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Game Review
MUNDAUN (First-Person Horror Adventure)

Hidden Fields, 2021

In the past years, a noticeable trend towards folk horror can be observed, particularly in indie culture. In recent films and television series such as Midsommar (Ari Aster, US/SE 2019) or The Third Day (created by Felix Barrett and Dennis Kelly, HBO/Sky, UK/US 2020), isolated landscapes and secluded rural communities serve as eerie backdrops for the resurfacing of ancient evil spirits and archaic superstitions. One of the main peculiarities of this kind of horror is the centrality of a sense of place. The evil encountered by the protagonists is not generic but firmly bound to or even brought forth by the landscape and history of the respective region. While this basic recipe, which was used in The Wicker Man (Robin Hardy, UK 1973), periodically resurfaces in horror films, video game culture has thus far been reluctant to embrace it.[1] The Swiss indie game Mundaun is a notable exception. As Andreas Inderwildi observes, Mundaun is "folk horror that embraces traditional aesthetics and themes that modern games often reject wholesale: the loneliness of alpine landscapes, the centrality of a rural and simple kind of Christianity stripped of all theological intricacies, as well as old folk tales, beliefs and customs".[2]

Mundaun started as an auteur project in 2014. Creator Michel Ziegler is responsible not only for the game's story and programming, but also for its most unique feature – its visuals. Everything in the entire game was hand-penciled, scanned, and then mapped onto 3-D models by Ziegler. This incredibly laborious procedure led to an end-product that sometimes feels like moving inside a sinister Expressionist painting, and at other times, es-
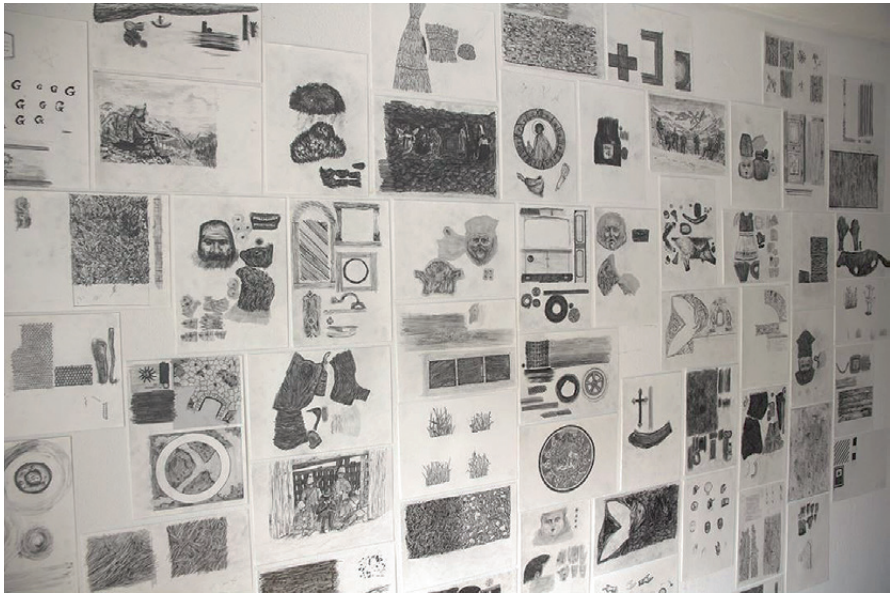
1   Wilson 2018.
2   Inderwildi 2021.

Fig. 1: Ziegler's sketches for Mundaun. Press still: Hidden Fields.

pecially due to the rough edges, it looks almost as if it was entirely carved out of wood. It is not least as a result of this unique look that the game has received considerable media attention from the beginning of its development. Another striking aspect about Mundaun that sets it apart from virtually any other media is that the entire dialogue is in Romansh, a Romance language that is spoken by only around 40,000 people worldwide, predominantly in the Swiss Canton of Graubünden. This truly unparalleled feature contributes to the game's atmosphere of authenticity as well as creating a certain otherworldliness. With the indie game press's initial focus on such aspects of aesthetic and atmosphere ahead of the game's release, I expected to play a short, artfully crafted horror walking simulator set in the Swiss Alps. Mundaun turned out to be much more than that.

Mundaun opens like many classic horror tales – with a letter. The protagonist Curdin, whose perspective the player takes on throughout the game, is informed by the village priest, Jeremias, that his grandfather Flurin has died in a barn fire. Jeremias writes that there is no need for Curdin to undertake the long journey to Mundaun as his grandfather has already been buried. However, as the game opens, Curdin is already on a bus riding along the serpentines leading up the mountain – a sequence that, accompanied by an un-

Fig. 2: Eerie Mundaun. Press still: Hidden Fields.

settling soundtrack, is strongly reminiscent of the opening of The Shining (Stanley Kubrick, UK/US 1980). Something feels odd about Jeremias's letter, so Curdin wants to see for himself what happened. As he quickly discovers, Flurin's grave is empty. Gradually, Curdin uncovers a dark secret behind his grandfather's death through nightmarish flashbacks. Long ago, in a moment of despair, Flurin made a deal with the devil. However, he did not uphold his side of the agreement – to deliver an unbaptized soul – but tried to cheat the devil by instead offering a goat, Allegria, whose bleating, chatting head becomes one of Curdin's companions throughout the game. As we all know from countless folk tales, cheating the devil is never a good idea. Hence the curse that has befallen the mountainous idyll of Mundaun.

As the story progresses, Curdin makes his way farther and farther up and even into the mountain. I was struck by the unexpected magnitude of the game world. At the beginning of the game, the focus is very much on the exploration of this surprisingly large world, and the player has to solve several puzzles in order to progress. As the game advances, however, Curdin is also confronted by dangerous enemies. The walking hay men, hostile beekeepers, or dead soldiers sunken in the snow, haunting the protagonist, make it feel as though the nightmarish mountain landscape is literally coming alive. In these moments, Mundaun starts to feel more like a horror survival game. The player has the possibility of entering into combat with enemies but with very limited resources, so it is often a better option to avoid

Fig. 3: Grandfather Flurin's house. Press still: Hidden Fields.

confrontation or carefully plot sneak attacks. In its more classic horror moments, MUNDAUN stands out for its excellent pacing – something that is central to horror films, but, I would argue, even more central to games: too many scares and the atmosphere gets lost in the action, which can, oddly, make the game less scary. So "down time" in between intense segments is necessary to keep the "audience engaged and open to being terrified".[3] MUNDAUN does this excellently, as moments of adversity are followed by episodes of relaxation and exploration, for instance, in Curdin's grandfather's house, which serves as a safe house at the beginning of the game. The house was one of the places within the game that really motivated me to explore and made me appreciate all the details of its design.

When enemy encounters do happen, they are additionally complicated by the fact that Curdin's sight narrows and he is briefly paralyzed when he feels fear. This simple yet very unusual mechanism for rendering the protagonist's emotions experienceable through gameplay systems, of translating Curdin's fear into a highly unpleasant situation for the player, significantly increases the degree of immersion. This feeling of actually becoming one with Curdin and the strange world he is exploring is enhanced by other aspects of the game, such as the fact that almost all the information necessary to play is delivered

3   Lins 2018.

Fig. 4: Curdin's backpack serves as the player's inventory. Press still: Hidden Fields.

through haptic in-world objects rather than menus and user interfaces. The inventory is a backpack one is carrying around; the map is hand-drawn by Curdin and kept in a physical journal the player has to pull out to flip through the pages. In Mundaun, everything is diegetic, causing the player to never leave the "magic circle",[4] even for a moment. It is these mechanisms that make the game world feel so organic and the overall experience so uncanny.

Besides these remarkable design aspects, Mundaun also manages to convey a feeling of authenticity through its skillful inclusion of Swiss folk tales and mythological creatures in the narrative. Although, as pointed out earlier, the sense of place is key to folk horror and also central to Mundaun's approach, the game manages to stay subtle in this respect, avoiding any all-too-obvious Alpine kitsch. As Ziegler reveals in an interview, since his childhood he has had a fascination for folk tales, many of which have inspired Mundaun, even if more in a certain atmosphere of dark oppressiveness that they convey than in terms of actual content.[5] Two stories, however, stand out as direct influences for the main narrative surrounding the deal with the devil: *Die alte Teufelsbrücke*[6] (The Old Devil's

4   Huizinga 2007.
5   Zurschmitten 2021.
6   Herzog 1887, 174–176.

Fig. 5: The devil and Father Jeremias in Mundaun's chapel. Press still: Hidden Fields.

Bridge), a Swiss folk tale, and Jeremias Gotthelf's 1842 novella *Die schwarze Spinne*[7] (The Black Spider). Both take up the trope of the cheated devil, with *Die alte Teufelsbrücke* even featuring a goat too. Ziegler manages to incorporate this and other classic folk tale themes, such as the appearance of the devil in the form of a well-dressed old man, without slipping off into the all-too-expectable and generic. As somebody who also grew up in the Alps and is well-acquainted with folk tales in the context of this "rural and simple kind of Christianity stripped of all theological intricacies",[8] I cannot help but wonder how the game is experienced by somebody completely unfamiliar with this cultural realm. I believe this is a highly interesting question that may be investigated further.

While in terms of gameplay – despite delivering far more possibilities for interaction than expected – MUNDAUN is hardly revolutionary, the game is impressive in completely different ways. It captivates the player most of all through an obviously extremely detailed and unique design and look that contributes to the player's immersion in this uncanny, oppressive mountain landscape, in which all pieces fall together causing the end-product to feel entirely plausible and authentic. This overall feeling is enhanced by the small

7   Gotthelf 2002.
8   Inderwildi 2021.

things, such as architecture, making coffee in the grandfather's house, or riding a sled down the snowy slopes of the mountain. In Mundaun, the devil is *literally* in the details. And it is these details that make the game a truly extraordinary experience.

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Filmography

Midsommar (Ari Aster, US/SE 2019).

The Shining (Stanley Kubrick, UK/US 1980).

The Third Day (Created by: Felix Barett and Dennis Kelly, HBO/Sky, UK/US 2020).

The Wicker Man (Robin Hardy, UK 1973).