

# The House and the Infected Body

## The Metonymy of *Resident Evil 7*

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**Abstract:** *Resident Evil 7*, in articulating the threat of infectious mold, situates the illness with the feminine: Historical, cultural, and physiological connections between mold and women gives the game license to limit, objectify, and render the female characters monstrous. First-person immersion brings us into contact with the infection, as mold and Molded threaten the buildings of the Bakers, while mold growing in their brains threatens the Bakers themselves. Through the form of infection, the disease is invasively feminine, reflected in the Bakers and their homes.

**Keywords:** Zombies; Mold; Resident Evil; Female Erasure; Embodiment

**Schlagworte:** Zombies; Schimmel; Resident Evil; Auslöschung des Weiblichen; Verkörperung

### 1. Introduction

In Capcom's *Resident Evil 7: Biohazard* (2017), Ethan Winters follows a message from his missing wife, Mia, to a rural home in Dulvey, Louisiana. Upon arrival, he finds Mia held captive by the Baker family; what Ethan does not know is that Mia and the Bakers have been infected by mold. After finding Mia and her cutting off his hand, Ethan wakes at the Bakers' dinner table and meets Jack, Marguerite, Lucas, and Eveline, who appear horrific and undead. He escapes and moves from building to building, guided by the information from the unseen daughter Zoe Baker, trying to find a cure for his wife, Mia, and ally, Zoe. Beyond the Bakers, Ethan is hunted by ambulatory mold-humanoids, called Molded, who corrupt and infest the buildings and grounds of the Baker home. As with previous *Resident Evil* games, the player guides the protagonist to escape the zombie threat, which in this game is the Molded, Jack, Marguerite and Lucas Baker, and the underlying threat: the interloper, Eveline. Ethan learns about the Bakers' past actions through found videotapes of Clancy and Mia's explorations. He also gradually gains weap-

onry, knowledge, and confidence moving through the different buildings to fight back against Jack, Marguerite, and Lucas before finding his way to the shipwreck that brought Eveline to Dulvey. As Mia in flashback and Ethan in the present, the player fights back against Eveline, Test Subject E, who telepathically controls the Molded and the Bakers.

The title of *Resident Evil 7: Biohazard* (2017) focuses us from the outset on disease, as the game articulates the personal and intimate experiences of infection. As Ethan Winters, the player invasively explores the Bakers' home: we walk the halls, enter rooms, and examine the trappings of life. Moving into the basement of the Main House, we discover the inhuman threat: the mold. The growth covers the walls and ceiling, infesting the space and growing through the major arteries of the home. The buildings on the Baker estate each reflect its primary resident, as Jack dominates the Main House, Zoe inhabits the trailer, Marguerite controls the Old House, and Lucas manipulates the Testing Area. Similar to earlier *Resident Evil* games, collectable files provide further insight into the Bakers and their spaces. The game provides an immediate, personal experience of infection through the metonymy of the house and body, as the mold growing in the hallways and rooms reflects the growth in the Bakers' bodies; for example, Marguerite's doctor describes the foreign structures infecting her brain:

I'm writing to tell you that I've finished examining your X-rays. Those dark areas in your cranium are fungus-like structures that seem to be related to mold.

The hallucinations and noises you said you've been hearing may be related to these growths.

If your symptoms are due to a fungal parasite, it must be removed before it's too late. I don't mean to scare you, but I am seriously concerned for your health.

Please come to the hospital as soon as you read this letter. As your doctor, I strongly recommend you undergo further tests. (*Resident Evil 2017*, »Doctor's Letter«)

The »fungus-like structures,« which the doctor frames as fungal parasite and wholly separate »it,« warns of the threat Ethan faces. By omitting Ethan's body as visible avatar and setting gameplay in a first-person perspective, *Resident Evil 7* asks us to walk through the structures of the house-as-body, seeing infection move through and corrupt the space. We witness the damage and must fight the threat to the body and home.

The game creates ambiguity about whether mold is a symptom or cause. While Molded appear after Ethan is attacked by the Bakers, the doctor's letter shows the mold's influence, causing the Bakers' resulting unnatural abilities and behaviors. This shift disrupts our understanding of the role of mold as decomposer: accompanying death, not causing it. Two forms of mold appear in the Bakers' homes: Blooms on the walls and structural growths invade the hallways, bulging from

walls, ceilings, and floors. One is a natural growth in moist, warm spaces; the other is a foreign body infesting the Bakers and their homes. *Resident Evil 7* relies to some extent on the player's familiarity with the biology and chemistry lessons of the earlier games, forwarding the narrative of Umbrella Corporation and its experimental manipulations of disease. Yet, the personalization of Ethan's journey and his experience with the Bakers brings the infection home.

The game connects body and house, and more specifically shows simultaneous infection of the two, complicating the representation of female bodies. The association of mold and the feminine is problematic, as ergot is tied to the Salem witch trials and medical use in childbirth. The bodies of female characters in the game are tethered to the family and home, while the male bodies of Ethan, Lucas, and Jack are more mobile and dynamic. The form of the disease, and Eveline's goal of corrupting the Bakers and Mia into a family, frame the infection as something feminine, as well as immediate, internal, and intimate. The disease and its visibility are uncanny: mobile, articulated infection is fundamentally disturbing through an uncomfortable transition from microscopic to macroscopic. While mold grows in many sizes and structures, the Molded are distorted and overgrown; though mold is a decomposer, and thus no threat to living tissue, the Molded are mobile and menacing; Ethan, the Bakers, and their homes are under attack by disturbing figures of disease.

Our examination of *Resident Evil* will address the layers of gameplay and narrative that impart the experience of infection and how the infected body disempowers the female characters. We begin with our discussion of embodiment, which functions as a mechanism of investment and engagement, drawing the player into Ethan either through regular gameplay or through VR immersion.<sup>1</sup> The player's experience as Ethan situates us in the space to witness infection and highlights our participation in an infected space. Next, we discuss the process of infection, as the Bakers' corruption by mold takes over the body and overwhelms the buildings. The spread of mold visible in the different structures mimics the mold growth in the Bakers themselves. We then examine how each character is reflected in their space, thus allowing us to read the infection of the home as the infection of the Baker. The metonymy of body and house limits the female characters, restricting their power and agency in the game. Ethan's explorations of the Bakers' home make the infection visible: bringing us face-to-face with the mold, the Molded, and the threat that grows in the home and body.

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1 We played this game in both VR and in console versions in order to ensure that the argument applies equally well to both of them for readers and players.

## 2. Embodiment

Ethan Winters' viewpoint complicates the player experience of *Resident Evil 7*. The player's position as embodied presence, rather than an on-screen avatar, focuses us and shapes our choices. While previous *Resident Evil* games threatened or infected the protagonist, embodying the player as Ethan makes immediate the threat to bodily autonomy and invasion by disease. Lauro and Embry's »A Zombie Manifesto« (2008) addresses how fear heightens self-awareness:

One psychoanalytic interpretation purports that we are most acutely aware of ourselves as subjects when we feel afraid – specifically, when we feel threatened by a force external to our bodies. [...] [F]ear heightens our awareness of ourselves as individuals because our individuality is endangered in life-threatening situations. Nowhere is this drama more acutely embodied than in the model of the zombie attack: for the zombie is an antisubject, and the zombie horde is a swarm where no trace of the individual remains. (88-89)

Faced with the zombie threat, players become acutely aware of their own individuality, which *Resident Evil 7* challenges through embodiment. While player experience does not need to be in a first-person frame to encourage mechanical and emotional involvement, as Gregerson and Grodal, and Jarvinen demonstrate,<sup>2</sup> the player's embodiment is central to the representation of disease and infection. Ethan's physical form – his hands raised to fend off blows, audible pain or labored breathing, his heart-rate monitor indicating character health – situates us in the character and world.

This embodiment puts us firmly in the space of the male protagonist, the so-called ideal point of projection, as Mulvey (1975; 1999) argues in »Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.« Viewing film and television, we are often positioned with the male protagonist to take on his viewpoint and objects of his desire: »the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude« (838). The reinforcement is more absolute when we use the eyes of the male protagonist: Ethan's gaze is ours. We experience the game through his body and are driven by his character: the dutiful husband willing to fight for his wife. Player immersion results from technological tools; Vivian Sobchak (2004) asserts the body is situated in film space, as »there is no such abstraction as *point of view* in the cinema. Rather, there are concrete

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2 Gregersen and Grodal (2009) specifically address the flexible body, which can extend our sense of self into our clothing, cars, and other objects of our person and how we can consider electronic bodies mapped the same way; Jarvinen (2009), while focusing on coding emotional experience, discusses how the player's emotions can be engaged through both narrative and mechanics.

*situations of viewing* – specific, mobile, and invested engagements of embodied, enworlded, and situated subjects/objects whose visual/visible activity prospects and articulates a shifting field of vision from a world whose horizons always exceeded it« (121). She argues that digital experience is more fractured, disrupted by heads-up display information relating to the structures of the game. *Resident Evil 7* strips away visible stats and mechanics, focusing our experience as active participant and enworlded subject. As Crick (2011) notes, the player's presence in the body of the character is a means to »produce high levels of dramatic tension and engagement« (262). Viewing the gameworld as Ethan shapes our response to the environment and thus play becomes collapsed: the player acts directly, rather than performing as a character. Immersion changes our response, increasing our awareness of space and detail through the immediacy of the walls, the doors, and the features of the Bakers' home. Without an external manipulable camera, to peek around corners or through doorways, we remain in Ethan's vulnerable body. We come right up to doors to push them open; we turn down a hallway before we see what is ahead of us. Pulling the player into a limited and immediate field of view amplifies the horror and reality of the house.

Virtual reality (VR) intensifies this element of embodiment: while the first-person perspective directs the Bakers' and Molded's attacks toward the screen, VR amplifies that threatening affect. The technology encourages the player to engage by mapping the trauma onto her body and making the damage more immediate and uncomfortable. The body and its suffering are a constant game element: checking health requires Ethan to raise his hand, showing his wrist where his hand has been reattached with staples. The player's immersion in the Bakers' infected homes brings an immediacy to the threats and attacks. Movement in VR means the player can turn her head when Jack stabs Ethan's face with a knife, and when Jack hoists Ethan over his head on the end of his shovel, the player tilts her head to look down into his face. The body, and specifically the traumatized body, is at the center of the player's experience. The draw into Ethan makes us aware of our body as character, what Crick calls a »body-centric gaze« (262). Removing the avatar brings us closer to the infection and how it impacts the bodies of the Baker family. Our position in the body challenges any distance the player may crave: we are immersed as Ethan, either on screen or in VR, and must come into contact with the mold. The VR set is still a screen, but we are drawn to consider it differently. Taking a cue from Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, Crossley's (1995) sociology of the body offers the reminder that the body's »being-in-the-world is at once mediated through physical presence and perceptual meaning« (47). In this way, the player, operating in and through the bodies – of the house, of Ethan, Mia, or Clancy – becomes more than a passive recipient of game inputs and becomes an active participant.

### 3. Infection and Identity

The game design and articulation of the infected space moves the player gradually into the idea of the house as an infected body. The first building Ethan enters, the Guest House, looks decrepit: rot, highlighted through piled trash bags, and rancid food in the refrigerator and on the table and stove, cues player senses beyond the visual. The infection is initially subtle, but the pathology is obvious. We eventually see disturbing signs and symptoms in Mia and the Bakers, yet our unease begins before encountering anyone: the kitchen full of garbage and rotten food suggests sickness. The space feels contaminated. Corruption is at the core of horror and central to the idea of the zombie and the *Resident Evil* franchise. Kristeva's *The Power of Horror* (1982) reflects on the body's rejection of the corrupted, the rotten, as a denial of the abject. »A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. [...] refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live« (3). This rot, the abject, invokes the player's anxiety before she witnesses contagion. The Guest House, separate from the Baker family, lacks mold. The sense of wrongness and shock of finding someone alive in the house is abruptly amplified by the reveal that Mia is the infection in the house. Mia transforms into a black-eyed violent threat, inverting expectations and warning the player that the danger is not what she expects.

This inversion continues into the Main House: Jack's space. The house itself, with more rotten food and dampness along the walls, looks fairly intact. In fact, Jack and the domestic space instill this veneer from the moment we encounter him. Even though the Bakers are infected, they show trappings of a »normal« family life, including a stereotypical sit-down meal. However, this extends the inversion, as Eveline directs and manipulates the family through infection. The house itself offers an initial reversal of the cosmology of Heaven, Earth, and Hell, as it initially appears that the underground is a safe place. Ethan's first set of moves in the house involve avoiding Jack until he finds a key for a floor hatch. The building is unsettled, scattered with piles of trash, and further destroyed by Jack crashing through the walls. This surface experience threatens Ethan, as Jack chases and attacks with a shovel, driving Ethan below the floor. While the initial use of crawlspaces seems safe, further subterranean exploration reveals the real threat of the house: mold growths cover the phone in the laundry room, and small blooms appear on the walls of the recreation room. As Ethan finds his way through a crawl space, we see the first mold structures: tree-like growths rising from the floor and stretching between beams in a starkly lit passage. It is in the basement, below the surface, where the infection becomes rampant. Mold covers the walls, ceiling, and floor, and from one such growth, a Molded appears: an ambulatory, humanoid figure peels off the wall and horrifies Ethan before attacking. These creatures, the manifestation of disease in the house, are the uncanny horror Ethan must survive.

Kristeva's description of corpses identifies how the concept of death psychologically impacts life: »The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. [...] Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us« (4). The abject is alluring and repulsive, much like the power of the mold Eveline threatens. The Molded present an immediate threat to engulf Ethan with the disease that either infects bodies or grows over their scaffolds to create more Molded. These uncanny bodies, ambling creatures made of tendons of black rot, articulate death infecting life.

*Fig. 1: The structure of the Molded body (headless)*



Molds are a type of fungus that grow in elaborate networks of microscopic filaments called hyphae. These hyphae weave together to create thin, fuzzy patches or thick, branching root-like structures. Hyphae secrete digestive enzymes to break down the substrates they grow on, absorbing nutrients to enable further growth. Some molds are parasitic, growing and feeding on living organisms without killing them, but most are saprophytes: decomposers that do not attack living things. While in the minority of known mold species, toxin-producing molds are common in many environments and can consume almost any nutrient-rich substrate (Coppock and Jacobson 2009, 637). A wide variety of fungi are capable of producing mycotoxins and many produce several different toxins that can have varying effects. The Bakers' buildings, water damaged and showing initial infestation in the basement, take on the standard environment of infection. As molds decompose dead matter, they metabolically generate heat and release moisture from the material breaking down. This moisture and heat are ideal for further mold growth, creating

an accelerating, self-perpetuating cycle until the substrate is consumed. For example, when Ethan returns to the Main House later in the game, the mold has progressed from the basement to the upper floors, filling and overwhelming the space.

The Molded are a disquieting hybrid of humanoid and fungus. Ethan first sees them sloughing off the mold-covered walls of the basement and can later examine their growth over a scaffold when he discovers the Deputy's severed head in Zoe's fridge. In contrast to the living-but-contaminated Bakers, Molded are the fungal domination of a deceased host. The body is covered by hyphae, enlarging and elongating its form. From the Deputy's head, we see the mouth of the Molded taking shape; it does not align with his mouth or imply any connection to the digestive organs within his body. Mold dissolves and digests the material it grows on, so the Molded's mouth is only functional as a weapon. In the same way that the mold throughout the Bakers' property spreads over the structures, the Molded grow over a human form, consuming it and turning it into a dangerous predator.

*Fig. 2: The Deputy's head*



In Mia's flashback, we see that Molded are also produced by Eveline, specifically from a substance that she vomits. The association with illness and contagion is obvious: vomiting is a common sign of both infections and toxins. We see the transmission in a cut-scene when Alan, Mia's partner, repeatedly vomits a black substance as his wrist heart-rate monitor shows he is dying. This grotesque death has Mia crouching down and focusing on Alan; from this angle we see nothing

more than Eveline's boots standing beside Alan's body. Mia is covered over with mold, obscuring her vision, and when the mold recedes, Mia sees black, spidering veins under her skin. The fixed nature of the cut-scene ensures that our attention is drawn to the vomit, the spreading mold, and the creeping blackness under her skin. The vomit, amplifying the visible contagion, shows the devastating physical impact the infection has on the body: Alan's black vomit shows his body struggling with infestation and corruption. His death is predicated by Alan insulting Eveline and then apologizing, signaling he can hear her reprobation in his mind. The tie between mental control and physical infection highlights the incredible power Eveline has over her victims.

Eveline shows mutamycete properties that relate to three classes of mycotoxins: vasoconstrictive and psychotropic ergot alkaloids; mutagenic and carcinogenic aflatoxins and fumonisins; hormone-mimicking mycoestrogens. Ergot alkaloids can constrict peripheral blood vessels and reduce bleeding but can also cause nerve damage and make subjects insensitive to pain. Because of the lack of blood flow, particularly to extremities, tissues in fingers and toes, or even hands and feet, can die and become gangrenous and necrotic: resembling the blackened, withered limbs of the Molded. Physical transformations associated with mold come from mold-derived aflatoxins, among the most potent natural carcinogens known, that target specific regions of DNA to mutate cells and produce immortalized, uncontrolled cancerous growth. Jack's distorted form shows these growths, while Marguerite's transformation mirrors the impact of mycoestrogens, such as zearalenone, which the body treats as a high dose of estrogen. This hormone interference can disrupt growth and fertility, as well as induce birth defects or abortions. The infection thus amplifies feminine traits to a dangerous level, as the female body is object: horrific and alluring.

A wide range of neurological illnesses have been linked to mold. Living in a water-damaged house is associated with neurological complications (Empting 2009, 577), most documented after tropical storms and heavy flooding (Meggs 2009, 573). Symptoms can mimic those of classic neurological disorders and include pain, loss of coordination, delirium, and dementia. Some individuals are more sensitive, particularly to neurological signs, which can manifest in headaches, tremors, and muscle spasms. Mycotoxins can induce mental confusion or brain fog, sometimes temporarily, that can interfere with memory and decision-making. While these »alterations of mental status wax and wane,« which we see in Mia and the Bakers, sufficient damage can make these effects permanent even after the mycotoxin has been treated (Empting 580). The game ties mental disorder and flooded, damaged houses through Marguerite's dementia and distorted movements.

The Old House, flooded and left uninhabitable before the events of the game, is the domain of Marguerite. The Old House and Greenhouse are free of Molded; instead of hyphae, the building is infested with hive structures. The walls and

rooms are marked with insectile traits; nests and hives shape the space, while detritus and piles of trash remind the player of the Guest House and that early sense of unease. These markers of human habitation work in tandem with the markers of insect habitation to provide Ethan assistance: seeming obstructions offer places to hide and paths to safety. The building is infested with insects, which respond to Marguerite and her lantern. Marguerite herself is the representation of illness, as her madness and paranoia result from Eveline's infection and control. The doctor's letter which Ethan finds early in the game indicates Marguerite has fungal growths throughout her brain. The infection is more visible when she mutates, becoming insectile and distorted. Yet, the more important aspect of the infection is the impact on her mind.

Several mycotoxin compounds produced by ergot have psychoactive effects, inducing visual and tactile hallucinations. Eveline reflects these abilities, invoked to control those around her. Ergot fungus produces ergolines and lysergic acid: psychedelic compounds.<sup>3</sup> Ethan finds a file describing hallucinations as the first stage of Eveline's control over a victim:

Almost immediately after infection, the subject begins to see images of Eveline (though she is not in fact there) and hear her voice (which is inaudible to anyone else).

Auditions with infected subjects throughout the stages of infection reveal that at first, the phantom Eveline appears to be a normal young girl, sometimes desiring companionship or assistance. As time progresses, she begins making more and more extreme demands, including self-mutilation and attacks on other people. (*Resident Evil 7*, »R&D Report [1 of 2]«)

The hallucinations moving from visual and auditory distortions into demanding violent action from her victims articulates an ongoing control: the mold does not simply disrupt the brain and leave it to hallucinate, but shows Eveline exerting her will. Mia hallucinates when she returns to the shipwreck, seeing flashbacks of young Eveline. Ethan's hallucinations when he returns to the house with the E-necrotoxin are of young Eveline, a large Eveline doll and a series of phantasmal attacks from Mia. The exact mechanism of Eveline's control is not clear: Mia hallucinates even after receiving the cure at the Boathouse, suggesting that these visions may not be induced through the same means by which Eveline controls those she has infected.

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3 Lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) was derived from ergot alkalines.

## 4. The Monstrous Fungus

Mold has been culturally linked with the young female throughout history. Linnda Caporael (1976, 21-26) proposed that the »bewitchment« of the Salem witchcraft accusations resulted from ergot poisoning. This concept remains tenacious in popular press, despite being heartily disputed. Starting in the sixteenth century, ergot was used to induce childbirth, though the practice was dangerous because of the risk of toxic effects (Moir 1955, 728). Ergometrine, modern medication derived from ergot alkaloids, treats post-birth vaginal bleeding. Fungal epidemics have been associated with children and many mycotoxins appear to have greater effect on the young. The Slow Nervous Fever and Putrid Malignant Fever epidemics in England between 1650 and 1750 have been linked with mycotoxins and primarily affected children (Meggs 2009, 572). Fungus is tied to the female and juvenile in the cultural imagination, reinforcing the mode of infection and the overarching threat of the young girl.

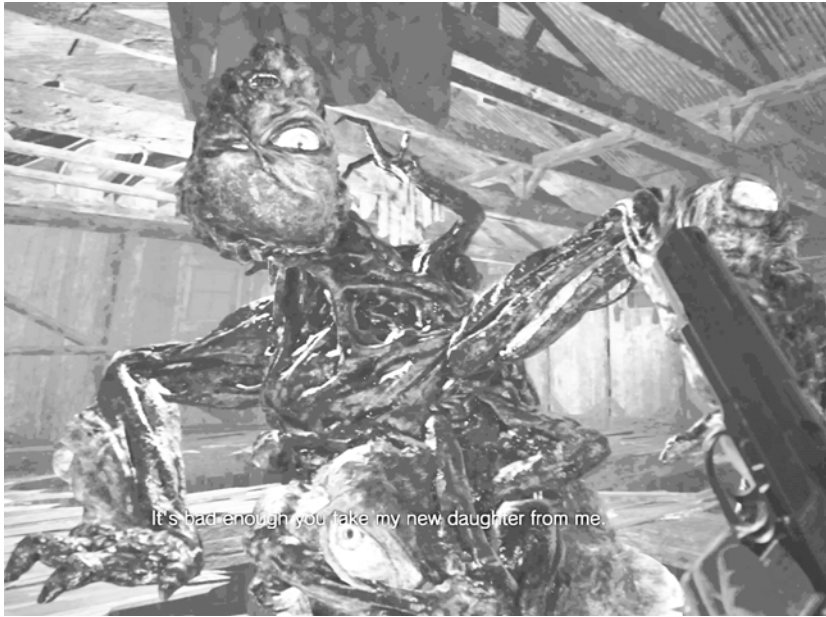
Marguerite's horrifying final form is a long-limbed creature with an engorged stomach and vulva marked with the same hive structures visible on the walls and ceiling. This hybridity, the monstrous lower part of the female body, carries on the long-standing tradition of combining the female form with the monstrous, which appears in Greco-Roman texts, medieval poetry, and through history into modern texts and media. As Anita Sarkeesian (2016) notes in her analysis of the »Sinister Seductress« trope in video games, the construction of the »grotesquely female« requires the incorporation of »highly gendered or sexualized elements in ways that are specifically intended to be creepy or disgusting« (4:02). Keogh and Jayemanne (2018) connect the trope of the monstrous feminine to a wider set of industrial and institutional practices regarding portrayals and characterizations of women in games, especially mothers, finding that video games only amplify the effects of the abjection of the monstrous mother because the form »converges them through the many procedural, artistic and narrative techniques of the videogame form« (10; emphasis in original). Marguerite's female body is made monstrous, specifically her abject genitalia and swollen belly: sites of female reproduction. This horrific malformation ties to fungal infection, as some *Fusarium* fungi produce mycoestrogenic toxins. In swine, these chemicals enlarge female genitals and atrophy male genitals, and are suspected to cause abnormal sexual development in humans (Coppock and Jacobsen 2009, 640-641).

Fig. 3: Marguerite's mutated form and insectile vulva



Later forms of Molded, introduced to elevate gameplay challenge through variation and escalation, begin to mirror these distorted and inhuman bodies. The crawling Molded, mimicking Marguerite's disfigured long limbs, the fat Molded, foreshadowing Eveline's mold-vomit on the Ship, and the bladed Molded, with overgrown hyphae creating weapon appendages, each vary the threat. Scaling difficulty provides novelty, develops tension, and keeps the game exciting. Jesper Juul's »Fear of Failing?« (2009) addresses the necessity of optimal game flow, which keeps the player dynamically situated between anxiety and boredom. Incorporating the work of Csikszentmihalyi and Falstein, Juul asserts that part of the enjoyment in gaming comes from the possibility of failure: »people seek [...] high arousal, and hence challenge and danger, in activities performed for their intrinsic enjoyment, such as games« (249). In *Resident Evil 7*, escalating challenge appears in the different styles and movements of the different Molded, which further reinforce the visual uncanny: humanoid in shape, but distorted in form. While they are associated with mold in the houses and on the grounds, the Molded through the Testing Area and Limestone Caverns appear isolated from those growths. Instead, they are corralled through the space by Lucas and Eveline. Challenge increases through mechanical complication, requiring different forms of creature for the player to recognize and combat.

Fig. 4: Jack's mutated form and multiple eye structures



The boss fights, amplifications of character and restrictions of combat, take place throughout the game to forward Ethan's journey. Jack, the Baker patriarch, fights Ethan in three separate boss fights, each escalating the challenge and visual extremes. The first, in the Baker family garage, disrupts the concepts of life and death in the game: after seeming to die, Jack gets up and uses Ethan's gun to shoot himself in the head. His return shortly thereafter elevates the horror and irreality of the game. The second fight, in the basement of the house, culminates with Ethan driving a chainsaw into Jack's head and its loss of structural form, becoming an amorphous pulsating blob. His defeat results in his later transformation into a gigantic hyphae creature covered with eyes. The more trauma Jack's body experiences, the more it undergoes mutation and becomes more inhuman. His final state, a hyphae creature, echoes the effects of mutagenic and carcinogenic fungal aflatoxins and fumonisins. These hyperplastic and neoplastic growths<sup>4</sup> advance with the stages of Jack's reconstitution: his skull reforms after a gunshot to the head and his body forms boils over his head and upper body when attacked

4 Hyperplasia refers to abnormally thick tissue growth or overgrowth, often compensating for injury or tissue damage. Neoplasia is the pathogenic growth of tissues, often as the result of DNA damage, that can form new growths such as malignant tumors. Both of these pathologies appear in Jack's transformations.

with a chainsaw. His most transformed, as giant creature in the Boathouse, is the most unnatural and accelerated growth, and his body reflects that distorted process. The cancerous, inhuman body forms tie Jack's seeming immortality to his infection and corruption by Eveline's mold.

## 5. House and Body/House As Body

Each building Ethan explores features a character who dominates the space and presents the threat. Mia, Jack, Marguerite, Zoe, and Lucas each have buildings that reflect their character and situate their combat. While games like Kitty Horrorshow's *Anatomy* (2016)<sup>5</sup> and Giant Sparrow's *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017)<sup>6</sup> map character identities onto individual physical spaces of the house, *Resident Evil 7* has whole buildings situating and reflecting the Bakers. Each space takes on markers of the character, and the form of infection and Molded reflect the Baker threat. Some cues are subtle, as Mia in the Guest House is literally that: a guest; the house has a sheen of normalcy with a presence of rot. Others, like Lucas' limited infection and attempts to corral Eveline's fungus appear in his controlled Testing Area and attached barn, associated with livestock domestication. Mapping the house and body is not a simple relationship of the physical forms manifest in the building's structures. Instead, the layers of the home, the public main floor, private upstairs and unseen basement, relate to the human experience. As an early cassette in *Anatomy* (2016) asks and answers, »Why do human beings of our modern age foster this tremendous sympathy toward their homes? [...] Perhaps it is due in some small part to seeing them as a reflection of ourselves« (Dining room cassette). *Resident Evil 7*'s reflection of identity appears in balance between the public face and the inner life: the corruption and rot start below the surface and creep into the public spaces, becoming visible.

Ethan's first point of entry into the Bakers' home is through the Guest House, which is, by its name, uninhabited by the Bakers. While rotten food and old newspapers show trappings of life, the lack of family photos or personal items keep the space neutral. Mia, trapped in the basement, does not extend her personality to the house: it stays generically unsettling. That lack of ownership in the Guest

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5 *Anatomy* establishes mechanics used in *Resident Evil 7*: the videotape is first-person movement through dark corridors, marked with artwork depicting insect bodies, seeking the cassette tapes that articulate the narrative.

6 Edith returns to her childhood home, exploring the rooms of her deceased family members. These rooms contain journals and stories of the lost family, allowing the player, through Edith, to enter their memories and bodies. The house maps character spaces onto these rooms, showing the strong identification of space and identity.

House reinforces Mia as interloper. She is not welcome in this space: she is incarcerated in a basement cell. The only evidence of infection here is Mia: her black eyes, extreme violence, and, when she regains control, her statement that »I can feel her crawling her way back inside me« tell Ethan that something is fundamentally wrong (*Resident Evil 7*: Guest House). However, while she is the threat in the Guest House, she is also the objective: »Find Mia.« The character, reflected in her space, lacks the agency and control that later characters demonstrate.

Jack, as patriarch, rules over the Main House, as his objects and photographs appear throughout the home. He asserts his dominance immediately when Ethan wakes: violently removing Lucas' hand and attacking Ethan. The other Bakers leave while Jack remains as the overwhelming threat. While each member of the Baker family has a room in the Main House, Jack's control remains unchallenged. In the upper floors, his trappings dominate, as the game ponders when Ethan examines a football helmet: »maybe it's Daddy's hobby« (*Resident Evil 7*: Main House). Echoing Mia's earlier language of *daddy*, rather than using the name *Jack*, frames his role in a juvenile perspective. Further asserting his patriarchal position, Jack fights Ethan in traditionally masculine spaces: garage, basement,<sup>7</sup> and boathouse. Jack attacks with a shovel, an aerator, and a chainsaw-based jaws of life, turning domestic and rescue tools into violent weapons. Assertions of masculinity are reinforced by his mutterings about being »her father« and feeling threatened because »now she says he will be her father« (*Resident Evil 7*: Main House). Ethan causes Jack's anxiety and fears of being supplanted: »It's bad enough you take my new daughter from me. Now you're plotting against me – with my own blood?!« (*Resident Evil 7*: Boathouse). The Main House photos situate him with his family, as old pictures of Jack, Marguerite, and their children appear throughout the main floor: Jack's public face. His identity is tied up in his role as the Baker patriarch and his anxiety over losing control of his family has him transgressing the spaces: he enters the Guest House, dominates the Main House, and fights Ethan in the Boathouse. While other characters are strongly situated, Jack is not limited; his transgression also appears in his increasingly mutated form. With each resurrection, Jack has less physical coherence. His gradual disintegration fits the illogical and uncanny nature of the zombie, as Reed (2016) notes: »Zombies, as a manifestation of corruption, have always violated the natural order, to the point of being unexplainable« (632–633). Jack is corrupted, and bodily trauma results in mutation, reflecting Jack's transgression of the character spaces of the game.

Jack's daughter Zoe has a trailer in the yard: a safe room, offering steroids, stabilizers, and an improved handgun, also has trappings of someone living there.

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7 Basements can also take on darker aspects, as *Anatomy* notes: »The Basement is dark. It is buried. It is a place full of cobwebs where memories are stored. [...] It is a place we spend our childhood filling with monsters that will lay for years in patient silence.« (*Anatomy*: Living Room Cassette)

One of the first objects Ethan can interact with is a bra: the caption when Ethan picks it up immediately speculates on its owner: »Maybe it's Zoe's« (*Resident Evil 7: Triller*). This small space is safe, full of valuable items, and plays immediately into the woman-as-reward trope.<sup>8</sup> While Zoe is not present, the focus the player can pay to her undergarments results in an immediate sexualizing of her character; drawing us to examine her underwear situates Ethan's safe space as a violation of Zoe's privacy and frames the player's awareness of her through the lens of her sexualized body, rather than her character or narrative arc. This sidelined figure is a helper: stapling Ethan's hand back onto his arm and offering guidance through the perils of the Baker home, albeit cryptically. Her space is free of mold and Molded until Lucas puts the head in her fridge, reflecting her early stage of infection and her struggle to overcome Eveline's control. Unlike Mia, who is Ethan's focus and yet is a threat, Zoe is a more helpful and likeable character. She is a vulnerable female seeking rescue, unlike Mia who lies to and attacks Ethan. Zoe is a passive narrative driver: the giver of quests and the optimistic recipient of male rescue. While we never see Zoe in the trailer, the space is defined by her physical markings and role as helper.

Marguerite, Jack's wife, is twice placed in the flood-damaged and rotted Old House. She chases Mia into the building in the videotape, and Ethan comes face to face with her after wandering through the bug-infested structure. Situating Marguerite in the Old House gives her control of an uninhabitable building. The locked doors in the house require her key and lantern to unlock them, protecting her altar and a child's room. The main floor, Marguerite's visible space, is infested with insects. Large hive structures, swarms of giant mosquitos, and clusters of spiders all make the Old House perilous to Ethan, as Marguerite herself does not attack here. She is not a physical threat herself: she just controls her environment and the insects and arachnids therein. Marguerite is thus more connected to her house, as the building's many insectile structures take on character through her apparent control. The Old House lacks many personal markers found in the Main House or Zoe's trailer; instead, Marguerite's extension of identity comes in the numerous insects she controls and eventually embodies.

Lucas is the most willing victim of Eveline's infection and the most tenuously under her control; his spaces are thus the least infected and most corralled forms of mold. Demanding Ethan find two key cards to enter the Testing Area, Lucas drives Ethan back into the Main House and his childhood bedroom. His room remains mold free and contains notes pointing to his lifelong sadistic and violent nature. Ethan must open secret passages and solve puzzles to find the key cards, showing how little Lucas has changed from his life before Eveline's arrival. The

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8 See Sarkeesian's »Tropes vs. Women in Videogames: Woman As Reward« for a thorough discussion of this trope.

Testing Area, which opens with a video of Lucas yelling that »not everybody wants to turn back the clock!« (*Resident Evil 7: Testing Area*), demonstrates his control. The hallways, with exploding crates and trip wires, have only a few Molded at strategic points, as Lucas corrals them to create the fights he wants to see. He even introduces a new form of Molded, which attacks with projectile vomit, for what he calls the Barn Fight. Lucas' strict control exerts his personality: personal items are missing, but he marks his territory through traps, trickery, and convoluted puzzles to test and torment Ethan. As Jack challenges Ethan physically out of a fear of replacement, Lucas pushes Ethan to prove himself psychologically. His puzzles are death traps, rather than brainteasers, which Ethan can only overcome by cheating and viewing the tape of Clancy's earlier attempt. The Testing Area, with its bare walls and shelves, long circuitous hallways, traps, and barely concealed brutality, reflects the mind of Lucas both before and after infection.

## 6. Female Bodies As Disempowered Bodies

As Ethan, the player arrives at and moves through the Baker family's residence. While his explorations are punctuated by the playable videotapes, all exploration is through the lens of an outsider. We, as Ethan, are voyeurs in the homes and lives of the Bakers. Brief forays into other character spaces, Clancy on videotape, or Mia on tape and on the wrecked ship, interrupt the play as Ethan. Notably, these other characters are also interlopers intervening in the Baker home:<sup>9</sup> we engage with the infected space through the lens of the outsider,<sup>10</sup> intervening on the house and the Bakers that reside within.

The limitation of the player's experience to predominantly the male protagonist is in many ways a step backward, not only for the series in its portrayal and play with respect to the women, and female, characters in the game. This unfulfilled potential is important because, as Laura Fantone (2003) writes, »the fact remains that in videogames it is possible to be a character of a different gender or even a different species, and this offers interesting possibilities. This specific interactivity has a potential for developing not only an oppositional gaze, but also subversive inner-action (by which I mean imagining a different body and internalizing its practices) which may have different effects outside of the virtual space« (58). These possibilities simultaneously operate at the narrative and ludic levels, so that

9 Later DLC protagonists are Chris Redfield and Uncle Joe, but not as any member of the infected Baker family.

10 If the player saves Zoe, we play the Ship as an infected Mia, but gameplay is identical despite that choice; Ethan's responses when Mia rescues him changes. Later DLC establishes the decision to save Mia as canonical.

performance in- and out-of-game map onto the story, and vice versa. For its part, *Resident Evil 7* reverses the potentials Ouellette (2004, 2006) sees for cross-gender identification in its predecessors. Instead of Sheri Turkle's (1994) hopeful observation of the »unparalleled opportunity to play with one's identity and to try out new ones« (157), *Resident Evil 7* restricts player's participation through embodiment while framing females as oppositional or targets for erasure; they are abject and situated with the infection, as Eveline is the source of the disease. While the female characters are not the stereotypical busty babes, their portrayals and actions are no less participating in what Nina Huntemann (2015) describes as the »continued symbolic annihilation of women from video games« (165). Female power in the game is corrupted, infectious, and denied space for redemption. The resolution of the Bakers, Mia, and Eveline fundamentally takes place in boss fights, which are thoroughly »contra-ludic,« or as Conway (2010) explains, serve to »resist the user and stop play« (135). Amplification of the characters and their form of infection necessarily focus Ethan's attacks, simplifying and restricting the forms of play.

Jack's fights demonstrate the contra-ludic and hypo-ludic, as Jack becomes a source of help in his boss fights, despite the entrapment and mechanics restricting the player's actions. He makes a handgun available in the garage and opens a cage to the chainsaw in the basement. In the Boathouse, Jack opens several supply crates, thus acting with the house to provide »reward« (Aarseth 2004, 52). In sharp contrast, the Marguerite boss fights are more directly contra-ludic and demonstrate problematic character gendering. Fighting Marguerite in the Old House, Ethan is situated in a pit with one option: shoot upward at Marguerite and her bug swarm. The result is not only Ethan aiming up her skirt, but also shooting toward her genitalia, foreshadowing the more elaborate fight in the Greenhouse. In the longer fight, Marguerite's vulva becomes a swollen nest of bugs, revealing the location of the infection. There is only one method for victory: repeated attacks on her vulva. In contrast, Jack's final form has many eyes that can be shot, stabbed, exploded, and burned. The player has far more freedom, ludicity, in fighting Jack. The threat of female sexuality is instantiated earlier in the game when Marguerite yells at Mia about knowing what she wants to do with »that boy Ethan« (*Resident Evil 7*: Mia Videotape). During that chase, Marguerite refers to »her gift« and feeding Mia to her »babies.« The disease becomes sexualized, and the threat of the female body is heightened.

*Resident Evil 7*, with its many female characters, seems to promote representation and empowerment: playing Mia on the ship gives the player access to new weaponry and a hypo-ludic feeling in the face of an increasing threat; Zoe provides Ethan with narrative motivation and inside information; Marguerite is a powerful antagonist; Eveline is the core threat. However, each character is framed in ways that undermine or disempower them, while Jack's agency and Lucas' machinations demonstrate authority and action. The difference extends into

the forms each takes under physical trauma, when the mutamycete activates and transforms the Bakers. Jack stays Jack initially, then grows to tremendous size as a hyphae-structured creature covered with eyeballs. Ethan defeats Jack by attacking his head or destroying the many eyeballs: the head and the eyes remain the target. The women, contrarily, transform in ways that disempower their forms. Marguerite's elongated limbs give her an uncanny form, while her insectile vulva is the focus of Ethan's attacks. Eveline becomes a giant mold creature; while Ethan attacks her head, it is on a wholly inhuman form. Mutation amplifies key character elements: Jack's eyes; Marguerite's ability to bear children; Eveline's inhumanity. The infection, the mutative agent, strips the characters to their core traits, and in doing so, the women become bodies without agency, while the men keep the strategy and control of their gaze.

The game's core threat, though concealed through much of the narrative, is Eveline: the child/old woman who appears throughout the Bakers' homes. In both forms, Eveline is fundamentally misunderstood and underestimated: both the very young and very aged female are stereotypically powerless. On the ship, Eveline is called »little girl« by the crew right before she attacks, while the elderly Eveline is left sitting in a wheelchair in the Main House, somehow able to get up and down stairs. She sits with her head lolling to one side, appearing unaware and silent. Ethan cannot interact with either apparition of Eveline, which positions her as a contradiction: powerful and yet harmless. She does not attack Ethan directly; she merely watches him. The innocuous female, compounding the erasure of female authority, fits with the form of infection. Mold and spore growths look harmless and yet can cause devastating psychological and physical symptoms.

## 7. Conclusion

The association of fungal infections and the feminine, the seemingly harmless causing incredible damage, gives the game leeway to erase female agency and frame the story through a lens of male empowerment. The mold strengthens male bodies while debasing female ones, reiterating the historical concept that the female body is threatening and infectious. The folkloric tie between mold and the young female body appear in symptoms of hallucination and toxicity, which the game modernizes and cues in the files around the Baker home. The female is positioned as dangerous, and yet powerless to act. Drawing on recognizable forms of toxic infection gives the game a grounding in scientific fact; in doing so, the game grants a sense of reality to the folk beliefs and fiction.

The use of mold, beyond situating the disease as feminine, also makes the disease visible. The infection is an infestation growing in the homes and bodies of the Bakers, made grossly apparent through avatar embodiment. Our visceral experi-

ences as Ethan, while situating us firmly with the male gaze, also tie the interior of the Baker's homes to inside the Bakers themselves: we watch the rot and corruption taking over once healthy spaces. The corruption and spreading rot center the abject in the player's experience. While the Bakers may not appear zombies in the tradition of earlier Resident Evil games, they take on the chaotic, destructive abjection of the mindless creature controlled by infection. The use of mold as a saprophyte situates the spaces as dead or dying, and the Bakers and Molded become substitute for the shambling corpses of earlier games. Instead of the disease remaining invisible, apparent only in the dead walking, the mold takes over our vision and demands our focus. The disease spreads, infects, and attacks.

Jack, in a vision at the end, reassures Ethan that Eveline has changed them: he, his wife, son, and daughter were not acting as themselves. Reiterating the threat of the infectious girl, who overwhelms the family and destroys them from within, perpetuates the erasure of women. While Eveline is powerful, she is the result of experimentation and must be destroyed: her craving for love, for family, is left unfulfilled. Ethan injects her with E-Necrotoxin and she weeps »[w]hy does everyone hate me?« (*Resident Evil: Eveline Fight*). Her aged body then melts, and reforms as a horrific, distorted face surrounded by the hyphae: she is wholly inhuman. Eveline, the powerful center of the game, degenerates into nothing more than mold: she is the cause of disease and the focus of the dismissal of women. The sexism inherent in these associations between the feminine and disease is articulated in *Resident Evil 7*'s use of mold as the core infective agent.

## Ludography

ANATOMY (itch.io 2016, Kitty Horrorshow)

RESIDENT EVIL 7: BIOHAZARD (Capcom 2017, Capcom)

WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH (Annapurna Interactive 2017, Giant Sparrow)

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## List of Figures

- Fig. 1: The structure of the Molded body (headless) (screenshot by author)
- Fig. 2: The Deputy's head (screenshot by author)
- Fig. 3: Marguerite's mutated form and insectile vulva (screenshot by author)
- Fig. 4: Jack's mutated form and multiple eye structures (screenshot by author)