


# 3rd Conference

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Ferdowsi University of Mashhad



سومین همایش

رویکردهاے میان رشته‌اے  
به  
آموزش زبان، ادبیات  
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۲ و ۳ آبان‌ماه ۱۳۹۶  
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International Studies Conference

## From Gothic Fiction to Video Games: *Batman: Arkham Knight* the Gothic Hero

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### **Abstract:**

The aim of this study is to show that the video game, *Batman: Arkham Knight* can constitute a gothic work and that the character of Batman can be considered as a gothic figure. Elements of gothic fiction might be evident in Batman comic series; however, few academic studies have been conducted to establish this hero as a gothic character. Moreover, although video games have attracted the attention of researchers in teaching languages, they have remained obscure in literature. Benefitting from the views of David Punter, Fred Botting and Andrew Smith, the scholars in Gothic Studies, this paper tries to create a framework for extracting literary gothic elements from Batman video game. These features include character types, science, psychological features, supernatural elements, and setting of the game. The findings of this study revealed that this game is rich in Gothic elements and can befall in the Gothic genre; furthermore, Batman was also found to be a character who can be named a gothic hero. It is concluded that the results would be of great help to video game developers to create more effective games with a gothic aspect, and to teachers who can use the game to teach the characteristics of the genre in literature classes.

*Keywords:* *Batman: Arkham knight*, video game, gothicism, hero, gothic elements

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## 1. Introduction:

The importance of video games or computer games is not restricted to entertainment. For example, Porsche, a major car manufacturer, decided to introduce their newly developed vehicle for the first time in a video game conference. This happened during the Xbox briefing in E3 2017. The German car company debuted the 2018 *Porsche 911 GT2 RS* in *Forza* conference. *Forza* is the title of Microsoft's racing game. Dan Greenawalt, the producer of the game, celebrated their six-year partnership with Porsche by announcing that Xbox gamers will be the first ones in the world to experience driving this new model of Porsche in the virtual world. His remarks best describe the magnitude of the event "Through your passion for racing the digital world and the real world are merging in an unprecedented way" (Greenawalt, 2017).

In recent years, games have also attracted the attention of researchers in language teaching. For example, Chandraa et al (2016) proved that action video games enhance cognitive abilities. They believe these games lessen reaction time and reduce stress (Chandraa et al, 2016, pp. 115-122). It also seems that students who play video games and use them for learning are more likely to remain motivated (Deubel, 2006, pp. 30-35). However, these games seem to remain obscure in the literature world. In one of the few attempts, Jonast Carlquist (2002) discussed the narratology of computer games. This study aims to view a computer game called *Batman: Arkham Knight* (Rocksteady Studios, 2015) from a literary viewpoint. This paper attempts to detect gothic elements in the game. An abundance of gothic elements is revealed in the analysis of the game; however, no study has ever proved this game as gothic narrative. For this purpose, a series of gothic works, namely, the writings of David Punter (1999), Andrew Smith (2007) and Fred Botting (1999) were studied and a list of gothic features and elements was extracted. Then, different elements were detected in the games regarding character types, the significance of science, psychological features, supernatural elements and setting.

## 2. Gothic Elements at a Glance

This section attempts to provide a list of gothic elements extracted from the works of most renowned theorist and figures of gothic literature.

### 2.1. The Setting of Fiction

A popular setting for gothic fiction, especially during the infancy of the genre, was Europe and especially southern European medieval Gothic-castle setting or imposing edifices.

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However, these exotic locations were later replaced by rural mansions (Cornwell, 2000, pp. 39-46). Gothic landscape and setting is normally alienating, menacing, and full of threats Castles, dark and labyrinthine streets are other popular locations in the fictions (Botting, 1999, pp. 1-9).

Hogle (2002) provides a list of different settings: a castle, a foreign palace, an abbey, a vast prison, a subterranean crypt, a graveyard, a primeval frontier or island, a large old house or theatre, an aging city or urban underworld, a decaying storehouse, factory, laboratory, public building, or some new recreation of an older venue, such as an office with old filing cabinets, an overworked spaceship, or a computer memory (Hogle, 2002, pp. 2-8). Night is when mind's fantastic and unnatural creatures can feel free to ramble in human imagination. Darkness also allows the person to perceive the soul within and expands the mind. That is why night is so valued in gothic literature (Botting, 1999, pp. 22-25).

## 2.2. Psychology and Character Types

Andrew Smith (2007) in *Gothic Literature*, talks about the internalization of evil. He argues that while gothic moved from 18th to 19th century, monsters ceased to exist only in giant external form, instead the horrors became largely internalized. He believes however, this dates back to the doubling relationship between Victor and his monster creature Frankenstein (Smith, 2007, pp. 14-16). Lisa Hopkins (2005) also discusses the duality, which most probably stems from the confrontation of the realism of Victorians with decadence (Hopkins, 2005, pp. X-XVI). Doubles and alter egos exist in this kind of fiction to undermine and disturb the human identity. Therefore, the boundaries between psyche and reality are blurred (Botting, 1999, pp. 1-9). Kristeva (1982) believes that ghosts and grotesque are created to embody contradictions. In her opinion this is an example of 'abject' or 'throwing off'; she suggests, is all that is "in-between . . . ambiguous . . . composite" in our beings prevents us from reaching coherence in our personality (Kristeva, 1982, pp. 102-107). She argues that we throw our contradictions on figures and uncanny creatures in gothic fictions (Kristeva, 1982, pp. 112-115). This also leads to, or might stem from the juxtaposing prevalent in gothic works; as in physical versus the metaphysical, and abnormal versus normal psychology, etc. presenting both ends in extreme, which is typical of the gothic since it is the literature of (Hogle, 2002, pp. 2-8).

Moreover, there usually exists a character who suffers from a fragmented nature. A return of the past horrors, which haunt the characters, is also another prominent struggle of the genre. Her book asserts that gothic is the literature of excess (Hopkins, 2005, pp. X-XVI). Meaning that

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passion, excitement and sensation transgress social proprieties and moral laws (Botting, 1999, pp. 1-9). This type of fiction depicts the ecstasies of Romantic idealism (Botting, 1999, pp. 80-84). Botting also believes that characters are at times engaged in life-threatening pursuits (Botting, 1999, pp. 1-9).

There is a list of characters that frequently appear in gothic fictions. Lisa Hopkins (2005) lists them as follows: “A mysterious and threatening older man, a vulnerable heroine, and a character who is poised ambiguously between good and evil” (Hopkins, 2005, pp. XI-XVI). Botting (1999) adds madmen, the monstrous double that signifies the duplicity of evil, to this list (Botting, 1999, pp. 1-9). Ancient characters also reside in this genre. Knights and old monsters of medieval reign are existent in some works of the Gothic literature (Botting, 1999, pp. 18-30).

### 2.3. Supernatural Elements and the Influence of Science

It seems that gothic fiction is replete with supernatural creatures and phenomena. As Botting (1999) asserts, the threats and horrors are associated with supernatural, natural and

imaginative excesses. Some fantastic creatures are abundant in gothic works such as specters, monsters, demons, corpses and skeletons. It is also noteworthy to mention that imagination and emotional effects exceed reason (Botting, 1999, pp. 1-9).

As discussed before, gothic is the literature of the excess (Hopkins, 2005, pp. 34-40) which manifests itself in subverting the social norms, values and behavior (Botting, 1999, pp. 12). Scientific discoveries and mad scientist play an important role in gothic fiction. Laboratory is one of the settings of gothic fiction (Hogle, 2002, pp. 1-18). In some works such as *Frankenstein* dilemmas stem from developments in biology, chemistry and electricity (Hogle, 2002, pp. 40-61).

### 3. Results and Discussion

This section attempts to make correspondence between the gothic elements discussed above and the recurrent ones in the game. Here, the storyline of the game casts light on the interpretation of Gothic elements.

On Halloween, Scarecrow forces the civilian evacuation of Gotham City after threatening to unleash his potent new fear toxin. Batman encounters the Arkham Knight and his heavily-armed militia. Batman overcomes the forces and locates Scarecrow, who has transformed the entire building into a toxin bomb.

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A flashback reveals that before the Joker died, his poisoned blood was used in blood transfusions, contaminating the blood of five people including Batman. Four other recipients were physically and mentally transformed into the Joker. The Joker, now existing as a mental projection produced by the infected blood and fear toxin, frequently appears to taunt Batman, and manipulate his perception of the world around him.

A dose of fear toxin allows the Joker to temporarily assume control of Batman's body. Harley Quinn seizes Batman's base in the Panessa movie studio to rescue the Joker-ized patients. Batman and Robin capture Harley and the infected people. However, one of the patients kills the others, before committing suicide, believing that Batman will become the perfect Joker.

The Arkham Knight activates Cloudburst, flooding the city with fear toxin. Batman's exposure to the toxin strengthens Joker's control. The Knight reveals himself as Jason Todd, the previous Robin, who was seemingly murdered by the Joker. Todd blames Batman for abandoning him. Inside Batman's mind, Batman and Joker battle for control; the Joker attempts to weaken Batman by recounting the people who have suffered and died because of Batman's

crusade; Batman triumphs and locks the pleading Joker away in his mind forever. Interestingly, to be forgotten, is Joker's only fear.

### **3.1. The Setting of Fiction**

The story of the game takes place in the fictional city of Gotham. Like other gothic fiction, which occur in a remote landscape, Gotham presents its dark streets as an ideal vicinity for the story to take place. Moreover, the city serves as a perfect area for abjection. Kristeva's definition of abjection has close affinities with the portrayal of the city, Gotham. For one thing, the city is a fictional one and does not exist in the real world. Therefore, an ideal place to bury and demonstrate our fears without being too close to us. This city might as well represent the unconscious and uncontrollable fear. The streets of the city are normally replete with crimes and horrors, providing that menacing environment of the gothic. The crimes and evils are realistic and at times even supernatural. For example, Bain is a character who gains extraordinary strength by injecting a potion to his veins. Deadshot is an extremely talented shooter.

There might not be a castle in the game, however, Bruce Wayne's mansion represents that threatening edifice. He is the agent of good. That is why his house poses as a threat to criminals and demons. It also has its hidden pass ways to the Bat Cave where he uses as a hiding

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place and a safe house. There are some statues on Wayne's tower, named Guardians, who cast fear on enemies and are not unlike demons described in gothic fictions.

Another location of the game is the Arkham Asylum (Figure. 1). The game makes it clear that it is a place for keeping mentally disturbed patients. However, in the game, it serves as a prison for dangerous criminals who suffer from a physiological problem. Since the name of the asylum appears in the title of the game and the previous ones, the importance of the location is



**Figure 1:** Arkham Asylum, dark setting and mystery

overemphasized. It is the storehouse in which all the threats reside. Madmen are important figures in the gothic fictions (Botting, 1999, pp. 1-9) and this prison provides a variety of the characters afflicted by mental and emotional disturbance; for example, the Joker, a mentally disturbed patient, who also has tortured Jason Todd, and turned him against Batman. One can also mention Dr. Crane, a professor of psychology, who attempts to control the city with releasing the fear toxin. The character of Harley Quinn, a former worker in the asylum, is of great importance since he is later affected by The Joker and becomes a major villain.

The story of the game happens during a single night and as discussed before, night is of great significance and value in gothic literature. Since night signifies horrors and leads the mind to discover its wildest imaginations (Botting, 1999). Another influential element in the setting is the music. The beginning of the theme sound track is 'dark'. Gradually, it gains an epic atmosphere beside the darkness. Heavy percussion in 'Invasion' by Nick Arundel creates a tense action feeling (Tillnes, 2015).

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### 3.2. Psychology and Character Types

The internalization of evil is an important feature of the game. In the story, the audience realizes that the Joker had injected Batman with a kind of poison that will eventually turn him into Joker. Therefore, Batman is engaged in this internal fight with the clown. The Joker is the agent of chaos (Nolan, 2008) and evil. Interestingly, Batman's hallucinations of the Joker even come to his aid at times during the game. That is when the audience is introduced to the duality of good and evil.

This manifests itself in different disguises during the game. Batman's psyche is the portrayal of the struggle between good and evil in human. The Joker resides in Batman's mind (Figure 2). Joker is too overpowering that he eventually tries to conquer Batman's whole psyche. Therefore, Batman is also Joker simultaneously. Therein reside two contradictory extremes. Moreover, Batman obviously leads a double life. In his daily life, he is the millionaire, Bruce Wayne, and by night, he fights crime in mask.



**Figure 2:** Joker in Batman's hallucinations

Harvey Dent is another character suffering from this duality and contradiction. He used to be a role model for justice, yet he fails to cope with a tragedy and becomes a villain. He falls from Gotham white knight to the state of Two-Face (Nolan, 2008). This duality is even apparent in his guise and figure: a partly burnt suit and face. One side representing his thirst for justice as the former district

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attorney of Gotham, the other his evil urges. This reminds the audience of Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

The past is always haunting character's destiny. Some characters in the game suffered a trauma in their past which led to their current situation. Bruce Wayne himself witnessed his parents' murder when he was a young child and this motivated him to fight crime for the rest of his life. He is haunted by the nightmares and images of the past frequently. In *Arkham City* (2011) for example, he faces his fear while affected by Scarecrow's fear gas; the alley in which his parents were killed (*Arkham City*, 2011). Jason Todd, the Arkham Knight, the former sidekick of Batman has also turned completely against him because of what Joker did to him. He blames Batman for all his sufferings.

Arkham Asylum is another feature that depicts psychological issues. This is a mental hospital for keeping dangerous patients and criminals. It is a storehouse for all the dangerous mind tricks, horrors and evil desires such as thirst for power and even fear. It might represent the

unconscious. Many characters in the franchise suffer from some mental and psychological disorder like the Joker, Harley Quinn and Dr. Crane.

Doctor Crane, also known as Scarecrow, was the former professor of psychology in Gotham City who after losing his job turns to a life of crime. He paralyzes his enemies by using chemicals, namely a fear gas, which makes the victim face and their worst fears and nightmares. He is the main villain in the game, who tries to control the city by dropping a fear bomb on the town. Harley Quinn or Harleen Frances Quinzel was a psychologist in Arkham Asylum treating the Joker. She later fell victim to Joker's mind games and fell desperately in love with him. This led to her madness. In the end, she becomes a super-villain. The Joker is probably the symbol of madness in the series. He is a psychopath, a criminal mastermind with a sadistic sense of humor who is the archenemy of Batman. He introduces himself as an agent of chaos and ridicules all the social conventions (Nolan, 2008).



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### 3. 3. Supernatural Elements and the Influence of Science

There seem to be events and characters in the whole franchise that are not bound by physical or logical rules. Poison Ivy, for example, is a lady who protects the greens and vegetation. She is able to control the plants with her mind and summon them in times of need. Initially a nemesis of Batman, she comes to his aid as the game moves forward. Killer Croc is also a fantastic character who appeared in *Arkham City* (2011); a super-villain who is half-human half a voracious reptile (Figure 3). Ra's al Ghul is another supervillain using supernatural sources of power to his

benefit. He is aided by the Lazarus Pits which are containers of chemicals which can bring the dead back to life. Therefore, he is armed with eternal life and several centuries old.

**Figure 3:** Killer Croc, half-human half- reptile

Mad scientist, another Gothic feature, is the prevailing image in *Arkham* series. In this game, for example, a scientist tried to enhance the chromosome of a bat; however, something went wrong during the experiment, and he metamorphosed into a giant bat, who was later called the Manbat. Poison Ivy is also a botanist who attempts to protect the green at any cost even by eliminating humans. Mr. Fox is a scientist who develops different gadgets for Batman. Scarecrow is also a specialist in psychology who uses his evil scientific expertise to gain control over the city. There is also another villain, Madhatter, who attempts to control his enemies' minds with his invention that is a device to manipulate their thoughts. However, the most disturbed and weirdest scientist might be Professor Pyg who starts a campaign to make people

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‘perfect’. He has manufactured an identity-destroying drug in the form of a virus and intends to spread it using his army of Dollotrons, which are his soldiers with masks fused into their faces. Later, he tries to wreak havoc in Gotham with viral infection. Batman ultimately foils his plan and apprehends him though.

#### 4. Conclusion:

Due to the abundance of gothic elements in the game, one cannot fail to regard *Batman: Arkham Knight* as an audiovisual gothic fiction. As discussed before, these elements are especially vivid in the setting of the game, the characters, the supernatural elements, and the role that science plays in the development of the game story. Batman himself also carries all the characteristics of a gothic hero, and can stand next to Frankenstein’s monster or vampires, and might constitute the gothic figure. He has been evolving since his creation in 1940s in response to the needs of each decade. Other characters also present gothic features abundantly. As discussed, the Joker and Scarecrow embody the horrors and nightmares of the unconscious. The sufferings, tortures, and mishaps in the laboratory are also key events in the storyline of the game. The events occur in one night, since Batman uses the darkness as a cover to fight his enemies. Night might also be the source of hidden fears and horrors. Moreover, the whole atmosphere of the game including the architecture, colors, and the music of the game also represent gothic features.

Further studies may also prove whether Gotham City or Arkham Asylum represent the unconscious. Moreover, the architecture of the city and the monuments such as statues appearing in the game could have been studied. Also, the costume design of the characters can be of gothic significance. This study attempted to initiate bridging the gap between literature and game studies. It discussed video games within the same framework that canonized literary works in Gothic genre were interpreted. It seems that in the past few years, games with better storylines and memorable characters attract more attention and do better in the market. Hence, game makers try to create more complicated stories with unforgettable characters rather than just focusing on gameplay and graphics. This has led to a great body of adaptation. Video games might soon introduce themselves as the newest and most popular form of fiction benefiting from the literary traditions.

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