Videogames in Horror Movies

Remediation, Metalepsis, Interface Effects, and Fear of the Digital

Michael Fuchs

Abstract

This article discusses four movies in which transgressions between gameworlds and diegetic realities take center stage: *Brainscan* (1994), *Stay Alive* (2006), *Livescream* (2018), and *Choose or Die* (2022). By exploring the interactions between videogame worlds and "reality," these movies do not simply project anxieties onto digital games, but rather reflect on media-specific affordances of videogames, inquire into discourses surrounding videogames, and explore game cultures. I am particularly interested in the strategies and aesthetics of remediating videogames in the horror films and the conceptualizations of videogames and game cultures thus produced, as well as the larger cultural fears and anxieties (and hopes and dreams) that these representations evoke.

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Michael Fuchs

"Every new medium is a machine for the production of ghosts," John Durham Peters has noted.[1] Similarly, Friedrich Kittler has concluded that media "have always made ghosts appear."[2] From Roland Barthes's observation that photographs make possible the "return of the dead" and Siegbert Solomon Prawer's remark that "the image we see on the screen is a kind of spectral double, the simulacrum of landscapes and townscapes filled with human beings that seem to live, to breathe, to talk, and yet are present only through their absence" to more recent articulations that conceive of cyberspace as "a ghostly matter with important connections to the all-surrounding ether of modern media transmissions,"[3] media have functioned as gateways to an "other side," a "vast electronic nowhere" that is populated by ghosts.[4] This "realm of the dead," in turn, "is as extensive as the storage and transmission capabilities of a culture" and simultaneously as much a realm of the living,[5] as the media promise to make real the transhumanist idea (and ideal) of overcoming the limits of the human body, providing a space in which immortality becomes both a possibility and an opportunity.

The final decades of the twentieth century witnessed how media increasingly infiltrated and penetrated everyday life, transforming the spectral associations of (and with) the media into lived reality, as "ghosts became ordinary figures for the operations of new technologies and their hallucinatory, virtual effects."[6] Responding to "culture's changing social relationship to a historical sequence of technologies,"[7] horror movies started to address and remediate digital technologies when they began to become increasingly integrated into everyday life in the 1980s. For example, in *Evilspeak* (1981), a military cadet uses a computer to conjure Satan in order to enact his revenge on people who treated him unfairly,[8] while in *Prince of Darkness* (1987), the

"Anti-God" deploys a human vessel to communicate their message to a small group of scientists via a computer screen.[9] Both of these films decidedly locate Evil in digital technologies: chaos, violence, and destruction spread from the digital domain. These movies are, to draw on Paul Young, "horror stories that speculate about the hidden dangers of fascinating electrical media."[10]

A few years later, supernatural horror movies in which the boundaries between the diegetic world and the hypodiegetic world of a videogame become porous started to emerge. For example, in *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare* (1991), a character is sucked into a videogame.[11] Since the entire Elm Street franchise "systematically eliminat[es] the conventional signposts that help us separate . . . the real from the fantastic,"[12] this transgression of the threshold traditionally distinguishing between diegetic reality and the fantastic realm is naturalized in the storyworld: Freddy Krueger, the monstrous villain in the film series, assaults his victims in their sleep, but these attacks have effects on, and in, the diegetic reality.[13] True to the formula of the series, the videogame sequence in *Freddy's Dead* starts in a dream before said dream segues into reality. Introduced by Iron Butterfly's psychedelic rock song "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida" (1968), a character smokes a joint prior to falling asleep and is mesmerized by the surreal extension of the hypodiegetic television space into the diegetic reality (Illustration 1). Once drawn into the screen, the character finds himself in a sidescroller, fighting various kinds of foes, including Freddy, who controls what usually are villainous non-player characters (Illustration 1).

The sequence parodies videogames' lack of photorealism by placing a live-action character into the animated world of a videogame (as well as performing videogame movements and actions in the diegetic reality). At the same time, the momentary remediation of videogame logic self-reflexively acknowledges how horror "'plays' with its reader": a film such as *Freddy's Dead* depends on a "game that one plays *with* the text," for it "*knows* that you've seen it before; it *knows* that you know what is about to happen; and it knows that you know it knows you know." In postmodernist fashion, *Freddy's Dead* suggests that knowledge of the franchise's rules may be more important to both the characters' survival and viewers' enjoyment of, and appreciation for, the movie. Jeffrey Sconce has remarked that this self-awareness extends to how *Freddy's Dead* exaggeratedly toys with moral panics surrounding teen cultures, in particular drug consumption and playing videogames, of the late 1980s and early 1990s: "For an audience of young teens, the stoner's eventual death by drugs, rock 'n' roll, and arcade addiction is funny precisely because of its hyperbolized treatment of the hazards of teen culture."[15] However, this satirical dimension may be easily lost on parts of the audience, for whom *Freddy's Dead* may well emphasize the potential dangers of excessively playing videogames, in particular since playing

Illustration 1: After a character has been sucked into a videogame, the film remediates videogame aesthetics and represents the act of playing a videogame.
Frame grabs from *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare* © New Line Cinema, 1991.

videogames becomes interconnected with drug consumption—both of them are forms of addiction.

The latter point is also true of the episode "The Bishop of Battle" in the anthology horror film *Nightmares* (1983), in which a teenager becomes obsessed with the titular arcade game. When he finally reaches the thirteenth level (which other characters believe to be "a scam to get suckers to spend their money"[16]) in a night of excessive gaming, the arcade breaks apart, and the game's animated foes attack the teenager in the diegetic reality (Illustration 2). Failing to master the purportedly final level, the player becomes transported into the arcade game (Illustration 2), seemingly forever trapped in its world. Indeed, the teenager arguably had been captivated by the fantastic world before literally being transplanted into the gameworld because "the arcade was a place to get lost in the various fantasy worlds of games like Frogger, Pac-Man, and Galaga."[17]

While several scholars have explored the haunted qualities of analog media in digital horror and the digital gothic (in videogames and podcasts, in particular),[18] I flip the proverbial script in this article to discuss how four horror movies released since the mid-1990s engage with digital games. More specifically, I focus on films in which transgressions between gameworlds and diegetic realities take center stage: *Brainscan* (1994), *Stay Alive* (2006), *Livescream* (2018), and *Choose or Die* (2022). Narra-

Illustration 2: Hypodiegetic and diegetic worlds segue into one another.
Frame grabs from *Nightmares* © Universal Pictures, 1983.

tologists refer to the type of "paradoxical transgression of, or confusion between, (onto)logically distinct (sub)worlds" that characterizes these movies as metalepses.[19] Although not mutually exclusive, I consider Alexander Galloway's notion of interface effects that emerge from the "mysterious zones of interaction that mediate between different realities" more productive for my discussion, as it emphasizes that interfaces "bring about transformations in material states" and are "the effects of other things, and thus tell the story of the larger forces that engender them."[20] The configurations of mutually influencing worlds and sub-worlds in the films discussed in this article demonstrate that "every act of mediation … can evoke a Gothic conflation of overlapping temporalities and realities."[21] By exploring the interactions between videogame worlds and "reality," these movies do not simply project anxieties onto digital games, but rather reflect on videogames' media-specific affordances, inquire into discourses surrounding videogames, and explore game cultures. I am particularly interested in the strategies and aesthetics of remediating videogames in the horror films and the conceptualizations of videogames and game cultures thus produced, as well as the larger cultural fears and anxieties (and hopes and dreams) that these representations evoke.

Losing Touch with Reality

Released in 1994, *Brainscan* is part of the wave of postmodernist horror movies that hit the silver screens and the home video market in the mid-1990s. Although less overtly self-reflexive than the likes of *Scream* (1996) and *New Nightmare* (1994), Brainscan addresses its myriad connections to the horror genre through its embedded virtual reality game. Sharing the film's title, the game-within-the movie promises to deliver "the ultimate experience in interactive terror": players may step into the shoes of a killer and experience his (it remains unclear whether the killer's gender may shift depending on the user) grisly deeds from the first-person point of view.[22]

Against the backdrop of the opening credits, *Brainscan* establishes that its pro-

tagonist, Michael, suffers from a childhood trauma as the movie alternates between Michael sweating in his sleep and images of a car crash, his dead mother, and his permanently damaged knee (images that compulsively return several times in the course of the movie). After waking up, his friend Kyle calls, reading from an advertisement in the latest issue of *Fangoria*: "*Brainscan* is not for the squeamish . . . We dare you to participate in the most frightening experience available on this planet . . . Enter a game that feels more real than reality." The final sentence anticipates an exchange between Michael and the school's principal later in the movie in which the former notes that horror allows him to "escap[e] the real world."[23] Although this idea of popular culture providing escapism has seeped into the popular psyche, one should remember that in the mid-1990s, digital technologies promised "protection against the defeating stimulus of reality."[24] Haunted by the death of his mother and confronted with an absent father, Michael turns to popular culture to not simply escape reality but to experience and feel *something*.

When Michael launches *Brainscan* for the first time, the movie simultaneously (and somewhat paradoxically) highlights the interface between the user and the digital game and tries to erase it, acknowledging what Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin have called the "double logic of remediation"–the combination of immediacy (which "dictates that the medium itself should disappear") and hypermediacy (which "acknowledges multiple acts of representation and makes them visible").[25] On the one hand, upon pressing "play," the visual and sound design draw on traditions of imagining space travel in audiovisual media to showcase that Michael enters a different world (Illustration 3). On the other hand, the videogame operates via "mind program entry," which is "transmitted through the television's blanking signal."[26] This nearly magical design nullifies the need for a controller or similar interface that mediates between Michael's physical activities and his stand-in in the gameworld. Once Michael finds himself in the (purportedly) virtual world, the simulation is photorealistic and lacks a user interface (Illustration 4); the only sign of the mediated character of the experience is a voice-over narrator who guides Michael through the scenario.

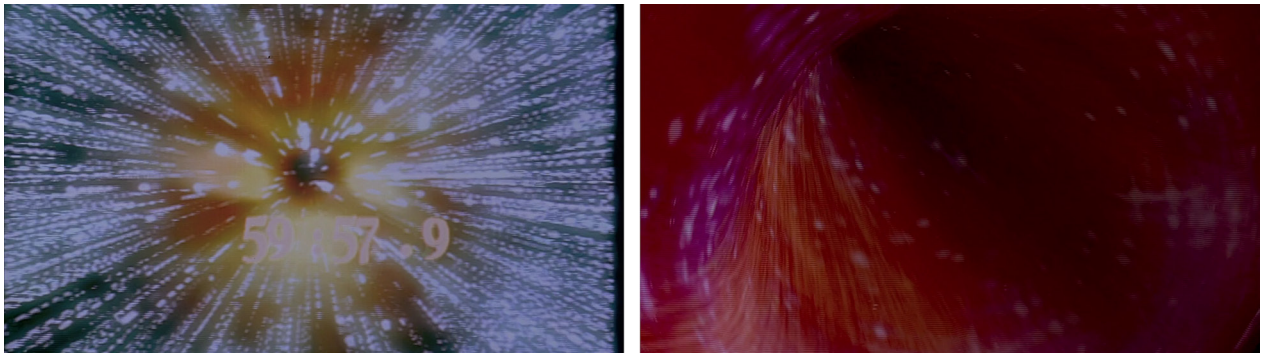

Illustration 3: Michael enters a different dimension.
Frame grabs from *Brainscan* © Triumph Releasing Corporation, 1994.

Illustration 4: The "videogame" looks like a movie.
Frame grab from *Brainscan* © Triumph Releasing Corporation, 1994.

In the gamespace, Michael approaches a stereotypical suburban home. He discovers an unlocked side entrance, takes a large knife in the kitchen, and proceeds to the bedroom, where he slaughters a middle-aged man before taking the man's tattooed right foot as a souvenir, which Michael finds in his actual fridge several hours after having stopped playing the game.

The first-person perspective employed in the murder scene recalls its role in horror cinema, in particular in the slasher subgenre. Although recent scholarship has explained that sharing the point of view with the killer "does not entail moral alignment or even sympathetic identification,"[27] as point-of-view shots suggest "some type of negative vision,"[28] *Brainscan* draws on the idea that aligning the camera's with a character's point of view places viewers "inside the perspective of the killer."[29] At first, *Brainscan*'s different layers of reality might seem to complicate the situation, but the visual depiction of the killer's murderous deed is practically indistinguishable from such iconic point-of-view sequences as the opening of *Halloween* (1978).

In videogames, similar to film, the first-person perspective has often been erroneously considered the perspective most conducive to identifying with the player-character, assuming what Laurie Taylor has called "the conceptual transparency of the video or computer screen."[30] The first-person perspective merges the viewpoints of the player and the player-character, which threatens to obscure the relationship between the player's and the player-character's bodies. *Brainscan* arguably intensifies the effect by removing control devices—which usually cause hypermedi-

acy due to how particular body movements and inputs are mapped onto in-game-world actions—from the typical videogame experience. These control devices are—somewhat paradoxically—key to player immersion, for "the player is engaged in physical activity … and … that action is synchronized with the actions of the game body."[31] By drawing on both the tradition of the first-person point of view in videogames and point-of-view shots in movies, *Brainscan* simultaneously alienates viewers from the killer and associates Michael-the-user with Michael-the-killer.

During the first murder scene, the movie repeatedly departs from the first-person perspective to focus on the knife and particular moments (Illustration 5), raising the question whether the audience of the movie can see what Michael sees (meaning that the videogame would turn to cinematic means to highlight particular aspects of the scene) or whether the movie departs from Michael's point of view to decidedly distinguish the film from the remediated experience of play. Viewed from the perspective of media rivalry, cinema could thus be said to showcase its superiority over videogames, as the movie incorporates the videogame. Such an argument would, however, be somewhat shortsighted because, as Sebastian Domsch has explained, "The video game is a meta-medium … that … allows the non-reductive incorporation of all other major [re]presentational media: spoken text, written text, as well as all kinds of sounds and images, both still and moving. Neither a written text nor a movie clip is lessened in their medial form by being part of a video game."[32] When a movie incorporates a videogame, on the other hand, it necessarily strips the videogame of

Illustration 5: During the first murder scene, *Brainscan* repeatedly departs from the killer's point of view.
Frame grabs from *Brainscan* © Triumph Releasing Corporation, 1994.

the interactive dimension characteristic of the medium. In addition, what becomes apparent in the context of *Brainscan* is that it doesn't really matter which medium is superior; what matters is that the two dimensions (and the media that they represent) become entangled, effortlessly bleeding into each other.

Indeed, after his first (virtual) kill, Michael tells his friend Kyle that "it was so real." However, he has no idea yet how real his actions, in fact, were. When he comes to understand the interconnections between what he believes are acts and actions in a virtual space and the real world (only to grasp later that everything was part of a dream or hallucination), Michael protests, "It wasn't supposed to be real!" but is told, "Real, unreal—what's the difference …?"[33] If not earlier, then this is the moment when *Brainscan* begins to challenge the dividing lines between virtual realities and outside reality, as Michael is made to wonder whether, in the media-saturated world that he lives in, there is no more "relation to any reality," as Jean Baudrillard put it.[34] In the hyperreal world imagined by Baudrillard, "irreality," as he called it, no longer resides in the domain "of dreams or fantasies, or the beyond or below, but in the *real's hallucinatory resemblance to itself*."[35] However, *Brainscan* does not embellish such a postmodernist worldview, embracing "the fetishism of the lost object" that is reality,[36] as Michael succeeds in re-establishing a difference between the world of the videogame and his experiential reality.

Nevertheless, what remains is the latent awareness that these dividing lines are porous, at best. In an article on postmodernist slasher films, Todd Tietchen explains that "the large-scale dissemination of electronic images leads to a saturated state of hyperconsciousness in which real and simulated events are increasingly determined/defined in mimetic relation to each other."[37] The character of Trickster, who functions as the digital game's voice-over narrator, embodies this idea, as he transverses from the world of the in-movie videogame to diegetic reality. Although the character's name foregrounds that he is squarely situated in the tradition of the trickster figure and thus a supernatural element that may impact the rules of the diegetic world, Trickster embodies what Sigmund Freud described as the type of the uncanny that results from erasing "the distinction between imagination and reality"[38]; the trickster becomes a corporeal manifestation of the digital sphere in the diegetic world.

Haunted Media

Stay Alive taps into the potentials emerging from the conflation of imagination and reality right from its start. After an opening jump scare, the film begins with an animated sequence set at Gerouge Plantation that makes viewers wonder whether they are confronted with bad digital visual effects or an embedded layer of reality.

The virtual camera moves through a foggy alley of leafless trees with dark clouds looming on the horizon, tapping into the aesthetics of "lushness flecked with decay" so typical of the southern gothic (Illustration 6),[39] while the very setting of the plantation evokes "the displacement and extermination of native populations, the forced exile and enslavement of millions of Africans, the tragedy of the Middle Passage, [and] the ravaging of peoples and lands."[40] The camera approaches an antebellum mansion (Illustration 6), which traditionally figures as "a house of bondage replete with evil villains and helpless victims, vexed bloodlines and stolen birthrights, brutal punishments and spectacular suffering, cruel tyranny and horrifying terror,"[41] to catch sight of a white male character who is about to enter the building. From here on, the perspective switches between first-person shots evoking the character's point of view and third-person shots showing him navigating the labyrinthine house. Ghosts appear in mirrors, while the bass-heavy sound of a beating heart and other uncanny sound effects support the atmosphere of dread and horror. A female figure starts chasing the character, eventually pushing him off the stairs, his neck gets tangled up in chandelier chains, and he dies, leading to a "Game Over" screen.

Illustration 6: The visual construction of Gerouge Plantation drips with southern gothic imagery.
Frame grabs from *Stay Alive* © Spyglass Entertainment, 2006.

The camera moves away from the screen, highlighting the embedded reality of the videogame, and turns to the player, Loomis, who looks dumbfounded. He calls his friend Hutch to tell him, "I played this new game called *Stay Alive*. Seriously, man. The sickest shit since *Fatal Frame*. It was creepy; really creepy." However, Loomis has no idea yet about the videogame's actual level of creepy, for he soon dies in a way similar to how his character did in the videogame—hung in chandelier chains. Some time later in the movie, Hutch notes the uncanny connection between the world of the videogame and "reality": "The police report said Loomis's neck was broken, and he was hung in the game."[42]

A group of people decide to play *Stay Alive* to honor Loomis. As they boot up the game, a book appears on the screen, displaying a page featuring "The Prayer of Elizabeth." Since nothing happens and pushing buttons doesn't seem to have any effects on the game, either, one of them wonders whether they are expected to read the lines out loud. "Voice-activated. No way. That's next-generation technology!" protests the group's resident geek, Swink. However, they read the lines, allowing them to proceed to the main menu, as a voiceover warns them, "You spoke the words, and soon you will die for it."[43] Here, *Stay Alive* draws on the supernatural qualities associated with books and manuscripts in the fantastic imagination. "Reading aloud from the pages of a magical book can . . . summon beings of unimaginable power, open gateways between worlds or dimensions, and orchestrate magical forces capable of reshaping the world at the reader's whim," Cindy Miller and Bow Van Riper describe some of the functions of books in horror.[44] Somewhat paradoxically, a digital medium (*Stay Alive*, the videogame-within-the-movie) draws on the haunted qualities of an analog medium (the book-within-the-videogame-within-the-movie), framed by an analog medium (*Stay Alive*, the movie), in this scene.

As the voiceover issues the warning, the six players configure their avatars, all opting to create virtual doubles of themselves (Illustration 7). The avatar is an interface between the player and the gameworld, allowing the player to act in the virtual world and project themselves into it. In short, the avatar is a "visual (and sometimes audial) representation of a player within the digital game environment."[45] The player accordingly simultaneously occupies a position in physical reality and the gameworld (mediated through the avatar). This liminal role has gothic qualities to it,[46] but these are amplified by how *Stay Alive* deploys the doppelgänger motif. In his study of uncanny architecture, Anthony Vidler highlights the uncanny's "propensity for the double, for the elision between reality and fiction."[47] The avatarial doubles in *Stay Alive* (and *Stay Alive*) operate in this tradition, as the characters' simultaneous existence as avatars in the gameworld furthers the mutual interpenetration of videogame and diegetic realities.

Reading from the (in-movie-)in-game book further corrodes the line separating diegetic reality from the embedded videogame. After a lengthy gaming session that lasts long into the night, Hutch's boss, Miller, who joined the game from his office, is killed by Elizabeth Bathory in the game. Upon reporting to the rest of the party what happened, he thinks to see someone in the corridor, remarking, "You know what they say: you play the game too long, you start seeing shit." Swink qupis, "It seems the longer you play, the more your subconscious mind perceives the gameworld to be a reality."[48] While this brief exchange explains the effects of *Stay Alive* on the characters in the diegetic reality as some sort of a media effect (and affect), Miller shares Loomis's fate a few moments later when he dies just like his avatar did in the gameworld.

Illustration 7: The players configure their avatars.
Frame grabs from *Stay Alive* © Spyglass Entertainment, 2006.

When Hutch digs into the case files, he concludes, "They all died the same way they died in the game. This can't just be some coincidence!" October, a mutual friend of Hutch and Loomis, then explains that her grandmother told her stories about Gerouge Plantation and that she has discovered that "this Elizabeth Bathory chick was sick and twisted and very real" and "couldn't stand to see herself get old." As punishment for her bloody deeds, she was "walled . . . up in her tower alive."[49] Indeed, Elizabeth Bathory's ghost uses the videogame as a gateway to the "real" world. Whereas the setting at the plantation is repeatedly highlighted in the course of the movie, its symbolic potential becomes increasingly backgrounded while the story progressively focuses on a what Barbara Creed called a "monstrous feminine" unwilling (or even unable) to accept the natural decay of her body,[50] contributing to the "vertiginous excess of meaning" characteristic of the gothic.[51]

Granted, *Stay Alive* draws on the idea that "the Southern Gothic haunted house spawns uncanny, often cataclysmic encounters between the past and the present,"[52] as Elizabeth Bathory's ghost invades the present moment and Hutch struggles with how the traumatic memories of his father setting the family home on fire compulsively return in the present. However, Hutch's example, in particular, demonstrates that these topics have broader applicability in gothic narratives and need

not be connected to the plantation setting or the American South, for that matter—"the Gothic is the perfect anonymous language for the peculiar unwillingness of the past to go away," after all.[53]

Nevertheless, a specific dimension of the southern gothic that is related to how the movie seeks to understand digital technologies reverberates in *Stay Alive*. Teresa Goddu has explained that "identified with gothic doom and gloom, the American South serves as the nation's 'other,' becoming the repository for everything from which the nation wishes to dissociate itself. The benighted South is able to support the irrational impulses of the gothic that the nation as a whole, born of Enlightenment ideals, cannot."[54] Set in New Orleans, *Stay Alive* taps into these "irrational impulses," as characters repeatedly stress that what they are experiencing cannot be real—neither can videogame events precede "reality" nor are ghosts real. However, in the technologically mediated worlds that the characters inhabit, the human is as much a product of the media and technology as the ghost that they have to confront. Kimberly Jackson notes in a discussion of early twenty-first-century techno-horror that "the real and the virtual bleed into each other, and the virtual is no longer an immaterial or spiritual space but rather is itself embodied . . . [T]he virtual . . . gains a bodily reality, a porous skin, a site of material birth."[55] As Elizabeth Bathory becomes physically manifest in front of the characters' (and viewers') eyes, she not only transgresses the borderlines between past and present but also virtual and purportedly real realms, highlighting the interconnections between these domains. In the film's closing moments, copies of *Stay Alive* (of which Hutch and company played a beta-version) hit the shelves of videogame stores to ominous music, indicating that the threat emanating from the digital game has not been contained. Here, a capitalist subtext surfaces, as the videogame not only requires its players to come into existence, but it also seems to feed on them, turning them into the resources that fuels the game industry. On another level, though, one might draw on Jeffrey Sconce and claim that *Stay Alive* (the videogame-within-the-film) produces an "uncanny space capable of collapsing, compromising, and even displacing the real world."[56]

Live-Streaming and Digital Communities

In *Livescream*, videogames and their live-streams have assumed such an important role in people's lives that they might, indeed, be said to have "displaced the real world"—despite the problematic exclusion of videogames from "the real world" underpinning this argument. *Livescream*'s narrative premise is very similar to *Stay Alive* and combines it with the real-time horror of digital communication evoked by movies such as *Unfriended* (2014). Scott is a streamer who plays the horror game *Livescream* on a Friday evening. Surprisingly, without entering his name, the game welcomes Scott, which causes him to note that things are becoming "creepy already."

When he dies for the first time, one of the users watching his stream, SimonSaid, "think[s] there is something in [their] house," which "sounds like [the] monster" that killed Scott in-game. "It's coming closer," SimonSaid reports; "It's banging on my door! HELP ME," before disappearing from the chat. Some minutes later, a voiceover tells Scott, "You can pull up your security cameras by hitting Q. This will allow you to see where Clyde [a murderous clown] is all the time." Pressing the key, however, allows Scott to see his audience in their homes. The clown suddenly appears behind one of the users in her video feed, but she reports that "there's nothing here in real life." However, moments later, the clown occupies one of the users' places on the screen before fading (or, rather, "glitching") away. Suddenly, the clown appears in the game again and kills Scott's avatar. The clown then appears behind another user and kills him. All but eleven users exit the chat, as the game informs Scott, "Abandon the game and die. Abandon the game and all of your followers die. Continue the game… and perhaps you will win."[57] Scott struggles with whether he should continue playing, knowing well that someone will die if (or, rather, *when*) he dies in-game.

In *The Ethics of Computer Games* (2009), Miguel Sicart reflects on his experience of playing *Deus Ex* (Ion Storm, 2000), noting that the game "was challenging [him] as a moral being, showing [him] new ways of understanding games as well as [his] presence and actions as a player."[58] Although the stakes are different, as Scott's in-game actions and performance have consequences in his (diegetic) reality, he undergoes a similar experience because, to draw on Simon Turner and Stuart J. Murray's reading of the Zoom horror movie *Host* (2020), "those left on the call remain hostage at home and hostage to their screens."[59] Indeed, as the user JohnnyDope comes to understand at one point, "Chat won't let me leave."[60] (A comment that admittedly raises the question whether simply turning off the computer in order to leave the stream/digital space would not be a viable option.) While the videogame thus confronts Scott with the fact that he cares about his followers, it moreover forces him to acknowledge the sad reality that sitting in front of a computer and playing videogames is the only thing he is good at. In the end, Scott beats what he believes to be the final boss, Death, only to come to grasp that another user played Death, a boy. Scott posts a video on the reddit-like website crawllrr to warn potential community members of the dangers entailed by playing *Livescream* (Illustration 8).

Alongside examples such as *Host* and *Unfriended*, *Livescream* belongs to the emerging genre of desktop horror movies, which "utilize laptop and computer screens as mise-en-scène."[61] That is, desktop horror primarily relies on screen-capturing software in combination with cameras pointed at the users sitting in front of their computers to record "action." "Ill-suited to theatrical exhibition, where the desktop framing jarringly contrasts with the scale and noninteractivity of the big screen and therefore detracts from the spectator's involvement," Shane Denson notes about

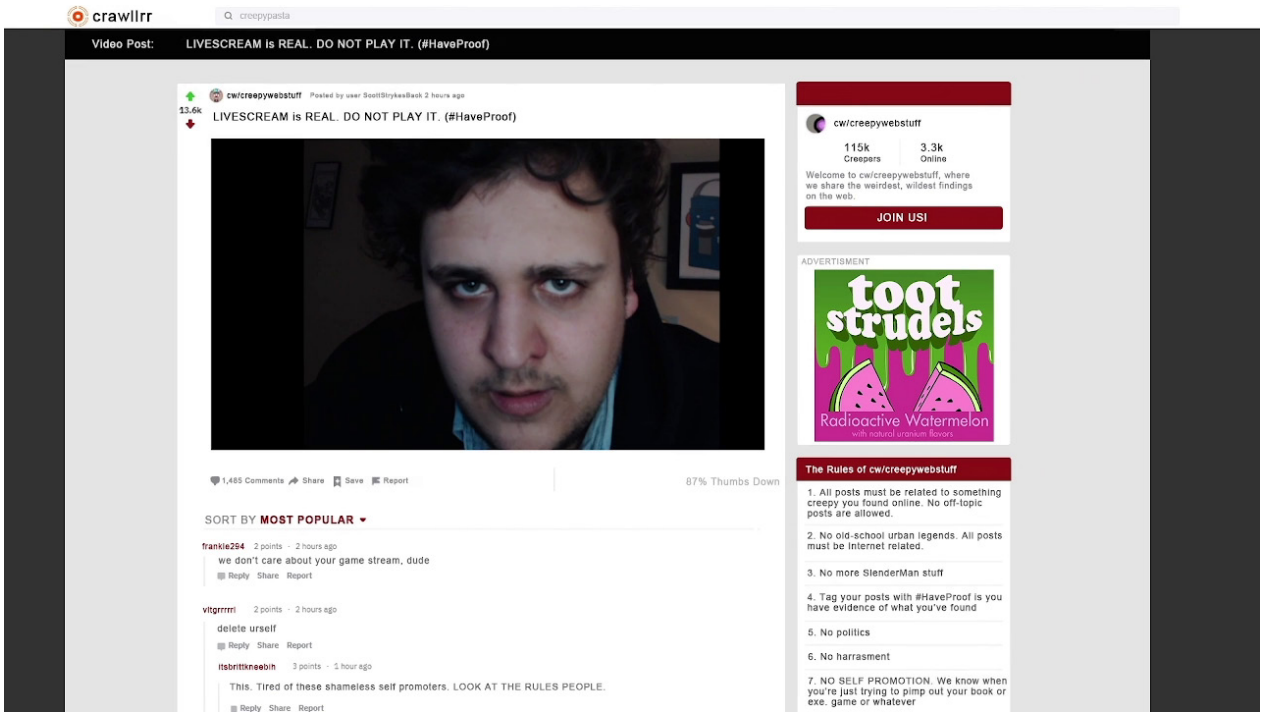

Illustration 8: Scott tries to warns others of *Livescream* in a post on a reddit-like website.
Frame grab from *Livescream* © Aether House LLC, 2018.

Unfriended, "the movie begs to be viewed on the small screen of a computer for full effect; it therefore insinuates itself fully into the post-cinematic networked ecology that it thematizes."[62] Similarly, *Livescream*'s horror is anchored less in its plot than in its form, which mobilizes digital anxieties, "exploit[ing] its own framing and stylistic devices to offer reflections on contemporary fears, especially those regarding digital technologies."[63] As the movie begins, the viewer sees Scott's desktop, how he is seemingly bored setting up his Open Broadcast System installation as he prepares to start streaming (Illustration 9). When his stream goes live, the viewer position suddenly changes, as they are interpellated as someone watching the stream. Scott's camera is placed in the top-left corner, the chat window in the bottom-left, and the majority of the screen is occupied by videogame footage, briefly interrupted by the other users' camera footage (Illustration 9). Other than the scene about the crawllrr post, which disrupts the end credits, this is the visual configuration of the entire movie (and even the crawllrr post suggests a desktop recording). Whereas in the opening moments, the viewer shares Scott's point of view, once the stream goes live, the viewer cannot be certain whose screen they see. Nevertheless, for someone used to watching streams, the movie's staging of online interactions seems eerily familiar to the point of being boring and/or banal. The typical, by now practically everyday, configuration of a screen imitating a video conference, in combination with the chat function offering social interaction, suggests the users' live- and aliveness, but the streaming session ends up being antithetical to life. *Livescream*'s aesthetics deploys

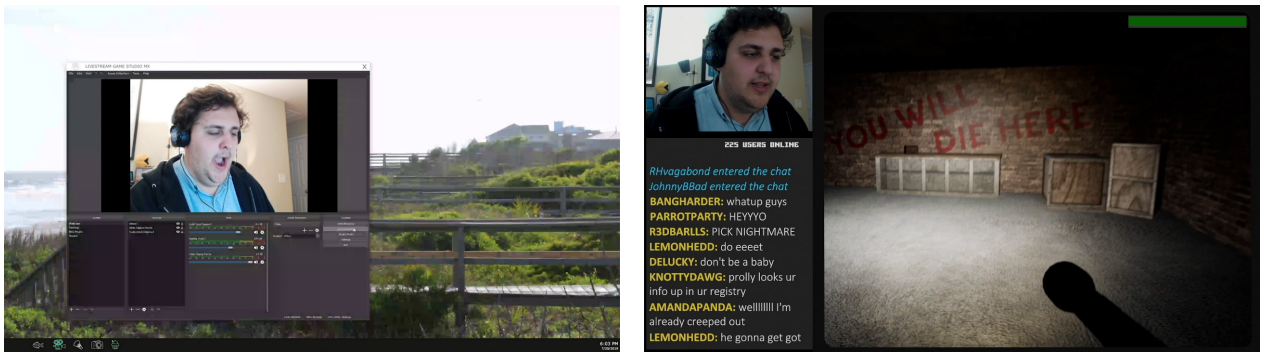

Illustration 9: Scott sets up his stream and the movie's standard visual configuration.
Frame grabs from *Livescream* © Aether House LLC, 2018.

the screen-within-a-screen to bring the potential dangers of the digital domain not only into the diegetic users' homes but also the extradiegetic viewers'.

As a desktop horror movie, *Livescream* is also situated in the tradition of what Caetlin Benson-Allott has called *faux*-footage horror.[64] Barry Keith Grant has explained that this type of horror relies on "the story unfolding in real time, as if it were there recording actual not fictional events."[65] *Livescream* not only emphasizes its live-ness through its title but also through a variety of intradiegetic markers, from the time and date on Scott's desktop in the movie's opening moments (see bottom right in Illustration 9) to the use of a timer that runs down in real time in one of the levels he has to master, creating the impression that "the full video was created in one go, in one uninterrupted run of the desktop-camera."[66]

What stands outside this temporal continuity is the concluding crawllrr post. By placing *Livescream* within the context of an online community, this closing further anchors the diegetic events in the everyday. Indeed, the online post, seen by close to 14,000 and commented on by nearly 1,500 users within two hours, embeds *Livescream* in the world of creepypasta and similar digital gothic artifacts. Notably, one of the rules of cw/creepywebstuff, where Scott's post is found, stipulates, "No more SlenderMan stuff," referring to the possibly most widely known creepypasta.[67] This connection to this type of digital-born gothic produces "a suspension of disbelief stemming from uncertainty about the tale's precise relationship to reality."[68] The post is titled "LIVESCREAM is REAL. DO NOT PLAY IT. (#HaveProof)" (Illustration 8) for a reason, anchoring the purported real-ness of *Livescream* (the game and the events unfolding in the movie) in everyday digital reality.[69] While the confusion pertaining to the truth-value of community-based gothic narratives springs from their speculative character, it just as much results from a postcinematic media landscape "in which all activity is under surveillance from video cameras and microphones, and in return video screens and speakers, moving images and synthesized sounds, are dispersed pretty much everywhere. In this environment, where all phenomena pass through a stage of being processed in the form of digital code, we cannot mean-

ingfully distinguish between 'reality' and its multiple simulations; they are all woven together in one and the same fabric."[70] Through its emphasis on nonhuman agencies (made manifest through intradiegetic users' deaths that are commemorated in the virtual world), *Livescream* (the videogame) confronts Scott with how "the allure of a game, the fascination it exerts, lies precisely in the fact that the game subdues the players."[71] Scott's intradiegetic audience and the movie's real-world audience are asked (and tasked) to face anxieties emerging from the human loss of control in this digital world of simulation and surveillance capitalism. Attacking users' inside their homes (into which the users have brought them, in the first place), technologies and machines assert their autonomy, showcasing the networked nonhuman agencies invisibly operating in a digital environment that has become inseparable from the "real" world.

Player Agency and Taking Control of the Game

Choose or Die opens with a critique of exaggerating videogames' significance to people's lives, as the text-based adventure game *CURS>R*, released in 1984, provides a means for Hal to "living in the '80s, . . . playing with his toys, his weird, creepy shit," as his son puts it. Indeed, Hal's man cave oozes nostalgia for the 1980s (Illustration 10). The *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) poster prominently on display suggests that the horror movie viewers are about to see is more terrifying than Wes Craven's classic. The film projector on the left-hand side promises the grainy quality of 1980s movies without them having been digitally restored or "remastered." Finally, *CURS>R*, stored on a tape, combines the whirring noises known from early modems going online with graphics that simultaneously evoke the 1980s (even if text-based adventures had their heyday in the 1970s) and are too refined to have been produced back then, conflating the past with the present. In less than two minutes, the movie thus introduces two themes that will prove key: nostalgia and the confusion of different (time) spaces. These two dimensions are intricately interwoven, for "the nostalgic feels stifled within the conventional confines of time and space," as Svetlana Boym has put it. Nostalgia spaces are "about the . . . materialization of the immaterial," to quote Boym again,[72] as nostalgia is centrally concerned with paradoxically recovering what Baudrillard called a "lost referential."[73] In other words, nostalgia spaces are virtual spaces—spaces of possibility that do not (really; or only potentially) exist.

From blockbusters such as *Tron: Legacy* (2010), television series such as *Stranger Things* (Netflix, 2016–), and podcasts such as *Video Palace* (2018) to videogames such as *Hotline Miami* (Demnation Games and Abstraction, 2012) and the M83 song "Midnight City" (2011), the entertainment industry has shown a "recent obsession with the 1980s."[74] "Since the millennium and 9/11," Kevin J. Wetmore has observed, "American culture has called a 'do over' and run straight back to the '80s."[75] Indeed, what

Illustration 10: Hal's man cave evokes nostalgia for the 1980s.
Frame grab from *Choose or Die* © CURSR Films Limited, 2022.

Dan Hassler-Forest has called the "nostalgia industry" has successfully (in economic terms) been mining the 1980s,[76] for which, in turn, the 1950s were "the privileged lost object of desire."[77] Fredric Jameson famously associated nostalgia with the "new depthlessness" of postmodernism,[78] but in *Choose or Die*, knowledge of the 1980s goes beyond the desire to revive an imagined past or return to an imagined past, as the past offers the means to solving the puzzles with which the characters find themselves confronted.

Seemingly echoing Hal, Isaac, the nerdy sidekick of protagonist Kayla, pronounces the 1980s "the greatest decade in pop culture history." Kayla may be well-versed in twenty-first-century technology and sufficiently skilled to repair a broken console and to launch *CURS>R* in an emulator, but Isaac's detailed knowledge about the 1980s offers insights into the decade's popular culture and technologies. When Kayla and Isaac are about to abandon the idea of revealing the secrets of *CURS>R*, he remembers that "some old games have code hidden in the analog loading sound."[79] This notion of sound as a carrier of a secret message draws on the uncanny quality of sound in audiovisual media: "sound suggests presence even when this presence is invisible or intangible, and is thus closely related to the ghostly," Isabella van Elferen has remarked.[80] Of course, Isaac succeeds in extracting the hidden code from the "fucking evil" sound.[81]

Choose or Die is thus positioned in the flood of popular culture artifacts and practices that "provide [a] link between geek culture, the 1980s, and contemporary nostalgia, creating a distinct popular culture phenomenon," to draw on Kayla McCarthy.[82] The geek is "a modern-day archetype born out of society's implicit reliance on, and potential resentment of, technology."[83] Although "masculinity, whiteness, and tech-

noculture are coconstitutive,"[84] the geek is traditionally associated with a nonhegemonic (usually straight) white masculinity: "white men who are too white and not masculine enough."[85]

Isaac's vulnerability becomes most explicit when he dies while trying to help Kayla end the game. By disposing of Isaac, *Choose or Die* also makes explicit that its focus is on Kayla, intimately interweaving the nostalgia for the 1980s with the topics of control and coercion of black bodies as well as claiming and asserting black power that permeate the entire movie. After launching *CURS>R*, Kayla finds herself in scenarios where the choices offered by the game either make no sense or are not really options, to begin with. When the game asks Kayla whether she wants to take a break while sitting in a diner, her opting for "yes" makes the waitress start dropping glasses. When the game asks whether the waitress should stop and clean up, another "yes" makes the waitress drop to her knees, onto the broken glass, which she starts to eat. Kayla's mother ends up in hospital when *CURS>R* suddenly develops a graphical interface and Kayla simultaneously controls a giant rat while directing her mother through their department via her phone, ending in her mother jumping out of a window. Finally, Kayla is made to revisit the trauma of losing her younger brother at a public pool in order to save Isaac, only for him to die the next night when the game only offers Kayla the choice of how he will die.

In the ensuing "boss battle," Kayla meets Hal and his family, whom he apparently controls through fear and violence. When the game tells Kayla that Hal is the final boss, he disgustedly remarks, "It thinks I'm the final-level boss? And you're the hero? Oh, that's... that's not fair. Aren't guys like me allowed to be the fucking hero anymore? You know, in the '80s...,"[86] anchoring his toxic, white masculinity in the decade known for its muscular action heroes, its "hard bodies."[87] "Fuck the '80s!" Kayla shouts, as she confronts both the whiteness of the decade that is nostalgically evoked and the whiteness of all the people who embody various obstacles in her life.[88] *Choose or Die* arguably taps into afrofuturism here, which is "a narrative practice that enables users to communicate the interconnection between science, technology, and race across centuries, continents, and cultures."[89] By entangling the racist politics of the 1980s with the present moment, the movie looks to the past to reflect on both the past and the present. But more importantly within the context of this article, for Kayla to assert agency, the virtual space of a videogame proves key. In an essay on posthumanism in black popular music, Alexander Weheliye explains that "black subjectivity appears as the antithesis of the Enlightenment subject by virtue of not only having a body but by being the body—within Enlightenment discourses blackness is the body and nothing else." "But," he wonders, "what happens once the black voice becomes disembodied . . .?"[90] A similar process of disembodiment takes place in the digital spaces of videogames: "information and communication technologies afford

Blackness a differently circumscribed space to luxuriate and grow—never free from white racial ideology but no longer materially coerced by it," André Brock notes in his book *Distributed Blackness* (2020). He continues, "This possibility exists because of the disembodiment enabled by virtuality . . . that is largely unrestricted by the fixity and pejorative reduction of the Black body that occurs offline."[91] Kayla's experiences may be situated in (diegetic) physical reality, but shaped by decisions and actions in *CURS>R*. Upon completing the game, she takes control over it, promising to only use its power on "people who deserve it."[92]

Writing about Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* (1991), Susana Morris explains that "people of the African Diaspora are continuously creating culture and radically transforming visions of the future . . . These visions are necessarily transgressive and subversive in relation to dominant discourse. To be black and not only envision yourself in the future but at the center of the future—to be the agent and subject of the future, and not relegated to the primeval past, used as props or pawns, or disappeared altogether—is an act of resistance and liberation, particularly in a present plagued by white supremacy and imperialism."[93] Both Kayla's defeat of the (white and male) final boss and her explicit promise to only make people suffer who deserve it (while she, her family, and all sorts of marginalized groups have experienced systemic violence for no reason) represents such a challenge of the status quo, led by a black woman. However, Frank Wilderson warns us of overestimating such symbolic acts—even more so when they are contained within an entertainment product: "What does it mean . . . when the world can whimsically transpose one's cultural gestures, the stuff of symbolic intervention, onto another worldly good, a commodity of style?"[94] After all, while *Choose or Die* imagines that Kayla takes control of the game, it continues to exist and to offer limited options to those who have to play it (chosen by Kayla). The attendant vision of Kayla as a God-like judge and executioner aside, this imagination of an empowered blackness (partly empowered through its traumatic experiences) is incorporated into Western (techno)culture, leaving little possibility to escape that framework. Tellingly, the movie's director, Tobie Meakins, is a white man who effectively allows Kayla to become powerful—within the limited and limiting world of a film.

Digital Horrors

My decision to discuss the filmic examples in chronological order was driven by two ideas. First, I meant to move from rather general ideas pertaining to videogames and digital media (hyperreality and the hauntedness of the media) to more specific engagements with videogames and game culture (live-streaming, online communities, and agency). Second, I wanted to conclude with examples that may locate the horror in the digital domain but at the same time acknowledge the significance of digital spaces for community-building and for marginalized people to organize and

take action, thereby evoking new types of digital horrors (i.e., community-created horrors such as creepypasta and the potential leveraging of digital technologies by oppressed groups—the latter of which exposes horror as a notoriously white genre) while simultaneously acknowledging the socio-cultural significance of videogames and digital spaces beyond the trite and clichéd notions of escapist entertainment and videogames as valves to release anger (expressed in *Brainscan*, for example). I do not mean to suggest a kind of evolution here in which the depictions of videogames in horror movies have become increasingly complex (interestingly, the in-movie videogame *Stay Alive* could be said to be the visually most refined one), as such teleology would be based on a consciously selected group of films that are not necessarily reflective of larger trends and would ignore that the topics addressed in my interpretations of *Brainscan* and *Stay Alive* echo in *Livestream* and *Choose or Die* (i.e., the interpenetration of purportedly "real" and digital realms, the hauntedness of the media, etc.).

Horror, Adam Daniel has observed, "has historically infected both emerging forms and the technologies which deliver them, parasitically preying upon the fears that emerge from these developments."[95] In different ways, all four movies not only remediate videogame aesthetics but also turn them into essential elements of their plots. In all instances, the videogame worlds infect the diegetic realities to the point that they become interconnected—with horrifying consequences.

Notes

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21 Isabella van Elferen, "'And Machine Created Music': Cybergothic Music and the Phantom Voices of the Technological Uncanny," in *Digital Material: Tracing New Media in Everyday Life and Technology*, ed. Marianne van den Boomen, Sybilles Lammes, Ann-Sophie Lehmann, Joost Raessens, and Mirko Tobias Schäfer (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 124.

22 *Brainscan*, dir. John Flynn (Culver City: Triumph Films, 1994). Admittedly, *Brainscan* uses a fantastic framing that recalls *Freddy's Dead*, as a trickster figure (named Trickster) is behind the braiding of the (purported) world of a videogame and diegetic reality. How-

ever, whereas in *Freddy's Dead*, the videogame sequence is a few minutes long, *Brainscan* centers on the porous thresholds between digital and purportedly real worlds.

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