Fonthill Abbey, terror and videogames at the British Library

Greg Buzwell

No discussion of Gothic literature would be complete without mention of William Beckford and his novel *Vathek* (1786), so it came as no surprise when both author and novel cast lengthy shadows across the British Library’s major exhibition *Terror and Wonder: The Gothic Imagination* in the autumn of 2014. The show celebrated 250 years of Gothic literature, ranging from Horace Walpole’s novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) to contemporary supernatural tales by authors such as Clive Barker, Sarah Waters and Neil Gaiman. Beckford, inevitably, featured heavily in the section of the display devoted to Gothic fiction’s first golden age, taking his place alongside Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis as someone who brought new ideas to the increasingly popular world of terrifyingly outré fiction. For the exhibition the British Library was able to borrow Sir Joshua Reynolds’s portrait of Beckford from the National Portrait Gallery in London and the superb architect’s model of Fonthill Abbey from Beckford’s Tower and Museum in Bath. The loans were exhibited alongside illustrated editions of *Vathek*, some of Beckford’s letters and John Rutter’s magnificent volume *Delineations of Fonthill and its Abbey* (1823). Taken as a whole these exhibits resulted in this part of the exhibition being arguably the most striking and memorable in the gallery.

The Gothic tradition and videogaming

In addition to exploring the genesis and development of Gothic literature the exhibition also addressed the influence of Gothic fiction upon fashion, music, lifestyle, film, photography, art and architecture. There was however one area of creativity that the curators of the show, myself included, found it difficult to reference – namely Gothic literature’s considerable impact upon computer games. There are literally thousands of computer games in which Dracula-style castles, dense haunted forests, sinister cults, ruined abbeys and moonlit, zombie-infested
graveyards play a large part. During the planning process for the exhibition the inclusion of videogames and computer animations was discussed at length, but a lack of space and money ultimately counted against the idea. This gap was partially filled, however, with the aid of the Off the Map competition, and once again Fonthill Abbey provided the imaginative spark that brought this additional element of Terror and Wonder to life.

Off the Map is an annual videogame design contest for UK higher education students. Each year the competition encourages students to create video games, text adventures and virtual environments using digitised British Library ‘assets’ (i.e. digitised maps, views, illustrations, sound recordings, manuscripts and printed texts taken from the British Library’s collections). The 2014 competition, run by the British Library in partnership with Crytek, a videogame design company, and GameCity, a cultural centre for videogames in Nottingham and the home of the National Videogame Arcade, took the Terror and Wonder exhibition as its inspiration. Students had a choice of three options around which to base their entries: the seaside town of Whitby, which features so prominently in Bram Stoker’s novel Dracula (1897); Edgar Allan Poe’s short story ‘The Masque of the Red Death’ (1842) or Fonthill Abbey. Specific assets for the Fonthill Abbey option included images from Rutter’s Delineations of Fonthill and its Abbey, plans of the estate, topographical drawings of the Abbey and its grounds, written accounts of the Abbey and, for an extra dash of background colour, extracts from accounts and letters relating to Beckford’s life, together with selected passages from Vathek.

Nix

The eventual winners of the 2014 competition were a team from the University of South Wales who chose Fonthill Abbey as the focus for their design. The fact that so little of the Abbey survives arguably worked in the students’ favour. We know what Fonthill Abbey looked like, we have the paintings, plans and descriptions, but the fact it is now largely absent from the landscape – a ghostly presence that exists purely in the imagination – meant that the students could pursue surreal flights of fancy. Put another way, their setting for the game was under no compulsion to resemble a specific, identifiable location. The result was a truly original concept and one that was in many ways reminiscent of the daring use of sublime landscapes frequently found in Gothic novels. The winning game, called Nix, and created by Jackson Rolls-Gray, Lauren Filby and Faye Allen, challenged participants to reconstruct the ruins of Fonthill Abbey by solving a series of puzzles in an ethereal underwater world. Nix, ideally, was designed to be enjoyed in conjunction with the Oculus Rift, a virtual reality headset for 3D gaming, which enabled the user to explore the submerged Abbey ruins in stunning three-dimensional detail. The device even gave the students the idea for their team name. They entered the competition as ‘Gothulus Rift’, a neat play on words combining the romantic past
and the technologically advanced present. The use of a virtual reality headset also dictated one of Nix’s most dazzling features, namely that it is set largely underwater. Virtual reality headsets can induce motion sickness in some users, but by setting the game underwater the visuals could be slowed down and rendered in a gentler, more languid and poetic fashion – a terrific example of how necessity often leads to creative leaps in imagination.

The imagery featured in the game is stunning. Players find themselves looking up through Fonthill’s submerged central tower as seaweed sways from the stonework (Figure 20.1); books glide like jellyfish from the shelves in the library and the sun, filtered through several fathoms of water, bathes the Abbey’s shattered walls and drowned rooms in a ghostly shade of green. The sight of Fonthill’s famous tower surrounded by fish and seen through an eerie underwater light is precisely the type of sublime spectacle – beautiful, haunting, awe-inspiring and terrifying – so beloved of Gothic authors. Visually, the imagery looks like the setting for one of H. P. Lovecraft’s more fantastical tales or the set design for a Hollywood film set in a post-apocalyptic future. As Tim Pye, the lead curator of Terror and Wonder, commented after Nix had been announced as the competition winner:

What is so impressive about the Nix game is the way in which it takes the stunning architecture of the Abbey, combines it with elements from its troubled history and infuses it all with a very ghostly air. The game succeeds in transforming William Beckford’s stupendously gothic building into a magical, mysterious place reminiscent of the best gothic novels.

Fig. 20.1 The spectral ruins of Fonthill Abbey as seen in the videogame Nix. The game imagines the Abbey underwater, overgrown with seaweed and illuminated by muted, distant sunlight.

Image © Jackson Rolls-Gray, Faye Allen and Lauren Filby.
Going further, the videogame’s curators turned one of Gothic fiction’s most common themes on its head. Ruins in Gothic novels act as both a short-hand method of evoking a past that has irrevocably vanished and as a means of inspiring a sense of melancholy. Taking arguably the most impressive Gothic Revival house ever built – and one made all the more remarkable by its almost mythical history and its tragic collapse – and then asking modern game players to recreate it in a virtual world reverses this process. Rebuilding the vanished walls of Fonthill Abbey in digital form brings the glories of the past back to life in new ways. Potentially, by the same means, any lost building, any vanished landscape and even any lost civilisation can be given a digital afterlife.

In conclusion Fonthill Abbey, while only being a small part of the Terror and Wonder exhibition, came to provide several of its most enduring memories. Many of the comments from visitors praised the iconic exhibits (Doctor Dee’s spirit mirror, which was on loan from the British Museum for example, or Bram Stoker’s manuscript for his theatre adaptation of Dracula). Others commented on the quirky and surreal (the model of the ‘were-rabbit’ we were able to borrow from Aardman Animations, or the vampire slaying kit we were delighted to have on loan from the Royal Armouries in Leeds). Many, however, perhaps because of its near total disappearance from the landscape, were enthralled by the story of Fonthill Abbey and its flamboyant creator. The Nix videogame combined the iconic with the surreal. It took the past and brought it into the present: nineteenth-century architecture combined with brilliant storytelling and twenty-first-century technology to produce something totally new. For a building which no longer exists Fonthill Abbey is curiously ever-present in the Gothic imagination, a ghostly reminder of how the glories of the past cast shadows that stretch to the present day and beyond.