

## GAME REVIEW

Lingdong Huang, *Normal Human Face Simulator* (itch.io, 2017)

The human face is one of the most ubiquitous and average of sights during a given day. Seas of human faces float by in crowds, on trains, at meetings, and one stares back as if from within a mirror. Lingdong Huang's *Normal Human Face Simulator* deconstructs the 'normality' of the human face. Rather than simulating average actions such as blinking, smiling, chatter, Huang's game pits two faces against each other in a gnashing bout of cannibalistic combat. Without a conventional text-based narrative, *Normal Human Face Simulator* offers its players the option of becoming cannibals and, themselves, part of the gothic.

Harkening back to the fading age of 'couch co-op', those years in the 1980s and 90s of local multiplayer games, *Normal Human Face Simulator* is a two-player fighting game played with a shared keyboard. Adding a physicality to the play, the players' faces are within, say, a foot of each other's as their fingers mash the keys in an attempt to gnaw at each other's digital faces. The procedurally generated graphics produce flappy, comical shreds of muscle and tissue over the skull beneath. The dazed, almost placid, faces of the simulated combatants and the overt, silly physics of the gore – which depicts the flesh flopping around and often getting stuck in unrealistic positions – positions this game squarely as a self-parody, one that exists within the larger tradition of gothic cannibals.

The gothic, as a genre, has a recurring fixation with cannibalistic appetites. Not often as literally manifested as in *Normal Human Face Simulator*, the trope is, nevertheless, omnipresent. The first gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), centres around a man 'consuming' his family for his own gain. More generally, the once-human vampire or zombie troubles the definition of cannibalism by consuming the humanity they have lost through their victims, while Faustian bargains effectively cannibalise the soul for mortal gain. Where these examples are abstracted acts of gothic cannibalism, *Normal Human Face Simulator* joins more literal depictions, such as the many adaptations of the folk-gothic tale of Sweeney Todd and films such as *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974). Rather than abstracting the act of cannibalism or rendering it figurative, *Normal Human Face Simulator* transforms the cannibalism that is inherent in the gothic into a literal act. However comic the result, Huang's game offers its

players the option to become digital cannibals and, in the spirit of the gothic, transgresses the distance implied by more literary cannibals. Instead of being passive observers or victims in a gothic plot, the players *are* the cannibals. Embracing one of gaming's unique features, *Normal Human Face Simulator* conveys this gothicised cannibalism without words.

Forcing its players to become digital cannibals has required Huang's game to remove several layers of abstraction. The most notable layer to have been removed is text-based storytelling – something video games occasionally share with film. Where the history of gothic texts has been dominated by the written word, video games can convey the gothic through play. *Normal Human Face Simulator* lacks any conventional story or narrative; instead, the players' act of lunging glass-eyed faces with gnashing teeth into each other constitutes the 'story'. No text or audio is there to command us to become cannibals; we, as players, choose this for ourselves. This decision is by no means far removed from the core of the gothic aesthetic – quite the opposite. The gothic, as a wide-reaching artistic tradition, can be seen as a continuous and cannibalistic dialogue. Horace Walpole's mock castle Strawberry Hill, the structure that launched both Gothic Revival architecture and the gothic literary tradition is, in itself, a cannibalistic building. Walpole designed his home by rending and consuming gothic architectural styles, with little concern for their history or usage beyond his aesthetic appraisal. In this vein, gothic artists emerging from that nexus have chosen to continue to consume and regurgitate gothicised aesthetics, narratives, and histories. The gothic is therefore a genre historically constructed through multiple forms of cannibalism. Centuries of architectural style, literary tropes, and folklore are consumed and remixed into the artistic mode of the gothic. Huang's *Normal Human Face Simulator* participates in this tradition of the gothic as cannibalised remix culture. Procedural graphics, the human form, couch co-op fighting games, and minimalist aesthetic are all cannibalised by Huang's art and reformed into a riveting two-player experience.

*Normal Human Face Simulator*, much like other gothic texts, also alienates us from ourselves. In the same way that the ancestral home becomes a haunted trap, or the lover turns vampire, occasionally you consume the face of the person sitting next to you on the couch – or at least play at the transgression. This game's transgression acts in the most obvious sense by having two people gnaw at each other's faces, but also by blurring the lines between comedy and horror, competitive and casual, modern gaming and the gothic literary tradition. And it

accomplishes all this without words, the only text in the game being a brief set of instructions on how to play.

*Normal Human Face Simulator* chews on the gothic tradition and cannibalises some of its most well-kept tropes and secrets. Without much in the way of narrative-by-text, the game communicates the gothic mode through its play. With a low price tag, accessible skill requirements, and unique alignment within the gothic tradition, *Normal Human Face Simulator* by Lingdong Huang is worth a bite.

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