediately leave the player off-kilter, like the pathways have done before them. The big issue with them is that each has different throwing speeds, walking speeds, and jumping heights. Some are painfully slow, while others are the clear winners among the pack (which results in some other interesting aspects later on).

What's so unknown about that? For starters, we've already talked about how jarring their various styles may be if you happen to choose someone slow and awful at the start of the game. As you move on, their varied powers will continue to keep the player from feeling comfortable with any one play style as well. That's because these differences between characters can be quite drastic, resulting in a kind of relearning of the game depending on who you are playing as. A shift from Crissy to Laura means the game is suddenly very different for its players.

Some characters can leap over several enemies at once, while some can barely make it over a single foe. Some can outrun monsters, but others only plod along. Some can rip off three quick hits on a creature before it will make contact, but others can't.

This works to keep the player unbalanced and uncomfortable in a variety of ways. The first one is that each character only has one life. Once your counselor takes too much damage, they're dead and gone, and you're forced to switch to someone else. That 'someone else' isn't going to play exactly like your initial character, resulting in different movement and attack speeds that you'll need to deal with. These changes, while seemingly minor, force you to continually relearn how to play.

If you think you'll avoid that by choosing a strong character and keeping them alive, you won't.

Jason, being the lovable killer that he is, will constantly wander the campgrounds, stopping in at the various camps he finds along the way to clobber whoever he happens to stumble across inside. He can essentially take away your extra lives when you're not fighting him.

What does that mean for you? Well, you can run to whichever cabin Jason is currently painting with blood, but Camp Crystal Lake is quite large, and Jason doesn't waste time. If you choose to walk there, Jason will continually damage whatever counselor he's in the cabin with, or he'll start killing children. The latter one gets you a Game Over relatively quickly (you fail if your CHILDREN counter goes to zero from Jason murdering too many of them. PS – This game is kind of messed up for the NES), and the former will tear through your backup counselors in a hurry.

You have a helpful option to save you, here. You can swap counselors at will so long as you move your active counselor into one of the small cabins around the lake. This forces players to decide whether the damage is worth taking as you rush to get a better character there, or if they should risk it and swap to the weaker player. Not only does this push a rather macabre choice on the player (who do you sacrifice to Jason?), but it often means you don't have a choice but to try out new characters. You typically just can't pick one counselor and play them forever, and you certainly won't be doing it on those delightful first few playthroughs when your fear will be at its strongest.

This means that the switch in play styles is practically inevitable. You have no choice but to adapt to different play styles, as you'll be swapping to deal with Jason's attacks faster, or just to preserve health on your best counselor, which keeps up that sense of discomfort with the game. You can't settle into a play style, as it is always changing. This removes that level of knowledge and comfort in play that can take away some of the fear players endure while playing a horror game.

After all, most horror games are at their most frightening when you're first learning them. This is true simply because the unknown is scary, and this applies to mechanics as well as narrative and monster appearances. Learning how to effectively fight monsters is a big part of dealing with the fear you

feel in a horror game.

An example of this is *Silent Hill: Homecoming*. The reason it leaps to mind is that, to me, the combat was quite challenging during the first few playthroughs of that game. Title character Alex Shepherd, despite his military background, doesn't seem to be able to carry quite as many bullets as past *Silent Hill* protagonists could. This made combat situations more stressful than they'd been in past titles, as you wouldn't just be sitting on piles of ammo you could blast into enemies. You had to make sure your shots counted, or you ran away when you could.

Unless, you know, you got really good with the knife. Which wasn't even especially difficult once you got a handle on it. You simply had to rush everything you were going to fight, attacking so quickly the enemies would get stun-locked and you could slash them to oblivion. If they got the drop on you, you tended to be screwed, but if you got them first, the battle was yours. Even on the highest difficulties (which I know from personal experience).

Until that point, every combat situation in *Silent Hill: Homecoming* seemed unnerving because the combat mechanics were not entirely known to you. What you did know of them at first was not enough to deal with most monsters effectively, leaving you with a sense of tension and fear each time something sickening came wandering by. As you gained skills in combat and the systems became more familiar, your fear would lessen. You knew exactly what to do in a fight, and what once frightened you would only become a bump in the road. The game had lost most, in not all of, its ability to frighten by this point.

As you learn the mechanics of *Friday the 13th*, you'll naturally begin to fear Jason and his cohorts less and less. As these become systems to be gamed, you just stop being scared of them. However, the camp counselor swaps keep that fear going for just a little bit longer, as you can't entirely settle into one play style. All counselors may be able to use the same attacks and movements, but the speed they can do them makes each play differently. Likely enough to keep that comfort and certainty from settling in.

It doesn't hurt that many of the counselors really aren't adequately equipped

to deal with the dangers at hand. Some of them are just straight up unusable, save for the most skilled players. This means that, for the average player, they exist as a grim last stand against the monsters that roam the camp. They're the least likely to be played on purpose, so every switch to them becomes an exercise in discomfort. It's demoralizing to have to play as them, and the sense of impending doom is unlike anything I've seen in other horror titles.

Mainly, it's that sense that you never quite settle into a combat groove, or that it at least takes much more time than it would in almost any other horror game, that helps fear linger in *Friday the 13th*. The developers of the game created an interesting discomfort that would take growing player skill into account, forcing them to stay on their toes just a little bit longer than they would if all of the counselors worked the same. Even really good players would often be forced to use bad characters, and this would keep them from developing that comfort with the game that would erase their fear. There would always be that imposed switch to throw them off of their game.

This effect also plays around with the concept of 'lives'. For most games of the era, you'd be given a stock of lives to get through the game. *Friday the 13th* essentially gives you six lives, but some of these lives are definitely more valuable than others. You get six counselors to use to make it through the game, but as each one is killed, they become unavailable to use for the rest of the game.

For most players, this will represent a steady weakening as the game progresses, which will drum up some feelings unique to this horror title. The typical stock of lives for the era, or reloading from a checkpoint or save these days, will return the player to a previous point at a similar power level they had left off at. Maybe you would lose some special benefit you picked up during the level in older games, but you'd essentially get another chance at a similar state in which you'd begun the level. For reloading a save, you'd be right back where you were (although likely with some lost progress). Annoying, but your strength hadn't really diminished.

Friday the 13th changes this so that, upon each death, you have a tendency to get weaker and weaker. In theory, you might play with the worst characters

early on, but for the most part, you'd be losing strong characters over time, and find yourself relying on weaker ones. This meant that, with every loss of life, you'd see an appreciable difference in power on the next one. Those lives and reloads we take for granted in other games take on a far heavier weight when you find yourself looking at permanent downgrades for your characters on every failure.

If you just had six lives to use against Jason, would any one particular life really matter all that much? You lost one life, but you've got five more. It's annoying, but it's not THAT big of a deal. But what if that one life stood the best chance of helping you beat the game? What if your other lives were weaker, bringing you on a spiral towards failure? Suddenly, every life counts.

This, therefore, loads life with an importance, which is highly valuable when you're trying to scare folks.

Holly Green, Assistant Editor of Paste Games, has written some compelling pieces on horror (her work on *Rule of Rose* helped me figure out some complex feelings about the game), suggests that the threat of danger has to feel real in a horror game for fear to settle in.

“The threat has to feel real. The consequences of that monster or creature catching you has to also feel very real, meaning it has to have impact. And that can be hard to achieve in a video game scenario, in that video games are often a bit too forgiving to really make a gameplay consequence feel lasting,” she says.

“After all, it's hard to be afraid of consequences like, say, death, when you're just going to start over at a respawn point anyway. This can be subverted somewhat through design - for example, if save points are few and far between, players are incentivized to avoid death as much as possible. Disturbing animations or a disruption to the player's progression through the game, like taking an XP penalty, can also help. It's a narrative challenge in the sense that the player is inherently aware on some level that some elements of the story will be inevitable and unavoidable, which will work against the sort of tentative reluctance that many horror game atmospheres rely upon.”

We see that here with a loss of a valuable, specific life when Jason guts someone in *Friday the 13th*. You didn't just lose one of your many similar lives, but a single, specific life that may carry a high gameplay value, or perhaps a narrative value for you. The lives of the counselors carry meaning and specific weights, which in turn has the (un)pleasant effect of making Jason's appearances a bit more frightening as well. You're more afraid because you'll lose something unique when you find the killer.

George's life doesn't count, though, right? What about the worthless characters? Even they can be important as you struggle to make a final stand against Jason. It hurts to lose your powerful characters, but you can still fight back. George is difficult to keep alive, but he might just be able to turn the tide. It will just be a lot harder than it was a few moments ago.

Friday the 13th's difficulty skews harder as players make mistakes, which has the lovely effect of making you appreciate every little failure. Taking damage isn't something you can ignore or brush off, because if you take enough hits to die, you will become appreciably weaker on the next run. You can't just toss a life away and call it a bad run, hoping to do better next time. You need to fight to keep each character alive, meaning you take every encounter seriously.

Even the throwaway zombies and crows that come at you on the path carry a weight that basic, insignificant enemies normally don't. Because if they hit you, you're that much closer to a permanent state of weakness. You're that much closer to failure, even from one hit.

Screwing up makes the game harder. Not just for that single life, but for the rest of the game. You are steadily getting weaker with every goof-up for the entirety of *Friday the 13th*. You can't brush anything off, or hope that you play better on the next life. This loads every moment with tension, moving away from the disposability of lives and replacing them with a sense of value for each character. They represent a kind of withering of the player, one that ends in death and ruin.

This is an amazing concept for a horror game. Rather than give the player as many chances as they want, you get a slow decay from the moment the game

begins until it ends. You have permanent failure at the end, a concept that has loaded many horror games with heart-crushing levels of terror (try *Dead Space 2* on Hard Core mode, where death is permanent, if you want a taste of the idea put to work now). Not only this, but you're growing more feeble with every mistake you make. With every life lost, you're more guaranteed to die and lose.

This will have players scrambling to stay alive, making each encounter with Jason or the lowliest of enemies feel that much more frightening. It means your tension will go up with each fallen counselor, your chances of survival dropping as you're forced to use ever-worse characters. It makes for some tense, unsettling play as you watch yourself grow weaker.

While I like this concept, it's one uniquely suited to *Friday the 13th*. The shortness of the game means players aren't going to get as annoyed by losing power as they would over a ten hour game. Growing weaker from a mistake or two is something you can tolerate a bit more in a game that's only an hour long. You get to appreciate the unsettling effects of growing weaker as a killer stalks you, but not the irritation of finding yourself in a position where you have to restart a game you've sunk most of a week into.

This feeling can also create unique narratives from the game. A turnabout with George at the last second? Debbie suddenly pulls one of your valuable characters from the fire with a quick medicine or weapon delivery (you can share weapons and healing between characters, if you can get to those counselors in person)? Their varied powers can load moments with more drama, or create their own interesting stories of who lives and who dies. The counselors may be faceless characters in *Friday the 13th*, but their power levels give them their own personalities and opportunities to create narrative.

George, who I mercilessly pick on, stands out with his awfulness. Mark and Crissy have their own character in being the best at everything. The average characters, like Debbie and Paul, seem built to be helpers who come to the rescue of the weaker characters as the strong ones battle Jason head on. These descriptions came to my mind, unbidden, simply from how each of them played in the game.

The resulting effect is characters with actual character, even if the game doesn't take the time to set them up in a narrative sense. Have you ever had George deal the death blow to Jason, or even just fend him off despite his weakness? Seen Mark or Crissy fall from a few foolish blunders of a sneak attack you weren't expecting? Had Debbie manage to make her way through the caves to a harrowing battle with the severed head of Jason's mother (a fun little optional boss we'll talk about later)?

You could argue that this is just the nature of games. Whether these lives all have their own names or not, it is still your story of facing these beasts. You're controlling George and Mark and Crissy, so what does it matter that they have their own names? It's still you as the avatar.

To me, though, giving them their own unique names and abilities gives them an identity beyond the player. Despite their faceless looks, as I said, their abilities tell their stories. They hint at who they are. Maybe Mark is a jerk track star, or a fallen quarterback. Maybe Paul, with his average physical abilities, is looking to make a few bucks for college with a Summer job at a camp. Maybe Debbie, with her crummy stats, just wants to get away from the teasing at school and find a new identity out in this woodland campground.

Maybe Joel has an overactive imagination.

The point is, their abilities give them a form of narrative and character. They have a story, as they're not all just the same cutout character. They have something about them that makes them unique within the framework of the game, and that gives them a special presence within the game world. George has specific attributes that make him George, and no one else. These attributes can make playing with him more exciting and terrifying, creating a unique experience playing as him that you don't have when using the other characters. It makes each character feel special, in a way.

This, in turn, loans weight to their deaths. When a character falls to Jason, you have feelings specific to that character. Maybe it's relief that it's only one of the useless characters, or despair when the best counselors get a machete to the face. If you've been concocting a little story in your head around these faceless characters, there can be a bit of an emotional moment

surrounding their deaths.

Either through gameplay mechanics or your own busy mind, you feel a certain weight when a character dies that you don't necessarily feel when another one falls. These lives, when lost, come with their own unique feelings. You'll also feel something different should one of these characters get attacked, or if they narrowly survive an encounter with Jason and his monstrous cronies. It's not the same blanket sensation as it would be when a single character dies multiple times, which you see with lives or a save system. It's not the same as it would be when you know your avatar will be reappearing shortly.

This isn't the same as a game where you only have a single life to get through it, either. While this would make *Friday the 13th* much harder, it would ruin some elements of the game that make it unique. For our current line of thought, though, it's that a character can die and you can still finish the game. You can lose someone who has a personality and presence in the game and still make it through in the long run, but carry that specific, unique narrative loss through the story you and the game are collaboratively creating.

Plus, what's a slasher movie (or game) without a body count?

You might not feel much of anything when a character dies in a game. You probably don't feel much at all for our blank-faced counselors beyond a tinge of irritation if they're carrying valuable items. However, you do feel some sort of loss based on that character's abilities. Their own unique setup takes something out of the game that cannot be replaced on that run. It's a strange feeling, and while I wouldn't call it a sense of actual loss, there is a bit more weight to it than just losing a life.

It's still just a game, after all. You're only going to care so much when your character dies in a game, as they'll just be popping back in again once you're ready for another fight (unless it's for a narrative reason that's meant to leave you in tears). *Friday the 13th* falls into this camp, but it doesn't give you characters that are disposable, as it were. There are characters you'd probably prefer die over some of the better ones, but you still remark the loss of something when a character dies. Again, it could be relief that you didn't lose

someone useful, but you feel SOMETHING.

I find that extremely interesting for a game to capture, and especially a horror game. Giving the player some sense of loss when a character dies, no matter how small, loans it a bit more emotional weight than a simple loss of life or a respawn. It makes the player feel, even if only the tiniest bit, that something of note has been taken away. It gives Jason's actions more of a narrative power, and makes you appreciate the danger you are in just a bit more.

If it's a good character you're about to lose, you feel that even more keenly. As that life bar shrinks, you can feel the pressure building. The tension as you struggle to keep out of harm's way. The fear that you'll make a mistake. You will only get one shot with this character, and then you have to move on with someone else, afterwards. Your valued friend will be gone.

Yes, you can just shut off the game and try again, but that would get old really fast, and it would also defeat the point of the game. You're helping a group of camp counselors survive an attack from Jason. A slasher villain who's kinda known for not being a fan of teenagers. You can't just give up with the loss of one kid. If horror heroes gave up after the loss of one friend in a scary movie, the whole genre would shrivel up and die. It's about dealing with the bad odds and doing anything you can to survive. It's about the struggle as you're growing weaker.

You feel that struggle as you play through *Friday the 13th*, striving to do anything you can to keep those kids above ground. You really get to embrace the fear and despair as you watch the best and strongest fall, or feel that danger growing closer as your weaker members are picked off. Each death means your chances have gotten a bit worse no matter what is happening.

Having a few lives and a single counselor couldn't possibly capture that feeling of circling the drain - of everything steadily falling apart. With the six varied playable characters, you get to feel that tension as a killer stalks your group and tears it to pieces. You get a little sense of fear as each of your friends gets picked off, and as the game steadily grows harder with each loss. You can't reach areas as quickly. You lose the ability to move around the camp as easily. You lose your chances at having some backup. You get to

feel your hope dwindling, and while you would also feel that as your lives drained away, you don't feel it as keenly as you do with the loss of unique characters in *Friday the 13th*.

“You And Your Friends Are Dead. Game Over.”

It's *Friday the 13th*'s well-known Game Over screen, and it reflects the power the game places in character. These characters represent hope, each in their own way. Whether that hope is strong or weak, they still represent a chance at making it through the game's horrors. They each offer their own story through that hope, in a sense. They also represent a group of friends – people connected together. They're like your own group of high school pals and close-knit buddies.

And they are fighting to save one another. Like any group of close friends would (Probably). Therefore, there is an importance in bringing them all to safety together. In saving your friends from the loss of one of your numbers.

Friday the 13th doesn't really do much to explicitly explore this feeling (but how much time do horror movies spend on making sure you know that everyone is besties?), but it does create that connection through the varied gameplay abilities. It shows a group of teens who form a powerful whole, even if their members are weak on their own. No one character can fight off Jason by themselves (barring very skilled play and intimate knowledge of the game, which tends to hinder the spookiness), so they rely on one another to fill in the gaps. To overcome Jason and keep the camp safe, they'll need to work with each other. They will become one force against the evil that is coming for them.

It hurts when they're whittled down, as well. I highly doubt players will feel a twinge of sadness when Debbie kicks the bucket, but they still feel a gameplay loss as she falls. There is still that sense of despair as your chances grow a little slimmer, so you feel something as she dies. You definitely feel something should your more powerful counselors drop (even if that is just irritation). It captures a little sense of loss, even if it's only insofar as a sidescrolling horror game with faceless characters can manage. It's still more than that of most other horror games with player-filled avatars, though. Their

abilities give them an identity, their connected powers make them a family, and the losses they represent make you feel for their passing.

I am honestly stunned by this effect. It's not a deep emotional connection, but for a horror game that can (technically) be beaten in a few minutes, or one that mainly involves watching faceless characters get thumped over the head, there is an attempt to make you feel something. The developers could have left these kids without names or varied powers, but instead chose to make them different to keep play from growing stale. Who you are playing as matters, and therefore their position around the map matters. You feel something when forced to choose a crummy character. You feel something when you lose a good character. Again, it's the loss of a life in a video game, which can only have so much of an effect on you, but you still feel. You feel because that person had a name and identity. They had meaning for your playthrough.

In a sidescrolling horror action game from 1989, the developers created feelings of connection and friendship, and captured a sense of loss. It's limited, yes, but it makes me feel something more than if Mario blundered off a cliff or if I lost a life in *Contra*. I know they will be coming back, and I can try again. I can do the same in *Friday the 13th*, but not during that given run. There's a mortality within that run that didn't exist often in that era (*Double Dragon 3* had it, I guess, as characters died permanently. Except that game is more concerned with making me FURIOUS). There's a hint of loss there, even if it does boil down to a gameplay annoyance.

Yes, you lost a life in *Friday the 13th*. Boo hoo. Except that life mattered, dang it (if it was Mark or Crissy). And now, we must soldier on without them, with a demoralized player and demoralized friends. And maybe you eke out a win and have a neat story to tell. Or maybe you don't and you watch as your buddies die in despair, their mood matching your own withering hope.

"You And Your Friends Are Dead. Game Over." is a powerful message from the developers as you fail. It's a touch that makes this feel like something more than losing a game. It's a loss of cherished friends. It's a loss of characters who mean something. It's an attempt to make every life in the

game matter, even if they are terrible. It makes the disposability of in-game lives mean something more.

Making players feel something for the lives lost in a video game, even if it is just the tiniest of things, makes for much stronger horror, and in *Friday the 13th*'s case, does something I've seen few horror games repeat. For once we value our lives, we will be that much more afraid to lose them.

4.

Friday the 13th is a complicated game, especially when considered alongside the gaming landscape of its time. It was released in the midst of many popular sidescrolling action games, when the appeal of making another similar title had to be high. *A Nightmare on Elm St*, another horror franchise that received a video game iteration around the time, was a sidescrolling beat ‘em up filled with bats, snakes, and disembodied hands. It’s not without its own neat ambitions (having a sleeping/awake state in a beat ‘em up is neat), but it still represents a safe bet for the time.

Friday the 13th seems to be built around a similar kind of safe style. You walk side to side and hit monsters with thrown rocks, knives, and pitchforks. Seems like a simple blueprint for a game of the time. Still, its development team designed something far more complex out of the appearance of that framework.

Friday the 13th doesn’t just have you thumping creatures, but instead scrambling around a confusing campground trying to save as many lives as you can. In it, you have to stop Jason’s near-constant attacks all over the camp, chasing after the dangerous killer while also managing to arm yourself well enough to survive those encounters. You’re forced to hunt the thing that, in a typical horror game, you’re trying to avoid.

This forced chase creates a tension like few other horror games. In many frightening games like *Resident Evil*, *Rule of Rose*, or *Fatal Frame*, you can avoid getting into a fight with some of your enemies. You’re allowed to choose, to an extent, when you fight, and how you do it. You might be limited to a room or a position at times, but there are means of avoiding combat until you feel you’re ready. Barring that, you’re at least given the tools to deal with the dangers you meet if you’re forced into a showdown. You can screw up and leave yourself poorly-armed, which can create some gut-wrenching moments as you deal with an enemy encounter you just aren’t prepared for.

Friday the 13th seems to be built exclusively on those moments. When Jason

appears, you HAVE to deal with him. You can't avoid it, and you can't put it off until you're better armed. You have to seek out Jason the moment you hear that alarm tone that indicates someone is under attack. You have to go to him, rather than wait for him to come to you. And Jason is not easy to overcome once you find him.

Resident Evil 3 would use a similar style of attack to Jason from *Friday the 13th*. In it, Nemesis, a hulking monster that makes all other challenges in the game seem tame, will appear at certain points in the game to just wreck your day. He's extremely quick, very powerful, and will follow the player between screens, which was something of a surprise at the time. Just ask my dad how much of a surprise it was at three in the morning when I thought I'd ditched Nemesis when I walked onto a new screen. No one likes it when you scream in the middle of the night, by the way.

The principle is similar to Jason. You have a powerful monster that will dog the player, attacking them seemingly out of nowhere. You have little chance of overcoming the beast, and everything you throw at it does barely any damage. It's frightening to be chased by something so imposing, and made for some heart-clenching scares.

Jason does operate a bit differently, though. Unlike Nemesis, he is always whittling the player down, but not by directly attacking them. By striking at other counselors and the children, he is still damaging your playthrough, as this health pool between characters represents your chances of winning. He's not always attacking the player themselves, but his actions do cause a resource drain that is unsettling.

Jason is on your trail, like Nemesis, but there's something more insidious about him. With Jason, you have to seek him out. You can outrun Nemesis, or work to eventually escape it after a terrifying encounter. You don't get a message that Nemesis is around and that you need to go looking for him to pick a fight. In *Friday the 13th*, that's exactly what you need to do. You need to find that terrifying thing and start a brawl with it. You can't run away. You need to face it.

This was a big part of what made the game's play style so interesting for

horror. In most films, you'd see the characters working to avoid the killer creature. They're rarely looking to fight it directly (except for the climax). Games are about taking the fight to your enemies, though. So, you will have to fight Jason, right? It just makes sense, as a game.

Still, Jason is raw power, given form. You can take quite a few hits from basic enemies before you drop, but Jason can stomp the counselors flat in about three hits. Seeing that chunk of life come off of your life bar is a sobering sight, and one that can lead to panic and mistakes. Then, when you've died or managed to chase him off, you're left with that disturbing knowledge of how hard he can hit. So, when that alarm goes off moments later to tell you he's around again, you feel a little quiver of fear.

Friday the 13th takes the time to show you how strong Jason is, then leaves you to worry about it as it forces you into fight after fight with him. It lets you know that, in all likelihood, this thing will kill you, but that you need to keep fighting it. There is no running away.

Green experience a similar persistent, extremely powerful foe herself. "You know, personally, I didn't play *Resident Evil* when I was younger, but I did enjoy a *Fallout 3* mod that put Pyramid Head into the game. It was great; Pyramid Head would be spawned in a location inside Grayditch and once you met him, he'd follow you for the rest of the game, no matter where you went. You could fast travel all over the map, and like *It Follows*, he'd show up when you least expected it and kill you with a single hit."

"That sense of impending doom and uncertainty was intoxicating; you never knew when he'd charge up behind you, blade out and ready to slice you. I remember it rattled me particularly hard when he followed me all the way out to Adams Air Force Base, which is only accessible in the game by train."

Jason is pure power and persistence, not unlike the Pyramid Head from this mod. It's that sense of never knowing where he will be, but that he is likely on your tail. It's knowing how hard he will stomp you when he shows up. Both of these are what make his presence such an overwhelming, terrifying threat. It's that feeling that you can die at any point (and that this death will matter greatly due to lives carrying importance) that gives Jason such a

frightening power.

If you want another parallel to *Resident Evil 3*, Nemesis is set up in a similar fashion. You get shown a cutscene of Nemesis giving poor old Brad Vickers a new orifice in his face. It's gross, and also gives an indication of how much power he has. If that doesn't make it clear to you (and why would it? Monsters kill folks in cutscenes all the time), then the vicious fight with him that follows should make it clear.

Here, you get to see Nemesis' strength. As he throws poor Jill around, shrugging off bullets, you get a sense of your powerlessness against him. It is possible to kill him, but without a ton of practice, it's not going to happen. So, instead, you learn just how hard he'll kick you around if you run into him. When you finally learn that you can flee from him, you'll also learn that running away is the best tactic against him. The game teaches you to escape.

This setup makes for some great sequences later on, when the player suddenly finds themselves sharing tight hallways with Nemesis. Running from that thing as it rushes you or fires rockets will leave your heart pounding. Likewise, that first encounter with Jason will likely have similar effects on you. It lets the game demonstrate Jason's power in comparison to yours, and sets you up to fear this thing for the rest of the game.

But unlike Nemesis, you don't get the benefit of running away. You don't flee Jason like you would Scissorman in the *Clock Tower* series, or the disturbed characters of *Haunting Ground*. These games would also show the power of their antagonists through cutscenes or having the player experience their lethal skills first-hand, but you were expected or encouraged to run away from them. It's a tried-and-true horror game style, but *Friday the 13th* wasn't going for that.

Friday the 13th wanted you to feel that same fear, but then face it head-on. To see just how hard Jason could stomp you, but then have to go looking for him and fight him purposely. The game doesn't show you Jason's power in order to demonstrate that you need to run away. It wants you to know just how strong he is right before it forces you to face him over and over again.

It's an interesting design decision, given how many horror games usually use this weakening moment to show players that they need to run. Games like *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*, *Clock Tower*, *Hell Night*, and many others will show the player a monster of overwhelming power, and then encourage them to run away from it rather than fight it. It plays upon many of our existing feelings of revulsion and panic, and we happily hop right onto that plan. You want me to run from that guy with the huge scissors? NO PROBLEM.

Nemesis can technically be beaten every time he shows up, but he's so strong that fighting him probably isn't a good idea. The player then learns to run from him, but it's still kind of possible to take him down. As such, it plays around with this line a little bit, allowing for some fun mixed feelings of terror. Do you let your pride get the better of you and keep fighting? Do you give in to greed for those fancy items he drops upon death? Nemesis is a delightfully complicated look at how we deal with monsters in games. Especially the truly ruthless ones.

Friday the 13th, despite being years older than it, manages to go even further into the mixed feelings Nemesis drums up. In *Friday the 13th*, you pretty much have to tackle Jason no matter where he shows up. You have to experience his power, and then go rushing toward it whenever he rears his head. Which is pretty much constantly.

Jason patrols Camp Crystal Lake in a pattern that will become somewhat predictable with a bit of practice. The thing is, the campground is still huge, and Jason can easily clear a huge distance in a short amount of time. While on his morning walk, Jason likes to stop into cabins along the way and stab whoever happens to be inside. This means you'll be racing across large portions of the campground to catch up to him, or else swap to the counselor inside and hope they're capable enough to fight him off.

Here, we see that similar line of thinking to Nemesis. You have to consider whether you're in a position to be fighting something this strong, and how you wish to approach it. You can try to run your best character across the camp, but Jason will still be poking holes in his current target's face the whole time. This can lead to a weakened character later on, or a dead one if you waste too much time (or if you choose not to save them, which is

interesting in a narrative and play sense). You get to make a choice on how you wish to approach this battle.

Unlike Nemesis, there is a cost if you choose cowardice. Running from Nemesis can result in a few hits, but you'll get to save your ammo and healing items if you don't fight. Tangling with him can also leave you vulnerable for the next segment of the game, as you won't have many supplies to deal with what you face next. It's usually not a hard decision, as fleeing gives you more items and a better chance.

You can't really run from Jason without paying a price, though. It might be one you're willing to pay, as you may only be losing a lousy character or a few kids, but you still lose some of your available health and life pool. You grow weaker for choosing to run away.

Also, there is a direct benefit to facing Jason, as ending his life the end goal of the game. You need to take the time to whittle him down, or else you'll never finish. Nemesis isn't any weaker in the mandatory boss fights even if you fight with him during the optional ones, so there is no benefit there. You will get some good guns if you do take him down, but these may not be much of a tipping point for you. You can also beat *Resident Evil 3* without these weapons, whereas you won't be finishing *Friday the 13th* any time soon if you avoid Jason.

This pushes the player into a position where they know how bad they're likely to get beaten, but that they have to fight anyway. They might also have to do the fight in a manner they aren't really prepared for, as they might only be able to get to Jason in time by switching to a worse character. You can't build yourself to a point where you feel comfortable fighting Jason and then choose to take him on. You do it when the game tells you to, and if you choose not to, you'll lose life, or even the game entirely.

The result is an unsettling choice. You learn to fear Jason, but then you're forced to confront that fear, over and over again, in moments when you're often weak or unprepared. You get to embrace a sense of powerlessness in this, even as you're grabbing items and getting stronger. You get to feel weak and vulnerable against Jason, creating a sense of terror and panic every time

you hear the howling sound of the in-game alarm telling you Jason is attacking someone else.

Still, there is a certain feeling of power in knowing you have to fight a monster in a video game, right? If the developers expect you to fight a monster, then you have to be armed well enough to deal with it. Or that it's at least possible to arm oneself well enough to deal with our foe. Simply by the nature of being able to fight back, there is a kind of comfort and empowerment.

By this logic, horror games that make you helpless are naturally just scarier than ones where you can fight. *Clock Tower*'s unsettling Scissorman does seem to be a little more frightening than our purple and teal slasher villain, doesn't he? There is a sense of fear that comes from being helpless, and you are far from helpless in *Friday the 13th*. You've got rocks. They're not great, but Jason CAN be killed with them. Which is an empowering thought, which makes you feel capable of winning, which erodes that fear you would feel if you couldn't do a thing about Jason.

I don't think *Friday the 13th* would have been better if you'd been running from Jason the whole time, though. A big reason for this is that the technology of the time likely couldn't have handled this kind of experience. A sidescroller where you just run from a monster the entire time? I just can't see that working out very well.

Like I said earlier, modern 3D games gave the possibility of depth to a scene, allowing for more nuance to running around. You could skirt around things that were after you, and get to feel just how close they were as they turned to grab at you. Seeing that proximity in 3D space makes those games work, and lets you really sink into panic as you sneak by something that's after you.

2012 sidescrolling horror game *Lone Survivor* managed this without using 3D by having the player tuck themselves into cubbyholes in the wall to avoid monsters, but they worked well because you were dodging multiple foes. The game featured many zombie-like creatures to avoid, and sneaking into these nooks made for some tense games of hide-and-seek.

If *Friday the 13th* had focused on avoiding Jason, using these cubbies might have gotten a bit tired after a while. You'd often be stuck waiting for Jason to walk by or leave, which would have slowed the pace down considerably. Not that it's impossible to scare players with this slower play (*Lone Survivor* is excellent), but there is a sense of thrill to a slasher movie, isn't there? The gruesome action that comes fast and hard when it finally finishes setting up its atmosphere?

Friday the 13th sought to hit the player like that, skirting the line between action and horror game. It used a similar speed one would expect from sidescrollers of the time, but used it in careful ways to horrify the player. It could have tried something with avoiding Jason and running from the camp, but I feel like it was trying something unique. As I've said, there are ways to make horror work in a 2D sidescroller, but I feel like the developers wanted to use the speed and intensity of a sidescrolling action game and shape that into a horror experience instead.

It doesn't seem like a great idea at first blush, and you only have to look to *Castlevania* to see why. A fast-paced (well, for a whip-slinging slowpoke) action game where you have to lash out at horror monsters didn't really end up all that scary, did it? Even when you're fighting vampires and fish men and little creepy dudes, it never really became an experience I felt was frightening (not that I think horror is what it was shooting for). It was steeped in a horror atmosphere, but only in that it drew from horror lore, not because it was particularly spooky. It was scary when a bat came lunging at you as you made a jump you were totally committed to, but not 'scary' scary.

A Nightmare on Elm St seemed to be working from a similar angle, using horror monsters in an action game to build up an unsettling atmosphere. The trouble was that Freddy was kind of a trash boss, once he finally appeared, among other issues. Your player characters, when they weren't punching ghosts and spiders in the face (which kind of makes things un-scary in and of itself), are steadily falling asleep as they explore Elm St. Taking damage speeds this up until, eventually, you nod off and end up in an alternate realm where things get a little bit spookier. Think the nighttime transitions from *Castlevania II*, if you need an example.

Here, after a set amount of time, you would start to hear the unsettling chiptune version of “1, 2, Freddy’s coming for you...”, followed by an attack from Freddy himself. This could be quite jarring as you’d transition to another realm out of nowhere, finding yourself going toe-to-toe with the killer creature. However, Freddy’s feeble, almost absentminded swipes felt like a joke after only a few moments, and you could easily run circles around the killer. Not exactly frightening stuff, which sabotaged any tension the game could have built up.

Oh yeah, and you can also collect Dream Warrior abilities in the dream world that gave you way better attacks and movement. So, falling asleep became something you wanted for the power boost. I like it as an action game, but as a horror title, it’s all backwards.

Friday the 13th took sidescrolling action play and made horror work within it, though. It found a way to use the perspective and make it possible for players to feel lost within it, taking away their confidence in their positioning and ability to get around. By necessity, the campground had to be laid out in a circle, but it could be just confounding enough to work out the clockwise/counterclockwise movement required to get you through it.

It made the experience of fighting monsters work to unsettle the player by giving them surprise time limits while dealing with it. Monsters didn’t present much challenge on their own, but they’d come in packs while the player had to rush to get to other areas of the camp. Even if they weren’t scary, so to speak, they represented another problem to juggle, and therefore an increase in tension. When you’re racing around, confused, these ever-spawning zombies become a source of further anxiety.

They add to the action of these segments, too, playing on the fast-paced enemy slaughter that made games like *Castlevania* so much fun. It feels good to whip monsters, and it feels good to clobber them with rocks. Both games play with unwieldy weapons to add challenge to the combat, though, forcing players to factor in whip windups and rock trajectories so fighting is more of a considered thing. You can’t just slam the button and mow foes down, but must think about how each attack works in reference to enemy and environment. Every button press is a thought-out act (although it does

become second nature eventually).

You need to fight these monsters to get new weapons, but you also have to get to wherever Jason is, too. And when you do have a run-in with the purple lout, you get to feel his raw power. Dying in a handful of hits as opposed to the many you can take from basic enemies makes his presence feel intimidating. You're not dealing with Freddy's feeble swings, but a monster who aims to kill your character in moments. And indeed, they'll be DEAD. Gone forever. Jason doles out pain in ways that will directly affect how you play from here on out.

It all works within the framework of an action game (with maybe a bit of cheating with the first person perspective in the cabins). It makes for a harrowing experience fraught with tension, but still done in the shape of many of the action games of the time. It builds on that quick-paced action play style, where players need to deal with dangers quickly and effectively, but throws in unfamiliar elements that make the game confusing and unsettling. It builds on the sidescrolling action formula to bring horror to it.

Why would framing it like a sidescrolling action game be so important? Possibly to draw in unsuspecting players. It looks just like an action game where you fight Jason, judging from the screenshots from the box (well, maybe with a little exploration). However, you're entering into a horrifying chase instead, one that plays with the expectations of an action game of the period to create something clever and new.

This is one of its more horrifying elements, honestly. As I've said, most other horror games of the time were action games that empower the player while carrying some spooky elements. You'd be fighting ghosts and monsters and the like, but you'd be fighting from a position of strength. Beating these games was hard, but your arsenal tended to give you the feeling of having a great deal of power. Maybe you didn't feel that way when Death hit you with eight scythes all at once in *Castlevania*, but there was still some sense of empowerment, there.

You're probably thinking that I have no idea what I'm talking about, as there is no person on this planet who felt empowered by that miserable level before

Death. If I'm trying to make the point that players would feel empowered as they played – to be made into action movie stars of a sort – then how? It's not through the weapons, as *Castlevania* and *Friday the 13th* both feature weapons players can gather as they explore, gaining power. *Castlevania*'s weapons are arguably worse, too, as *Friday the 13th*'s enemies die much quicker to newer weapons, whereas *Castlevania*'s special weapons were really only good in certain situations, varying their usefulness. So, you're a filthy liar there, Joel.

And taking hard bumps? Have you forgotten how much damage you take on each hit in the final stages of *Castlevania*? The most basic trash enemy dealt almost as much as Jason near the end of *Castlevania*. WHY DID I BUY THIS BOOK IF YOU WERE JUST GONNA TALK NONSENSE, JOEL?

Is it the straightforward path? Getting lost in the woods isn't enough to make a sidescroller scary. Neither is having to rush around the same map looking for the right cabin. Mucking about doesn't suddenly make an action game feel frightening.

It's in death that we feel what matters. Again, we look back to the fallen counselors, and their differences in power levels. Their lives mean something, as in dying, they can drastically change how you'll be playing from here on. If you die in *Castlevania*, there is a drop in power as you lose your stronger whip and weapons, but you still have your fundamental abilities. Your jump and weapon swing aren't any worse. You have an equal chance of victory no matter which life you're on, whereas *Friday the 13th* offers very different difficulty levels that get doled out on the seemingly random whims of where a killer ends up in your game.

Building upon this, the other elements become frightening, rather than just horror elements in an action game. Taking tons of damage matters more because you may be losing your best chance at beating Jason. Losing a life in most other action games means having your victory chances lowered from lost weapons, but not that your whole play style needs to be adjusted.

Combining that with Jason's sudden appearances, his immense power, the ability to get lost, the challenge of finding the items you need while juggling

keeping everyone safe, and the fact that you have to seek out that which would normally frighten you in a horror game, makes *Friday the 13th* work as a horror game within an action game's frame. The importance of death helps fuse everything together.

It does all this while preserving the speed of an action game, too. Let me be blunt here: hiding is horribly dull. *Clock Tower* suffers through some fear-crushing moments where you're just doing nothing while hiding from the enemy (as well as the boredom that comes when Scissorman just isn't around for ridiculous amounts of time). Sticking yourself in a locker in *The Evil Within* or *Outlast* is tedious, pure and simple. For some folks, maybe it provides tension, but for me, I just get bored out of my mind waiting for the scary thing to buzz off.

Friday the 13th could have gone down that road, but I feel it would have been extremely boring. So, instead, it played like an action game, working within its faster frame to create something frightening anyway. It does so through playing with the meaning of a player's life, which then takes elements of challenge, stage layout, and attack patterns, all of which weren't scary in other games, and creates an interlocking system around the meaning of life, which in turn helps every element get that much more frightening. All horror is the sum of its parts – a house of cards that tumbles unless every piece does its part.

Facing your fears in a realm where life mattered made for some excellent horror, and all while preserving the pace of what made many games appealing at the time. It's a delicate balancing act, but one the developers got right.

5.

The tools you use were a big part of making *Friday the 13th* into a more frightening experience as well. Not just because swinging a rock at a supernatural killer was scary (which it kind of is), but that they represent a sensation of randomness within the normally static world of video games.

If I want to find ammo and weapons in *Resident Evil*, they're all kind of there for the taking, aren't they? Despite the unsettling atmosphere of the game, I still could get a pretty good idea where stuff was lying around. Just look for those glimmers of light and you were in business, baby. You could see that there was something good lying around with a glance. Just don't get so excited that you get yourself killed, though.

Friday the 13th didn't especially care if you knew how to arm yourself or not. It didn't even care if you had any idea where to look for items.

"*Friday the 13th* definitely bears many hallmarks of a survival horror game, which is pretty remarkable considering it's an NES title. It really captures that feeling of scrambling for supplies and for safety, knowing you're always at a disadvantage when you face all the terrors lurking around Camp Crystal Lake," says Ponder.

Admittedly, you could arm yourself with a useful array of tools in *Friday the 13th*. For starters, you could upgrade that crummy rock into a knife by clobbering enough zombies with pebbles. If you got too preoccupied cutting zombies with your knife, you could unlock a machete (that you THROW) for a little more stopping power. Not that you'll know that at first, as the game gives few tips as to how you unlock these weapons (although it does hint that you'll get better weapons for killing foes in the manual. Again, assuming you read it). You could also find a torch, although that was an extensive job to get, as was the axe and pitchfork. All handy to throw.

Tools aren't limited to just picking up new weapons, either. You can collect lighters to help set fires in the fireplaces of big cabins around Crystal Lake (which helps unlock stuff eventually), find medicine to heal your counselors

(a very small amount, although they did give you an instant revive upon death), a flashlight that let you see in the caves, a key to get into a place Jason would rather you not go, and a comfy sweater that makes Jason less inclined to cut you up (his mom would be SO MAD if he ruined her good sweater).

That's a lot of possible goodies to be looking for. But how did they capture that sense of scrambling for supplies in a sidescroller, though? If there's so much junk you can pick up, how did they make the player feel they were always low on supplies?

For starters, all of these items are very well hidden around the campground. Like, invisible, well hidden. Medicine and keys can be found by leaping around the camp and hoping you make contact with a spot where they happen to be sitting, all invisible-like. Since they don't appear until you touch the spot they're sitting in, it makes them nearly impossible to find when you're in a bind. They're an extremely welcome boon when you stumble over them, but it's very hard to reliably know when you'll find medicine or a weapon (without EXTENSIVE knowledge of the game).

Medicine feels like a random stroke of luck more than anything you can rely on, which adds to that fear you feel when confronting Jason. It's not like you can easily get your health back, as finding medicine is extremely difficult without encyclopedic knowledge of the game. Personally, I assumed they showed up in random places throughout the game, which often had me leaping everywhere in a panic as I neared death. Turns out they're in specific spots, but given that most of the campground looks the same, unless you're paying close attention to the map, they'll be hard to find. This makes you further reliant on other counselors, rather than a hope you'll heal yourself. Plus, wandering and looking for stuff tends to put you in worse danger than just trying to press on.

The same goes for the weapons you get for killing zombies. Yes, a knife tends to come fast, giving you a slightly better tool to fight with, but you have to kill dozens of zombies for that machete unlock. If you're taking that kind of time to kill monsters, you're going to be finding Jason coming after you more and more while you try to build those numbers up. You're going to be suffering losses. It's often better to just avoid zombies and rush around to

stop Jason's attacks (to keep from losing the game) or going after the hard-to-get weapons and items (so you might actually be able to kill him). It's a nice bonus if a special weapon pops up, but it's hard to seek them out.

Still, at least the machete is reliable. To get the other weapons, you have to light fires in cabins, follow where hidden notes will lead you, find locked hidden rooms in the woods, or tangle with optional bosses. You have to work through the mass of winding passages and caverns that make up the Caves and Woods to get the really good stuff, and all while Jason is still giving the kiddies a hard time. And dealing with the confusing nature of finding your bearings in this 2D game.

Your best chance of fighting Jason involves scouring the campground for clues and hidden goods. It means going into the woods or caves and mapping them out, which would be a challenge on its own, but Jason is still gutting counselors while you do this. So, you have to move through a confusing area, mapping it if you want to have any hope of getting back again or of finding anything safely, and doing so in a hurry. You have to be ready to flee back to fight Jason, or take the loss of a counselor and keep pressing on.

Friday the 13th forces the player to make some unsettling decisions if they want to find the equipment they need to take Jason out for good. Do you let some people die for the greater good? It plays into the narrative element we discussed before, with the player deciding who is worth turning back for. Who sacrifices themselves to buy time for the other survivors? Or is every life worth saving, even if it means turning back and likely failing your mission? It presents an intriguing narrative choice that makes this game all the more unsettling.

It also adds tension on the player. It's difficult to risk going out to get the good items because it means willingly throwing yourself further into danger, playing upon the game's theme of facing what frightens you. Getting effective weapons in a horror game can often be a challenge, but the tools to efficiently fight bosses are rarely kept from players in extremely difficult-to-reach places. You don't have to fight optional, hard bosses in order to get the basic tools you arguably need to win. But *Friday the 13th* never seemed too interested in playing fair.

You could say that claiming these items is all part of the normal game loop. You're expected to go out into the caves and pick a fight with Jason's mother's floating head. You're expected to figure these out as part of the game. Yes, it's possible to beat Jason without these tools, but it's just as possible to beat the final bosses of many horror games with basic weapons as well. It's hard, but it can be done.

The key, to me, is that it is prohibitively difficult to get these items. Most horror games will make you work to get good stuff, but they won't make you work extremely hard. Getting the shotgun when it first appears in *Resident Evil 4* makes a powerful enemy appear in an already-challenging area, but said shotgun also makes it easier to beat that same foe. It's not exactly hidden, either. Getting the best film in the various Fatal Frame games can force you into some dangerous situations, and the cost may not prove to be worth it, but these often involve combat situations that are challenging, but not extremely so.

Navigating the caves and woods is extremely hard, though. They don't make a great deal of sense without taking the time to map them out, which is hard enough on its own with Jason constantly attacking the camp. They are also filled with the game's dangerous wolf enemies, which can leap and have odd attack timing, meaning you're more likely to take damage. So, you run an extra risk of getting your counselors or yourself hurt as you fight.

Finally, you have to deal with the optional boss of Jason's mother, Pamela, when you want to get something really good. Arguably, she's far more irritating to fight than her son, as she's a disembodied head that flits around the top of the screen before swooping down to attack you. It's similar to the *Punch-Out!!* style of fights you have with Jason (which we'll talk more on in a bit), except she sticks higher up on the screen, making her a bit harder to hit predictably. Also, as you're trying to throw your shots so that they'll hit her all the way up there, you tend to forget that she can come lunging down at you quite quickly, easily scoring a hit or two if you're careless. Oh yeah, and she can come swooping down at an angle, which is new.

At least she dies a lot quicker than her son, taking far less hits to put down.

Except the fight isn't going to stop early once she gets low on health (Jason tends to flake off after a few hits). You're in this fight until the end, and it's usually your own.

Oh yeah, and it's really hard to find her in the caves without a lot of experience getting around in them.

Still, if you can take her out on each of the game's three days, you get some good stuff. You get a weapon upgrade depending on what item bring to the fight with her on day one, a protective sweater that lowers the damage you take from Jason on day two, and the extremely powerful pitchfork on day three. It's good stuff, and all of it may make a big difference in your fight against Jason.

That said, will you make it through that fight with Pamela? Will you lose a few counselors or kids while trying to find the hidden rooms in the caves? Will you lose a ton of health as you work your way through these events? Are you better off teaching yourself to work with the tools you can find outside of these dangerous areas, as this plays it a bit safer and doesn't put your characters into unnecessary danger?

After all, you can get the Torch relatively easily from some cursory exploration and a trip to the woods. You don't even have to go into the caves or deal with Pamela at all. The torch weapon deals as much damage to Jason as the Pitchfork and is far easier to get (although it still involves some knowledge of how the game works, a map of the woods, and the discovery of a few notes).

If that doesn't interest you, you can always try to work with the machete, which you get from killing tons of zombies (which you'll likely be doing anyway). You need to hit Jason three times to take off one of his life bars as opposed to hitting him once with the Torch, though, so this plan is risky in its own ways, too. Still, if the woods and caves have you nervous, or if you just don't have the life energy left to find something else, it's not a bad weapon to use.

What's interesting with all of these plans is that they all contain elements of

risk, in one form or another. There's no one plan that's particularly safe. Using low-power weapons means not dealing with complex areas, but you have to fight Jason for much longer, running the risk of taking more hits. You can go for the solid Torch weapon, but it involves a lot of legwork, which might also wear your characters down. You can go for the best weapons in the caves, but you have to face extra bosses and even more challenging areas to get to them.

All of these plans are risky in their own way, and while the Torch seems like the lesser of all evils here to me, that might not be the case for another player. Some might highly value that Sweater to soak up Jason's damage and slow him down a bit if they're clumsy, and others might find that all of the fussing around the camp isn't worth it when you can just focus on tackling Jason head on. There are multiple plans of attack players can take through the game.

This works with *Friday the 13th*'s themes of putting pressure on the player and forcing them to tackle things that scare them head on. In choosing what items they'll need to approach the challenge of defeating Jason, they'll have to do something that likely frightens them. They'll need to tackle Jason when they're weak to avoid going into the caves and woods. They'll have to solve a complex puzzle and carry out many actions, all while going into some confusing, challenging areas while also managing Jason's attacks in order to get the Torch. They'll have to face even more difficult foes and complex areas if they wish to get the best weapons and defenses, and STILL manage to deal with Jason at the same time. All of them create a fearful anxiety in their own way, and there is little you can do to avoid it. You're going to be mulling over what you should do, second-guessing your plans.

In this, *Friday the 13th* forces the player to do something that makes them uncomfortable no matter what they choose. They'll have to willingly throw themselves into additional danger in order to improve their chances, no matter which way they feel is the best route to fighting Jason. The player has to embrace a certain amount of fear and uncertainty with each possible plan, and as such, the developers have used items and weapons to make the player feel more uneasy within their world.

There is no quick and dirty plan that works without a great deal of experience. So, you get these tense first runs at the game where you find yourself lost in the woods, or running head-first into a floating head that mauls your counselor. Or, you find yourself woefully unprepared as you chase a killer from cabin to cabin. You're always moving forward into something that makes you nervous or that you don't feel equipped to deal with. There is rarely a point where your arsenal will make you feel entirely competent to deal with the danger you're facing, and certainly not without taking some great risks yourself.

There are safe plans to get through *Friday the 13th*, but there are safe plans to get through most horror games. However, getting to the most effective weapons and tools can often require a great deal of risk, rather than an action game that gives you the best equipment in other ways. Think of the Spreader in *Contra*. It's not long before you can pick that up and mow enemies down. When you do this, you feel pretty good about yourself. You feel strong. Maybe you're not that strong, since a single shove from an alien will kill you, though. It's important that the player feel powerful with that weapon, though.

You'll likely feel that same power from getting the pitchfork from *Friday the 13th*, but you'll put in a lot of work to get it. You'll hunt through mazes and seek out invisible items to find it. You'll risk your friends' lives and your own, and have to deal with additional hardships, to finally grasp it. You might even lose it in dying on the way back, or if you stupidly pick up a knife while walking around (because of course *Friday the 13th* allows you to accidentally downgrade your items with a pickup. And pickups are invisible until you accidentally stumble upon them).

That feeling of empowerment comes hard in a horror game, and it has to be fleeting. You cannot make the player feel strong easily if you want them to feel fear. That's why it's kind of hard to be scared in *Doom* when you've got the shotgun in your hands – it loans the player strength and confidence (although *Doom* soon takes that confidence away with increasingly-vicious foes). It makes them feel equipped to deal with the problems at hand, which runs counter to the feelings of powerlessness that are required to feel fear. If you feel like you can handle all of your problems, you might be startled when they arrive, but you don't feel fear.

This was something that *Fatal Frame* demonstrated effectively. You may have a camera that kills ghosts by taking their pictures, but the phantoms often moved erratically, or could shift behind walls and out of view. They could fade out of sight and shift into other locations. Enemy position is something we often take for granted in what we play, but knowing where your enemy is makes all the difference in how you feel about a fight. A foe that can obscure this information makes the battle all the more unsettling, and even if you know how to use that camera well, you're not quite certain how to deal with an enemy you cannot find. You might be strong, offensively, but knowing where to point that weapon is where the game continues to unnerve.

It's also super scary to turn and have a ghost lunging for your face, too. That doesn't hurt.

First person horror game *Enemy Zero* would also use this to great effect. Its enemies are all invisible, and you're a bit slow to move and load your gun. You have to gauge where your foe is by sound, taking that shot at just the right time if you hope to live. It can feel obscenely unfair, but the tension is undeniable as you pray your aim and timing are perfect.

These are games where you don't feel entirely equipped to deal with danger, keeping the player from gaining that sense of power in the game. This allows them the space they need to feel fear, and *Friday the 13th's* weapons are purposely challenging to get to ensure the player never gets to that point of confidence as well. If players want to reach it, they'll need to work hard, throwing themselves into additional, unsettling dangers to do so, increasing their anxiety and stress as they play. It forces them to confront the fears they have of those challenging places as well, creating a deeper sense of fear surrounding the game as they strive to arm themselves enough to hopefully overcome.

This is all just to give yourself a better chance of winning, too. This isn't victory, but a step toward it. This is just part of the progress of the game, and the developers used it to make the player feel even more lost, alone, and weak. The search for these items will leave many lost and confused, creating more of that panicked disorientation that helps increase terror. You get to feel

that fear of Jason growing closer as you run through the woods, taking path after path in blind hope you get somewhere. It plays on that fear in incredible ways for a game of that era.

And for just a CHANCE at power. Even then, you can still lose it in a blundered item grab. Should you have the torch and accidentally pick up a knife while exploring, your good weapon will be gone. Lost in a single, unfortunate movement. It feels beyond unfair, but think about what the game looks to capture. Being chased by a nigh-immortal character shouldn't be fair. Fear does not play fair. Gaining a weapon of superior power erodes some of that fear, so giving it an impermanence in the game does wonders to keep that fear going.

You can lose that weapon through dying or a single stupid accident. You may have the most powerful weapon in the game, but that power is fleeting, teetering over a precipice it may tumble off of at any time. As a game, it's absolutely infuriating, but as a horror experience, it keeps the player from feeling confident and forces them to stay uneasy even when they're at their most powerful. It gives them something new to be afraid of – the idea that their best chance can go right out the window out of nowhere. It can all fall apart at any moment.

Friday the 13th makes some sharp decisions regarding its items, forcing players to seek invisible tools in dangerous places if they hope to live. It makes them confront dangers they'd otherwise ignore to get a fighting chance of beating Jason. It makes them struggle over which way they want to fight, and pay prices they don't want to. Then, in the end, it might all get snatched away by one cruel mistake – a moment of narrative climax where the hero or heroine drops their only weapon, leaving only the dramatic finish where you face the killer, unarmed.

6.

Sound is a large part of making horror effective. It's ability to invoke the imagination, giving simple noises a dark meaning, or through loaning tension to a single moment, makes it an integral part of almost all good horror.

Friday the 13th doesn't exactly have a broad scope of music and sounds in the game, though. Much of the soundtrack is quite limited, offering only a handful of tunes and sounds to keep the fear train going. This seems like a gross misstep, given how much horror relies on sound to make it truly effective. Give a listen to *Corpse Party*'s deeply-concerning sound effects if you don't believe me.

With sound being such a key element to horror, how does *Friday the 13th* measure up?

"It's bad, but oddly effective," says Anthony Swinnich, chiptune artist and game developer with Neon Deity Games. "The first thing that comes to mind is that the overworld loop lasts roughly four seconds. I can hum it from memory to this day. I both hate and love it, which might be Stockholm's Syndrome speaking. The rest of the game's audio is similarly limited in scope, but the execution is slightly smoother."

The main loop that you hear as you explore the campground, lake, woods, and caves is extremely short, resulting in a droning series of tones that never, ever end. It's the sort of stuff that, as Swinnich says, burns itself into your ears after only a few minutes, making it extremely memorable, but it's just too short and simple of a loop to do more than irritate the player.

However, there is possibly a certain purpose to this aggravation. The repeating tone sets the player on edge, constantly badgering them with the same handful of notes over and over. This minor irritation can get on the player's nerves, serving to distract them just the tiniest bit from the task at hand. It takes just enough of your attention away that it can force you to make little slip-ups that you might not if you were calm and relaxed.

Looking at it this way, the rough sound serves to keep the player from settling into any sort of comfort zone while playing. There's still this annoying loop that draws just enough attention that it gives you one more reason to mess up and lose some more health, or make a poor decision. Seeing as you're angry, it can push you to make more aggressive calls, or throw yourself into more foolhardy situations as your temper is already short.

I feel like I'm reaching here, but I can't get it out of my head. The main musical loop is short and annoying, possibly due to a lack of budget for the game's sounds and songs, but it has this odd effectiveness. Its droning tone set me on edge as I played, getting me just a little bit annoyed and a little bit more clumsy. It would make me get angrier at my mistakes, and usually keep me from thinking clearly enough to avoid making new ones.

Being angry isn't necessarily conducive to fear, but a little rage at your near-unkillable enemy is kind of normal, really. You're going to be just the slightest bit annoyed at someone killing your best friends, I'd think. This music captures that, if in an odd way, forcing a tiny bit of rage out of the player. Not that Jason can't do that all on his own once he starts moving around at absurd speeds on day three. But in this way, the repetitive music kind of works for a horror game. Kind of?

There are other, far more effective tracks in the game, though. The cabin theme isn't overly long either, but contains a gloomy, unsettling mood. It gives off a sense of mystery and danger lurking in the dark, its low tones invoking a sense of unease. Given that it plays in a place where you're active bumbling in the shadows, looking for Jason, it creates a sense of dread that is just right for your dangerous actions. "The cabin music lends some intrigue to these more thoughtful sections," says Swinnich.

The cabins are often the culmination of your search for Jason – the final step just before you run into the beast. You know it from seeing his health bar show up on-screen, or from a camp counselor's weak offer of thanks upon entering the cabin. You know he's here, and that downcast track plays as you begin your search for the killer. It hints at things that are watching from the darkness, creating an effective mood despite how short it is.

When you finally find Jason, you're reintroduced to a familiar sound effect – a stinging, brief series of sounds that indicate Jason is right on top of you. This tone plays when the knife enters the eye of Jason's mask on the title screen (which is a pretty cool start, although it definitely lies to you about how powerful you're likely to be in this battle with Jason).

You know this sound is tied to Jason, but when it plays during the game, telling you that Jason is right there before you, it's jarring and frightening. "The stinger at the title screen works shockingly well when it abruptly announces Jason's arrival in game," says Swinnich.

This short series of sounds is like an alarm – a warning to tell you that you're in great danger right now. It always plays as Jason attacks you on the paths, in the lake, or inside of a cabin, and by the time your mind has likely registered the sound, he's already on top of you. The mixture of near-immediate damage and attack along with this short song makes the tune extremely effective at startling the player, creating an instant anxiety.

The song also marks a change in how you play through the game. You're no longer exploring or seeking out something, but are locked in vicious combat against a fast, relentless enemy, with the transition happening in milliseconds. You can't just shake him off with a few hits or leave the screen once he's here, either – you're locked into this situation with Jason and will have to fight your way out.

When you hear this song in your first encounter with Jason, it imprints itself upon you. You're likely left confused and unsure what to do as the game changes combat styles just to fight with Jason (fighting in a cabin involves a first person *Punch-Out!!* style rather than sidescrolling combat), or alters the rules about how you can change the screen's position by walking around, leaving enemies behind (the screen locks in place if you encounter Jason on the campground). It plays when you're thrown into a situation you aren't prepared for. Maybe you'll be more prepared for it later on, but on that first time, you won't be.

That sticks with you, through this track. It exists as a reminder of that first, unprepared moment. That time when Jason struck at you, and you didn't

know what to do. It reduces you back to that moment of panic, and brings you to an all-new terror as Jason comes at you with little warning again, forcing you to orient and collect yourself with very little time to do so. That song always carries that kind of rushed shift in perspective, play, and mindset, carrying it right back to your mind with only a few notes. It's powerful stuff, and still startles me to this day. Part of that comes from Jason's sudden attacks just being startling on their own, but that track is always what leads the charge, jarring me before my eyes and reflexes can react.

When you're fighting with Jason, yet another short track plays. This one might get on your nerves as well due to its brevity ("The battle music is incredibly repetitive and quite boring, but battles are infrequent and brief enough that it wouldn't grate on you," says Swinnich), but there's an intensity in the hammering notes of the track. It feels extremely aggressive compared to the game's other, more laid-back tunes, carrying with it the cruel intentions of our current screen partner. It feels brutal and overpowering – a force that is lumbering toward you. It's almost train-like – a steady force that keeps moving forward, crushing everything in its path with its steady, even notes.

It's quite effective when you're using the game's offbeat *Punch-Out!!* battle system to stay ahead of Jason, and is equally effective on the paths. It captures Jason's strength and makes you feel it through sound, enhancing these battles with an intensity on top of the fact that you'll probably die in like three hits.

This intensity is helped by the fact that fights with Jason are rarely very long, as you only need to hit him a few times to make him temporarily run off, or to take a few before your counselor drops to the floor, dead. You won't be hearing this track for long, which allows it to make its impact without irritating the player (most of the time). And even if it does aggravate, it still gets the player to slip up and make some mistakes, sometimes. It gets under your skin, and takes that tiny bit of concentration away.

It mingles fear and anger all together in its own way. You get to sense the power of what you're facing, feeling awed and afraid of the danger you're in.

While you get annoyed at the song, you get that taste of anger you'd feel in this situation. Not that you'd be mad about the bad music that plays while your friends are murdered, but that the game draws a feeling of anger out of you in a moment where it would be the proper emotion to feel.

It's a bit of a trick games can play on their audience. Think of Trico from *The Last Guardian* (he's comparing *Friday the 13th* to *The Last Guardian* now WILL HE EVER STOP?!). The cat/dog creature who accompanies your human character doesn't much listen to you for a great deal of the game, taking your commands however it wants to. You can coax it toward doing what you want it to as you explore the game's sprawling locations and ruined temples, but it'll often misread your directions, or outright ignore them.

From a play perspective, this is going to agitate the player because the game isn't doing what they want. They are forced into a situation where passing and failing is no longer in their control, which is something that tends to make players get angry at the game. This is when the cries about fairness will come into play.

However, *The Last Guardian* is looking to draw a few emotions out of you in these moments. In real life, having a pet and teaching them is a challenging process that doesn't always go as planned. You're guiding a living thing, after all, and one that doesn't speak your language. It's not necessarily going to know what you want or how to listen to you. There's going to be mistakes. Battles of will. There will be times when you get angry and frustrated. This is what the game wants you to feel to develop that emotional connection with the game itself. It uses those feelings, created by in-game annoyances, to make you feel that real, honest emotional connection with Trico in the game.

Does that message get lost on players? Often, I think. It seems to be a common perception that anything that annoys you in a game is a bad thing, but sometimes, developers seek to irritate their players to create an appropriate emotional response. You're being asked to feel something to better connect with the emotions of the protagonist. Here, those emotions are even coming with the protagonist's own frustrations. You share in the difficulties of getting Trico to behave very directly, creating a seamless connection between you and this adorable, but stubborn, creature.

Friday the 13th isn't quite as directly connected, here, since you're getting mad at repetitive music instead of at the loss of your friends. Still, that connection does form as you face Jason, and your anger connects from the music to his presence. Jason is here, and so his music must play, so I am angry that Jason is here. That rage is connected to Jason's presence, and so you learn to feel that tangled mix of fear and anger in a very real way. It might not be tied to him as efficiently as other games might, but it's a stunning thing to be doing way back in the eighties.

And...that's pretty much it. Except for a slightly cheery ending track, there's no more tunes to be heard. Those that are in the game play on irritation in interesting ways, and while it's definitely debatable how effective this is and whether it's a purposeful move on the developer's part, these songs have an effect on the player that ties into to the anxious experience of a horror game, as well as the mixed feelings that come from being stalked in the darkness.

7.

Friday the 13th's greatest contribution to horror has to be its stalker killer, Jason.

Jason wasn't some final boss hiding out in the last level of the game. He was right there in the mix with the player right from the start, rushing right into battle moments after the game began. He was still the final thing to deal with in the game, but he didn't waste any time waiting around for you. Alpha and Omega and so forth.

Friday the 13th doesn't mess around with players with Jason's power, either, as the monster hits like a truck as soon as the game's begun. He does become more challenging throughout the game, but arguably, he's a huge threat from the beginning right up until the ending card pops up (no credits to be had, here).

This unkillable power enemy would become the basis for some fantastic horror games, with titles right up to the modern *Resident Evil 2* remake taking cues from the NES monstrosity. "Jason is reminiscent of Mr. X or the Nemesis from the *Resident Evil* series: he relentlessly stalks and torments you, appearing everywhere and anywhere. Nowhere is truly safe," says Ponder.

I'm inclined to agree. Good Old Mr. X is happy to dog the player for a large portion of the police station. If you're not familiar with our sharp-dressed Tyrant, he's an unkillable monstrosity that aims to slam your head off the floor a few times, and will follow you throughout the police station just as you're about to wrap things up there. Oh yeah, and there are regular zombies to deal with while he's lumbering after you. Try not to get too tangled up!

You can make Mr. X take a knee for a while through a few grenade rounds (which has the fun side effect of wasting your limited ammo on an unkillable beast), but he doesn't stay down for long, and is very good at finding you even if you manage to get a few rooms away. You're never entirely safe from the guy until a story beat makes him leave you alone, creating a constant

pressure and fear in the player as they struggle to get anything accomplished with this hulking creature lumbering behind them.

This may be sounding a little familiar to those who've been chased around by our purple and teal villain. Jason isn't quite as determined as Mr. X, but the blueprint is still there: a near-unkillable enemy that chases the player throughout the game, putting them in constant danger as they struggle to complete other gameplay tasks. As we've said with Nemesis, though, we're not looking to run into Mr. X. We want to create distance between us and him, whereas we need to tangle with Jason to complete the game. Again, we're forced into a situation where we're going after that which we fear.

So, why not have Jason follow the player as aggressively as those above-mentioned critters? Given that Jason is both a gameplay goal and the thing that's supposed to scare us, he can't really be around all the time, or else we'll be forced into facing that goal constantly. If I had to take down Mr. X permanently to finish the game, his determination would be a useful thing. At least I'd never have to go hunting for the guy, and could set myself up to deal with him at the right moment. Not that it would make it easier, but it would change my emotional reception of his presence. Him being around is a GOOD thing, because I need him around to beat the game.

I feel that this put the developers of *Friday the 13th* into an interesting situation. Making Jason into a dangerous killer that could absolutely wreck the player's day would make him very scary, and having to kill that scary thing would make things even more frightening. However, having him constantly on top of the player would force confrontations that the player could probably use to their advantage, or force them into ones they couldn't work with and they'd just die over and over again.

Not only this, but it makes the monster a bit predictable. I like the pressure Mr. X puts on the player in *Resident Evil 2*, but I wouldn't say that I was frightened of his presence the way I am with Jason or Nemesis. This is because his behavior is reliable: he's always just a short walk away. He's around the corner or up the stairs or something. I do feel some fear from his presence because I don't want to fight him, but it's not like Jason or Nemesis, where I'll suddenly turn and run into him out of nowhere. Jason's appearances are jarring and surprising, adding a layer of uncertainty when he

isn't around.

This is kind of the kicker with stalker killers in games. When you're in close quarters with them, you have a pretty good idea how to deal with them. Maybe you're trapped and have to use your combat abilities, or maybe you're supposed to flee through a complex area, or maybe you need to trigger some story. You gain a knowledge of the situation and a way to deal with it. Not that this erases fear, but at least when the killer's around, you have a very explicit set of instructions. There's often little confusion about how you need to act.

Award-winning writer and narrative designer Leigh Alexander (and writer of countless in-depth looks at horror games like *Silent Hill* and *Haunting Ground*, and books like *Breathing Machine* and *Clipping Through*, and...just read her stuff, all right?) finds that many of the elements that come with the 'big, unkillable baddie' can undermine the fear it's looking to create.

“Other than, I dunno, something classic like Pyramid Head, I don't know if I like this particular trope. I hate the idea of making the player waste resources (especially in a genre where resource scarcity is important!) just so that we as designers can go ‘Aha, but you CAN'T kill him!’ and the player's like ‘Ok, sure, I'll just run away then,’ and they do it in a fairly scripted fashion. I think games thrive on creating ever-present threats, and that is just hard to do in genres where you have a briefcase full of 5 different shotguns you found on the floor, so this is the solution they use a big guy who is COMING but isn't HERE.”

“What should they get right? It's hard, right, because if you are meant to fight him then it's not a threat, and if you are meant to run and he is not really going to catch you, then it's not a threat; nothing scripted stays scary, it mostly becomes about the game design reminding you ‘It's time to leave the mansion and go to the lab now,’ or whatever.”

You can see even more flaws as you spend more time with our dear big baddie. Kiting Mr. X around a coffee table makes him somewhat less frightening, doesn't it? Or leaving him behind outside of a save room because he dare not follow you in there. If you spend too much time with him, you begin seeing him as the gameplay device he is, and not the frightening

presence he's supposed to represent.

Also, when the killer isn't there, you worry about when they'll appear. You wonder at how you'll use your items and the stage layout to overcome them. You start to second guess whether you should press on or maybe find a safer path. Maybe you just forget about their presence and get lost in whatever activity you're doing at that moment. The villain is allowed to retreat into the imagination, growing more powerful, frightening, and deadly, there.

Green feels that this shift to the imagination is a powerful element of horror. "I think part of the reason horror as a genre - and this isn't limited to just video games - is so effective is that the threat doesn't have to be real or present to affect you. As human beings, our fears extend beyond what is physical and directly threatening, so it makes sense that we don't need to be in a stressful or scary situation in order to feel frightened; our imaginations are horrifying enough."

"It kind of reminds me of a scene in a late season of *The Office*, where Robert California goes around asking everyone what they fear the most, then invents a horror story on the fly that touches on each answer. Some of the answers given to him by the employees of Dunder Mifflin reflect a fear for personal safety, but others have worries that cut deeper, like Kelly's fear that she'll never find a husband. It's very easy, then, for a video game to pull the player in and affect them despite the lack of imminent or real threat to their well being. You don't have to make them fear for their safety, you can just touch on any number of theoretical threats to their sense of security and the end result is the same," she continues.

That's the point of horror media, right? To get inside your head and make you feel it, emotionally. To take it into yourself. Manipulating a character on a screen, doing your best to keep them from being killed by another character on a screen, isn't technically the most frightening stuff. You're still just moving pictures around other pictures. There is little reason for us to fear what we are seeing, and yet games like *P.T.* can still leave players (like me) visibly shaking with terror as I try to make my little camera fella not touch the spooky eye moving picture.

I've talked extensively about *P.T.* in its own book, but its stalker killer, Lisa,

is hidden from the player a great deal of the time. She is always after them, don't get me wrong, but she isn't visibly rushing up to them most of the time. When you can see her, you know where she is and what she's doing, though. When you don't see her, you can't.

That doesn't sound too impressive, but it's when she's outside of sight that your imagination makes her your own. Is she just behind a wall? Peeking in the window? Creeping up behind your back, ready to kill you with a touch? Your mind races over the possibilities of where she could be, panicking at every errant sound or flicker of in-game lighting. When she's present, you know her movements and actions. When she is out of sight, you're left to wonder what things indicate that she's there, and to load every second with the dreadful possibility of her appearing when you're not prepared to deal with her. Every single moment becomes a gulf of dread, something that's put to masterful use in that playable teaser.

It's also, arguably, present when you haven't even seen her yet. Through masterful use of sound, environmental storytelling, and hints at a presence, *P.T.* sent my imagination into overdrive, creating all sorts of horrors before I even knew that I should be afraid. Things just felt off from the clever work the developers had done, and my imagination did the rest.

Green experienced similar feelings with a game that technically wasn't horror, yet contained that same unease that put the imagination to work. "I think more games rely on this [imagination] than not, so there could be any number of examples but, personally, any game that makes me feel alone and isolated has that effect on me."

"For example, *Myst* is not really a horror game, but I still found it really scary. Mostly because I find its stillness so disquieting and alarming. If I were to feel that kind of stillness in real life - if the birds stopped singing, traffic ceased, and even the insects no longer hummed - I think I would know something is very wrong," she continues.

This use of imagination to weave fear was also put to some dang fine use all the way back in 1989 with *Friday the 13th*. Jason isn't always on top of the player because it leaves them with some room to worry about what would happen if he appeared right at that moment. This is why he can appear on the

road, in cabins, or by the lake. It's to ensure that you never feel safe, and that you are constantly wondering if he'll show up.

“The ‘one big baddie’ is, in my opinion, one of the most effective ways to invoke fear, and I’ve used it extensively in my own games. It felt like Jason was really roaming the map, just hoping to run into you. It didn’t matter where you went. He might be there if you were unlucky. That’s probably not how it works when you get to the nitty-gritty of the game’s programming, but it definitely felt like it when playing as a kid,” says Tamminen.

This is also why he isn’t around all the time. If he was, the game’s major crux would be about figuring out how to stay ahead of him while gathering power-ups. It would be about manipulating an AI in ways that will help you overcome. Not that this isn’t scary, as having a ruthless Jason always on your tail would make for some stressful runs, but having him leave periodically frees your mind to scare you. You’re given room to breathe so your imagination can do the work.

And it imagines some cruel ends you’ll have to deal with, constantly keeping the player’s mind on the risks they could be walking into. Green finds this to be yet another effective way of making imaginary horrors stick with us. “I think one technique that works particularly well is to put the player in a situation where they have to assess risk. It’s supremely effective at breaking the fourth wall because you’re asking the player to take their perception of a threat very seriously.”

Once Jason’s in your head, then you can really start to soak up the terrifying possibilities of what a sudden appearance would mean. You’re given time to make him out to be something more frightening than a clutch of purple and teal pixels. It’s a powerful touch that is incredibly impressive, given the time the game came out.

The developers took this all a step further and gave Jason the means to mess up your life when he’s out of sight as well. It’s not like Lisa is going around breaking the means to escape, or Nemesis is going around chomping on your herbs. Jason, though, is out stabbing counselors. He’s straight-up stealing your lives out from under you, as well as chipping at a counter that will eventually end the game even if you never see the guy. This gives the player

even more stuff to be nervous and afraid over, forcing their minds to race when they're supposed to be thinking about how to best arm themselves.

I've rarely run across a time limit in a horror game, but *Friday the 13th's* clock is always ticking away. Jason doesn't have to actually run into you to mess up your day. He's free to go around the camp whittling away at your support, and can reach a point where he beats you regardless of how strong you become.

"The mechanic of lives being tied to the camp counselors was kind of cool on its own, but what happens with the characters while you aren't playing as them is amazing. The fact that Jason can show up to a resting character's cabin and wreak havoc, taking one of your lives should you fail to intervene, pushes it over the edge into awesome. Knowing that Jason could strike at any moment adds incredible tension, especially if you're lost in the woods or on the other side of the map. Sometimes you know you're too far away and can't get back and have to just let it happen. Resource management can be deadly!" says Swinnich.

There's a certain hopelessness in knowing that all your work might be for nothing, and all because you couldn't get to your objectives in time. You need to catch Jason while he's hurting your people, and do so in whatever shape you happen to be in. There's no planning this encounter – you just have to throw yourself at him in your current state.

Taking away that element of player choice works wonders for building up the fear players feel of Jason, playing with uncertainty again. You don't get a choice on fighting him or not, and while you can be willing to burn a few kids or counselors (or just reset the game and hope he attacks somewhere else at first), you largely just have to take him on. The game forces your hand when, normally, you'd hold off as best you could until you had some good stuff to throw at him. Taking away the player's ability to arm themselves makes this battle that much more tense.

Oddly, the game does give you some warning when Jason will be causing you grief. When Jason is attacking someone, the game tells you where he is. It's no secret which cabin he's in. It's a bit of a relief, for a moment, giving that comforting predictability that makes the constant stalker a little less

scary. You know its position, so you know when and how to deal with it. You at least have control over that small aspect.

Horror is often about that removal of control and acceptance of danger. Its riding a wave into an unknown place. That's why we so often fear what we don't know or understand, as we have no idea what to do with it, and it could do ANYTHING. Jason is hiding somewhere in the cabin, which gives us that bolt of temporary safety, but then you are forced to explore the cabin and wonder just where he's hiding out inside it. You're given a comfort, then get to have it snatched away. The game doesn't force you to poke around in cabins and annoy yourself, but rather go directly to the danger and then soak the fear in.

The third person viewpoint the game switches to in the cabins makes for some delicious scares, as you're stuck flipping the camera around, dungeon crawler-style, and making these extreme angle changes when you know Jason is going to be rushing toward you in one of them. "The first-person adventure exploration, especially when you know Jason could be around any corner, was deliciously nerve-wracking," says Swinnich.

It's great in that it gives you that semblance of control, but worse in that you know you're going to be in a fight before you can react. He'll attack with startling speed the moment you find him, too, making you jump and forcing you to take a moment before you can react.

Shouldn't turning the screen yourself give you a moment to gather your emotions and grasp control, though? When you can choose to turn the camera yourself, are you not taking a form of control over the situation? He might come at you fast, but you can brace for it before you make that transition, right?

These are valid points, but I still feel that the moment is a bit like a bungee jump. You have control over this scary thing you're going to do, but only right before you jump. Once your feet leave the ground, you're at the mercy of the events that come next. Turning the camera in *Friday the 13th* likely isn't quite as stressful as that, but you still get that same effect. Control is given up the moment you switch screens, and that's the moment your heart is in your throat.

This moment works similarly to turning all of those tight corners in *Resident Evil*, or trying to open all of those closed doors in *Silent Hill*. You're walking into a situation, blind, allowing yourself a moment of temporary vulnerability when you might normally feel safe with your throwable pitchfork.

Alexander feels that this kind of moment is key to creating fear in a horror game. "They need to control the player's perspective and withhold information. This can be literally - you can't see around that corner until you round it yourself, you need to try every door, etc - but the player is afraid when they have to make risky decisions on limited information, as an active participant in the events."

We have limited information just before each turn. We know that Jason is present in the building, as well also know that something is around the blind corners of *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill*. We know something is there, but have no idea when it will appear.

As an example, Alexander cites *Silent Hill*. "The series is fricative and controlling to the point of discomfort - it steeps you in horrific sensory imagery and then controls your ability to access it. The crux of the *Silent Hill* series to me is in all its rusty, locked doors - there are like hundreds of locked doors across those games, and yet, with every single one, the same combination of 'Please open,' and 'Oh god, please don't open,' is present. I also thought *P.T.* was really brilliant as well; when the player feels the need to step forward into the darkness and the dread of it in equal measure, that's when horror games are at their best."

Again, it's the leap. The hope that you will turn that corner, or open that door, and find nothing, even though the game has taught you that it is full of horrors that mean to kill you. It's in also wanting to get that scare over with so you can move into the play style that you know and understand. Once that awful moment of terror is over, you can move back to your position of mental safety.

It's always in the moments that Jason isn't around when he has the most power over the player. When he appears, it's honestly a little bit underwhelming. The *Punch-Out!!* combat style in the cabins is a bit ridiculous, his little rush across the water is quite irritating on the lake, and

his stumpy self coming at you on the paths is less than frightening. The limitations of the time and tech make themselves clear in these moments when you're up close to this goofy-colored killer.

His power can only do so much to assuage that issue. You're made to be nervous about how hard he hits, but there's really no denying that he's just kinda silly looking, and that the fights with him are just the same sidescrolling action game battles, or a horror-themed boxing game, but with you taking more damage. This high damage does make them tense (and also feel a little unfair in places), but it has a hard time making up for the fact that his character design just isn't all that scary.

So, the places he has the most power to scare come from his absence. Jason is much scarier when he's a concept in your mind, far from your actual screen. When he's the spectre of failure – a hint of danger that can come and overwhelm you at any moment. That he'll look pretty silly in his purple outfit when he does so is far from your mind at this time, and only the potential, crushing result remains.

So, when he shows up with his sharp stinger tune – before any of you have even moved – is when the fear strikes the hardest, but then quickly begins to break down.

As he moves from mental concept to gameplay reality, that's when things start to take a turn for the worst. That's when we can see all of the parts of the game moving together – when we're reminded by all the health bars and weapon windows and our blocky characters facing a silly, sidestepping killer, that we lose that sheen of ignorance. We can no longer ignore that this is just a video game. The spell is broken, and we're instead just working to stay intact. The visuals and play style simply don't support the kind of horror that comes from being followed by a dangerous killer, here. It's not frightening any more when we see the simple game that's under the hood.

It's in Jason's absence that we can forget it all for a little while. Having Jason attack other counselors at this time works wonders for this effect, as it gives Jason a dangerous power when he isn't even around. He's still up to no good and causing you harm, even when he's out of sight. Initially, I felt this might take away from his mystique, as you know for a fact that he's not coming for

you any time soon if he's busy with someone else, but it also keeps him on top of your mind.

Also, this gives Jason a kind of frightening realism. Video game monsters tend to follow set behavior patterns of activities, but Jason feels more like a real being with real motives. His whole goal is not to hunt down the player, but to destroy everything they value in the game. He has stuff to do when he's not on-screen trying to maul you. If you run into him, it's because of bad luck on your part. There are no scripted moments for him to show up, and instead, you just find him as he is moving around the camp, looking for you.

“There's something you miss when a game has these pre-determined scares. You're walking down a corridor, about to open a door, and you know the horror is activated by a player-action. There's nothing bursting through the door if you wait too long. The scare happens when you press that button. You brace yourself for it and the effect is lesser. In this game, the danger felt like it was always there. The game felt like it was living its own life, even if you played it or not,” says Tamminen.

Jason's sole goal is not just the player. He has a task that he can complete without ever running into them. So, there is a frightening surprise in stumbling across him in his grim work, because you are actually interrupting him. In some ways, this can be relieving as there IS a chance you'll fail without him scaring you, but it also ensures it's extremely difficult to predict when you'll run into him. You never really know when Jason will show up to mess up your day (until you know the game inside and out).

However, a common problem with the stalker kind of horror is that the killer is either around or they're not. That sounds dumb, but when the killer is nowhere nearby in these games, you're left with your basic gameplay goals of killing enemies, getting supplies, solving puzzles, making progress, etc. When the stalker is there, you're in full avoidance/combat mode. It creates two different styles of play, with your fear of the latter motivating you to act in the former.

Thing is, if the developers aren't extremely careful with their timing of killer appearances, you tend to get lost in progress mode. This can make the killer's appearance more jarring when they finally attack, catching you unawares, but

I find it typically lets fear dissipate entirely. And with Jason just wandering about, it would seem like it would increase your chances of never running into the guy, removing the fear from the game.

Clock Tower suffers from this problem. The Super Famicom version does a pretty good job of making a gumpy kid with a pair of huge shears into a frightening presence, but he has a tendency to disappear for long periods of time. Like, REALLY long periods. It often reached the point where I'd forget the little dude was still around, and all I'd be left with was the adventure gameplay. Not necessarily a bad thing, but if you lose your tension in a horror game, the whole experience becomes uneven, or falls apart altogether. Then you're just some kid who's mucking about someone's dirty old house.

There were many times when *Clock Tower's* atmosphere would just crumble because, short of a dangerous bird and our often-absent killer, there was little danger. I knew this because I had all the time in the world to discover how the game worked, and the logic of its world and play.

I keep saying this, but mystery is the key to horror. The more you know, the less frightening it becomes. This is extremely true in games, as you already come to the table knowing everything is fake. You have to force yourself to ignore your knowledge that it isn't real, and everything that makes that harder makes it difficult to be scared. So, when I have a ton of time to run around and find out that the only danger in *Clock Tower* is the lazy, often-absent Scissorman, I stop being scared until the little jerk shows up.

This did make Scissorman's appearances effective, as I knew little about the creep besides the fact that he wanted to leave me in a few pieces all over that nice floor. However, it showed me that I really didn't have much to fear from the rest of the game. The pacing just wasn't quite right, even if some of Scissorman's appearances and actions were downright unsettling at the time. Go watch the scene where he emerges from the shower if you want to see the chills they could deliver with pixels at this time.

Friday the 13th tried something a bit more aggressive. Jason's constant attacks on other counselors and kids give the player an appreciable sense of danger much more often than some other stalker games would try to do, and does so while also leaving the player alone, letting their own imagination

build up their fear. This would also keep up the pressure on the player, which would drive anxiety and fear while also keeping them from having much time to figure out everything about the game. They're not just scared of their own run-ins with Jason, as they have to worry about their friends as well, which forces more encounters and keeps up the pace of the scares.

I've gone on about how elements like mapping the caves and forests, figuring out where items are located, or finding out the game's varied secrets and items, are made purposely complicated. *Friday the 13th* is far from a straightforward game, and Jason's constant, varied attacks keep the player from having enough time to really figure out how they all work. You're forced to work with guesses and little information, keeping that sense of mystery going. You're not given the time to think about how you're being chased by this clutch of pixels because you're too busy trying to juggle being attacked, helping other characters, or trying to figure out just how this odd game works. You're not allowed to find your footing, which works extremely well given the music and audio limitations that hamstringing the game's scares.

Friday the 13th's constant pressure (which is a pressure that works without putting the player in direct contact with our somewhat-silly-looking villain) ends up creating a tense atmosphere by keeping the player off-guard. When your stalker killer just isn't frightening enough on its own, this use of mystery and confusion help keep things a bit more unsettling, taking some of the weight off of the villain.

Jason is strongest as a possibility and a memory. Knowing how you'll be savaged is much more unsettling than trying to figure out how to navigate a stiff character around the screen and throw rocks at a monster. Knowing you can be attacked and killed at any moment takes some of the attention away from fighting lumpy zombies and crows while trudging along a repetitive path. The developers seem to have a knack for finding the weaknesses in their design, and then finding ways to make them work as a horror experience. The combat and play were not exactly the stuff of nightmares, but the developers could carefully frame them, and their killer, with the mystery of the game and create something that left players confused, nervous, and afraid.

Jason is at the crux of this. Not his presence, but what he could represent to

the player. He's the ever-lingering spectre of death, and a constant thorn in the player's side, yet also the goal of the game. He's something that carries that threat of failure, and a mystery surrounding how you'll overcome such power. When he's right there in front of you, he's underwhelming, visually, but when he's somewhere far away from you, hurting counselors or maybe about to lunge at you, he loads the play with a pressure that makes for an unsettling experience. You're nervous as you explore, because danger is coming, and coming quickly, in a variety of ways, and yet you've still got to find some way to stop him. You have to overcome and think despite the danger that lies in every single moment.

In this way, it almost doesn't matter what he looks like. All that matters is what he'll do, and what you'll do about it. And what you'll do most of the time is die. Even if he's ridiculous, that quick, ruthless death will hang over you, loading the game with dread.

8.

Jason is an important element to frightening the player, but what might be *Friday the 13th*'s biggest strength is its ability to leave the player confused and uncertain. And likely its biggest weakness to many players.

If you've just booted up the game, you don't know much about it. You're shown a map, allowed to pick a character, and get told to use the lighter to light the fireplaces. That's all the instruction you get from the game. If you've got the manual and actually read it, you'll know that you're supposed to kill Jason, and get a lowdown on some of the weapons and their effects. You have a better idea of how to progress and where you might find what you need, but it's not much.

Either way, hopping into the game doesn't leave you with much direction on how to apply any of that knowledge, and the game's action comes so fast it's hard to figure out what you should be doing. You're often scrambling to keep up, only able to spend mere moments thinking on what to do before Jason's off cutting another counselor in half.

How do you get items? What makes them appear? How do you find Jason? Is there any pattern to his attacks? How do you get through the maze areas? How do you even know which direction you're walking in? It's all at least a little complicated to figure out, and works to keep players in the dark so that they're more afraid than they'd normally be.

Did you know that Jason has a set patrol, and that he'll wander the camp predictably save for a random chance of taking side paths when he comes across them? That he moves to the right, so you can actively chase him if you figure out where he is? Do you know the series of things you can do to get yourself the torch super early on in the game? Or how about just a reliable place to find helpful medicine? All of this is hidden from you at the start, leaving you to wonder at how you'll progress or how you'll stay alive.

Without knowing Jason's patterns, it feels like the killer can be anywhere at any time. Like an episode of *Scooby Doo*, though, once you know that you

opponent has to follow rules of reality like a normal human, it gets a whole lot less frightening, and far more manageable. You can start to move counselors out of the way, or track his movements on the map to plan your attack. You can even force certain behaviors, increasing your chances of winning by choosing your own battlegrounds.

For first time players, though, the game is utterly baffling. I feel like this is a major contributor to why most people don't like the game, as it makes little attempt to explain how its systems work. You are left to guess which weapons hurt Jason or enemies more, whether there is anything worth getting out in the caves, or what you're even doing as you wander, rushing after Jason over and over again. It feels like a confusing journey of circling the drain, as the player, constantly caught off-guard by repetitive attacks, scrambles to figure out what they should be doing besides playing defense against the killer.

“I think the game's charms aren't immediately apparent for a few reasons. *Friday the 13th* has somewhat complex gameplay, but it's not explained well at all. If you don't have the manual to shed some light on the mechanics and you know, what you're actually supposed to do in the game, it's just going to seem like a nonsense game. You'll run through screen after screen of trees and cabins that all look the same while Jason kills everyone and it'll all be over before you know it. Digging into its depths takes some work, but many players may not even be aware that it has any depth,” says Ponder.

But there ARE things you can be doing, even if the game itself doesn't really explain them. You can be hunting down special weapons, or plotting how to manipulate the game's rules to put Jason where you want him. You can figure out tactics on when the best time to tangle with Jason's mother is, or if you even need to bother with special weapons. You can completely turn the tables on Jason, if you want to, through doing a ton of in-game research (or looking stuff up online).

How are you supposed to know that, though?

1989 wasn't exactly a time to be digging up information on the internet. You weren't just going to hop on ol' GameFAQs or the *Friday the 13th* NES

message boards at this time. You had to figure out these mysteries all on your own (or buy the exact right issue if Nintendo Power) if you wanted a chance of winning.

Well, maybe your friends on the school playground had a good idea on what worked. Although, if your friends were like mine and tried to tell me that you could beat Mother Brain in *Super Metroid* without her *ANCIENT SPOILER ALERT* killing the baby Metroid *ANCIENT SPOILER END*, then their information was hard to be trusted.

Which was actually kind of fun in and of itself? I mean, it was a waste of time trying to do what MY friends said, but didn't those rumors just fill you with excitement over those old games? Didn't they give them a new life, even if just for a little while until you figured out they were garbage lies? That's even more interesting for horror games, as it builds on their mystique, making them seem even more frightening or confusing. I never heard any rumors for the already-nebulous *Friday the 13th*, but I'm sure they would have only added to its reign of terror.

Brock Wilbur, a journalist who wrote Boss Fight Books' *Postal*, and who has many works on VICE, Rock Paper Shotgun, Polygon, Rely on Horror, and more, had schoolyard pals were a bit more useful than mine. "Perhaps the most memorable parts of the game weren't even the game itself. This represents one of those grade school word-of-mouth legends. Mostly, the guys who had older brothers had spent more time with the game than me. Those kids were also usually the kind of guys whose parents let them watch rated R movies. So, they had a few legs up on me."

"A kid named Mark told me about all these secrets from parts of the game I had yet to crack, including that Jason's mom's head attacks you. I didn't know what Jason's mother had to do with this or how a head would attack me? I didn't really believe what he was telling me. But he was one of the cool kids and his older brother was a bad boy so who was I to question?"

This kind of schoolyard exchange – of possibilities told in whispers at recess – creates a mystique around the game. The mysteries give players a reason to talk about the game to themselves, sharing it like bits and pieces of a ghost

story they'd heard. Like *P.T.* would do years later, it created a kind of dialogue around the things the game refused to tell you, which in turn only makes the game more interesting. Especially when you find out your friends are lying by testing these elementary tall tales to see if there's any fact to them.

This is, interestingly, another facet of what makes *Friday the 13th* so compelling. The mystery does make it hard to play, sure, but the game DOES have rules you can parse and understand. It CAN be figured out, which encourages players to talk about it in the real world. It makes them think about it in their daily lives, and share their thoughts on its horrors to their friends. It helps its horror live outside the screen, giving it an existence in the player's own life. Not that you're scared that Jason is going to come get you in the real world, but that the game's fiction is still sticking with you when the game is off. It's not immediately dismissed with the power button. You're still playing it as you talk it over with your buddies and think about it at school.

For immersion, this is a neat trick. As I've said, immersion relies on tossing aside the idea of the game being false. While thinking about solving puzzles does technically take you out of the fiction as you're working to break down their answers as the player moreso than as the game's protagonist, it is still keeping a part of your mental state engaged with the game, even when it's off. Again, you're still playing without the game being there. That's an extremely interesting development for a game that wants to stay in your head, keeping you engaged with its reality over your own.

A part of you is still in the game, battling Jason, due to the mystery surrounding the game and how it is now bleeding into your life. Yes, you're just talking gameplay tips, but a part of you is still back there in those woods, and still dealing with the challenges of surviving them. In real life.

Also, your own imagination is constantly at work within these mysteries, adding your own fuel to the fire that's steadily burning you. "I think it's pretty common for the genre, as a whole, to rely on certain techniques because of how they cross the threshold and break the fourth wall in how they achieve their impact. Using a sense of the unknown or the uncertain is

effective specifically because it invites our brains to fill in the blanks ourselves - and what we can insert is far more frightening than what other people write for us,” says Green.

I thought Jason wandered the campground stalking me when I played. Many other people who played the game felt the same thing. The game’s actual rules don’t work that way, but my own imagination filled in that gap with something much scarier than what the game was actually doing. Through being confusing with its rules, the game got me to come up with a new means of scaring myself. Again, getting the horror to play out in your mind works wonders for making the experience more frightening to the player.

“Generally, when reading a horror story or watching a horror movie or playing a horror game, people don’t really go about expecting the best about what’s to happen. So, you could almost say that adding an element of the unknown is all but essential. People don’t fear that which they know, are comfortable with, and understand,” Green continues.

Learning that Jason followed a set path, and that I could abuse it at will, made the game far less scary. Knowing its systems erodes that fear I felt while lost in the game’s horrifying confines. It’s that mystery that keeps the game from growing safe and normalized. It’s in not knowing that my fear can linger.

Back to my point, though. There was not a lot of information out there for people playing *Friday the 13th*, so, for the most part, players would need to figure out its mysteries all on their own. This would add challenge and help pad the game’s length (as it can be quite short if you know exactly what you’re doing and all goes well), which would have been a concern at the time, but it also serves to give the player a lot to do. Not knowing how to play would be a death sentence for an action game, but a little mystery and confusion really helps a horror title, so not knowing what to do or how to figure out the best approach would be quite compelling when creating unease and fear.

You also see this kind of mystery in modern games like *P.T.*, or the buzz around the *Resident Evil 7* demo. There were secrets to be found in both of these, and many other horror games, that got players working together to

figure out how to solve them. It got people talking about the game, and would drag them into the game's world, forcing them to languish in their horrors while they tried to think through complex problems. *P.T.* is the scariest thing I've probably ever played, and working through it while trying to figure out how any of it worked was paralyzingly frightening.

P.T. locks the player in an endless loop, tasking them with figuring out which bizarre, nigh-unknowable actions will free you from it. You're being followed by a highly-aggressive ghost as you try to figure these actions out, making it hard to concentrate on solving the mystery. Juggling panic and puzzle-solving makes for some bone-chilling scares.

It seems to lock you into this mental loop. You're scared, so you want to escape, but to do that, you need to think and explore. But thinking means stopping, and exploring means poking around these haunted environments, which forces you to do things that scare you some more. This, in turn, makes it harder to think or walk around, freezing you in place. But then you're not progressing, so you force yourself forward, moving deeper into what frightens you even more. It's this constant pull in two different directions, but your fear is motivating all of it, sending you into this loop where you're always pushing yourself further into your fear.

Friday the 13th was doing this twenty five years before *P.T.*, though. How did you get weapons? What was the secret of the cabins? How do you navigate the caves? They're not as complicated questions as the downright confounding things you had to do to beat *P.T.* (but you also had the help of modern players and online tools to solve those mysteries), but they were still a lot to understand for a single player picking at the game on their own.

I have only just recently learned about Jason's behaviors while researching this book. The years I've spent playing it, and the hundreds of times I'd picked the game up just to have another spin at it, never once told me that he followed a set path through the campground. I didn't have the slightest clue that you could predict where he would go. I also didn't know you could force him to fight on the paths by switching to the counselor he was attacking and just leaving the cabin. I never pieced together any of this.

Even more, I still avoid the caves to this day. I have no real good idea how to get through them, and Jason's mom is just too nasty an opponent for me to feel it's worth getting her items. I still don't know the paths for this reason, and also actively avoid the woods since I don't know those areas too well, either. I've been playing this game since the eighties and still didn't understand most of its systems at all. I thought weapons and items just appeared randomly, not that they were set to appear as you moved past. I seem to know almost nothing about this game, and I've been poking at it for decades.

Without this knowledge, I've probably only completed it a handful of times because I give in to my cowardice each time. I don't want to check the woods, don't want to go in the caves, and don't want to figure out how the game works. With Jason constantly attacking, and the pressure unrelenting, I just haven't been able to focus enough while playing the game to find out its secrets. They were all just complicated enough, and Jason's presence overwhelming enough, that I couldn't make myself dedicate the time and mental effort to solve them. Plus, you could always try the easier way out and fight with your trash weapons, although that has gotten me killed most of the time. I lose far more often than I win, and it's my own fault.

Even so, I just couldn't muster that courage to look around and figure the game out. I might say that Jason isn't all that scary when he's there, but that threat of his sudden appearance and danger was enough for me to avoid making the game any more difficult for myself over the years.

In doing so, I only gave him more power over me, though. I forced my character to fight him in weaker states because I couldn't overcome my anxieties long enough to arm myself properly to beat him. I couldn't push through that fear, just like I couldn't push through it with *P.T.*, waiting until others had figured out what to do (and I'm still scared to do it all even when I know exactly what I have to do).

This same sense of confusion traps the player in that panicked state, keeping them from improving their chances of survival and ensuring they remain afraid of their enemy through ignorance. This is a sharp touch, as many horror games simply fall apart once you know how it all works. When you

know those systems inside and out – when there’s no more questions to be answered – the scares don’t hit as hard. The troubles don’t seem as daunting. You know what to do, and the killer’s appearance simply becomes another nuisance to be dealt with.

Many horror games have used confusion and mystery to great effect, though. I might not have a high opinion of the Super Famicom *Clock Tower*, but later entries would sharpen this use of confusion and pressure to have players running and afraid. Figuring out what items you need and how to solve puzzles as you run from deadly foes is something the series only got better at with time, culminating with *Haunting Ground*, a game of near-constant chases with some tense, frightening music and challenging puzzles to overcome alongside them. This is just standard video game puzzles, too, where you have to fiddle with mechanisms of find the right tools to get through. This isn’t a battle to figure out how the game works, but just a challenge to find the time to concentrate long enough without worrying about what’s creeping up behind your back.

Knock Knock takes this idea a bit further, going full on-confusing in order to make the player afraid. In it, you have to survive nights in your very haunted house, dodging ghosts and killer presences as you pray for dawn to arrive. For starters, it’s terrifying to know you just have to wait all of this out, but more importantly, the ghosts and items in the game don’t have behaviors that make a lot of sense.

I’ve hidden behind objects to stay out of sight, but have been caught by ghosts that had no reason to see me. I’ve hidden while ghosts were right on top of me and had them miss me entirely. I’ve had phantoms appear at odd times, sometimes even right on top of me, killing me with no chance of fighting back. I’ve had nights pass with almost no incidents, the game offering constant bonuses that made the day come quickly. I’ve flicked the lights on and off in-game and have never been able to figure out if that was useful or not.

This chilling little sidescrolling horror game has since been figured out, but it relished in the confusion it delivers to the player when it released. The game’s logic just didn’t make much sense at first glance, even though I know

that, as a game, there has to be some internal logic for each behavior. Maybe it was random chance, or maybe there was a rule I didn't understand yet. Still, there WAS a rule at play during each time I failed or succeeded in avoiding getting caught by ghosts, but I could never figure out what it was. Not once. *And I finished the game.*

That was one unsettling experience, I will tell you that much. Never knowing what to do or why something worked or didn't had me consistently terrified of everything and anything, because I didn't know how any of it worked. It drummed up this primal fear within me, one where the cosmos and all of its agents are unknowable things that could turn on me at any time. I felt a constant sense of danger and fear, because I could never find that logical foothold of safety in anything. Any in-game element could turn on me at any time.

And again, this is the kind of template that *Friday the 13th* created. In making its play elements confusing for players, it ensured they would have a hard time reaching that sense of confidence over the game's systems. It would take a while, working by yourself, to feel safe going through the caves, or in knowing where to look for the best weapons. You'd feel like Jason could pop up at any moment, because his behavior feels random and chaotic. It's not, but you wouldn't know that at the time without fighting off your own fear, which would feed into that loop where you forcefully terrify yourself even more.

That said, it is this same mystery that will absolutely drive your players batty. *Knock Knock* helped me realize this as well, because when you lose the same stage a few dozen times for reasons you can't even explain, you start to wonder why you're even bothering to play. It stops being something that makes you afraid, and becomes something that makes you angry. Players still need to feel like they're making progress, or that they at least have some idea on how to make progress, if you're to keep that tension up. If they're always worrying about understanding systems and how to overcome them, then they've fallen out of the atmosphere you're creating.

This is such a delicate dance with horror games. Mystery keeps them scary, but if the player feels like they have no idea what's happening at all, then

they're not going to stay afraid. They're going to start getting frustrated, and it will happen fast. "I look at its lack of direction as its greatest weak point. Without a manual, you have no idea what to do or where to go while being instantly pressured by a non-descript time limit. Then there's the navigation...moving around the camp should feel large and a bit time consuming, but with the cardinal directions not coinciding to the direction you travel in, it is a confusing mess even with an understanding of how it works," says Kubiak.

"Most of my biggest issues with it had to do with lacking information and the understanding I needed to play and succeed. Now that I have a better idea about it, I see the game as an interesting, albeit a bit flawed horror game," he continues.

Many might not agree, but I feel that *Friday the 13th* somehow managed to carefully dance that fine line between annoying and mysterious. Figuring out Jason's appearances and item drops and cave layouts was something that was confusing, but could be solved with one person's efforts (well, maybe not a certain writer's). Jason hits with incredible power, but after a few encounters, you can find some relatively straightforward ways of dealing with him. This made it less irritating to fight him because it's technically quite simple, but it puts a lot of pressure on the player to not make a mistake. A single error has a big cost, which loads combat with tension, even if it's not actually all that complicated.

The *Dark Souls* series uses this with many of its early foes, which actually have very simple, easy-to-avoid movesets, but cost you dearly if you get overconfident and make a stupid mistake. Yes, I'm saying that *Friday the 13th* predated *Dark Souls* on some of its good ideas, too. I'm really going after everyone.

It's that careful dance that's another element that makes *Friday the 13th* an effective horror game, though. It's in creating situations that will challenge the player, but not annoy them. It's in creating a mystery that will keep them from immediately understanding everything they need to do, and force them to juggle exploration and critical thinking as they try to fend off a killer who will stomp them flat if they're even slightly distracted. And since you have so

much to think on, it's easy to get distracted. Which leads to more mistakes. Which leads to failure and stress. Which keeps that fear loop going without accidentally nudging the player out of it and into Angry Town.

Well, to me, at least. Unfortunately, not everyone felt the same way.

9.

Friday the 13th has received a bad rap. I see it widely cited in ‘worst game’ or ‘worst movie game’ articles that look to kick a few developers’ hard work around for clicks. It’s starting to see a bit of a turnaround in the press, with many beginning to see the clever work that runs through the game. A few years late, but sometimes it takes time to understand what a developer is going for with their work.

That said, I understand where the distaste is coming from. At the time of its release, you couldn’t deny the appeal of the sidescroller. Straight up action games featuring oddball heroes and enemies to clobber. Pogo jumping on creatures in *DuckTales*, laying waste to alien nations with the Spreader in *Contra*, punching robots and thugs in *Batman*, whipping monsters in *Castlevania*. It was all about that move from left to right, leaving nothing alive in your wake. It was pure action, non-stop, and all you had to do was hammer that attack button at the right time.

Not that these games did not have interesting mechanics and complexities to how you played them, but they were all quite straightforward at the time. Your goal was always in one direction ahead of you. Weapons could be predictably acquired. The tools to beat the game were usually in your hands by the end of it, only asking you to play around and find which ones worked best for your play style. Sometimes you had those tools right from the start, and only skill was needed.

Friday the 13th wasn’t like that, though. Its tools appeared at odd times that you had to figure out. Moving left to right wouldn’t always get you to where you needed to go. Exploration was built to confuse you, rather than force you in a single direction. The enemies did not fight fair, and did not care if you weren’t equipped with the right tools. Alarms started to go off that meant stuff you might not even understand. Your extra lives are other characters, and none of them play alike. Some of them are just plain awful to use, period. It’s all confusing and tangled, and it’s enough to make someone crave the simplicity (yet reflex-challenging play) of the Mario games.

“The game is a casualty of how game design changed in the late eighties and nineties,” says James Id, horror buff and one of the developers of puzzle game *The Legend of Bum-Bo*. “The game seemed to be developed with the same sensibility as personal computer games from the eighties. You were expected to draw a map of the forest, take notes on spatial orientation, weapon and item locations, and log your attempts as to learn from them. This game would have killed on the Commodore 64 or ZX Spectrum.”

“Unfortunately, the game was made for a console that quickly moved away from that kind of gameplay, instead favoring a plug-and-play aesthetic and feel. Any angry gamer YouTuber would probably berate games such as *Battle for Olympus*, *Rygar*, and *A Nightmare on Elm St* for the NES for the same 'flaws' as this game. Oh wait, at least in the case of *Nightmare*, they did!” he continues.

Friday the 13th was a game that you had to figure out. Not just weapon weaknesses or which item was best to carry at what time, but about what on Earth was going on. Why was someone getting attacked across the map, and why do I have to deal with it? Why would I bother going into the woods? How do I find Jason? How do I best deal with him when he shows up? How am I supposed to deal with how hard he hits? So many questions assault the player, and often from the second the game starts. It throws players into a panic immediately, and rarely lets up the pressure to figure it out.

Playing games can be a confusing thing. I recall a paralysis of choice the very first time I started *Super Mario Bros*, staring out into that open field. There's some hills and grasses, plus that bush just chilling there. No enemies are coming my way. It's relaxed and peaceful, and I honestly wasn't sure what to do. The world is open wide to your right, though, which eventually coaxes a player in that direction. I started to move, soon seeing some bricks and question blocks, as well as the very first Goomba.

I didn't like how that little dude was coming my way. No sir. For someone who'd never really played a video game before (besides *Ring King*, was made exactly 0 sense to me), that thing may as well have been one of the dangerous stalkers from *Outlast*, or Mr X. It was relentlessly bearing down on me, and I had to do something to get away. Running to the left showed me that the

screen locked me out, leaving me with no place to go besides forward. I had two buttons to try – one did “nothing” (I wouldn’t figure out running for a while), and the other jumped. So, I leaped, landing directly in front of the creature and getting myself killed.

This startled me, honestly. That sharp death sound, and the end of my run, was unexpected. I wasn’t sure exactly what I thought was going to happen as I played the game in my neighbor’s basement (Russell, you were one Cool Dude), but I was not prepared for that. Still, I would eventually gain a comfort with this game, and many others of the time, through pushing into their mechanics, playing with buttons, and steadily seeing similar rulesets between games.

Sidescrollers would vary up how you’d fight foes, but movement tended to be similar across games. Left or right, baby, and it’s all good. Maybe some stairs or ladders if you’re feeling wacky. Pushing ahead was always the way to go. Not that more complex games like *The Legend of Zelda* and *Blaster Master* weren’t out at the time offering some challenging play and neat puzzles, but sidescrollers often worked with movement and play that had similar styles.

I’m not trying to say they looked alike, but they would present themselves in a specific manner. You’d be looking down the screen you had to walk towards, 2D enemies would come toward you as you walked, that sort of stuff.

Friday the 13th looked a lot like those games, on the surface. It appeared to be a normal sidescroller, from the look of that first screen with your character on the campground. It feels like it’s just going to be one of those games where you move left to right, shooting baddies with weapons as you work toward that boss standing all the way to the right. I feel like this set up an expectation in many players that they’d just be able to coast through the game, not because it wasn’t challenging, but because you wouldn’t have to think much about where to go and what to do. Maybe a few thoughts on weapon choices, but nothing extremely complicated.

Players would soon find themselves being pulled all over the map, constantly putting out fires as they struggled to keep ahead of Jason, or arm themselves

in the few safe moments they had. But how do you do that? What are you supposed to be doing? Why is everyone dying?

“I first played *Friday the 13th* somewhere around the time it released. As a young'un into video games and horror movies - slasher movies in particular - I was really excited by the fact that it existed. Two great tastes and all that,” says Ponder.

“My two overriding thoughts at the time were 1) Who is this Jason? What are those colors? He doesn't look like movie Jason! And 2) This game is really difficult and incomprehensible. After playing repeatedly (and spending some time with the instruction manual), I got the hang of it, mostly...or, at least, I could kind of find my way around the map. But the fun factor was never so high for me that I was willing to spend hours and hours trying to get better at the game or discover all of its secrets. Mostly it was a huge disappointment that I gave up on fairly quickly,” she continues.

If you come into *Friday the 13th* expecting a game like all of the other action games of the time, you're not going to enjoy it. I really don't think this helped the game, even though I feel like it did a great job of getting the player to lower their guard, expecting to be a tough game hero instead of a squishy, vulnerable camp counselor. I think it solidified that feeling of powerlessness through discovering it by surprise, as horror often comes through this sudden sense of vulnerability. Life is safe and happy, and then you realize how quickly it can be snuffed out at the whim of monsters and the monstrous. It's a jarring sensation that *Friday the 13th* plays upon through playing with the player's expectations of the genre.

The back of game's box did try to help players see that something was different, though, showing the map screen, as well as an interior shot of you fighting with Jason, the creature towering over you (which was an excellent choice of shot, honestly). It hints that the play will be varied, so expect something a little bit different from your average sidescroller. But I'd seen map screens and stuff like that before, so for me, I ignored it. I thought it was just going to be an action game, too.

(PS – The front of the box was very...something, too. “So, when I was old

enough to pick out games to rent, I was drawn to the ghoulie-faced killer surrounded by garish graphics. That cover was stark! It had about the same emotional punch as a picture of Richard Ramirez glue-sticked to a Lisa Frank trapper keeper. It's very Andy Warhol," says Id, far more effectively talking about the rainbow splashes and photo-realistic Jason than I ever could)

I hated it on that first few runs because of my assumptions that it would play like a 'normal' action game as well. I wanted to know why everything felt like it was out to get me far more than any other game I'd played before. I was used to coming across foes when I chose to move forward, controlling the pace of battle to an extent. I was the one moving ahead, and the game was at my mercy. Even if it was hard and my skills didn't measure up (which was often), I was the one who chose when to fight.

Games often give that power fantasy. You're the strong hero who's out to save the day, and you have the means to do it. Your hero is an effective person, and only needs you to point them in the right direction and make the right choices to overcome. In games like *Castlevania* or *Mega Man*, I feel like I'm hopping into a hero role, and if the hero falls, it's my own fault. I am within this power role, and am empowered by it, blasting through foes in exciting ways, and if I blow it, it's not the hero's fault. They had the tools to win, but I made bad decisions on what to do with them.

Although, honestly, in *Castlevania*, you start to see this playing around with humanizing our power fantasies. The Belmonts move kind of slow. They jump without being able to redirect. They need to wind up before they can strike with the whip. It makes them feel more vulnerable, or as vulnerable as you can when you're a powerful vampire killer who whips zombie faces off.

Friday the 13th took this line of thinking further and gave us very human characters in a situation of vulnerability. You are outnumbered, weak, and easy to confuse. You have no idea what is going on, and vicious attacks are coming at you whether you move forward or just stand still. The game is constantly closing in on the player, and they just have to react to it. In many sidescrollers, you act, but in *Friday the 13th*, it is about reacting to what is happening.

That simple change created the horror within *Friday the 13th*, but also is part of what I feel made so many players develop a distaste for the game. They were no longer in control, or choosing to act of their own will. You can rarely do much besides react to what is happening in *Friday the 13th*, chasing Jason all over the confusing campground and leaving you feeling weak and confused until you start figuring out how it all works. This takes a while, and when a game throws the player off of their expectations like this, many rarely feel like putting in the time to get past it.

This is a feeling I think was unique to *Friday the 13th*, in its time. This sense that you're reacting to trouble, rather than making a conscious choice to act first and attack, takes that sense of power away from the player, and I feel like many folks just did not like it. Who wants to play a game to feel weak and scared, anyway? I want to be a blue robot that shoots things!

This sensation ran counter to the feeling of 'fun' that I think many players felt was core to enjoying a game. It's kind of weird to enjoy feeling vulnerable and scared, isn't it? To enjoy feeling lost and confused? It's the sort of stuff most game developers work to erase from their titles, but *Friday the 13th* wanted you to feel these things. It wasn't really worried if you were enjoying yourself or felt empowered to act.

It's a game made about a series of movies where teens are stalked and killed by a ruthless being. Why would it be fun to put you in the role of someone being attacked by this killer? "LJN gets a pretty deserved reputation for subpar quality, but some of their games have unique concepts (I often wonder if their output was due to a lack of time rather than talent). *Friday the 13th* is no different in my eyes. The way they took the formula of the movies and applied it is actually really smart," says Swinnich.

The developers absolutely nailed that sense of dread and fear with the way they built *Friday the 13th*, but it ran counter to what many players might enjoy in games. It wasn't themed around empowering the player to be a ninja, fighting robot, monster hunter, or heartless plumber. It was about that feeling that you're in danger and being dogged by a killer. One who's likely going to succeed, or else why be afraid of them?

Friday the 13th is about scrambling to survive. It's about the fight to keep friends alive, and about the challenge of finding weapons when all you can think about is the monster breathing down your neck. It's not about being the hero, but surviving a horrible night. You are not called upon to act – you're just a regular person trying to live.

This captures that horrifying spirit, but again, it's not what many players of the time were likely looking for. Games were about being powerful, and this one wasn't. And it soured people on it, myself included.

And confusing the player? Leaving them wondering what they should be doing the whole time they play? This stuff flat out turns people off of games constantly. It's the sort of stuff that, for many, removes the enjoyment out of games.

Sometimes, this confusion is what draws us to the game to begin with, though. It's a mystery to be solved. "It's a little like Ubisoft's 1986 game *Zombi*, which is just a beat for beat game version of Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*. If you haven't memorized that movie, figuring out what you're supposed to be doing with various gas cans or power systems or characters is just madness. *Friday the 13th* is certainly more abstract than that, but still it would have helped to have a vague idea of my goal. Or not. That kind of mystery was what kept bringing me back to the game. The idea that I could eventually outwit it; or at worst, translate its bizarre language into some version of fun," says Wilbur.

"Well, first impressions were that it wasn't very good. The repetitive sound grated on my nerves, and Jason was an impossible brute in the cabins. But there was an odd sense of mystery that gnawed at me to the point that many years later, one Summer day, a bunch of my friends and I took turns and did finish it," says Swinnich.

I found something compelling about the game's eccentricities. I wouldn't develop a taste for horror for many years, but something kept pulling me back to *Friday the 13th* as I grew older. Its mysteries seemed interesting, and scrambling to find any help you could get grew more compelling. The fights with Jason became a tense dance, rather than a quick steamrolling of my

character. I started to feel something for my crew of more hapless characters.

It just didn't jive with folks at the time, though, and over the years, continues to be kicked around for being one of the few NES games that didn't care if you felt empowered while playing it, or even if you really enjoyed it. It asks you to embrace your vulnerability and fight for every ounce of strength you draw from it, rather than idly giving it to you because you opened a box or finished a level. It asks you to fight and win when it's far more likely that you'll lose. It doesn't fight fair, and it doesn't care what you think about that.

Of course people were going to hate it. People still hate it when games don't make them feel strong. There's still whole swaths of players who just want to feel powerful when they boot up a game. They'd probably still hate this.

And besides, what's to like about being lost all the time? About not knowing what to do? About finding invisible weapons, or in surviving a killer who's far more powerful than you are? Even I agree that it's a formula that isn't going to work for a lot of the people who try it.

"In terms of things it did well, I don't think there's anything that particularly sets it apart. I mean, there's plenty that sets it apart, because it's wildly experimental, but nothing that makes me reflect and say 'That device was interesting' or 'That level is particularly memorable.' The positive memories I associate with it are all based in my childhood journey or confusion and attempting to puzzle solve by reverse-engineering a slasher film before I'd ever seen a slasher film," says Wilbur.

If its strange concoction of confusion, disorientation, and deliberately unfair and tangled play jive with you, though, then *Friday the 13th* works, and works well.

"So, here's the thing: I'll go to bat for any game that had more ideas than it could pull off. That's certainly this. There's an overly complex series of actions and character shuffling, a map that makes it difficult to parse where you're headed, items that don't logically translate, attacks that seem untethered from hit boxes, and a timer of dying children. That combined with the onslaught of weird monsters and animals, along with an overpowered

serial killer, makes for, at the very least, a highly stressful experience. It's tense and it does a lot with the confines of both the NES hardware and the constraints of working within a rating system that doesn't lend itself to bloody teen sex-romp massacres," says Wilbur.

"It certainly deserves a spot alongside the early survival horror titles on the NES," he continues (although he seemed to enjoy *Home Alone*, which is far, FAR more terrifying than you'd think, more: "Personally, I think the NES adaptation of the film *Home Alone* is the early survival horror legacy title to beat. You have exactly twenty minutes, no more or less, in which you need to survive against the brutal AI of two robbers. Your house has traps, but not nearly enough to keep these baddies at bay. I've never felt terror quite like when my unseen assailants grabbed and murdered my 8-bit Macaulay Culkin when I was only seconds away from saving Christmas. It's a brutal experience.").

There's no real sense of being powerful in *Friday the 13th*. No point where the game won't crush you if you make a few mistakes or aren't quick enough. You never get that feeling that you're the hero who's ready to overcome evil. You just get a sense that you might, maybe, have a fighting chance, here.

And overcoming this tangled, mysterious, downright unfair experience is all the sweeter for this when you pull it off. You know, the handful of times I've achieved it.

Is completing a game the sole goal, though? Is reaching the end state the most important part of a game's value, or is it about the journey itself? While *Friday the 13th* may feel like an unfair game to play, I'd argue that this is mainly within the framework of completion as the final goal. If, instead, your goal is to soak in some of the feeling of being a teen trying to escape a dangerous killer, and all while keeping their friends alive, though...

I'm not trying to say that folks are wrong for disliking it. However, as an experience in capturing the confusion and fear that would go along with being a teen trying to stay alive while being hunted by Jason, the game is flawless. It is an experience in despair and terror, with little hope of escaping it.

“I had a very nihilistic view of video games as a child,” says Id. “I didn't think that it was possible to beat them. I had started playing stuff like *Circus Atari*, *Munchman*, and *Parsec* – arcade-y games not meant to be beaten. So, to an elementary school child such as myself, *Friday the 13th* just seemed like a more succinct version of that. Death was inevitable. Your friends were being slaughtered. Helping them only meant you've sacrificed what little time you had on this simulated earth.”

“Because I didn't get the rules of the game, I interpreted it as a simulation of being in a horror movie; How you have no chance, and Jason will destroy you and everything else you love. The Game Over screen's copy, ‘You And Your Friends Are Dead,’ seemed to reinforce that idea.”

Most horror games carry that hope, don't they? When you play *Fatal Frame* or *Sweet Home* or *Kuon*, you get a sense that they are designed for you to complete. They're challenging, don't get me wrong, but they are not designed to be purposely unfair. They will push players, but if they're diligent in their play, the games are, arguably, fair in how they intend to allow the player to win. I was challenged by those games, but I never felt actively sabotaged.

Friday the 13th, not so much. I never felt like I was equipped to complete that game. Its mysteries were too much, its antagonist too powerful, and my options too feeble. It feels like a game I was supposed to lose, which was something I found strangely interesting as I came back to it, over and over. My enjoyment didn't come from playing the game to completion, but rather getting lost in its hopeless and frightening atmosphere.

“It's not only emulating the feel of a slasher movie, but emulating the experience of someone who survives in a slasher movie. I've run into very few horror games that give me that feeling. I might be more in love with the game as an adult, especially now that I know that there are detractors,” says Id.

This is just my own personal feelings on the game's play style (as many, many people have beaten it, so it's not like its purposely impossible or something), but I feel that it was specifically designed in ways that ran

counter to design you would implement for a game you wanted players to complete. Not that most NES games were designed with their players finishing them in mind, but this one seemed especially vicious. It wanted its players to soak in their failures, and in how outmatched they were.

You're kids facing a supernatural killer. That's going to feel hopeless, and the game captured that sensation by making it extremely unlikely that you'd escape. That adds satisfaction the few times you do get through it, but that's not the point. It's focus is on making you lose yourself in that misery and fear, leaving you dying and afraid in the gloomy woods.

You're supposed to fall. That's the entire point. This was never a game you were expected to win – you were simply expected to feel.

Conclusion

I reached out to the handful of people at Atlus who worked on *Friday the 13th* (which was not easy given that none of them are credited, because OF COURSE the game has no credits when you complete it). Hideyuki Yokoyama, who was in charge of production, planning, and graphics, declined to talk. Hirohiko Takayama recalls little of the game in interviews he's given. The rest of my requests to talk about the game were met with silence. No one seemed interested in talking about the game or remembering it.

I can't imagine what it felt like to put this much thought into their game, only to have critics pan it. To have people drag it out for their 'Worst Game' lists. To pour so much thought into creating a horror game with the NES' limitations and have people bounce off it so hard.

I think about what they did often, and I'm beyond impressed, though. They captured a horrifying spirit in a time when most were just having a little man move around the screen shooting people. They created a sense of confusion through their map layout, and a disorientation in their mazes of caverns and woods. They realized that part of unsettling the horror experience was making the player feel lost within the setting. And they somehow figured out how to do this in a 2D, sidescrolling layout.

Friday the 13th's ambition has impressed many other folks as well. "I've revisited it a few times over the years and while I'm still not sure it's 'fun' for me, I've definitely come to appreciate it a lot. It's fairly strategic and maybe even ahead of its time as something of a survival horror game. I've grown to really admire its unabashed weirdness. Now, I completely adore the elements that used to put me off because they weren't enough like the movies for my taste. Things like Jason's color scheme and paunch, his mom's floating head, the zombies that wander the campgrounds, the zombies that launch out of the lake...it's all pretty bananas. Once upon a time I wasn't prepared for it, but now I'm totally on board." says Ponder.

"It feels more like a *Friday the 13th* game made by someone who heard

about *Friday the 13th* at the end of a long game of Telephone. It's got some of the elements the movies have—Jason, Camp Crystal Lake, Jason's mom—but they're all skewed and distorted, turquoise and purple where they should be off-white and olive green, you know? It seems like the game's becoming something of a cult...well, 'classic' might be too strong of a term. Worth reassessing, at least? Young'un me would never believe that *Friday the 13th* is worth a second glance, but today I consider it to be a weird little gem," she continues.

They took that confusion and applied it to the items, making it uncertain if the player would ever arm themselves. They knew that weapons had to be a valuable commodity, and that making it hard for the player to get them would leave them feeling vulnerable to the killer that was after them. Gaining knowledge of where to find these things would give players some comfort, so they had to take that away to create that feeling of fear. Invisible items helped them with this, giving players the tools to reliably arm themselves, but only with extensive knowledge of the game.

They took that vulnerability and spread it across six varied camp counselors. This would give players a strategic choice on how they played, granting them a little power, but the risks that came with playing the game would soon erase that. Do you send the useless ones into the woods to explore? Stay as a strong character to increase your chances of survival? It gives the player much to think about, and also increase their fear as their 'lives' dwindle, leaving them with weaker characters to finish the game with. You atrophy over the course of the game, sensing your weakness growing, rather than shrinking, as you progress.

"*Friday the 13th* is on my shortlist of games that serve as a mission statement for my work. *Friday the 13th*, *Monster Party*, *Wizball*, *M.U.L.E*: They are examples of how I must not be a slave to a theme, but allow a theme to inspire the weirdness in me. Mechanics and cool stuff must be culled from the outer reaches of what is relevant, otherwise, I'm just doing what is expected. I imagine some of the greatest artists in all mediums work that way," says Id.

"David Lynch immediately pops in my mind as an example of this. The

tagline for *Inland Empire* was 'A Woman In Trouble.' I believe David Lynch used that as a launchpad for story mechanics, characters and scenarios that are related to that theme, but not to each other. In having a theme so ambiguous, he could create a scene of relatable drama in the same movie as a hallucinatory dance number to 'The Locomotion.' In doing so, the film feels cohesive but bewildering. It makes sense but it doesn't. Its mere existence is a spectacle."

"*Friday the 13th* has the kind of spectacle and free thought I'd wish any of my games to have. To do what is expected is just boring."

They continued to apply pressure to the player through Jason's ability to attack all over the campground. You could arm one character all you wanted, but Jason wasn't just attacking you. You were still vulnerable in other ways, keeping players from feeling well-armed no matter what tools they picked up. This also could create a narrative for the player through individual characters, or create a sense of moral obligation to keep the others alive. You didn't let everyone die in the finale of *Mass Effect 2*, did you? Then HOW DARE YOU LEAVE GEORGE TO DIE?

Your attacker was powerful, able to kill you in a handful of hits. A few mistakes, and all of your work into a character would be gone. And Jason was everywhere, attacking in cabins, on foot paths, or on the lake. He didn't fight fair, and he didn't wait until the end of the level when you had your weapons in order. He came when he liked, and if you didn't deal with him, you could lose.

"There is a shockingly real feeling of dread when you're looking for Jason in a cabin. Or when you're low on life in the overworld and you know he might be looking for you. The idea that the annoying beeping and countdown is, in fact, children being slaughtered by a maniac has always stuck with me as an incredibly dark concept, and cultivated a sense of anxiety while trying to get back in time to save them. *Friday the 13th* succeeds as a horror game if you surrender to and accept its quirks. The calm moments between attacks are quietly oppressive, and the ensuing battles grim," says Swinnich.

You had to face down that power, as well. You had to turn on the thing that

was hunting you – this extremely effective killer – and somehow win. You had to brave mazes and additional bosses, figure out the game’s confusing pathways and mechanics, and all while dealing with your fear and endless attacks from a being who could beat you easily. You had to unravel its mysteries, all while under extreme stress and fear, and somehow overcome.

“That sense of mystery. It was tied in with the exploration, and was ultimately what really stuck with me. Sure, the sidescrolling gameplay was painfully basic and your characters had moon jumps. And sure, the game loves to troll you with random and awful item drops. But I loved looking for clues, or lighting the fireplaces, or wandering the woods or the caves. It never quite coalesces into a solid payoff, but they definitely got me chasing the carrot in a way other games failed,” says Swinnich. “It taught me the value of thinking outside of the established norms. In a world of *Castlevanias* and *Mega Mans*, it taught me the value of establishing a mystery for the player to chase.”

Friday the 13th did all of this on the NES. Its development team put in a great deal of consideration on how to make players feel like vulnerable, frightened camp counselors facing a terrible danger in 1989, and in a 2D sidescroller. They put in a tremendous effort, and show thoughtful design in every aspect of how the game came together. Every piece of it works together to make the player feel more stressed, alone, and confused – to build up that fear within them.

“Looking at modern games and how they've adapted, I see it as a wonderful predecessor to a lot of current horror games, often oddly surpassing the feeling of horror that tends to get lost with how a lot of more modern games have taken the formula. As an NES game, *Friday the 13th* really manages to create a very unique experience that separates it from so many games. I also have a strong appreciation for games with multiple gameplay styles and how they made that work on very limited hardware, and the *Punch Out!!*-like Jason combat is surprisingly well done,” says Kubiak.

“*Friday the 13th* is a game filled with a constant state of dread. Both through its mood and its mechanics, you always feel scared, weak, and uneasy as Jason rampages through the large and hard-to-traverse camp killing kids and

counselors. It does a great job at not only giving you the feel of the movie, but also leaves you concerned about when Jason will show up near you next!” he continues.

And it got panned. It was too opaque. Too confusing, Too relentless. Too broken. But did these things end up serving the whole in ways that were unintended by the developers?

“I always said that certain games, like turn-of-the-century Japanese horror, were scarier for being opaque, mistranslated - things like that, “ says Alexander. “I think Westerners, in particular, respond to ‘the other’ in horror reliably. But is this a mystery, or a mistake? When I was young, everyone always said *Resident Evil* had ‘bad controls on purpose’ to make the game scarier. And like any loss of control, as I mentioned before, it does kinda work, but does that mean it's ‘good’? Is your narrative design working if the game needs to feel a little broken to be frightening? I certainly don't think that's intentional.”

“Real mysteries are satisfying. Clarity is usually pretty important to game design -- I'm pretty sure no one on the *RE* team set out to make ‘bad controls on purpose.’ I think it's actually brokenness that we find scary in this software. We see a lot of indie games today where the fear factor comes from the perception that the program itself is glitched, foreboding, determinedly unhelpful, even self-aware; we don't so much see anyone making bad controls ‘on purpose’, but allowing something broken to exist in a game, to explore the unintended constraints of a spooky mistake, feels a lot more interesting and radical.”

All of its elements, which were technically ‘unpleasant’ by player standards, were broken in ways that made *Friday the 13th* more effective at simulating the fear and panic that would come from being a weak teenager trying to avoid a supernatural killer. Perhaps, even if its elements were unintentional, they still served to create a more powerful horror experience.

And, like I said, people have been coming around to the game. They’re starting to see the horror elements at work in the game, and how its myriad pieces not only were far ahead of their time in creating tension, but would

also get used in many modern games to create fear and tension as well. You can see bits and pieces of *Friday the 13th* in nearly every modern horror game, from their powerful stalkers to their use of disorientation to their focus on making the player feel weak. The developers behind *Friday the 13th* nailed what it was like to feel afraid in a video game back then, developing something that would inspire and affect the entire genre.

I loved *Friday the 13th* for a long time, but I could never figure out why. What was it about having Jason kick my head around that was good? Why did I like being lost and afraid? It's something I ask myself a lot about horror games in general, and that I still don't have an answer to, a lot of the time. I at least know what I like about *Friday the 13th*, though.

“A game on the Nintendo Entertainment System had children being slaughtered as you ran around collecting machetes, pitchforks and axes for use in butchering a serial killer,” says Id.

“A game on the same platform as Mario or Mega Man disempowered you, told you to get yourself together, and murder the man who is murdering your friends.”

“A game, played by children from the eighties and nineties on a machine that came with a robot, inspired hopelessness, anxiety and fear.”

“To ignore such things is to be a fool.”

To me, it's the game that kicked off horror in video games. It explored how it would be possible to scare someone who was sitting in front of a screen, controller in hand. How to frighten someone who knew they were safe, and who likely couldn't really identify themselves as the clutch of pixels on the screen. It explored how to drag the player in, creating a loop that would keep them feeling scared without getting too irritated. It found the tools to scare people in its own darkness, creating fear in a time when games were only meant to entertain.

It's an exploration of a complex emotion. It's a search into what can make us afraid, even if we aren't physically present in the game's world. It shows the

power games have to touch us in our own lives, even if that contact is through fear. It showed that games were not just toys, but that they could affect us, emotionally.

It's where I saw that games could touch the heart. Even if that touch was more of a stab.

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Joel Couture basically won't shut up about games, writing about all sorts of them for Indie Games Plus (formerly IndieGames.com), Gamasutra, Warp Door, and CG Magazine. If you have games, please talk to him. He has become a bottomless maw for games and we are no longer sure if we can keep him under control.

Despite being a wimpy baby who is scared to look in the bathroom mirror in the dark, he is obsessed with horror games, seeking any way he can frighten himself with a controller. And he'd kind of like to know why that is.