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Game Review

PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR

StoryTale Studios, Point-and-Click Horror, ID 2018

In indie and mainstream popular culture alike, Asian horror has been gaining world-wide recognition for quite some time. The most widely known digital cultural goods are produced in Japan and South Korea. However, as a Google search demonstrates, the global popularity of Indonesian horror narratives has also seen a sharp increase despite their being less broadly disseminated. For example, the number of Indonesian horror titles on Netflix is striking. Interestingly, the majority of those stories draw on and incorporate the country's rich folk traditions. Thus, tradition in its plural meaning is absolutely key here: with its diverse ethnic groups, languages, and religious traditions, Indonesia is anything but culturally homogenous. This cultural plurality is often depicted in Indonesian horror tales just as they are deeply embedded in Indonesian everyday life and its practices. In fact, the remarkable proximity of horror and the seemingly mundane is the basic premise of PAMALI, an Indonesian folklore horror game. The first-person point-and-click horror game was (and is still being) developed by StoryTale Studios, a small indie studio based in Bandung, Indonesia.¹ As Mira Wardhaningsih, co-creator of PAMALI, explains in an interview, one of the intentions in creating the game was to introduce international audiences to a distinctively Indonesian approach to horror. As she elaborates:

We believe that every culture has a different perception towards horror. [...] In Indonesia, it's not a big, catastrophic, one-time phenomenon that is terrifying; it is something else, something closer. We are scared of our ghosts, of our monsters, our spirits, because we can actually meet them at any time, for they are closely related to our own daily lives.²

Strictly speaking, PAMALI is an anthology game: it is divided into four episodes, two of which have been released since late 2018 with two more in development. Each

1 Trattner 2019, 117.

2 Trattner 2019, 122.



Fig. 1: A haunted house in «The White Lady». Press still: StoryTale Studios.

episode features a ghost or another supernatural entity from Indonesian folklore. There is, for instance, Kuntilanak, a female ghost deriving from Indonesian and Malayan mythology. She purportedly died during childbirth, which keeps her longing for newborn babies and haunting her former home (see fig. 1). Another example is Pocong, the restless spirit whose burial shroud was not untied in time, according to Muslim burial customs. Those two characters, who are central to the first two episodes – «The White Lady» and «The Tied Corpse» – were heavily inspired by and hence serve as illustrations of Indonesian horror tales and the diverse religious traditions from which these tales originated. The game effortlessly implements such aspects of Indonesian cultural plurality. On the whole, the most intriguing moments of gameplay include the player actively experiencing the amalgamation of the various religious and cultural traditions in everyday contexts.

In general, a frame narrative connects all episodes, granting the player the role of a game designer in search of supernatural phenomena for a particular project. A dorm room serves as point of departure. Here, the protagonist starts their investigations primarily by reading emails. Each activated attachment initiates a playable episode that follows the respective narrator's point of view. When I played the game for the first time, I spent nearly an hour in the tiny dorm room looking at every single item, reading every newspaper clipping lying around, curiously inspecting each and every piece of furniture. In my view, this is one of the game's top qualities: the extremely detailed depictions of everyday Indonesian life fascinated me. I will return to this point in more detail.

The central episodes do not follow a linear plot: how each episode ends depends entirely on the player's actions and behavior, particularly on how they interact with their surroundings. Hence, the time it takes to complete an episode can vary considerably and most players will explore each episode repeatedly and by every conceivable means. Overall, the episode endings – and, quite frankly, the degree of scariness – primarily depend on the player's regard or disregard for certain cultural taboos. This is, in essence, the gist of the game, and herein lies the source of its name, too. As Mira Wardhaningsih explains:

The name *Pamali* comes from the Sundanese (an Indonesian tribe that comes mainly from West Java) word *pamali*, loosely meaning taboo or prohibition in English. It is one of the most common words, as we actually grow up hearing *pamali* over and over again. [...] Examples of *pamali* that we've implemented into the game are "you shouldn't take a bath at night, or ghosts will come to you", or "you shouldn't throw scissors away because they will protect you against evil spirits".³

But how exactly do these *pamali*, these rules for dealing with the supernatural, become effective in the gameplay experience? At the beginning of each episode, the protagonist is given certain tasks they need to carry out. In the first playable folklore part, «The White Lady», the player takes the role of a young man returning to his family home after his father's death. Hence, his duty is to make preparations and, among other things, to clean the property in order for it to be put up for sale. «The Tied Corpse», PAMALI's second folklore part, is about a new graveyard keeper who is tasked with burying a body and tending to the graves at night – activities that are accompanied by numerous taboos (see fig. 2).

The player interacts with all kinds of objects and from a first-person perspective explores in detail the eerie game world that is reinforced by an equally uncanny musical backdrop. A lot of times, the player can comment on objects, and players are given the choice to do so in either a polite or an abusive manner (see fig. 3). As Holly Green from *Paste Magazine* pointed out, PAMALI successfully subverts genre conventions with this broad-ranging possibility for interaction with objects: most point-and-click (horror) games limit the player to interacting with objects that are solely of immediate relevance to the player's objective.⁴

In PAMALI, however, protagonists can spend countless hours in the tiniest of rooms because seemingly every single object on the screen can be investigated,

3 Trattner 2019, 120–121.

4 Green 2019.



Fig. 2: In «The Tied Corpse», the player has to tend to a graveyard without angering the spirits. Screenshot, PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR (StoryTale Studios, 2018).



Fig. 3: Items can be interacted with or commented on in various ways, causing different effects. Press still: StoryTale Studios.

read, touched, commented upon, or interacted with in various ways. Although looking at items can unlock hints, a certain feeling of irrelevance comes up as numerous actions barely provoke any immediate consequences. However, in the course of the game it becomes clear that nothing, absolutely nothing, is irrelevant, as every single move and word has an effect on the progression of the game (see fig. 4).



Fig. 4: Some objects must be handled with particular caution or the player could anger the spirits. Screenshot, PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR (StoryTale Studios, 2018).

Far-reaching consequences might follow from the protagonist's interaction with apparently mundane items such as a comb or a pair of scissors. Accordingly, each episode offers between 30 and 35 possible endings. The ending will depend on the degree of respect a player shows a particular *pamali* and the extent of the player's interference with the spirits.

Finally, PAMALI is not so much about mythical creatures or ghosts from Indonesian folk traditions as about how to (or more or less how *not* to) act in their presence. Accordingly, Michael Audish, in his review of PAMALI, asserted that the game was basically a “ghost etiquette simulator”.⁵ Although this slightly ironic statement rings true to a certain point, I would argue that this view is somewhat reductionist. Certainly, a major issue of the game is that the developers' ambitions to grant the player maximum options in gameplay severely threaten the game's entertainment value. If one reads all hints with care, acts properly towards the supernatural and simply attempts to be respectful (e.g. by not making any foul comments, not throwing talismans in the trash), next to nothing happens. The ghosts will only appear if the protagonist behaves in a blasphemous and rude way. Thus, the player will likely disregard various *pamali* on purpose, in order to provoke the potential consequences, which was probably not the intention of the developers. In other words, as Holly Green from *Paste Magazine* put it, the game “teaches you Indonesian custom by

⁵ Audish 2019.

encouraging you to completely disrespect it”.⁶ Nonetheless, even disregarding cultural and religious taboos means learning about them and knowing how they are implemented in everyday life in Indonesia. In addition, particularly for someone like me who knows very little about life in Indonesia, one of the game’s strongest points is the rich and detailed depiction not of the supernatural, but of the ordinary. The time I spent observing the kitchen of the haunted house simply to see how a typical Indonesian kitchen is organized or carefully examining every single band poster in “my” dorm room provided some of my most immersive experiences during the game. From time to time these banalities made me forget all about the supernatural hauntings I was meant to uncover. Yet if PAMALI taught me anything, it is that these are exactly the moments when one should be scared.

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6 Green 2019.