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Women as witness, victim and villain: multifaceted role-play in *Fatal Frame II*

Maxine Gee

Department of Media Production, Bournemouth University, Poole, UK

ABSTRACT

In 2003 Japanese folk horror game *Fatal Frame II: Crimson Butterfly* directed by Makoto Shibata, the protagonist bears witness to an ancient tradition of a community linked to the ritual sacrifice of twins, which results in the female victim becoming a malevolent spirit. Gradually the player, as Mio, equipped with the Camera Obscura, transitions from observer to participant in the cycle of events that results in sacrificing their own twin sister. This article focuses on establishing the game within the folk horror subgenre, before examining three female characters: Mio, the protagonist, who shifts from witness/voyeur to participant; Mayu, their twin, who transitions from unwilling to willing sacrifice; and Sae, the victim of the original ritual and antagonist. In *Fatal Frame II*, the Camera Obscura, which captures the supernatural world, is the lens through which past and present blur as the player is confronted by the twisted beliefs of the village. Through analysis of the game's narrative, ludic elements, and visual aesthetics, I examine how these roles fit within the context of folk horror, gender and Japanese folklore.

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> Didn't we always promise each other, that we'd be together … forever. *(Shibata, 2003)*

The Fatal Frame video game series (*Project Zero* in the UK) places players into interconnected scenarios where, as the mainly female protagonists, they must uncover how ritualistic practices of an isolated community went wrong, before completing these rituals properly and laying the ghosts to rest. In each iteration, a female ghost is at the heart of the horror, a ritual victim who returns to enact vengeance. This article focuses on the second game in the series, *Fatal Frame II: The Crimson Butterfly* (Makoto Shibata, 2003). From this brief description, many elements of what Adam Scovell (2017) has titled the 'Folk Horror Chain,' four links – landscape, isolation, skewed moral beliefs, happening/summoning (pp.17–18) – which underpin media in the folk horror subgenre, are present and as such these games can be re-examined through this genre framework. Just as the theme of twins is integral to the game, this article is also divided into two parts. The first establishes how this game fits within the folk horror subgenre. The second examines the representation of three female characters who assume three very different roles: Mio, the

CONTACT Maxine Gee mgee@bournemouth.ac.uk Department of Media Production, Bournemouth University, Poole, UK

protagonist/player character, who shifts from witness to participant; Mayu, their twin and sometimes playable character, who transitions from unwilling to willing sacrifice; and Sae, the victim of the original ritual who is transformed into the main antagonist.

Synopsis

Fatal Frame II follows Mio and Mayu Amakura, twins who are lured into, and trapped within, Minakami Village. In searching for a way out, Mio picks up the Camera Obscura, an old-fashioned camera that can exorcise ghosts, enabling her to fight against the vengeful spirits also trapped within the village. The rest of the game follows Mio as she uncovers village lore and witnesses the chain of past traumatic events. All while attempting to rescue Mayu who falls under the influence of Sae Kurosawa's spirit, the main antagonist and the last person to be sacrificed in the village's rituals.

Mio uncovers that Minakami village is constructed over a deep pit, labelled the Hellish Abyss, which the community believes leads to the underworld. When the Hellish Abyss rumbles, the community must perform one of two rituals or the underworld will spill forth. The first is the Crimson Sacrifice Ritual, in which the second-born twin strangles their sibling. The twins symbolically become one; the living remains to bring prosperity to the village, while the dead acts as a guardian. In the village lore, the elder twin is born second, the one who lets the younger/weaker be born first. This twist has an important narrative impact as Mio is the second-born twin, so outside the village she is seen as younger, but within the village she is considered older. If that ritual goes wrong, a secondary sacrifice can be made to temporarily appease the Hellish Abyss: The Cutting Ritual. An outsider is suspended by ropes, their limbs are broken, and they are repeatedly cut to cause as much suffering as possible. Just before their death, the sacrifice is thrown into the Hellish Abyss. The victim in this case is called the Kusabi.

In the village's past, a series of Crimson Sacrifice Rituals failed leading to the turn of Yae and Sae Kurosawa. To buy time, a travelling folklorist, Seijiro Makabe, and his apprentice, Ryozo Munakata, are invited to this isolated community under the pretence of documenting their customs. Naturally, the real reason for this invitation is to kill them in the Cutting Ritual which becomes Seijiro's fate. On the night of their Crimson Sacrifice Ritual, Yae and Sae run away, pursued by the villagers. Sae pretends to fall and is captured, believing her sister will come back for her. But Yae continues to flee with Ryozo. Sae is hung by the villagers, violating the ritual rules and darkness pours out of the Hellish Abyss. In an event called The Repentance, Sae and Seijiro's ghosts return from the Abyss killing all the villagers and trapping their spirits in a time loop of these horrific events.

Once Mio pieces this information together, she finds the Hellish Abyss. In the final moments of the game Mio is forced to kill Mayu, thus completing the Crimson Sacrifice Ritual and laying all the village's ghosts to rest. In an alternative ending, after a second play through, Mio rescues Mayu, at the cost of her sight, and they escape the village together.

Gameplay

Fatal Frame II uses two gameplay elements, the Camera Obscura and the collection of testimonies, that I will briefly introduce before moving to my analysis.

Photography forms a main element of gameplay in the *Fatal Frame* series. In each game, the protagonist finds an old camera, the Camera Obscura, which is used to observe and catalogue past atrocities and to battle against vengeful spirits. As I discuss later, the power of what to observe and destroy lies firmly with the female characters. In her use of the Camera Obscura, Mio is transformed from passive to active witness of the village's past.

Foremost, the camera in *Fatal Frame II* is used to fight ghosts. As Susan Sontag discusses within, *On Photography*, 'there is aggression implicit in every use of the camera' (Sontag, 2008, p. 7). The terminology of shooting or firing off a shot is violent and an incursion within the world of others (Poremba, 2007). The photographer, in taking a picture, captures something of the subject. *Fatal Frame II* makes a virtue of this linguistic similarity between the camera and a gun, transforming the former into the latter to exorcise ghosts. The player must master the camera's controls and steel their nerve to take the best close-ups to defeat the ghost who will yield some clue to solve the game's mystery. The player, therefore, is compelled to fight to understand. In capturing the image of these ghosts on film, the player uncovers their secrets; in the same way a photograph in the real world captures the essence of the subject (Sontag, 2008, p. 14).

This also speaks to the second use of the Camera Obscura; witnessing the past. Throughout the game, non-violent ghosts can be photographed, like snapping rare animals in the wild, to gain points and provide further information about the village. There are also places within the game that react to the camera, where taking a photograph reveals another location or clue. This is shown on screen like the film is developing, as if the psychic energy of the space warps the image. In the early twentieth century, Tomokitchi Fukurai conducted a series of controversial experiments on mediums who attempted to project their thoughts onto undeveloped film plates (Takasuna, 2012). Fukurai called the process thoughtography. It is possible that these experiments influenced this use of the camera in the *Fatal Frame* series.[1]

The second gameplay element is the collection of testimonies. These take the form of folklore texts, notes and journals, that present the thoughts and experiences of the village's inhabitants. The player becomes an antiquarian who must find all records to construct a picture of what happened. This ties to real-world practices of folklorists in Japan during the end of the nineteenth and into the beginning of the twentieth centuries (Foster, 2015). Folklorists travelled the countryside, cataloguing folktales and beliefs before they disappeared. Every *Fatal Frame* game features a folklorist who leaves notes for the player to find after meeting with a tragic end; sacrificed in the very rituals they came to study (Tolbert, 2015). It is through piecing together their knowledge that the player comprehends the rituals and conducts them effectively to release the trapped ghosts. Information about the past is not only textual, spirit stones reveal the character's thoughts and film reels show past rituals, although they also act as a medium for conjuring spirits.

Fatal Frame II as folk horror

In his 2017 book, Adam Scovell theorises four interconnected elements as a chain which can be used to place screen texts within the subgenre of folk horror. The four elements: landscape, isolation, skewed moral beliefs, happening/summoning

(Scovell, 2017, pp. 17–18), generate specific qualities of folk horror texts. These elements are present within *Fatal Frame II* and thus, I argue this video game can be viewed through the lens of folk horror. It is important to note that Scovell's work focuses on British films and television and thus is designed within that framework. However, as Keetley and Heholt discuss 'folk horror . . . inevitably reaches beyond Britain, not least because this under-theorised and yet centrally defining characteristic, [folklore] is a global phenomenon' (Keetley & Heholt, 2023, p. 4). I acknowledge that I am applying a framework designed around British screen texts onto a Japanese game, which was developed within a different cultural framework. Although, the links within Scovell's folk horror chain are purposefully designed to be adaptable and in exploring how they function within a Japanese video game, this article adds to growing global perspectives on folk horror.

Landscape

Scovell's first link in the folk horror chain is landscape '. . . where elements within its topography have adverse effects on the social and moral identity of its inhabitants' (Scovell, 2017, p. 17). *Fatal Frame II*'s Minakami Village, which translates to All Gods Village, is a secluded mountain community. The Hellish Abyss and cave systems beneath the village draws on the specific volcanic topography of Japan, which has a distinct influence on Japanese folklore that allude to rumblings or earthquakes (Berns et al., 2021; Reider, 2010; Yasumaro, 2014). The pit in *Fatal Frame II* ties to one of Japan's most prolific creation myths, the tale of Izanagi and Izanami. When Izanami, the female founding deity, gives birth to Hinoyagihayao (Swift Burning Flame Man), a fire god, she dies and goes to the underworld. Izanagi, her husband/brother, not wanting to live without her travels to the underworld to bring her back. Once he finds her, she tells him not to look upon her as she negotiates with the underworld spirits. But he cannot help lighting a torch and is horrified by her decayed appearance. Her shame at her appearance, and his inability to follow the rules, leads to Izanami chasing a fleeing Izanagi in a rage. He traps her in the underworld, she curses him with the death of a thousand of his children every day; thus, the cycle of life and death begins (Yasumaro, 2014, pp. 12–16). The links between this myth and the lore within *Fatal Frame II* are connected by the Hellish Abyss leading to the underworld and the return of Sae from the underworld, like Izanami, filled with vengeance against those who wronged her. The monstrous female is a concept I will examine in relation to Sae later in this article. For native Japanese players, or players who know Japanese legends, this situates them within the game's story world by drawing on pre-existing knowledge of mythology, lending some authenticity to the world of the game. While the player is to encounter game-specific lore, it is not so far removed from the real topography and mythology of Japan (Tolbert, 2015, p. 130).

From this brief exploration of the game's location, we can see that specific features of Minakami Village's landscape have had 'an adverse effect' (Scovell, 2017, p. 17) on the community. The Hellish Abyss, an element of the landscape, exerts its will over the village; the landscape demonstrates its awful agency (Keetley, 2020).

Isolation

'The second element of the Folk Horror Chain … [is] **isolation**. The landscape must in some way isolate a key body of characters, whether it be just a handful of individuals or a small-scale community' (Scovell, 2017, p. 17). In the Folklorist Note 1, Seijiro Makabe, a travelling folklorist, writes 'The village has little contact with the outside world. They continue to practice the views of old, frozen in time' (Shibata, 2003). This in game text underpins the way the community functions, matching the conditions of the folk horror chain.

The game begins with Mio and Mayu in a peaceful forest, which will soon be flooded by a new dam. As Mio chases her sister, isolation of the area becomes clear. The camera angles move in rapid succession creating a feeling of disorientation, emphasising that these characters are alone. The angle shifts to a close-up of an ancient stone carving depicting a pair of twins connected by a rope across their chests, only one of the twins has a head. Mio's legs are seen passing the carving and the image switches to black and white; she has crossed a barrier into Minakami Village.

Isolation is twofold within *Fatal Frame II* as the village is also isolated in time. Since the last Crimson Sacrifice Ritual failed, the village, and all who enter, are trapped in a time loop. Scovell states that 'as long as people are cut off from some established social progress of the diegetic world, the Folk Horror Chain can continue in its horrific domino effect' (Scovell, 2017, p. 18). Minakami Village is isolated from the social progress of the normal world, both as a community that has little integration with others, and as a community that is now outside of the normal progress of time. The inhabitants of the village are unable to re-join the established social progress of the diegetic world.

Skewed moral belief systems

The third link within the Folk Horror Chain is a consequence of isolation and landscape in the development of 'skewed belief systems and morality' (Scovell, 2017, p. 18). Because Minakami Village is built over the Hellish Abyss, their survival depends on appeasing this pit, thus their morality has been twisted. As mentioned in the synopsis, there are two main rituals in the game that demonstrate the skewed moral belief systems of the village: The Crimson Sacrifice Ritual and The Cutting Ritual. Pain and suffering are required for the rituals to occur effectively underpinning the cruelty of the community which has developed due to their isolation.

To cement the importance of these ritual practices, the village is run by a Ceremony Master rather than a village chief. This is highlighted as unusual within Folklorist Note 1 (Shibata, 2003), indicating that the customs of the village are at odds with the outside world which meets definition of folk horror as discussed by Keetley (2020, 2023) and Tolbert (2015, 2023). The Ceremony Master is a patriarchal figure at the top of the village hierarchy. All the villagers involved in the rituals are male: the veiled priests who conduct the ceremonies, the blind mourners who carry the corpses into the Hellish Abyss. Men control the flow of life within the village, and it is against these men that Yae rebelled. Yae, breaks from her conditioning and questions these patriarchal power structures in deciding to escape. It is this act of rebellion that instigates the calamitous events that end in the village being removed from the normal flow of time demonstrating a conservative presentation of the village within the text. In their attempt to reinstate order, Sae is sacrificed alone resulting in her return to destroy those who controlled and manipulated her. Although, in death, Sae supplants her father at the top of the village hierarchy. She is the most powerful ghost, she traps the villagers' souls in this nightmare and lures others in, trying to find a surrogate to complete the Crimson Sacrifice Ritual. However, Sae has not broken from the patriarchal system of the rituals.

It is important to note that not all the sacrificial twins are female; Yae and Sae's father the Ceremony Master sacrificed his twin brother, as did the side character Itsuki, who sacrificed his brother Mutsuki in the ritual that fails immediately before Sae and Yae. Itsuki tried to help Yae and Sae escape, and acts as an ally for Mio, who he mistakes for Yae. He acts as a counterpoint to the other male figures within the game. In the case of the Ceremony Master, this perpetuation of the tradition which claimed his own brother demonstrates a fanaticism that is passed onto Sae, his daughter. This fits with Keetley's description of community behaviour in folk horror as being about 'a tribe joined by tradition, ritual, folklore, and multiple forms of social identity as well as some portion of blood kinship' (Keetley, 2020, p. 12). Sae self-sabotages her escape, and her belief in this ritual, is so powerful it facilitates her return in the calamity.

The male figures, veiled priests, Ceremony Master, mourners, are transformed into the ghosts who attack the player. They constantly refer to Mio and Mayu as Yae and Sae respectively, inducing them to perform the ritual. The villager ghosts who attack the player on the deserted streets are also all male, representing the pervasive male control. As the female characters battle these ghosts, this becomes a symbolic of a fight against traditional male authority. *Fatal Frame II* is unusual within the series; while there are also powerful female ghosts, the male dominated hierarchy of Minakami Village and their control of rituals stands out as the force of oppression.

The happening/summoning

The final link in the folk horror chain is the 'happening/summoning' (Scovell, 2017, p. 18). In *Fatal Frame II* the happening/summoning is called The Repentance, which occurs after Sae's sacrifice fails. Darkness erupts from the Hellish Abyss and the vengeful ghosts of Sae and the Kusabi, Seijiro, return to kill the villagers.

Just as concept of isolation is twofold in the game, the concept of a summoning is also doubled in the game's endings. Often video games end with facing a difficult enemy, usually the main antagonist. Tanya Krzywinska states that 'the winning condition is, however, in direct opposition to the deeply pessimistic tone of folk horror, in which human agency over natural forces is regularly shown to be ineffectual and delusional' (Krzywinska, 2023, p. 191). This is reflected in the two endings to *Fatal Frame II*. In the first, Mio summons and faces down the Kusabi, in the chamber outside of the Hellish Abyss. If the player defeats the Kusabi, they trigger the final cut-scene of the first play through. In this segment Mayu, possessed by Sae, convinces Mio to kill her, thus performing the Crimson Sacrifice Ritual. Mayu, transformed into a crimson butterfly, emerges from the pit and Mio rushes after her, apologising. As she runs, Mio is surrounded by crimson butterflies, the souls of all the villagers who can now move on. The sun finally rises on

Minakami village, the cycle is over. Mio survives but is haunted by her actions, a red mark appears on her neck. The pessimistic tone of folk horror is clear.

On the second play through, the player unlocks another fight after the Kusabi; summoning Sae. When the player defeats Sae, they blast the vengeful ghost out of Mayu's body. Mio manages to grab her sister's hand as she, like Sae, falls back into the Hellish Abyss, saving Mayu. However, as she looks down to help her sister, Mio sees what is contained within the Abyss and is rendered blind. This ties back to the prohibition on looking in the Izanami/Izanagi myth. Mayu helps Mio escape and in the final cut-scene Mio's voice over states 'that village is no more' (Shibata, 2003); the fate of the inhabitants is left ambiguous. Even in this positive ending where both twins survive there is a pessimistic tone. Mio pays the price for witnessing the past events of the village with the loss of her sight and must rely on her sister. The final shot, a close-up on Mayu's eyes, reveal a malicious glee in the fact Mio needs her, with the statement 'together … forever …' (Ibid, 2003). This cements game within the pessimistic tone of the subgenre.

Mio: from witness to participant

Mio Amakura is the main playable character in *Fatal Frame II*. The younger of the Amakura identical twins, she appears as a fifteen-year-old girl in a brown top, with a crimson bow, white skirt, and black leggings. Both twins wear similar clothing with Mio's being lighter in colour, hinting at her more positive personality. Mio is the more courageous and agile of the twins and starts the game cast into the role of protector. The player quickly learns Mayu's limp is the result of a childhood accident. Mio carries guilt from the injury which she sees as her fault; therefore, the player as Mio is primed to protect Mayu.

The role of protector is further compounded when Mayu follows a butterfly into the forest and traps both twins within Minakami Village. Mio does not react with anger, but with compassion, swiftly switching into problem solving mode. Mio's reactions to the situations within the game likely align with those of the player; thus, they move through what Murray Smith describes as recognition, alignment, and allegiance in the structure of sympathy (1994). She wants to protect her sister and escape the nightmare; she is pragmatic and sees through the twisted beliefs of the villagers. While Mayu is swayed by the rhetoric, until the very end of the game Mio is sceptical. The player, like Mio is scared by the situations they find themselves in, but they are quickly able to overcome this to fight the ghosts. In this way, Mio also reflects the final girl archetype seen within the slasher genre and other horror subgenres (Clover, 1992; Nitsche, 2009; Thornham, 1999).

As Mio is the younger twin, information from early chapters indicate she will be sacrificed; in the ritual the older twin kills the younger. The Japanese version of the game makes the fact Mio is younger clear as she refers to Mayu as, older sister, which is switched for just using her name in the English dub. This contradicts the dynamic of the siblings where Mayu is presented as the victim, she is lured into the village while Mio is presented as the protector. Further investigation reveals that in the twisted belief system of the village, the second twin to be born is the older/more mature, letting the weaker twin be born first. This switch in understanding confirms the personalities of the twins and their roles within the ritual.

Mio begins the game as a witness to the horrors that have occurred in Minakami Village. In the first playable moment, the player guides Mio up a forest path towards firelight and chanting. As they reach a torii gate, traditional gates to shrines or villages, a cutscene is triggered. Mio sees a woman in a white kimono weeping outside the gate, apologising. This is Yae, the twin who escaped and who Mio is mistaken for throughout the rest of the game. From the start, Mio acts as an observer. The consequences of this first ghostly encounter are not understood until much later, but like an investigative photographer Mio is given access to multiple perspectives (Lowe, 2014).

It is Mio who finds the Camera Obscura and who wields it against the ghosts. She is the protector, the hero, and thus needs to have a weapon (Clover, 1992). As previously mentioned, photography can be viewed as a predatory act (Sontag, 2008, p. 14) and Mio becomes a hunter, both of the ghosts and of the truth. The player takes pictures to reveal history, whether that is of objects which develop into records of the past; benign ghosts who are hiding; or in observing the main events of the past. Until these elements have been catalogued and witnessed, the player cannot move on. The witness, as an archetype, plays a powerful role in a narrative. They are a survivor who exists to pass on knowledge, they do not flinch from what they observe and are compelled to see events through to the end (Clover, 1992; Lowe, 2014).

The photographer as witness can morph into the voyeur, capturing intimate moments that the subject may not want observed. Sometimes when a ghost has been observed doing something they did not want seen; they attack Mio. While it is integral to survival-horror games that the player is attacked, as much of the game's pleasure is in defeating antagonists (Perron, 2019), having the player/Mio attacked after taking a photograph of a ghost plays with the voyeuristic nature of photography. Ledbetter (2012) complicates our understanding of the voyeur, challenging the negative connotations of the term that tie it to perversity. This approach is useful for analysis of the player's voyeuristic role within the game. It adds an ethical dimension of bearing witness; the player must observe all, both in-game and from their position of watching the characters on screen, scanning the image for clues. Is the player always a voyeur, in Ledbetter's definition, where the voyeur's gaze can both violate and be violated? The player within *Fatal Frame II* is challenged to engage, to empathise and not turn away from horror but to understand.

It is interesting to note that often voyeur characters are gendered male, their gaze intrusive and perverse, taking advantage of women (Mulvey in Thornham, 1999). However, within this game the voyeur character is Mio, a young woman. This could be interpreted as subverting traditional power structures. The power to observe and capture is placed in female hands. Like the final girl with a chainsaw (Clover, 1992), Mio wields the Camera Obscura with destructive force, exposing and exorcising the patriarchal hierarchy of Minakami's cruel rituals. However, the male gaze is not fully subverted as the static third-person camera angles of the game are placed to provide tantalising shots of Mio's body; low angles that focus on her legs and skirt, shots that look down on her cleavage. As Mulvey has theorised in relation to cinema, choice of camera angles which focus on the female figure from a male observer position can undercut more progressive gender presentations within the screen texts (Mulvey in Thornham, 1999; Chaudhari, 2006). Krzywinska argues that video games '... regularly look to the visual storytelling of film and television ...' (Krzywinska, 2023, p. 186); thus, theories of the male gaze that are applied to film, which influences games, can be applied to camera angles within games. Nitsche (2009) explores this contradiction between third and first person in the *Fatal Frame* series. *Fatal Frame II* replicates the male gaze in its use of camera angles for the sections where Mio navigates the village, while the fight sections place power of observation within the control of the female character. In this aspect, the game, like many folk horror texts, is caught between the conservative and progressive, simultaneously perpetuating and subverting gender stereotypes. Buckley's (2019) exploration of the figure of the witch in folk horror finds a similar paradox in representation. This uncomfortable paradox within the game brings questions of gender and power to the fore. Who is the voyeur, Mio or the player who controls Mio? I argue it is both, with the player experiencing both perspectives. This generates a rip in the verisimilitude of the story world, where consciously or subconsciously the player can question the power dynamics of the camera's gaze.[2]

Sontag states, 'The person who intervenes cannot record; the person who is recording cannot intervene' (Sontag, 2008, p. 12). Mio transgresses this divide within the latter part of the game when her role shifts from witness of the past to participant within the ritual. This causes cognitive dissonance between the player and Mio as their goals no longer fully align. Mio/the player is lured back to the ceremonial space within the village when Mayu is once again captured. At this point, it seems that Mayu is more than willing to go along with the ritual even though it will lead to her death. However, Mio/the player are still fighting to escape. As the player progresses along the separated path, the ghost of Sae mapped onto Mayu appears in the parallel path, this is the route taken for the ritual. At this point, the player may assume they can achieve a positive ending as they have not yet faced Sae, who is presented as the final boss throughout the game.

After Mio/the player defeats the symbols of the village patriarchy, the mourners, the veiled priests, the Ceremony Master, and the Kusabi, the player might think they were going to rescue Mayu. They control Mio, racing down a corridor to find Mayu. At the bottom they meet Mayu who seems to be speaking for Sae. The player is given control of Mio to approach Mayu, when after a few steps a cutscene is triggered and Mio proceeds to enact the ritual and kill Mayu. The patriarchal order of the village and their rituals are restored. This feels anticlimactic; Sae is barely present in this first ending. However, from the beginning of the game, there are hints of Mayu's desire to never be separated from Mio that point towards this ending. It also conforms to the fatalistic structure of folk horror in which the outsider/witness is drawn into the community's rituals without a hope of escape (Keetley, 2020; Krzywinska, 2023). Mio appears to be horrified by her actions once the ritual is complete, a feeling that may be mirrored by the player who in the final moments of the game is denied a 'win.' However, this folk horror where player agency and conventional mechanics of 'winning' are challenged by the subgenre's fatalism (Krzywinska, 2023).

However, this is not the only ending of the game. The player who perseveres and completes the game twice faces Sae in a final battle. Mio, as protector, prevails and rescues Mayu, although at sacrifice of her sight. Mio, the witness, is blinded by seeing too much in the Hellish Abyss. Her loss of sight draws a line under her role as the witness. In rejecting her role in the Crimson Sacrifice Ritual, Mio forfeits her sight and her dominant role becoming reliant on Mayu to guide her. However, they are now more likely to remain together, as Mio needs Mayu so that symbolic aspect of the twins becoming one prevails.

In both endings player agency too is sacrificed, these may not be the endings the player is led to expect but are the endings which the subgenre demands.

Mayu: unwilling to willing victim

From the first cutscene Mayu is established as the weaker twin; she is presented as softer spoken and withdrawn. Her outfit of high-necked black top, under a brown dress with crimson bow, knee high boots and a bandage on her wounded leg also show her as more closed off and negative. The bandage is a visible reminder of Mayu's injury. Just as Mio's role within the game is to be a witness, Mayu's role is instantly established as a victim. Mayu is also represented as weak to make the player want to protect her. Mayu is lured away and trapped multiple times throughout the game, prompting the player to find her. She follows Mio/player when they are in sections together. She cannot fight back or hide from ghosts in battles, and they will attack her over Mio/the player. This can lead to the player using Mayu as bait in battles which places player agency over that of Mio, who would not use her sister as bait. Again, this demonstrates how a disconnect can form between the player actions and those of the in-game narrative. However, on another level the fact that Mayu can be used as a willing victim does underpin the macro narrative of the game; Mayu wants to be sacrificed.

Mayu's dialogue focuses on being with her sister forever; there is a fatalistic desire to never be separated from Mio even before Mayu becomes possessed by Sae. Her personality is constructed around Mio, and it is this passivity that enables Sae to dominate. This co-dependency is not presented in a positive way; the reliance is almost toxic, especially in moments where Mayu allows herself to be trapped or in the second ending where she is seen to smirk now that she is Mio's eyes and they cannot be separated. While she is passive, this toxic aspect of the relationship shows how this character manipulates her role as victim to control the situation. In this role as willing victim, Mayu becomes a way for the player to understand the rhetoric of the village community and provides some grounding for the first ending. As Mayu is linked to Sae from the moment she is lured into the forest, she also becomes a way to develop player empathy for the antagonist.

In the sections where Mayu becomes the playable character, the aesthetic shifts to a trance-like version of the village. The image switches to black and white, a grainy film texture overlays the screen, signifying this is a flashback. Thus in Mayu's sections the player is given an insight into Sae's perspective as she heads to complete the ritual which will fail. The sound design adds to the dreamlike quality. The world sounds like it is underwater, a tone like tinnitus plays throughout, and traditional Japanese instruments such as temple bells are heard. There is a muffled monologue in Mayu's voice, which is revealed to be Sae's. The player, while moving along a pre-determined path highlighted by crimson butterflies, is unable to wander off course. This demonstrates Mayu/Sae's indoctrinated perception of the village, trapped within their rhetoric, she cannot deviate from the path. Sympathy is generated in alignment (Smith, 1994) with Sae thus Mayu exists on one level to enable the player to understand Sae, another victim of this patriarchal regime.

The player can choose to leave Mayu if they have not become attached enough to want to rescue her. This demonstrates a fine line that the game's creators tread with Mayu as willing/unwilling victim. If the player aligns too much with Mayu as a willing victim, they may choose to sacrifice her for their own freedom from the village. This triggers a third ending where Mio is attacked by Sae in an underground tunnel then wakes up alone in the forest without Mayu. The final line of dialogue from Mayu/Sae is 'I'll wait ... forever.' This hints that the cycle of death within the village has not been broken and that Mio's escape might not be permanent.

If the player is invested enough in Mayu as unwilling sacrifice, then they will choose to rescue her from the ritual. As Mio descends towards the ritual chamber a divide between Mayu and Sae is heard in voice over dialogue. Mayu urges Mio to run away and save herself, while Sae urges Yae to join her. This is the first time in the game that Mayu and Sae give different instructions. This is important as it hints that Mayu does not want Mio to take part in the ritual and that in a crucial moment she breaks the trance to protect her. Mayu is not Sae, she does not really want to be sacrificed. However, this contradicts Mayu's earlier insistence on forever being with Mio and the final smirk in the second ending. Mayu's role as victim thus becomes more complex. In the first ending, it is unclear whether it is Mayu or Sae who want Mio to kill. Their dialogue plays to this ambiguity 'I kept waiting in a dark, dark place ... shall we begin?' (Shibata, 2003). The dark place hints that this is Sae possessing Mayu, in reference to the village which has been in perpetual night. Although this might also be a reference to Mayu's own feelings about her sister since her injury. Either way, *Fatal Frame II* offers no simple solution to understanding Mayu as a willing or unwilling victim. She is a more complex character than the player's initial impression.

Sae: sacrificial victim to villain

The main antagonist of *Fatal Frame II*, Sae Kurosawa, is seen as a young woman in a white, blood-stained kimono. It is important to note that the kimono is tied right over left which is reserved for dead bodies in Japan, so through her outfit Sae is symbolically tied to death even when she is seen in flashbacks with her sister, Yae.[3] Many ghost stories in Japan centre on women who return to enact vengeance on the men who have wronged them (McRoy, 2005, p. 22; Balmain, 2008, p.72). Popular Kabuki and Noh plays focus on these tales; there is an entire category of Noh plays that explore woman who have gone mad or died due to the treatment which they received from men (Nogami, 2005; Suan, 2013; Teele, 1975). Sae Kurosawa fits within this wronged woman ghost tradition. The character was raised to be a sacrifice; she is groomed to believe this is her fate and thus when given the option to escape she self-sabotages in the hope that her sister will return and be forced to conduct the ritual. Sae is a victim of the twisted beliefs of the villagers. Near the end of the game the player collects a fluorite stone which contains Sae's thoughts. This demonstrates the level of her indoctrination, 'since my birth I have been waiting for your hands to descend upon my neck' (Shibata, 2003). Sae has completely bought into the rituals of Minakami village, and it is this that drives her, even after her death. Alongside her journals, which underpin this commitment to the belief system and the Fluorite stones, the player experiences Sae's perspective through Mayu, which builds Sae into a complex villain who is a product of the village's control.

Sae is destroyed and corrupted by the thing she believed in the most, just as many women in Japanese ghost stories are also destroyed by those in whom they place their faith (McRoy, 2005). Her vengeful spirit has no compassion and is presented as an all-powerful force of violence. This is the opposite of Sae's personality when alive, where she is the weaker, passive twin. Carol Clover discusses the concept of the victim-hero in relation to *Carrie* (1976) who is transformed into the monstrous to enact revenge on her community (Clover, 1992, p. 4). Sae shifts from victim to monstrous through supernatural means to wreck revenge on the community that created her. However, Sae's attack on this patriarchal system is represented negatively within the game; it is this act of violence that the player is fighting against. Within this framework, the player/Mio, in stopping this violent female force and completing the Crimson Sacrifice Ritual, restores the patriarchal order. Barbara Creed (1993) has argued that while monstrous female characters can present female power over male-dominated systems, the ways in which they are cast as monstrous or villainous do present an implicit reaffirmation of patriarchal structures. By the end of the game, in understanding the twisted codes of the village, the player may come to empathise with Sae; ultimately, like the teens at the prom in *Carrie* (1976), the villagers got what was coming to them. Yet in completing the game the player puts the ghost to rest restoring order, in the first ending particularly, by participating in the ritual formed by patriarchal beliefs of the village. Mio, surrounded by and encouraged by the ghosts of the veiled priests, strangles her sister to set Sae's soul free. In the second ending, Mio fights Sae's ghost and exorcises it from her sister, destroying the monstrous feminine. Female power, Mio, overcomes the woman, Sae, who is corrupted by the patriarchal views of the village. Neither of these interpretations sit comfortably with placing *Fatal Frame II* as a feminist text. There is too much ambiguity.

Sae is the monstrous feminine, but she is not ultimately feminist. Her destruction of the patriarchal community is driven by an overwhelming desire to properly follow through on the patriarchal beliefs. She wants to become one with her missing twin, she wants to conduct the Crimson Sacrifice Ritual so much she compels others to follow suit. Sae in her role as victim/villain is both conservative and progressive, like the figure of the witch within other folk horror screen texts (Buckley, 2019).

Conclusion

This article has repositioned *Fatal Frame II* within the subgenre of folk horror using the framework of Scovell's Folk Horror Chain. Hoeger and Huber (2007) explored some elements of narrative doubling in their article on *Fatal Frame*, but their focus remained on twinned characters and character/avatar gameplay. My argument pushes this concept of doubling/twinning further in relation to *Fatal Frame II*, demonstrating how it employs doubling in multiple elements of its construction in relation to folk horror. The two forms of isolation – physical location within the mountains but also outside the flow of time – the doubling of Crimson Sacrifice Rituals – Sae's failed ritual and Mio/Mayu's successful one – and the requirement for two play throughs to achieve both endings and summon and defeat Sae's ghost. The development of this complex story world around the player works to generate immersion within the skewed belief systems and folk horror atmosphere of the game.

I have also dissected three different roles for female characters within the game, namely Mio as witness, Mayu as victim and Sae as villain. Each of these characters affirms and subverts patriarchal power structures within the game's story world and challenges the player with their juxtaposition of conservative and progressive approaches. *Fatal Frame II* generates these complex contradictions in its use of the camera: in game, as a weapon in the hands of a female character who chooses what to observe, and what to exorcise. Meanwhile, the third-person perspective perpetuates patriarchal viewing cultures. Mio, Mayu and Sae all shapeshift in their roles complicating simple definitions of who women are within folk horror. Each of these three characters conforms to patriarchal expectations, while also breaking down those self-same beliefs. *Fatal Frame II* effectively encompasses these paradoxical positions; it is a folk horror text which offers the player no simple solutions.

Notes

1. Koji Suzuki acknowledges the influence of Fukurai's experiments on his novel, *Ringu* (1991), and thus on its subsequent adaptation *Ringu* (dir. Nakata, 1998).
2. Further exploration of the game's intended market, male or female players, could offer rich ground for study, although this is beyond the scope of this current article.
3. This visual design is also tied to Japanese folklore and traditional drama representations of ghosts or *yurei* (Foster, 2015; Suan, 2013).

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