

Armenian Identity in the Video game Medium: Exploration of Diasporan Representation
and Paternal Trauma in “Fatherland”

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Abstract

This capstone is a creative project consisting of a horror-themed video game demonstration focused on diasporan struggles and familial trauma. It aims to provide representation in the video game format as the medium is underexplored in Armenia despite its popularity with the youth within the country and with the diaspora at large. This paper analyzes why representations of diasporan experiences and paternal trauma are important in the context of Armenian society, and why horror video games are the preferred medium for exploring these themes. This paper also goes over the inspirations for this project's core idea, narrative and aesthetic choices, as well as gameplay mechanics. The paper concludes with a justification of Unity as the engine of choice and an explanation of the creative process.

Keywords: Armenian diaspora; Family; Paternal Trauma; Video Games, Horror; Cultural Identity

Introduction

Representing certain identities and experiences in narratives has been one of the most prevalent ways in which media creators have been able to build connections with their audiences, as being able to relate to the struggles and triumphs of a character tends to result in higher empathy and understanding that a given storyline can elicit in an audience. Audiences may feel connected to the exploration of depression in “Omori”, PTSD in “Silent Hill 2” or face their fears alongside the protagonists in “Layers of Fear”. Individuals of queer or otherwise marginalized identities may use fictional representation as a tool of escapism in optimistic farming games such as “Stardew Valley” and “Coral Island”, or in dramatic life simulators such as “The Sims” franchise. Despite the universal nature of the desire to be represented in storytelling, Armenian representation has been lacking, particularly in the gaming sector. Most representation of Armenian characters is found in Armenian media produced in the Republic of Armenia. As such, these narratives tend to not feature intersectional experiences, especially those that stem from one’s diasporan identity. While this project will not represent every experience, it will address themes of growing up outside of Armenia and how that affects one’s relationship to their homeland. The project will do so by creating a narrative that draws parallels between the main character’s damaged relationship with his now-deceased father and the complex feelings that emerge from having to come back to his “fatherland” in order to bury him. By removing the traditional narrative that mandates that everything “truly” Armenian be antique and linguistically inaccessible, it will be possible to connect with more, younger Armenian voices through this project. Besides the diasporan factor, the game will also seek to address cultural concerns regarding familial, particularly paternal issues among Armenian youth. As Armenia is a highly

patriarchal society, much of what is pertaining to the family is seen as “shameful” to bring up outside of a close circle of relatives, and “Fatherland” seeks to break this taboo.

By focusing on these two underexplored dimensions of the Armenian identity, “Fatherland” will offer a unique glimpse into the typical Armenian psyche, all while enhancing its narrative through the horror video game medium.

The Armenian Diaspora and Its Underrepresentation

According to the Office of the High Commissioner for Diaspora Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, there are approximately 7 million Armenians constituting the Armenian diaspora around the world (Office of the High Commissioner for Diaspora Affairs of the Republic of Armenia, n.d.). While a lot of Armenians were forced to settle in new countries following the aftermath of the Armenian Genocide, Armenian communities have existed for centuries across many cultures. As a result of this, many Armenians have had to synthesize the culture of the countries they were born into with aspects of their Armenian heritage. This task is made more difficult if one does not speak the Armenian language, or lacks the basic knowledge of Armenian customs and history. This information is often inaccessible due to language barriers, be it in the sense that this information is written in Armenian or that it is written in highly academic language. A method through which this journey of discovering one’s cultural identity can be made more attainable is by changing the way it is presented. By incorporating contemporary forms of entertainment such as video games, “Fatherland” seeks to make experiencing Armenian culture more digestible and enjoyable. Having the protagonist be a diasporan Armenian and the game be in English will also hopefully make it more accessible with some diasporan Armenians.

It is, however, important to note that it is impossible to group the Armenian diaspora in a manner that would be fully inclusive of all of the different experiences that the identity

encompasses. In an interview with the Armenian General Benevolent Union, Khachig Tölölyan summarized the current diasporan experience as the following: “Assimilation will continue. In each generation, intermarriage, loss of language and other factors will lead to it”. Tölölyan also highlighted how the youth in Western countries tend to perceive their identity differently as opposed to their ancestors. Instead of adopting one singular identity that defines all facets of their being, the younger generations tend to favor building a personal identity that encompasses multiple aspects of their being that are not limited to ethnic identity alone (AGBU, 2015).

Additionally, the Armenian Diaspora Survey conducted a public opinion survey in Ontario, Canada, and the United States in 2022. Their survey revealed that much of the younger generation of the Armenian diaspora lacks the ability to converse in Armenian with their older relatives. The survey showed that there was a trend in the decrease of fluency among the younger participants surveyed. The survey also showed that many of the individuals polled defined their Armenian heritage through the spoken language, family and cultural practices and that younger generations were more likely to view Armenian history as a connector to their cultural roots (The Armenian Diaspora Survey, 2022). Issues of Armenian identity through the preservation of the Armenian language are not new or even unique to the contemporary diaspora, as through centuries, the Armenian language and the Armenian Apostolic Church have been viewed as pillars of the Armenian community worldwide.

While creative projects and arts can never fully account for the complexities of the contemporary diasporan Armenians’ cultural concerns, they can be a vehicle to provide an important sociocultural factor: representation. Cultural representation plays an important role in shaping one’s understanding of themselves in relation to their own community, as well as

illuminating how they are viewed by outsiders. Through more diverse Armenian representation, more Armenians will feel inspired to consume and create works of their own.

One example of such representation was the “We Are All Armenian: Voices from the Diaspora” book. The book was published in 2023, and consists of 18 essays from different Armenian-diaspora writers on a number of issues. Liana Aghajanian’s essay talks about how cultural food can bring people together in unknown places, even when grieving. Chris Bohjalian discusses the footprints left behind by Armenians in Turkey, and the complexities of wanting to visit an ancestral home that you can never be welcome in. J. P. Der Boghossian has an essay on the complexities of being Armenian and queer, and the push he had gotten to start compiling a library of queer Armenian literature (Mrjoian, 2023). The point of the book is to illustrate how diverse the Armenian diaspora is, and to provide a platform for narratives that have been underrepresented in Armenian literature to flourish.

Besides literature, video games are another creative medium that can aid in illustrating culture in an easily digestible and accessible manner. In the past years, there has been a push for more diverse storytelling and characters in the gaming industry. In a 2023 report conducted by the Geena Davis Institute, it was found that 92% of respondents found the inclusion of diverse characters in video games to be of importance, ranging from finding the issue moderately to extremely important. A similar trend could be observed in a survey regarding the need for diverse stories, where 92% of participants found the issue to be similarly pertinent (The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media (GDI), 2023). While no such data exists for Armenia specifically, it can be assumed that one country would not be the outlier in this general trend.

How the Father Shapes the Family: Shame and Parental Expectations

According to the "Independence Generation Youth Study Armenia – 2016" study commissioned by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, almost 88 percent of the young people surveyed noted that their primary aim in life was making their parents proud. In Armenian culture, bringing "սղոխ" (shame) upon your family is seen as something completely socially unacceptable. Adherence to familial expectations to avoid shaming one's family is of particular concern to youth who rely on their families for support, shelter and income (YSU, Faculty of Sociology et al., 2017; Titizian, 2017).

In the survey, 72 percent of the respondents were reportedly living with their families in the last year, 7.5 percent were residing with their spouses and/or children, and 2.2% resided alone with no spouses or children. Chief among the reasons for this structure of living arrangements were the social and financial factors. Despite the added economic benefits of residing in one household, cultural beliefs regarding what the "correct" living arrangements are were also taken into account. Unlike other cultures, living alone from one's parents without being married is seen as a cultural taboo in Armenia. Even in the case of marriage, many spouses often reside with their parents, with some households also including the grandparents of the family and other family members. While there is cultural pressure to adhere to this lifestyle, the study did report that only 15.8 percent of respondents would prefer living on their own given the opportunity, with the figure increasing with the respondent's age (YSU, Faculty of Sociology et al., 2017; Titizian, 2017).

The patriarchal nature of Armenian society is also an important one to consider. The report also noted that respondents found that a father was the most influential member of the family, a claim that 51.2 percent of all respondents had reported. According to a World Bank

study, Armenian society remains patriarchal within the context of families as “gender relations within the household continue to reflect a strong ‘male breadwinner’ model” (YSU, Faculty of Sociology et al., 2017; Titizian, 2017).

While analyzing the paternal role within this framework, it is important to note that within Armenian culture, family is seen as highly important, almost "holy", as Armenians see the familial unit as a reflection of society. The reasons behind this mentality vary, but the decades of hardship faced by Armenian people resulting from ethnic cleansing and genocide have made preserving one's ethnic and cultural heritage an important social factor. This factor reflects itself in how families are perceived, with the maintenance of one's strong familial ties seen as a reflection of one's connection to their Armenian heritage and roots. Armenian pop culture does little to shatter these ways of thinking, often similarly placing importance on the "strong family=strong nation" mentality (YSU, Faculty of Sociology et al., 2017; Titizian, 2017).

Some steps have been taken to better understand the paternal role in family care. To celebrate the role fathers play in the family unit, on August 15th, 2024 during a Cabinet session, June 17th was chosen as the National Father's Day of Armenia. The government declared that “In a number of countries around the world, Father's Day is celebrated with the aim of honoring and expressing gratitude to fathers, giving credit for their sacrifices, contributions, and investments for the future and well-being of their children and families” (News.am, 2024).

Some of the initiatives aimed at better engaging fathers in family care were the "Papa Schools". These workshops focused on equitable family care and positive parenting were funded by the European Union, and operated in the Shirak, Tavush and Lori provinces in Armenia under the “EU 4 Gender Equality: Together against gender stereotypes and gender-based violence”

programme. Equal sharing of domestic labor and increasing paternal involvement in child care were big focuses of the initiatives (UNFPA-Armenia, 2022).

The programme also had a poster contest titled "Dads Matter", with a similar goal of bringing attention to responsible and gender equitable parenting. The contest was organized by the Gyumri Youth Initiatives Centre NGO and UNFPA Armenia Country office, and implemented by UN Women and UNFPA (UNFPA-Armenia, 2022).

Another set of initiatives are the "Family Corner" resource center operating in Tavush, Lori and Shirak provinces as part of the "Together against Gender Stereotypes and Gender-based Violence" regional project launched in 2020 and executed by the UNFPA. The centers organize local meetings and events for the parents in the region with the aim of combating gender stereotypes in parenting and childcare. Regular workshops, seminars, contests and courses are conducted. The head of the UNFPA Armenia office, Tsovinar Harutyunyan states that: "Our mission is to create an environment in our country where every individual can fully realise their potential, benefiting both the family and the community. We work with both women and men, aiming to empower women on one hand and increase men's involvement in family and child care on the other" (The European Union for Armenia, 2023).

While these initiatives show progress, they are not accessible to everyone, as the centers operate in a select few regions. Just as is the case with representing every diasporan, "Fatherland" will not represent every paternal dynamic, but it will hopefully be the first among many projects willing to bridge this taboo.

The Choice of Medium: Video Games

This narrative will be told through the video game medium. This medium was chosen due to its multimedia capabilities. Video game narratives can be told through a combination of

conventional, text-based storytelling, gameplay integration, player-based choices affecting the central storyline, visuals, audio and other creative techniques and elements.

This medium was also chosen due to the fact that the video game sector is not well developed in Armenia despite the fact that the IT industry is one of the fastest growing ones in the country (Enterprise Armenia, 2024). In the research conducted for this paper, only a handful of initiatives pertaining to video games were identified. One example is the “Gamechangers: Girls for Girls” initiative hosted by UNICEF Armenia in cooperation with Enterprise Incubator Foundation, the Gyumri Technology Center and the Vanadzor Technology Center. The initiative aims to introduce young girls to the video game development industry through team-based cooperation (Ghazaryan, 2024). In terms of existing game studios, only the “Triada” and “Rockbite Games” studios were identified. Despite growing interest in video games, it is evident that Armenia’s consumption of the medium is primarily internationally based. As far as startups are concerned, 32 exist in Armenia, with only 2 managing to secure funding. In the past 10 years, only 2 companies are launched annually on average (Tracxn, 2025). The revenue in the market is projected to reach only around 350,000 dollars in 2025, with an annual growth rate of 0.33% (Statista, n.d.).

Regardless of the outcome of the project, initiatives are required in order to accelerate change. “Fatherland” will be the first of its kind in a multitude of ways. It will be the first Armenian video game to be in the horror genre, the first to cover the topics that it does and the first to be a narrative-based experience. While these circumstances result in a lack of an already established foundation to rely on in order to craft the project, it also presents “Fatherland” with a unique opportunity to set certain standards in place.

The goal of the project will not be to create the definitive Armenian video game experience, but to be the first of hopefully many similar projects and initiatives.

Why Horror: The Genre and Its Strengths

In “Why Horror Seduces” Mathias Clasen (2017) discusses how fear and anxiety are produced in humans as adaptive responses to potential or abstract threats, and how horror taps into these emotions. Feeling fearful puts humans into a “fight or flee” zone, and anxiety makes them cautiously look through every corner of a given surrounding. Clasen argues that horror, as it is built on these two emotions, is highly effective in keeping the audience engaged. It draws consumers in by “placing them in a fictional recognizable universe; giving them an “anchoring” character to connect with and exposing said anchor to horrifying events. Through this structure, horror effectively transports the audience into a given setting, allowing them to project onto the protagonist. Horror’s subject matter also aids in keeping audience retention, as well-crafted fictional environments will have viewers scanning every corner for all potential threats as the emotional reactions increase in intensity throughout the story (Clasen, 2017). Horror media consumption is built on the “horror of participation” and the “horror of transportation”, working in tandem to generate the experience of fear and dread (Christopher & Leuszler, 2022).

While this is true of horror in a broader sense, video games offer a uniquely intimate experience in how the genre is experienced. They offer a unique blend of fiction and narratives with the virtual bodies and objects that are tangible to the player, such as the controller, the keyboard or the touch screen. The metaphysicality of horror is what lets players experience a much more intimate and immersive connection with the medium they are actively interacting with (Keogh, 2018).

The constructed, player-driven narrative of horror video games is what makes the act of playing a horror game such an active experience. While the game may provide players with settings and characters to follow, the existence of action within the story is entirely dependent on player input. According to Ewan Kirkland (2009), in order to motivate the player to unfold the story, horror video games utilize psychologically motivated anchor characters, clear goals and obstacles and a “cause and effect” logic, where every solved action, such as a puzzle, leads to a logical pay off such as the unlocking of a new challenge.

In terms of narrative construction, fixed camera angles and cutscenes are common in video games, forcing the players into a predetermined, “correct” narrative path on how the story ought to be viewed. While these tools limit player autonomy, they are powerful tools in setting the narrative straight and ensuring that the game's story is properly communicated and not reliant on gameplay instability. Players may also be “guided” to look at certain objects, such as a torn bed sheet, or forced to interact with something, such as a lock, before further progression is unlocked (Kirkland, 2009). It is important that these “locked” experiences be rewarding in order for players to remain engaged with the story they have been “forced out” of controlling.

Horror games are also much more loose with timelines and sequencing than other forms of media, allowing players to passively or actively experience past events and memories. The space the player occupies may change at any moment, further adding to the surrealist feeling that horror invokes (Kirkland, 2009). If the narrative is well constructed, then each found clue and narrative twist in a horror game should feel as though fate is unfolding before the player's eyes. Paradoxically, the more compelled players feel to finish the story, the less in control of it they should feel, as horror video games' biggest strength is not in the story or gameplay itself, but in

the dread players feel at the suggestion that they lack the control they thought they had (Kirkland 2009).

The Initial Conception of The Game: “Ara the Beautiful and Shamiram”

The initial concept for the game came from the mythological “*aralez*” as seen in the story of “Ara the Beautiful and Shamiram”. In the story, the Assyrian queen Shamiram is infatuated with the Armenian king Ara, demanding that he marry her. Ara remains loyal to his wife, and Shamiram wages war on Armenia as revenge. Ara is killed on the battlefield. Desperate, Shamiram takes his corpse and gives it to the *aralez*, the woundlicking mythical creatures, hoping that their magic might save him, but is futile, and the story culminates in a tragic ending where Shamiram sends an Ara lookalike to calm the Armenians.

The story of “Ara the Beautiful and Shamiram” aligns with many pre-established psychological horror tropes. Shamiram's attempts at reviving Ara represent an exaggeration of grief meant to showcase how desperate someone can act when they love deeply. The concept of woundlicking, winged mythical dogs is also quite striking, as it isn't necessarily horrifying in nature, but imagining big dogs gathered around a corpse would likely invoke imagery of a human being torn to shreds.

Of course, there is also the component of love. Shamiram's love for Ara is romantic, but romantic love is not the only type of love capable of invoking deep, psychological introspection. Familial love and love for one's homeland are also powerful in affecting one's psyche, which is where the idea for “Fatherland” came from.

Using “fatherland” as opposed to “motherland” is intentional, as the game is about the protagonist's complicated relationship with both his homeland and his father. The setting is as follows: Ara, the main character, hasn't been to Armenia in many years following a fight with his

father. One day, unexpectedly, he receives news of his father's passing, forcing him to abruptly abandon the new life he has built for himself and rush back to Armenia. When the game starts, he is driving to his grandmother's house, his father's corpse resting in his car. It's snowy and foggy, making it harder and harder to drive without any accidents. When Ara inevitably gets into a car crash, he is offered to stay at a local gas station, where the true horror begins. Much of the game's horror was inspired by the "Silent Hill" series, particularly the second installment. The idea was that Ara, who has been running away from Armenia as he sees his Armenian identity as synonymous with his troubled relationship with his father, is forced back into his homeland in order to bury the father who he had declared dead to him already. Ara's narrative arc is structured around the confrontation of both his fatherland and his father. Much like how Silent Hill operates in the "Silent Hill" franchise as a physical manifestation of individuals' unresolved trauma, the gas station in "Fatherland" carries the same narrative function. The monsters are not what drives the horror, as they are mere manifestations of Ara's troubled thoughts. The true horror lies in not the jump scares, but in the game's reflection of grounded human anxieties and fears, exaggerated through the medium of horror.

Gameplay, Aesthetic and Narrative Inspirations

As the Armenian market of video games is severely underdeveloped, and the horror-based one is missing altogether, many other games were looked at as sources of inspiration for game design, narrative, game polish, puzzle-mechanics and other crucial video game components.

Supergiant Games's "Hades" has a similar framework of incorporating myths into a story about familial bonds and complicated paternal dynamics. While the gameplay differs quite heavily from that of "Fatherland", its balance of gameplay and narrative was inspirational.

The aesthetics of "Fatherland" are a mismatch of elements found in the nostalgic "PSX" aesthetic. In the past few years, much like other "Y2K" trends, the look of games on the first Playstation have become quite popular with young game developers, particularly in the indie scene. While many visual choices in the years prior were made due to hardware limitations, the low-poly graphics, the pixelated textures, the grain and the unrefined animations are now seen as visual methods of incorporating nostalgic horror into newer projects.

Heavy inspiration was drawn from the "Haunted PS1" series in the creation of "Fatherland". In the series, each game features a snapshot of demos from indie game developers, letting players experience a diverse catalogue of horror video games prior to making a purchase. Besides the series, other indie projects were also considered, such as the surrealist, medical horror "The Heilwald Loophole" and the more humorous "Egg Fried Rice".

Older games with heavy psychological elements were also looked at prior to the creation of "Fatherland". The themes of loss and guilt found in "Fatherland" are also present in the second installment of the "Silent Hill" series, influencing the game's tone and pace. "Faust: Seven Games of the Soul", the 1999 graphic adventure game, similarly influenced the philosophical components of the game.

Engine and Tool Selection

As mentioned before, the "PSX" aesthetic was chosen due to the fact that the technical limitations of the original console translate well into a horror-esque atmosphere. The nostalgia element was also a big factor, as the game is all about memories. The abundance of assets was another factor that was considered, as the scope of the project was too vast for the intended timeline if all assets were to be handmade.

The aesthetic was achieved through downloading “prefabs” and blender files with the look, changing the settings of textures to be of lower quality and shaders. The character animations were purposefully unrefined. Other small choices, such as the addition of fog, were used to mask inconsistencies in the art style and add to the atmosphere.

The engine the game was built on is Unity, as Unreal Engine is too graphically demanding, and Godot is better suited for developing 2D games. Unity also has the most documentation readily available out of any engines out there, making it the obvious choice.

The core mechanics of the game were heavily inspired by other, similar scale "PSX" style indie projects. The gameplay was to be minimal, with the main focus being exploration and storytelling. Initially, the game was to start and end at a gas station. A gas station was chosen as the central location of the game due to the inherent liminality of the space. They are often far outside any cities in the country, enhancing the feeling of isolation one may already feel on a long journey via a car. Most gas stations are also quite old, and it is not uncommon to find soviet-era furniture or operational machinery inside. Patrons at gas stations also perfectly embody the classical horror trope of never trusting strangers, as they may pose an unseen threat. During the bug testing and feedback gathering process, it was concluded that this area felt too small and that players wanted a variety of content. With the feedback in mind, the gameplay was diversified to include a forest, a village house and an apartment building during dream sequences.

Prior to the bug testing session with players, the entire area was sketched out by hand and later incorporated into the game. 3 sessions with 4 players with a background in computer science or web development were conducted, and a survey was filled after each 1-3 hour session. As the number of assets required grew following this stage, the workflow was altered. First, all

the assets that were available would be laid out in a separate project and be tested for compatibility with one another. After this, a rough level design would be produced in Unity. After it was satisfactory, the Unity project with the game would be loaded and have only the required assets be imported into a new scene. Only after this setup would the core mechanics, such as the camera, the lighting system and the player model, be reimplemented into the new scene to avoid crashes. After it worked without any crashes, sound design and visual polish would be added, and scene sequencing would be checked to make sure that all of the scenes load as intended in the correct order.

Due to the time and resource constraints around the Capstone, the scale of the project was considerably scaled down. Initially, the game was much more traditionally horror-based in its gameplay, featuring a mix of stealth and armed combat as the primary gameplay features. As the project's primary narrative was about paternal trauma and the Armenian identity, the gameplay had to take a backseat in order to produce a narratively engaging short demonstration of the game. The idea was that the Capstone would showcase the introduction to Ara's past and end as soon as the gameplay and subsequent horror began in order to propel player engagement and interest. From a storyboarding standpoint, it was crucial to get Ara into the gas station, as the gas station is the primary location of the game. From a thematic standpoint, establishing Ara's diasporan identity and troubled paternal relationship was of equal importance, which was achieved through the stranger helping him out after the car crash conversing in English with him, and the dream sequence of his childhood memories respectively.

While the demo works in establishing the core basics of the game's concept, its structure was heavily reliant on what was deemed achievable in the timeframe allocated to the project. For example, the apartment dream sequence was meant to take place when Ara falls asleep on the

wheel prior to the car crash, and another, more surreal dream sequence with stages and potential deaths with bigger player involvement was drafted. Due to technical difficulties, it was not possible to achieve both dream sequences, and only the one deemed most important to the narrative was kept. The abrupt ending was also due to technical limitations, as the much more extended gas station segment was simply not possible to implement due to technical difficulties and time constraints. Factors such as health concerns resulting in eyesight complications and hand tremors also made the creation of the game very difficult. On average, 10-50 cumulative hours would be dedicated to the project per week. As an example, the implementation of a door teleportation mechanic took 3 hours for the first door, and 5 hours cumulative. Each asset in each scene is hand placed and scaled accordingly, and the environment building could take anywhere from 5 hours to 30 depending on various technical factors. The final build of the game itself is the fourth one created overall, and the other three all had varying degrees of the same mechanisms and environments implemented but had to be scrapped due to unfixable bugs or exploits.

Overall, despite prior game development experience, "Fatherland" was a project that required much more care and technical knowledge in order to execute as planned. In subsequent months, more will be done to fully develop the game. Ideally, a choice system will be implemented, where the players' choices will dictate the ending of the game, and whether or not Ara manages to overcome his trauma. The assets will also be re-made to achieve a more cohesive and stylized visual style, after which the game will be both bug-tested and play-tested. If the initial build is functional on multiple devices, then the full game will be released on the "Itch.io" platform, a video game and asset publishing platform centered around the creations of indie game developers, for free.

Link to the project: [Capstone](#)

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