Who is afraid of the big, bad wolf? Representation of childhood fears through independent video game *Fobos*

¿Quién teme al Lobo Feroz? Representación de los miedos infantiles a través del videojuego independiente Fobos

Quem tem medo do lobo mal? Representação dos medos da infância através do videogame independente Fobos

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ARTICLE

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Abstract

Video Games, as cultural media, and a form of artistic expression, allow their users to approach topics of all kinds; from something concrete, like a historical conflict or a literary character, to abstraction, like a philosophical current. Throughout this text we will deal with childhood fears, and we will analyze the indie video game *Fobos,* highlighting the way in which its features as a digital fictional product, its approach to the relevant topic and how it relates to children's literary imaginary turn this game

into an optimal piece to work childhood fears from school.

KEY WORDS

Video games, Childhood fears, Children's and young adult literature, Fobos, School.

Resumen:

Los videojuegos, como medios culturales y de expresión artística, permiten la aproximación de sus usuarias y usuarios a temáticas de toda índole; desde algo concreto, como un conflicto histórico o un personaje literario, hasta lo abstracto, como una corriente filosófica. A lo largo de este texto trataremos los miedos infantiles y analizaremos el videojuego independiente *Fobos,* incidiendo en el modo en que sus características como producto de ficción digital interactiva, su enfoque de la temática en cuestión y las relaciones que establece con el imaginario literario infantil lo convierten en un título óptimo para trabajar los miedos infantiles desde la escuela.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Videojuegos, Miedos infantiles, Literatura infantil y juvenil, *Fobos,* Escuela.

Resumo

Os videogames, como meios de expressão cultural e artística, permitem a aproximação de suas usuárias e usuários a temas de todos os tipos; do concreto, como um conflito histórico ou um personagem literário, ao abstrato, como uma corrente filosófica. Ao longo deste texto trataremos os medos infantis e analisaremos o videogame independente Fobos, enfatizando o modo como suas características como produto de ficção digital interativa, sua abordagem do assunto em questão e as relações que estabelece com o imaginário literário infantil tornam-se um ótimo título para trabalhar os medos infantis desde a escola.

Palavras-chave

Videogame, Medos infantis, Literatura infantil e juvenil, Fobos, Escola.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since they first appeared, video games entered the entertainment industry with great force. Thanks to their ability to adapt, both in terms of hardware and themes based on the interests and accessibility of their audience, they have become a leisure alternative suitable for both young people and adults.

Over the years their popularity has also increased, and they have gradually entered different paradigms, many of which, such as health, business and professional training, are completely removed from leisure. As Moreno Cantano and Venegas (2020) point out, "their transversal, mutable, constantly updated character, have turned them into a permeable 'being' that play an increasingly leading role in political, economic, cultural and educational agendas" (p. 2). This feature, together with others such as their interactivity and immersive capacity, make video games an ideal means to bring all kinds of scenarios, problems and realities closer to their users.

These three features – their mutability and adaptive capacity, their popularity as a leisure alternative, and their possibilities in non-leisure areas – make video games an excellent means of representation. From our artistic and educational perspective, they are an ideal medium to

approach with young people an issue whose importance tends to be minimized: fears and how to face them.

In this study we will carry out a theoretical review of children's fears and the way in which they have traditionally been represented in children's and young adult literature (hereinafter, CYAL), one of children's main means of approaching reality. Second, we will discuss some defining features of video games understood as an artistic and expressive medium and as a product of interactive, digital fiction: the participation, interaction and immersion of the player are of special interest to develop a methodology that allows us to work on childhood fears with children and young adults through the attractive medium of video games. Third, we will present *Fobos,* a video game developed as part of a university project that uses the figure of the Big Bad Wolf and takes a tour of some of the CYAL classics, focusing on fear and how to face it. We conclude by relating *Fobos* to the literature previously discussed and justifying the potential of this video game to work on the fears of children and young adults.

1.1. FEAR AND ITS PRESENCE IN CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

Fear is something that is present in our lives from childhood to adulthood, although its causes vary depending on our development and our experiences. It is therefore not surprising that it is a common and recurring topic in the creation of stories in general and in literature in particular. In this study, we will focus on how this is reflected in CYAL.

Although every culture has developed, over time, different stories of oral tradition, legends and popular works in general, there are some elements that are common to all of them (Coo-per, 2000), such as settings (an old castle, a dark forest, a cave) and characters (witches, evil stepmothers, fairy godmothers). Some of these elements are very recurrent, immutable, so it is easy to identify them in numerous works in which other aspects, such as the main characters and the environment, do change. A clear example of this is the Big Bad Wolf: the quintessential, evil antagonist of childhood. This is the creature that tricks Little Red Riding Hood in order to eat her and her grandmother; the one that blows down the houses of the Three Little Pigs to, once again, eat them; and, also, the one that torments the Seven Young Goats that have been left alone at home. The Wolf is thus one of the most representative symbols of childhood fears in literature. It is also inevitably associated with forests, places where it is easy to get lost, as happens to Hansel and Gretel, and where there are all kinds of dangers, such as entering the house of a witch (for example, Baba Yagá in Slavic folklore) or discovering, as did poor Snow White, that a hunter plans to attack. All these situations, so familiar to most young readers, are some of the first encounters with anxiety, insecurity and fear in fiction. And the fact is that CYAL is so broad and, above all, so accessible to boys and girls that it is difficult to find any area or theme that is not reflected in some work. This makes it easier for us to address these questions with children in a simple and, thanks to the nature literary texts, pleasant way – especially those that are painful to deal with in a direct way, such as death or illnesses; or that can be complex and controversial, such as questions related to religion or affective-sexual education; or that are simply somewhat abstract, such as growing up or, in our case, fears. There are many works that address such issues, be it directly, as for example in the illustrated album of Margarita del Mazo *¡A mí no me comas!* (You are not going to eat me!) (2011) or placing fears as one of several

themes in the work or as a means to deal with another in a veiled way, as happens in *De verdad que no podía (I really couldn't)* (2001), written by Gabriela Keselman and ilustrated by Noemí Villamuza.

After this brief incursion into CYAL and the presence in it of symbols associated with fear, it is time to ask ourselves what fear is exactly. According to Vivas et al. (2007), it is an "emotional warning signal that physical or psychological harm is approaching. Fear also involves insecurity with regards to one's own ability to withstand or handle a threatening situation" (p. 25). As previously mentioned, fear is not an emotion that disappears with age. What happens is that, in general, we learn how to face it. Reyes et al. (2017) state that there is no correct way to face fear, but rather that any type of strategy will help: from avoiding conflict to emotional relief via third parties to facing it directly. These learnings begin in childhood, because something so natural and spontaneous as running next to an adult in search of protection, hiding or looking under the bed to make sure nothing is there are clearly childhood strategies to combat fear.

It may therefore be appropriate to help children to gradually get used to these kinds of situations as they happen. To do so, as Vallières (2009) suggests, we can use stimuli that frighten them in an indirect way from, for example, stories and movies and, we can add, video games, media that provide a safe environment to come into contact with and experience the situation in question.

1.2. VIDEO GAMES AS A NARRATIVE MEDIUM AND ENVIRONMENT FOR EXPERIMENTATION

Not only do video games, like stories, picture books or movies, offer a safe environment to experience situations that can cause fear and anxiety, as well as many other emotions, they also have many other features that make them a suitable medium for other purposes, including the creation of stories.

Videoludic works of fiction – a term we can understand as a synonym of video games –"present elements typical of narrative texts: characters, development of action, contextualization in time and space, and a powerful communicative intention" (Serna-Rodrigo, 2020). Moreover, these are not isolated and superficial stories that seek only entertainment. In many cases, video games have found inspiration in literature, which make it common to identify characters, places or situations which have already become part of our cultural baggage. For example, *Child of Light* (Yohalem, 2014) presents a classic story structure based on the hero's journey and cites different, very well-known characters from universal literature, such as Hamlet, Dorothy, Sleeping Beauty and Snow White's stepmother.

Video games also involve direct interaction with the players (Marín, 2015), making it easier for them to play a more active role. As Méndez (2021) puts it, this enables

> the user to become completely immersed in the story and feel the character's actions as if they were his/her own. That is why video games are an ideal medium for recreating reality and transmitting messages to the user, delving into various social problems. (p. 317)

If we extrapolate all the above to the field of education, we can appreciate the potential benefits that video games would have if, correctly selected, they were used in classrooms together with stories, novels and movies.

2. METHODOLOGY

Taking into consideration the approach of Prensky (2001), in which he stated the need for a pedagogy adapted to a new student profile defined by their familiarity with computer language, video games and the Internet, Zepeda et al. (2016) suggested three aspects to consider when providing new methodological proposals: this new student profile's taste for instruction within playful environments; their search for immediacy; and the importance they give to feeling constant progress – preferably based on attaining rewards. Under this premise, it seems clear that play-based learning and, within that, video games, is a highly efficient methodological style, especially from the perspective we offer in this work: bringing students into contact with an abstract and sometimes forgotten theme, namely fear.

We now describe how *Fobos* arose and how we decided to use it as the method with which to analyze the topic of educational games. *Fobos* was created in order to look at childhood fears from a fresh and innovative perspective. Video games are an expanding field that is increasingly popular among all ages, but especially among the younger generations. In addition, their simple mechanics, humor and constant references to characters from CYAL make them even more attractive to use in the classroom. *Fobos* also follows the classic structure of stories, simple and complete in itself (Lluch, 2003): initial situation, action and final situation. The narrative thread is based on conversations, which justifies and facilitates the use of a less complex language that can make it easier for younger players to understand, although there are some textual interventions typical of omniscient narration. All of this has another positive implication, namely, as Colomer and Durán (2000) point out, that the act of telling stories through audiovisual media makes it easier to gradually become familiar with the literature and to gradually have access to ever more complex literary works.

Fobos began as a university project in the Arts degree at the Open University of Catalonia. It became imperative, therefore, to perceive video games as an artistic discipline, not just as a product and even less as mere entertainment. As with any work of art, it was necessary to take into account the context, endow it with a discursive intention and build it upon all the resources it offers as a specific medium. Furthermore, given that it generates an explicit relationship with traditional tales, the need to add a didactic and narratological perspective became clear. This, of course, was not the only thing that was taken into consideration. The most important thing and what in the end led to *Fobos* becoming a video game and not a comic or picture book, were the peculiarities of video games themselves, some of which we have already commented upon. For example, the active role that this medium demands of its players and that enables them to embody the main characters and feel more intimately the situations and experiences portrayed in the game. Another reason was the fact that the game provides a safe space in which it is possible to fail and constantly repeat puzzles and levels until a specific goal is reached. This gives *Fobos,* in particular, great pedagogical potential since it enables autonomous learning based on trial and error, always maintaining a motivation driven by the desire to complete the adventure. Finally, it should be noted that turning *Fo-*

bos into a videoludic fiction story links it directly with technology, which is a highly motivating element (García et al., 2014) for the general student profile we currently find in our classrooms.

The main theme of Fobos is fear in a very general sense. It does not seek to show specific conflicts or complex realities, but rather something much simpler: to suggest ways of managing this emotion from the dichotomy between facing fear or feeling from it. The simplicity of this approach influences its educational purpose and, at the same time, allows it to adopt an approach that is very close to that of classic tales. In short, it involves a relatively simple story that, among other things, teaches a lesson; but it is here where everything changes with respect to traditional formats. The readers can no longer be limited to a passive role in which they can only see the consequences of decisions made by a character to whom they are, to a certain degree, indifferent. On this occasion, thanks to the particular features of video games that we have been highlighting throughout the text, the players put themselves in the shoes of the main character and decide how to act.

We therefore believe that *Fobos* constitutes a valid methodological procedure for the goal pursued. But its creation also raised new questions that could both enrich this goal and help the development of new research possibilities. For example, what impact might this interactive quality of videogames have on children? Is it possible to give **Fobos** a pedagogical use based on this trait? Does bringing a video game into the classroom generate more interest in a particular topic?

Reflecting on what to do with this video game once it was created opened the door to numerous possibilities. Thus, once it was decided

that *Fobos* would become a video game, it was time to give shape to it.

3. RESULTS

Taking the above into consideration, the development of *Fobos*[1] reached its most formal aspect: its conversion into a functional program that allowed its users to interact with it as with any normative video game. To do this, RPG Maker VX Ace and a free engine – Arc Engine – were used, which allowed it to become a standard platform game. From this, other sections were completed taking into account the technical and computer characteristics: the images and animations were adjusted to the resolution of the program, and music was composed in a simple format that allowed it to be repeated –MIDI– throughout the game. Moving beyond these perhaps more technical questions, the content of *Fobos* will now be detailed, focusing on what really makes it a great product for the purposes discussed in this text.

First of all, it is worth pointing out the main theme of its story. *Fobos* is based on the famous story of Little Red Riding Hood, widely known by the general public and whose characters and events people are familiar with. Taking advantage of this fact, *Fobos* seeks to draw the attention of its players by offering a new rendering of the story in two ways: telling it through a less conventional means than written text; and by rewriting it using irony and humor. It is usual, given the taste for immediacy of children and adolescents today, to start the game with action and ignore the dialogues. This is why *Fobos* tries, from the start, to attract attention to itself: it offers an initial text (Figure 1) that quickly

1 *Fobos* can be downloaded for free via the following link: https://mega.nz/file/RwskiC6B#EpGdV2BkiLzRMl2oc8Rz_O2WAF4ycZ1gXCJDJJxqFiI

opens a mystery (what has happened to Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother?) and places it in a contemporary context (the granny in question, for example, is a dab hand at social media).

One day, granny got sick; or so we believe, because she stopped using Facebook to fight with every human being she came across: her usual routine.

In addition, once this introduction is over and the player has taken over the controls, he/she is immediately faced with a clean and clear setting, full of concrete elements that quickly encourage him/her to explore (a frog with a crown on a trunk, a note left on the ground, and so forth), which avoids excess information that could overwhelm players or cause them to not know where to go. Another noteworthy feature of *Fobos* is that, while Little Red Riding Hood is its backbone, it also makes use of numerous characters from popular literature, who offer brushstrokes that reformulate their own stories in order to get into the main theme, fear, through different reflections. An example of this are the clues provided throughout the game, which are none other than texts written by the famous Fearless John. While in the original story he is characterized precisely by never having found anything that can frighten him, in *Fobos* we realize that what happens is just the opposite. Some aspects of the story have been changed, and reading between the lines of his messages and what other characters tell us, it

is easy to see that, in the forest where *Fobos* takes place, Fearless John is truly scared (Figure 2).

There is a human that I know who was afraid of him and thought he was going to eat him. Luckily, he was able to run away before finding out.

It is also noteworthy that these notes that Fearless John has left along the way are dispersed throughout the different level, so players need to explore them if they wish to read them all. This is a secondary option and not a requirement to complete the game, but it enriches the experience. From an artistic perspective, it forces players to interact with their environment, to explore it, to mentally reconstruct the character that has written these messages, and so on. From a more educational point of view, it helps to work on patience and conveys the value of commitment in order to complete a task. Furthermore, although we will delve into the gameplay of *Fobos* later, it encourages players to try the different directions that the game allows them to take, suggesting that it might be interesting to break the dynamic of going only to the right ('forwards' according to the conventionalisms of video game platforms) and moving towards the end of the game. In addition, as there is no time limit or number of lives and, despite the brevity of the game, several save points, players can investigate and explore different options.

As already mentioned, humor plays a fundamental role in this game. This is not a resource that is used lightly; rather, *Fobos* uses it to develop its own discourse and help generate reflections on fear. Thanks to this, it is particularly enjoyable to play, as well as making it easier to provoke that counterpoint that was sought with respect to the original stories. In this regard, a number of questions in relation to the game begin to arise: What is it telling me? Why is the story different from the one I know? What relationship does this character, who belongs to another story, have with the main plot? Why is what it is telling me funny? Asking and solving these questions while playing is one of the bases of *Fobos*. All these elements have special importance within the game, not only due to their narrative load but, especially, because of what they mean from the interactive point of view. The characters address themselves directly to the person who is playing and, based on their actions (addressing them or ignoring them, exploring or not certain areas), they will change their dialogues. This breaking of the fourth wall, so typical of v¡deo games, favors immersion and also appeals to a sense of responsibility, which is also very interesting from an educational point of view.

In terms of gameplay, *Fobos* stands out for its simplicity. It's a platform game with very conventional mechanics: side scrolling with an option to jump and a button to interact with the game's elements. This approach is intentional since it has sought a gameplay that is established in the sector and is stimulating and familiar to regular players, which makes it easier to focus attention on other aspects of the story. In addition, the way of moving the main character is directly related to the main dichotomy of *Fobos* in terms of how to deal with fears: face

them or flee; which, in parallel, establishes an association between moving towards the left (backwards) and towards the right (forwards). This aspect is directly linked to the main scenes of the game: the confrontations with the Big Bad Wolf, which symbolizes fear itself. It is gigantic, aggressive-looking with very sharp teeth and many eyes that are fixed on Little Red Riding Hood. This appearance, surreal and imposing, seeks to make whoever is playing feel vulnerable on seeing him, which is why – together with the fact that the only gameplay options that *Fobos* gives consist of moving – the automatic reaction is to flee (move from left to right), seeking to move forward in the hope of reaching safety or losing sight of the wolf.

This escape can be done relatively simply since the obstacles on the way are easily surmountable. However, what *Fobos* seeks is not to defend that flight is the only possible solution to fear, but that we have the option of facing it. That is why, normally, the wolf will chase us at the same speed that Little Red Riding Hood runs; but just by turning around, the gameplay will change: the wolf will move back very slowly as soon as we make eye contact. If we resume our flight, it will chase us again; if we get too close, we will lose the game; if we keep our distance and move slowly towards it, it will end up leaving. These mechanics symbolize three ideas. First, that facing fear can be positive; we can simply examine it cautiously (turn round to look at the wolf), without exposing ourselves to danger. Second, that throwing yourself headlong at him, recklessly, is not the best solution. Finally, the importance of cultivating patience; because a fear is not overcome suddenly, there is no magic formula for it. It requires care, prudence and a period of time that, on occasions, we cannot control (the game presents a certain

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rhythm and it is necessary to adapt to it). This can be uncomfortable, annoying and exasperating; it can take whoever is playing out of their comfort zone. This is something that fears also cause, but the message is that, sooner or later, this fear will go away.

In short, *Fobos* allows (at first even pushes) the option to flee. It is not something that is penalized because it is an alternative that we have in reality when facing a fear or conflict in general. It is a natural, even comfortable, response, and it avoids us being in a position of immediately deciding what we are going to do. The game also aims to focus on the importance of overcoming, no matter how long it takes to achieve it; the person who manages to face the wolf earlier is just as valid as the person who does not dare to do so until the end. Although it is true that in the final level there will come a moment when there is no longer an option of escaping, so that the only options available for the character will be to face the wolf or end the game. This seeks to symbolize extreme situations, the fact of finding oneself, literally, between a rock and a hard place. Although we have not thought about how to beat the wolf until now, the game itself gives us a decisive clue on how to do so.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Game-based learning constitutes, without doubt, an active methodology that responds to both the profile and the interests and tastes of children and adolescents today. It provides a playful environment for learning, implements achievement with immediate feedback and rewards, and makes progress visible, among many other aspects. Video games, as mentio-

ned throughout the text, are situated within this same methodological line, plus they also give rise to new possibilities thanks to some of their inherent features. For example, their direct link with technology, their intrinsic narratives typical of a multimodal text and, especially, their nature as an artistic medium, open to any kind of theme and representative intention.

In education, games have traditionally played an important role, although their presence, which is strong in early childhood education, fades during primary education and disappears in the final years of compulsory secondary education. From our perspective, we seek to defend the role of games – video games in this case – beyond the earliest ages, since they provide a safe environment for trial and error (Brull & Finlayson, 2016) and free expression. Furthermore, they can increase motivation and sometimes even manage to make students more interested in completing the proposed task than in finishing the class (Fernández et al., 2016). Of course, it is important to take care of which video games we take to class. This could open the door to another avenue: the educational interest involved in developing independent conventional video games that could both be interesting to the students and enable them to come into contact with different realities. We could place *Fobos* in this line.

In fact, we wanted this game to leave behind theory in order to test its performance in an educational environment. Thus, *Fobos* was taken to classrooms of the first and second years of compulsory secondary education at the Col·legi Santa Teresa de Jesús, in Tarragona. To do this, a small workshop[2] divided into

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2 Comments about the workshop can be found on the school's Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/545243635611440/posts/2195437033925417/?sfn-sn=scwspmo

three parts was designed: a brief presentation of the game by its creator; a game time of half an hour (the time needed to complete it, even if you wanted to explore, look for notes and so on); and a short reading comprehension questionnaire that would give rise to shared feedback and a discussion that were very interesting. As this was an unstructured dynamic with a small sample, we did not want to present it in terms of research and results for this article, although we intend to do so soon in order to obtain valuable data that can enable us to continue refining both *Fobos* and any activity that we might derive from the game. What we can say is that the workshop was very well received in terms of motivation and interest and, based on the debate, we were able to assess how the students perceived and got involved in the activity. The most notable aspect was the ease with which the symbolism of the game was interpreted, since most of the group understood both the theme of the video game and the role of the wolf and the reason for the mechanics selected to work through it. The proposal, however, is not limited to carrying out this activity; we are also working on the design of materials for didactic proposals related to the curriculum of the different educational levels and that are part of the prospective of this line of research.

In conclusion, video games are not only an ideal means of artistic expression for the representation of any theme or symbolism; they are also a versatile resource for today's classrooms. They adapt to the new student profile and are open to a wide variety of proposals and dynamics that will promote motivation and learning. In this regard, we believe *Fobos* is an promising alternative and opens the door to new lines of research and didactic proposals that might be interesting to explore. We also believe in the potential that the creation of new video games along the lines of *Fobos* could have: video games that take advantage of the medium's intrinsic features in order to, without being instrumentalized, facilitate the introduction of complex, delicate and/or abstract topics in the classroom.

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