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Box Logic Project: Part 3 – Recording a Nightmare: *Outlast* and the Remediation of a Camcorder

Introduction

The act of remediation is typically thought of as the language or form of a medium being used within another. A common example used for videogames is how “cutscenes” remediate film, which present a story in a more realistic, dramatic light to break up playing. While this medium has reached the point where the visuals of cutscenes are increasingly indistinguishable from in-game graphics, they were clearly meant to provide a cinematic flair to titles such as *Final Fantasy VII* in contrast to the blocky, polygonal graphics, respectively shown in figures 1 and 2.



Fig. 1: The cartoony, in-game graphics.



Fig. 2: A more lifelike, pre-rendered cutscene.

This can be further analyzed to point out how the camera angles, structure, and presentation of cutscenes remediate filming norms, but a curiously understudied aspect of remediation is how the devices used for previous media languages/forms are represented in newer media. Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin understandably compare the evolution between, say, photography remediating Renaissance painting as the fulfillment of lifelike art to the point where

many asked, “Was photography an art? Did it make painting and painters unnecessary? And so on” (25). Film is the fulfillment of bringing motion to the static images of photography, and videogames have sought to provide direct involvement while striving for the lifelikeness of film and photography with “photorealistic graphics.” The cycle of each medium trying to eclipse the other continues onward with virtual reality, but what about the remediation of the tools that made them possible? How is a piece of art portrayed in a photograph, a camera used in a film, or a camcorder used in a videogame? How are these recontextualized in a newer medium, and what new purposes or meanings are they given in this process? Videogames in the survival-horror genre have tackled these questions in surprisingly thoughtful ways, with the zombie-killing franchise *Resident Evil* using the typewriter as a saving mechanic, *Fatal Frame* using the camera as a weapon to subdue hostile spirits, and *Five Nights at Freddy’s* employing CRT TVs and monitoring equipment for strategic management to survive against nightmarish animatronics. Developer Red Barrels is known for its 2013 hit *Outlast*, which has you playing as an undercover journalist to expose bizarre practices going on at Mount Massive Asylum. As soon as the player assumes the first-person perspective of Miles Upshur, one of the first things he does is pull out a camcorder to record everything he sees. Little does he know that it will prove instrumental in saving his life, which is why it is the main mechanic the player must constantly manage to progress without dying. Reflecting on my time playing *Outlast* and its expanded content *Whistleblower*, I’m astounded at how this simple tool amplifies the tension and horror a player can experience. In other words, by remediating the camcorder itself, Red Barrels has made a powerful statement about how devices used for older media can be used in newer ones to not only alter their original purposes and functions in creative ways, but also how we perceive them henceforth after relating to them in ways we usually wouldn’t experience.

An Overview

It goes without saying that if we want to talk about remediation, we have to foreground a review with the authors who founded the concept. Bolter and Grusin solidified the term in 2000, and “we may think of [remediation as] a historical progression, of newer media remediating older ones and in particular of digital media remediating their predecessors. But ours is a genealogy of affiliations, not a linear history, and in this genealogy, older media can also remediate newer ones” (55). I have already framed it in this linear progression, but films can remediate the rules and design of videogames for their narratives, as an example of reverse remediation. It’s also defined by the double logic of immediacy and hypermediacy. The former is the goal “that the medium itself should disappear and leave us in the presence of the thing represented” (5-6), whereas the latter “multiplies the signs of mediation and in this way tries to reproduce the rich sensorium of human experience,” which essentially means that viewers are made explicitly aware of the medium(s) (i.e. the device/form itself) being interacted with to provide a contradictory sense of immersion that “reminds us of our desire for immediacy” (34). This is the double logic at work, which has only become more prevalent with digital technologies by “our culture want[ing] both [to] multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: ideally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them” (5). Hypermediacy is key in understanding how *Outlast* remediates the camcorder and its usual perception. In the same way, the videogame *Myst* has “moments and strategies by which the computer game remediates the printed book” because it creates fantastical allegories and judgments about this medium, for “the book as a text should be replaced by the book as a window onto a visually realized world” (96). *Myst*’s developer had ulterior motives in critiquing the medium to proclaim how videogames are better, but *Outlast*’s goals are not so critical. Both take the angle of remediation being reform, but

whereas *Myst* is more about “a new medium...[that] fills a lack or repairs a fault in its predecessor, because it fulfills the unkept promise of an older medium” (60), *Outlast* is more attuned to reforming reality by “reimagin[ing] and therefore...reform[ing] the world as a mediated (and remediated) space” (62), specifically with the camcorder. It changes our cultural perceptions of this technology and how we identify with it, which I will elaborate on later.

Ewan Kirkland is more specific with this unique form of remediation by studying survival-horror videogames. In demonstrating some of the most prominent examples such as the typewriter being used as a saving mechanic in *Resident Evil*, he tellingly comments that “[t]he recontextualization and defamiliarization of old media forms—radio, television, celluloid film—within new media texts provides insight into the cultural meanings of both remediator and the remediated” (115). It goes both ways with these meanings being exposed for both *Outlast* and the camcorder. Where the game diverges is how it’s more focused on digital media technologies such as the camcorder and high-tech, scientific equipment seen throughout the environments. This contradicts how this genre has “nondigital media technologies...characterizing the game experience,” which are “[a]nalog media [that] emphasize verisimilitude (116). Many of them “rely on hypermediated combinations of diegetic remediation,” which means they take old media (ranging from documents to radio) to make these games more tense with slower, more unreliable and primitive forms of media (120). Nondiagetic remediation attempts to convey the opposite, which instead reveals the “consistency, physicality and mathematical regularity” of modern technology with radars, cell phones, and computers for survival-horror games as mechanics or helpful user interface icons (121). With the camcorder, a curious effect is struck between these two goals by attaining immediacy in the player’s mechanical relationship to it through its hypermediated visual presence. There is a sense of reliability not found in any of the other media

throughout the environments, but that slow and unreliable pull infects the camcorder as it undergoes damage and suffers abnormal issues compared to what we expect from this type of device, which “produces the uncanny impression of an older, ghostly or undead analog media seeping into, contaminating and enveloping the digital. And although this impression is itself entirely digitally produced, its unsettling effect is profoundly real” (123-124).

While the camcorder in itself does not really alter in its design or functions in any substantial ways, there are elements of the device’s screen and functions that are remediated to fit within the logic of the videogame’s visuals and mechanics. This is similar, albeit not as extreme, as the “bookwork” in *Dragon Age: Origins* that Stacey Church analyzes with its menu design and information management. It “reveals a remediation of the book that privileges the principles of immediacy; although the book commands an aura of authenticity with its tattered, bloodied pages and an exaggerated facsimile of inscribed documents, it has been updated for operational purposes” (1). In the game’s medieval world, using the format of books for menu sections is a brilliant way to maintain the time period’s aesthetic consistency while maintaining immediacy of a “linked data network whereby flipping pages is replaced by pointing and clicking” (3). There are better examples of “camerawork,” if you will, in *Fatal Frame*’s drastic revisions yet grounded representation of the camera the characters wield to fend off ghosts, but *Outlast* demonstrates signs of this remediation.

Christian McCrea notably comments on how the remediation of older media within videogames exposes how “the player sees gaming’s formal properties and how these gain visibility through the shifting and changing layers of other media,” which is called “hauntology” (221). He says that what the player’s character experiences is translated into a different yet similar type of fear as we control them in a constantly changing battle of agency and power while

the game world fights back. In *Outlast*, it's always flight and hiding that the player must resort to, but the acts are intimately tied to the camcorder's purpose to help you do so. The way the player controls it with the layout of the buttons and views enemies effectively through its night vision creates a "relationship between apparatus, meaning, and body – technology, text, and flesh" (236). The camcorder, *Outlast*, and the player. The camcorder acts as a mirror (a mediator of sorts) into the game world, and understanding its impact relates to how Marshall McLuhan saw how much of the media we extend our functions and perceptions to are extensions of man that influence how we see ourselves. When media, media shapes those things in return. "Any invention or technology is an extension of self-amputation of our physical bodies, and such extension also demands new ratios or new equilibriums among the other organs and extensions of the body" (McLuhan). He uniquely observes that "man is impelled to extend various parts of his body by a kind of autoamputation," which can range from scuba masks and oxygen tanks extending our mouths and noses to breathe, glasses allowing us to see more clearly or effectively in harsh environments, and so forth. The camcorder in *Outlast* accomplishes this in its own way with how we identify and associate with it and the protagonist. With these primary scholars being detailed, let's see how their work plays into this remediation.

Push Play

Right at the start, the immediate connection the player receives with the camcorder is meant to signify its importance. It isn't something the character wears from the first-person perspective, but something apart



Fig. 3: The player can put away the camcorder at any time, but it's usually best to leave it out.

from him that can be lost or broken. After all, this is reminiscent to hypermediacy, which is about “repeatedly redefining the visual and conceptual relationships among mediated spaces - relationships that may range from simple juxtaposition to complete absorption” (Bolter and Grusin 42). By constantly pulling the camera up and down from view, this digital space establishes the fragile relationship between the camcorder and Miles Upshur. This relationship extends to the player as well, which bodes well with Bolter and Grusin’s ruminations over virtual reality. “[W]e employ media as vehicles for defining both personal and cultural identity. As these media become simultaneously technical analogs and social expressions of our identity, we become simultaneously both the subject and object of contemporary media” (231). When this happens, our identity is remediated in the process of the media being remediated because our previous understandings and experiences with the represented mediums are being remolded. And by being an investigative journalist, our traditional experiences with camcorders to, say, film birthday parties or sports events is suddenly upended after you play the game. Even in a fictional context, associating the device with grave circumstances involving death, gore, and fear translate into our impressions of real camcorders; mediation is always remediation. It’s purposed in *Outlast* as a means to peer through the darkness and expose enemies in the night vision mode, so players are constantly looking at distorted foes and what remains of their victims as they sneak around the asylum. This is very similar to McCrea’s observations of *Dead Rising*, where players are encouraged to take pictures of their zombie killing sprees. These “pleasures are not merely sensory because they are concerned with bodily extremes...but because the combat is often connected to the camera” (229). Likewise, the stealth gameplay required to sneak around and run away from enemies is only possible with the camcorder to see where you are, pulling the device into horror conventions of, as Brigitte Peucker wrote, “multisensory, yet nevertheless aesthetic

experience[s]” (qtd. in 229).

Indeed, Kirkland writes as much in how the horror genre as a whole is prone to illustrate adversarial, chaotic ties that bind old and new media, and this can be seen in how computers, phones, and



Fig. 4: The player is forced into this more claustrophobic point of view in the darkness, ramping up the tension even more.

radios – analog and digital media – are rendered useless with the exception of the camcorder, but even it cannot escape this seeming corruption. The camera drains batteries in a matter of minutes if the player keeps night vision on for too long, so they must frantically search for replacements at the risk of their own safety to move forward. Should the batteries not be replaced, the camera begins to produce buzz and static at an alarming rate until the batteries go empty. It’s incredibly disruptive and nerve-wracking when you have monsters to worry about, and since the game takes a supernatural turn toward the end, it seems to jive with traditional technological portrayals in survival-horror games because they “use signs of media corruption—audio and visual static, celluloid scratches, negative images, blurring—to communicate the supernatural. The dominant critical framework of such imperfections, when considered by digital and traditional media theorists, is—once again—realism” (123). This is especially compounded when the camcorder’s lens is damaged when the character loses it for a short time, which makes it seem as if the old media and haunted corridors of the asylum are trying to snuff out all digital media.

This reliance on the camcorder is not only meant as reform through remediation, but also as a means to shape how the player views the character and camcorder. They are an inseparable

pair, and there is a pained regret and hopelessness that sets in when they are severed, as if the device is a character in itself that's an integral part of how the player relates to Miles. When one sinister sadist, Richard Trager, kidnaps you, he flaunts the camcorder in your face. While he may not know



Fig. 5: Trager takes the camcorder away and puts it in plain sight. You can do nothing but wait to see what he does. It's torture in more ways than one.

its significance, his flippant attitude toward the device is angering since it is the only means to survive. While Sherry Turkle is talking more about game avatars and personas, her statement proves no less relevant in how players can relate to an inanimate object in *Outlast*. "On the one hand, we insist that we are different from machines because we have emotions, bodies, and an intellect that cannot be captured in rules, but on the other we play with computer programs that we think of as alive or almost-alive" (177). Players can understandably start to view the camcorder as a friend, and when it is threatened or lost, it can feel just as gut-wrenching as losing a human character you like in another game; you don't want to lose a partner.

It seems natural considering McLuhan's thoughts once more, since to "use or perceive any extension of ourselves in technological form is necessarily to embrace it. To listen to radio or to read the printed page is to accept these extensions of ourselves into our personal system and to under the 'closure' or displacement of perception that follows automatically" (McLuhan).

Strangely enough, this is a two-fold process with *Outlast* where we extend our influence into a digital world with our hands as the extension of being the eyes, ears, and omniscient power that moves the protagonist. However, in the digital world, Miles Upshur extends his sight through the

camcorder, effectively making us do so as well. Kill Screen writer Stephanie Carmichael writes, “You, player, are no longer a neutral observer; you’re dragged in. The camera lends a sense of voyeurism and creates the sickening feeling that whatever horrors you’re about to witness, you invited upon yourself by seeking them out” (Carmichael). What also aids this effect is how the camcorder’s user interface is integrated simply and intuitively for players to understand how the controls relate to it. The battery and two icons in the right corner respectively indicate how much juice you have left and if your night vision is turned on or not. While the left icons don’t serve purposes other than to emulate features one would see on a camcorder, the top-middle icon responds to pushing up or down to zoom by, well, using the up or down directional buttons.



Fig. 6: “The Groom” picks up the protagonist by one hand while recording...this won’t end well for him as he gets his death on tape.

While this isn’t as radical as Church’s “bookwork,” there is a remediation of the functions of the camcorder to a videogame format. Since zooming and replacing batteries only takes the click of a button, one could say this modernizes the ease of recording a real camcorder. But why use a dated one? Like *Dragon Age: Origins*, there’s “a simulated aesthetic that

recognizes the culturally inflected units of a book” in the game’s world (Church 3), just like how the combination of digital and analog technology creates the “hauntology” McCrea mentions, and with the controller layouts partially mimicking the design of a camcorder’s buttons, this creates “sensorial mimicries and connections as a type of expanded realism” (229).

Conclusion

Outlast could have experimented more with the supernatural or simply finding additional components to affect the camcorder’s abilities in a positive or adverse way, which would have been an uncommon yet creative way to enact remediation. There’s so much more videogames could do to recontextualize the design of older media in more transgressive manners, much like the bookwork that’s evident in *Dragon Age: Origins*. However, by keeping the camcorder based in reality with even greater limitations, its role in *Outlast* amplifies the horror in a different light by symbolizing that, in McLuhan’s terms, “the stimulus to new invention is the acceleration of pace and increase of load,” leading to the “desperate and suicidal autoamputation” seen in creating something like the camcorder, which the player must put his “other organs” to submit to the “extensions of the body” (McLuhan). One may think they can experience something with any sort of device – a gun, paintbrush, or car – and not have their perceptions changed, but as *Outlast* demonstrates, even something as simple as a camcorder isn’t immune because we can only “understand media through the ways in which they challenge and reform other media,” which subsequently remediates us. There’s no rewinding this reality as we make new associations between art forms *and* the devices that make them possible.

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