
This Footage is Yet to be Found: *Outlast* and the Found Footage Aesthetic

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I'm sorry, my son, I didn't want to have to do this to you. But you can't leave, not yet.

There is so much yet for you to witness.

- Father Martin Archimbaud in *Outlast*

The opening of Red Barrels' 2013 title *Outlast* establishes a classic horror atmosphere: after receiving a mysterious letter, the game's protagonist is called to a remote location in search of answers on its horrifying reputation. Wielding little else but a camcorder, *Outlast* allows the player to star in their own found footage film, borrowing from the now familiar aesthetic of the form. Yet in a videogame, the ability to interact with the game changes the dynamic between footage and viewer. Rather than watching old material recovered from the asylum, *Outlast* offers an experience akin to the 'making of' of a found footage film, where the protagonist is creating the record of his experiences as the game is played. Using the *Outlast* franchise as the central case study, my aim here is to examine the status of the game as a found footage artefact in relation to theoretical work on the same phenomenon in film. This includes a discussion of the implications of this sub-genre for its audiences, and by extension, the possible impact of *Outlast* and its plot on the player. Casting the player as the creator of what I term 'footage-yet-to-be-found', the game changes the familiar dynamic of found footage films and poses wider questions about player agency, the potential of interactive horror, and the blurring of multiple media forms as videogames and cinema continue to move closer together.

Although it is widely acknowledged that the interactive nature of videogames creates an experience that is different to film, games do often make use of cinematic devices, and it is easy to see that connections exist between the technologies and strategies employed by cinema and videogames. Many games use cut-scenes and in-game videos as part of their narrative, alongside the interactive sections, and there is evidence of a direct and knowing borrowing between the two media. An obvious example of this are adaptations from game to screen (such as *Tomb Raider* (2001), *DOOM* (2005) and *Assassin's Creed* (2016)) or the creation of game titles as movie tie-ins (such as the LEGO games which have adopted franchises such as *Harry Potter* (2010-2011) and *Lord of the*

Rings (2012)). Not just residing in cut-scenes and adaptations, these crossovers are becoming more elaborate, with Hollywood actors taking starring roles in games. Recent high profile titles such as *Beyond: Two Souls* (Quantic Dream, 2013) and both *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* (Activision, 2014) and *Infinite Warfare* (Activision, 2016) have used actors Willem Dafoe, Ellen Page, Kevin Spacey and Kit Harrington to portray in-game characters. Similarly, auteur-developer Hideo Kojima, best known for the *Metal Gear Solid* series (Konami, 1987-2015), has stated that “games, novels and films will merge into one type of entertainment”, because “the time you have to choose what media or entertainment you experience is dwindling. More and more people are looking at types of media that combine elements together” [1]. With Norman Reedus, Mads Mikkelsen and Guillermo del Toro featuring prominently in the trailers for Kojima’s new project *Death Stranding*, it seems the developer has already taken the first steps in this direction.

Yet the connection between the two forms runs deeper than adaptation and acting: games often borrow visual styles and techniques from the big screen, employing elements of genre and iconography to draw players into their worlds. Representations of action, science fiction, and even film noir have found their way from the cinema to the console, bringing with them familiar imagery and settings. The horror genre has seen a similar fate, with its old castles, dark cemeteries and seminal monsters quickly finding a place in gaming. However, it is not simply plots and settings which have made their way from the big to the small screen, and certain games embrace a particular aesthetic: the slasher horror tropes of *Until Dawn* (2015) and the zombie infestations of games such as *Left 4 Dead* (2008 and 2009) and *Dead Rising* (2006-2017) offer players an opportunity to engage more fully with the cinematic conventions they have become familiar with. Another example of this is the *Outlast* franchise, which draws on the aesthetics of the found footage horror film to deliver its narrative terrors.

I start feeling sick just looking at this place

At the time of writing, the *Outlast* franchise, produced by independent Canadian developer Red Barrels, consists of two main games, titled *Outlast* (2013) and *Outlast II* (2017), as well as the downloadable content *Whistleblower* (2014), which serves as a companion piece to the original game. Although the plots and protagonist differ for each entry, they share certain characteristics, and the framing of the main character as a journalist and investigator, combined with the use of a camcorder as a core gameplay mechanic, allow for a particular reading of the games. Before offering such an analysis, I will briefly outline the plot and the role of the camera in each game.

In the original *Outlast*, players take on the role of Miles Upshur, investigative journalist, who receives an anonymous email outlining the questionable goings-on in the Mount Massive Asylum. Upshur travels to the facility to investigate, and as he makes his way through wards, cell blocks and sewers, he bears witness to the results of the horrific experiments conducted by the Murkoff Corporation. Led by doctor Wernicke, a German scientist enlisted by the United States after the Second World War, the Murkoff Corporation attempted to advance Project Walrider. A strange combination of the supernatural and the technological, Walrider uses dream therapy and human hosts to create a biotechnological swarm of nanites. Ultimately, this single malevolent entity finds a new host in Upshur himself.

The immediate follow-up to *Outlast*, *Whistleblower*, features Waylon Park as its protagonist. The game opens as Park is sending an anonymous email, the same email received by Upshur in the main game. A software engineer working at Mount Massive for the Murkoff Corporation, Park tries to blow the whistle on the activities inside the asylum, but upon being discovered, he is volunteered as a subject to the experiments. *Whistleblower* frames *Outlast* in interesting ways, providing prequel, background and additional closure to the events of the main game. It uses similar mechanics to its predecessor, giving Park access to a camera early on. Unlike Upshur, however, Park escapes the asylum and is able to upload the videos onto a website called VIRALeaks. He managed to get out of Mount Massive, and so has his footage.

In *Outlast II*, the focus shifts from the confines of a mental institution to the sprawling Sonoran desert. Blake Langermann, assistant and cameraman to his journalist wife Lynn, has travelled to Arizona with her to investigate the death of a young woman. When their helicopter crashes, Langermann loses track of Lynn and sets out to find her. In his way are both the inhabitants of a small village, hidden away from civilization and inhabited by a strange religious cult, and memories of his troubled past and the death of Jessica, a childhood friend of his and Lynn's. Although there is no direct link with either protagonist or location, *Outlast II* takes place in the same universe as the first game, and the sequel includes numerous hints that point to the Murkoff Corporation, the Walrider experiments, and their influence on the region and its inhabitants, including Langermann.

In each of these scenarios of torture, insanity and death, the importance of the camera quickly becomes apparent, offering players a tool to (seemingly) record their in-game actions. The camera becomes an integral part of the game experience. In *Outlast* and *Whistleblower*, the camcorder includes a zoom function and night vision. Key events are recorded in the form of hand-written notes, saved to the player's in-game

journal, but there is no way to review the footage. *Outlast II* features a more advanced camera, keeping zoom and night vision, as well as adding a microphone function, which allows players to hear nearby enemies. The notes are replaced by recordings: using the footage shot by the player, these are saved to the journal and accompanied by voice-over commentary from Langermann.

Rather than a gimmick or narrative device, the camcorder and in particular its night vision capabilities are integral to the gameplay. Each instalment of the franchise informs its players that they are not fighters, and that their options are to run, hide, or die. The camera's features enable players to navigate dark corridors and paths in an attempt to escape. In addition to its necessity for traversing the game space, the camera allows players a certain level of authorship and players are given the freedom to act *as if* they are recording events for some future audience. Each feature of the camera is explained early on and certain lulls in the gameplay allow for the careful selection and framing of shots. Whenever the camera is in use, its interface is in view, indicating battery power, level of zoom, framerate, and recording light, constantly reminding the player of the presence and function of the device. Although the footage that is recorded in both *Outlast* and *Whistleblower* is not accessible in any meaningful way outside of the direct experience of playing the game, the process of recording is deeply embedded. In *Outlast*, the opening text stresses to "stay alive as long as you can, record everything" [2]. Similarly, Park's first note in *Whistleblower* states that he hopes the camera is found with his corpse, so that "the evidence on it does what I couldn't, expose the truth" [3]. By contrast, the use of actual gameplay footage for its recordings in *Outlast II* further enforces the notion of authorship and creation. These features link the games to the aesthetics of found footage horror, not simply borrowing its style, but also the framing and the way in which they position their creation and audience. In order to fully explore this relationship, it will be necessary to discuss the form and its implications before returning to a more detailed analysis of the videogames.

Maybe it was a glitch in the camera. Or maybe this place getting to me.

Found footage was defined by Scott Meslow as being "built on the conceit that the movie was filmed not by a traditional, omniscient director, but by a character that exists within the film's world - and whose footage was discovered some time after the events of the film" [4]. Heller-Nicholas similarly notes that "[f]ound footage horror films rely on the *fictional* premise that the footage from which they are constructed existed previously, and has been reutilized into a new, separate work" [5], and finally, Aldana Reyes focuses on editing and visual treatment: "Generally speaking, in found footage horror we watch a recording that has been

discovered by someone else, who remains almost always unmentioned, and has been edited for ease of consumption. On the other hand, the images must look rawer and less edited than those of a mainstream film” [6]. What follows from these definitions is that found footage does not solely rely on its content, but rather draws on framing and cinematography, as well as the intervention of an unseen editor, to convey its narrative. The function of these framing devices is clear, namely to convince its audience that the recorded events have indeed occurred: “The formal construction of these films encourages a sense of verisimilitude and suggests that what is being shown is raw, unprocessed “reality”” [7]. Most commonly, they are presented as “either an un/official governmental record, a tape or digital file that plays as it would on someone’s camera, phone or computer which had been left behind or unattended, or as a home video taken home and then rewound and played” [8]. This emphasis on the supposed reality of the footage creates a greater proximity to its viewer and thus a more terrifying experience. As McRobert argues, found footage films contain “the implication that the filmic world is the same as the audience’s” [9], creating a situation where “the audience is not *there*, instead the filmic horror is potentially *here*” [10]. The fictional world that is recorded is close to the real world, and may not be so fictional, after all.

In addition to the use of narrative framing, the cinematic style of found footage horror equally offers audiences a chance to get up-close and personal. The size of the cast is small, often exceeding no more than four principal actors, and they themselves are in charge of the recording. The omniscient director is removed; instead, characters film whatever occurs and whatever their attention is drawn by, their raw footage joined by unedited commentary and physical responses to the events. This first person viewpoint can create a more direct connection between character and viewer, positioning the latter as if they were present and reacting alongside the cast, thus allowing “[f]ound footage horror [to] exploit its peculiar aesthetics to bolster this corporeal interaction, for example by including damaged stock that simulates the effects of external attacks on the camera holder or the recording apparel” [11]. Not only are the film’s characters placed alongside the audience, but so is their fate: when they are attacked, so, by extension, is the viewer. Interestingly, this proximity to the viewer simultaneously draws them in and frustrates them, as Heller-Nicholas discusses:

Implied in the camera’s presence here is a frustrating of visual control. Rather than acting as a surrogate eye that does our seeing for us, the camera obscures our vision, and stands between our eye and the things we wish to see. Additionally, we often want to look in places that the camera refuses to go. There is a mechanical slowing down that suggests a lack of agency working in direct opposition to the supposed sense of

autonomy that a free-moving hand-held camera implies. [12]

Similarly, Bordwell notes the camera ubiquity present in most fiction films, a position which is clearly altered by the use of a single handheld camera [13], and Heller-Nicholas describes the camera as being “deliberately and consistently exposed as faulty”, affording found footage the ability “to undermine the dominant and often sadistic supremacy of the gaze by exposing this inadequacy to fully see” [14]. Viewer alignment is the reason behind these choices, as Aldana Reyes explains:

Found footage imposes natural limitations on the field of vision, especially if images are shot at eye or shoulder level [...] Given that found footage aims to strengthen the artificial alignment between vision/body of the film and vision/body of the viewer via the camera holder, a restricted visual field potentially makes that link more organic. [15]

By filming in this way, the cameraman becomes essentially invisible to the viewer and forces them into a first person viewpoint, bringing them closer to what is being filmed and the process of filming. This creates an interesting tension within found footage: on the one hand, there is the conceit of reality. The footage has been recovered; it is raw, organic, close to the audience’s responses, yet on the other hand, it is an experience which is tightly controlled, both by the intervention of an unknown editor, and through frustrating the view due to the quality and movement of the camera. Found footage signifies a lack of control, both on the part of the filmmaker and of the viewer. Arguably, this puts the form at odds with the player agency within a videogame as it is the notion of interactivity which is seen as the defining distinction between games and cinema. In order to explain this tension, I will return to a discussion of the two media.

...I’m going to be a witness...

I have discussed the intersections between cinema and videogames, positioning *Outlast* as an example of found footage form. More needs to be said, however, in relation to what is arguably the distinction between cinema and games: the interactivity of the latter form. These ideas are the focus of the 2009 essay “Movie-Games and Game-Movies” by Douglas Brown and Tanya Krzywinska. The authors start by noting the similarities between the two media, stating that: “Like film, digital games are screen-based, and as such utilize many cinematic features, providing thereby one of the more basic and formal reasons for the increasing numbers of movie-game tie-ins” [16]. Indeed, the non-interactive cut scenes contained within most games “often utilize multiple points of view and editing, generally in the service of establishing place of situation” [17]. Yet the

relationship is not simply a one-to-one comparison:

Digital games often employ aspects of cinema to make more meaningful and lend resonance to the activities undertaken by players in a game, yet what defines games generally, distinguishing them from other media, is that a game has to be played. This necessarily involves the player in making choices that affect in some way the state of the game and that the game responds to those choices. [18]

Due to this emphasis on interactivity and player agency, the cinematic dimensions of games operate differently than in film. Brown and Krzywinska note that “the camera is [...] controlled by the player” and indeed that “[i]n many first and third person games that take place in a realized world across a range of platforms and game types, point-of-view and framing are anchored *directly* to the character whom the player controls” [19]. As a result, the ability of a director to carefully frame and compose shots is compromised. Cinematography is one of the core tools available to cinema to construct both narrative and affect. Although editing is of importance during scripted cut-scenes in videogames, for most of its duration, it is the player who is in control of the character and indeed the camera, diminishing the role of cinematography. This dichotomy raises interesting questions in relation to the case study: if the viewing of found footage removes control by frustrating the ubiquity of the camera, how can this be translated to an interactive experience, where the player is very much in control? The *Outlast* franchise manages to mitigate this contradiction, imitating the cinematic control and intended affect whilst allowing players the freedom to become the creators of their own found footage film.

Equally, the relationship between horror and interactivity is more complicated than in most videogame genres. Although gameplay is still key to the experience, this tends to focus on exploration and the discovery of terrifying events, often emphasizing narrative over player action. In her essay “Hands-On Horror”, Tanya Krzywinska explores this approach and its benefits for the genre. She reiterates the idea of games as interactive, stating that “games place a strong emphasis on the act of *doing* that extends beyond the kinetic and emotional responses that are common in cinema” [20]. However, Krzywinska notes, this process of doing is not present throughout the entirety of the game: “In each game there are periods in which the player is in control of gameplay and at others not, creating a dynamic rhythm between self-determination and pre-determination” [21]. She notes the importance of this ebb and flow in horror games as “in these particular games it takes on a generically apposite resonance [...] because it ties into and consolidates formally a theme often found in horror in which supernatural forces act on, and regularly threaten, the sphere of human agency” [22]. The character in

the game, and indeed the player, is out of control because of the antagonist(s) they are dealing with. Although all games include elements which promote or limit player agency, Krzywinska argues that in the case of horror games, “[t]hroughout the game, the effects of a higher power are always in evidence, [and] horror-based videogames are strongly dependent on their capacity to allow players to experience a dynamic between states of *being in control* and *out of control*” [23]. The reason for this is related to the supernatural forces as “[t]he operation of the game’s infrastructure invokes for the player an experience of being subject to a pre-determined, extrinsic, and thereby, Othered force, which is balanced against the promise of player autonomy offered by the game’s interactive dimension” [24]. It is not the game or its designer which frustrates the player’s control, but rather a malevolent outside agent who influences their progress throughout the game. Where found footage films appear to remove the agency of both filmmaker and viewer, the *Outlast* franchise uses the rhythm described by Krzywinska to position and affect its players.

Whoever finds my corpse - trust no one and tell everyone

As evidenced in a discussion of the original game by Phillippe Morin, co-founder of Red Barrels, these tensions between being in and out of control were part of the discussion throughout the game’s development. In an insightful post to the *Gamasutra* website, Morin charts the origin story of the game and the decisions made by the team in creating the title: “Out [sic] first debate was about the core gameplay. We wavered between a *Resident Evil*-style approach to guns, but with very limited ammo, and a no-combat-at-all, *Amnesia*-style approach. We decided to go with no combat because it would allow us to build a more focused experience” [25]. This vision of a combat-less experience defined a lot of the design process. Morin explains:

Having decided that we would use “night vision,” we needed a protagonist that required it. We considered a member of some kind of SWAT team with night vision gear, but we wanted to sell the “no combat” concept, so we dropped any kind of law enforcement characters. At the time, a lot of movies were using the found footage concept, so we thought, “why not games?” Camcorders also have night vision, so it fit nicely. [26]

This led to the creation of the protagonist of the first game and his role within it: “After more brainstorming, we hit on the idea of a reporter. A reporter doesn’t usually have combat skills, and has a good reason to be carrying a camcorder, particularly if he’s in the course of doing an investigation” [27]. It was these ideas that informed the original game, as well as the downloadable content and the sequel. Red Barrels have cast

the players as a specific protagonist, with abilities to match, and *Outlast* clearly frames their position within the game in its introductory text:

You are Miles Upshur, an investigative reporter whose ambition is about to earn him an intimate tour of hell on earth. Always willing to dig into the stories no other journalist would dare investigate, you will seek out the dark secret at the heart of Mount Massive Asylum. Stay alive as long as you can; record everything. You are not a fighter; to navigate the horrors of Mount Massive and expose the truth, your only choices are to run, hide, or die. [28]

This initial text is interesting for numerous reasons. Although the game employs first person perspective throughout, players are given a name and some background as to who they are within this world. It also frames their experience and behaviours in a particular way: as an investigative journalist, they are here to “seek out the dark secret” in the asylum location. In doing so, they will need to “stay alive as long as [they] can” and, perhaps more importantly, they are instructed to “record everything”. As the designers tell them, they “are not a fighter”; rather, they are here to “expose the truth” [29]. A similar text is absent in *Whistleblower*, but returns in *Outlast II*:

Lynn Langermann is an investigative journalist seeking the answers behind a pregnant woman murdered under impossible circumstances in rural Arizona. You are Blake Langermann, her husband, assistant, and cameraman. Record everything. Neither of you are fighters; to navigate the horrors waiting for you in the desert, your only choices are to run, hide, or die. [30]

The language used is close to that of the original, on the abilities and limitations of Langermann, as well as the subject of his investigation. Although the game does not actively enforce it, I would argue that the assignment set at the start of each game influences the role of the player. In framing both *Outlast* and its sequel in such a way, the developers have set down clear guidelines on how players are to interact with the world and what they are supposed to film as they are instructed to investigate and record everything. In addition, these messages clearly signpost the abilities and vulnerabilities of the player, where, from the outset of the game, they are positioned as a victim rather than a hero. This supposed lack of control manifests itself both within the story of each game, as well as in aspects of gameplay, and it is the plot elements which I will discuss first.

The narrative of both *Outlast* and *Outlast II* reiterates the experience of, in Krzywinska’s words, being *out of control*. This dynamic is reinforced by

certain secondary characters, whose actions influence the in-game events in a variety of ways. In *Outlast*, the character of Father Archimbaud, an inmate of Mount Massive, openly interacts with Upshur and even hinders his progress. After responding to the initial objective to investigate the asylum, Upshur soon discovers that not all is well: the building is in disarray, and evidence of violence is everywhere, in the form of broken furniture, pools of blood and even dead bodies. There is, however, no sign of the perpetrators, or indeed of any living soul, and it is only when Upshur is grabbed and violently thrown to a lower floor by the burly inmate Chris Walker that he realises that he is not alone in the facility. As Upshur drifts in and out of consciousness, he is attended to by Father Archimbaud, and as the priest examines Upshur's camcorder, he appears to experience a revelation: "I... I see. Merciful god, you have sent me an apostle. Guard your life, son, you have a calling" [31]. When Upshur regains his senses, the Father is nowhere to be seen, but he has left behind a message, written in blood: PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL. Aware that whoever, or whatever, is still inside Mount Massive is more than he bargained for, Upshur's objective has changed: the investigation no longer matters, and instead, the game instructs the player to escape by unlocking the main doors. His assessment of his meeting with Father is brief: "There are words scrawled in blood everywhere. I'm getting an ugly feeling in my gut that the "Priest" is writing them, and for my benefit" [32]. Alongside his occupation as an investigator, the priest has assigned Upshur the role of witness, effectively taking control of the actions of the journalist.

Archimbaud will remain an instrumental figure throughout the early part of the game. After Upshur reaches the security control room from where the doors can be unlocked, the priest is seen on one of the monitors, flipping the switch to the main power supply and scuppering Upshur's attempt at escape. A return to the control room after switching on the generator causes Archimbaud to once more approach Upshur directly, injecting him with a sedative in an attempt to keep the journalist within the asylum walls, commenting that: "I'm sorry, my son, I didn't want to have to do this to you. But you can't leave, not yet. There is so much yet for you to witness" [33]. Guided by notes and instructions left by Archimbaud, painted in blood, Upshur is led deeper into Mount Massive. Despite his distrust for the priest, he realises the weight of what he may have uncovered: "If he's telling the truth, now I've got a way out. And a story to tell. He wants me to spread his gospel. I'll tell the whole fucking world" [34]. Rather than a supernatural force, it is Archimbaud's insistence on the act of witnessing which forces Upshur deeper into Mount Massive to discover the Walrider. It is his own free will which brought him, and the player here, and although players are able to control Upshur, it is Father Archimbaud who guides the journalist, showing a constant awareness of and control over what is witnessed. The

final encounter with Archimbaud, now nailed to a crucifix and about to be set alight by fellow inmates, and his last words, are indicative of this: “You alone shall escape to tell them. This is your penultimate act of witness. [...] You will watch and record my death, my resurrection. And together we will be free” [35]. Upshur finds himself beaten, bruised and tortured, barely hanging on to his consciousness and his sanity, yet he has a role here: Archimbaud has cast him as a witness, an apostle, who will see and record, before being rewarded with his freedom and proclaiming this gospel to the world. By that point, however, both Mount Massive and the Walrider have too great a hold on Upshur, and his reward ultimately escapes him. The ending of the game, with Upshur remaining at the facility, overcome by what he was sent to discover, clearly echoes the conclusion of many found footage offerings.

Within the plot of *Outlast II*, Langermann’s wife Lynn and childhood friend Jessica take on a role similar to Archimbaud, in which they (indirectly) control the player and their actions. After being separated from his wife in the helicopter crash, Langermann’s initial objective is simple: find Lynn. This will remain the goal throughout the game and brief encounters with Lynn only serve to reinforce this objective and Langermann’s desperation to save his wife. This emphasis on Lynn’s role is also evident in the opening text of the game, which frames Langermann as Lynn’s “husband, cameraman and assistant” [36]. Interestingly, this message differs from the text that was used in the 2016 demo, which predates the 2017 release by some months. In the demo, Langermann is framed as a central and more proactive protagonist:

You are Blake Langermann, a camera man working with your wife, Lynn. The two of you are investigative journalists willing to take risks and dig deep to uncover the stories no one else will dare touch. You’re following a trail of clues that started with the seemingly impossible murder of a pregnant woman known only as Jane Doe. The investigation has lead you miles into the Arizona desert, to a darkness so deep no one could shed light upon it, and a corruption so profound that going mad may be the only sane thing to do. [37]

By contrast, the final release foregrounds Lynn as the primary figure, both within the narrative and in terms of gameplay. As a result, Langermann, and by extension the player, have already lost some agency over their situation: this story is not about them, and it is all they can do but to find Lynn and perhaps survive.

The same can be said for the role of Langermann’s childhood friend Jessica, who is another main influence within the game. Although the majority of the action of *Outlast II* plays out within the cultist village in the Sonoran desert, these segments are intercut with what appear to be

memories of Langermann's schooldays, and in particular, the time he shared with Jessica. The girl was found dead as a result of tragic events at a young age, and the game remains ambiguous as to whether Jessica was accidentally killed or took her own life; however, Langermann's lingering guilt in relation to these events is palpable. Within this sub-plot, the school location serves as a metaphor for Langermann's unconscious mind and pent-up guilt, revisiting and reliving Jessica's death as an act of penance. The status of these sequences remains unclear throughout the game: although players can move through and interact with the school building and objects within it, any recordings made while inside the school are saved only as static, leaving players to question the reality of these moments. The framing of these sequences as 'in the past', or perhaps 'inside his head', also means that players have no control over what occurs, instead simply navigating that which has already come to pass. Neither Lynn nor Jessica actively guide Langermann in so direct a way as Archimbaud does for Upshur; however, both Langermann's history (the loss of his friend) and his possible future (the loss of his wife) offer clear motivations for his actions throughout the game. This is not Langermann's assignment, nor is he here of his free will; rather, he has followed Lynn to Arizona to assist her. The events that befall him are on account of her disappearance, and his conviction to not lose her the way he lost Jessica. Indeed, Langermann's dialogue near the end of the game starts confusing the two women, using Jessica's name to refer to Lynn. Whereas Upshur's control is removed by Archimbaud, and subsequently by the Walrider and Mount Massive itself, Langermann's guilt means he was never in control in the first place.

A final point to mention in relation to the game's narrative is the protagonist's voice. Both Upshur and Park, in *Whistleblower*, function as what is essentially a blank canvas: players are provided with a name and a minimal context, but from that moment on, the men become largely invisible. Any noise they make are gasps and grunts of surprise, exertion or pain, and although both storylines feature a specific moment of body horror in which Upshur and Park are captured and tortured, there is not enough detail in the depiction of their bodies to create a disconnect with the player. By contrast, Langermann's body is never fully visible, yet some of his features are more distinct. He wears glasses, and his vision will become blurred when he loses these. In addition, Langermann has a voice: rather than simply producing noise, he narrates and comments on events, both during gameplay and in the recordings. The absence of Upshur and Park will help sustain the illusion of player agency, even as they are coerced by other characters, whereas the presence of Langermann serves to further highlight his lack of control over his entire situation and indeed his own mind. In the design of both the protagonists and the secondary characters, Red Barrels have offered players a first person view and the ability to control Upshur, Park, or Langermann,

whilst at the same time placing them in a situation in which their fate is influenced and, in many ways, already decided.

Not all elements that impact player agency are part of the plot, and some of them are embedded in the mechanics of the games. In borrowing the concept of found footage and handing the players a camcorder, they are granted a particular type of control over their experience. They are able to record as they play, focusing and framing as they see fit, and the information discovered is, in many ways, theirs alone. Most videogames will use a system of notes and artefacts that can be recovered by players to further illuminate the narrative and each *Outlast* game includes numerous documents that can be found such as letters and emails relating to other characters and unseen events. Whereas these materials, as in most games, can be uncovered through exploration, *Outlast's* notes and recordings rely more strongly on player agency. These items cannot be discovered unless players are filming and unless they are filming the right moment in order to trigger the recording. If players wish to uncover all the game's secrets, they will need to become the investigator and found footage filmmaker, keeping a record of their journey at all times, turning the camera this way and that in order to capture everything. At the same time, however, the camcorder is incomplete: like the camera in found footage films, the view of the camcorder is often frustrated and can be lost if the player fails to collect the batteries necessary for it to operate. In addition, each of the games includes a sequence where the camera is lost or damaged: in *Outlast*, for example, Upshur drops the camera, only to discover a cracked lens and occasional glitches when recovering it, thus further frustrating the supposed all-seeing eye. This example recalls the comments of both Heller-Nicholas and Aldana Reyes about the alignment of the viewer and the cameraman in found footage narrative, and the promise of damage to both character and audience. In addition, the damage to the camera further frustrates the visual control, the cracked lens and occasional glitches making it even harder to see.

What happens to the footage is also of note: any recordings taken by the player are registered, but not saved or indeed accessible after they have been captured. As a result, the player is put in a position similar to the filmmaker in found footage: everything is captured, but it is reviewed by someone other than the person who recorded it. Ownership has been transferred, whether players are aware of this or not. This idea is present most strongly in the original game, where recordings are saved as handwritten notes. The player knows what they have seen, and they have the evidence in the form of Upshur's notes, yet there is no way to retrieve it. Control has been lost, or perhaps handed over, leaving them to question the reality of what they have witnessed. *Outlast II* both increases and lessens the control in this respect. The recordings saved to the journal use the footage collected by the players, yet these clips are

tied to specific locations within the game, and are combined with a voiceover from Langermann, commenting on what has been captured. The player has agency over what has been filmed, but the authorship appears to be with Langermann, who interprets the footage. It is only in *Whistleblower* that the player is the author: although it uses a mechanic similar to *Outlast*, where recordings are made and saved as written notes, Park and his footage manage to leave Mount Massive alive and he is able to transfer it to the VIRALeaks website. At the same time, there are consequences to this transference of ownership, as is explained by an unseen figure during the ending of the game: “I need you to understand the bridge you are crossing here. You will do irrevocable damage to the company, you might even get close to something like justice. But. Once you click upload, your life is over” [38]. In each game, the player is given authorship over the footage, choosing what to focus on, yet in the act of recording, their ownership is removed, ultimately leaving them in the position of the found footage filmmaker, with no control over what has been captured.

The levels of control are not only tied into the narrative and the recordings, but also the gameplay itself. As is clear from the introduction to each game, as well as Morin’s comments on creating a combat-less experience, players have no option, as “your only choices are to run, hide, or die” [39]. As opposed to other horror titles, where players may obtain weapons in order to defend themselves and take down enemies, *Outlast* removes any such mechanics. The use of the camcorder precludes any real power being awarded to the player: in not allowing them access to weapons, players are unable to obtain any mastery over their assailants and forces them into a particular type of behaviour in how they navigate the game space. They are left vulnerable, unable to overcome, or even face up against, their enemies. In a direct confrontation, they have no chance, and the chase sequences present in each game work to enforce this vulnerability. In order to survive, players cannot attack, but rather, they need to navigate the game space to either run or hide. Indeed, the game space itself further highlights the lack of control players have. The interior of Mount Massive Asylum in *Outlast* and *Whistleblower* is littered with ways in which player movement is hindered: locked doors, broken furniture and blocked corridors, combined with the interference of other characters, funnel players down a particular path, to their salvation or their doom. *Outlast II*’s desert setting creates a different dynamic and makes use of large outside spaces. Certain obstacles are still in place to guide the player in the right direction, but overall, they are given much more freedom as to how they traverse the space. Interestingly, this does not grant more control to the players: the openness of the space removes their ability to mentally map the area. Upon turning a corner or ducking under a fence, players may face a change in landscape, a blocked pathway, or the appearance of a

new enemy. This requires constant adjustment, leaving them unable to fully master the space in the same way they would be able to do with an inside location. Running, ducking and diving, the camcorder shaking, the traversal of the space of the asylum and the Arizona desert fully mimics the quality of most found footage films. Directorial control gives way to pure terror. As I have shown here, Krzywinska's ideas of being in and out of control and their influence on player agency are found in the *Outlast* franchise in a several ways. Despite offering players agency over both the main character and the camera, Red Barrels uses both narrative and gameplay elements to frustrate control and guiding them through the experience.

In the article "Return to Paranormalcy", Bordwell notes that "I haven't yet mentioned one creative problem discovered-footage filmmakers need to confront. Who's *responsible* for what we see?" [40]. In *Outlast*, the answer to this question is simple: it is the player, in the form of Miles Upshur, Waylon Park and Blake Langermann, who picks up the camera to record their experience. In both its narrative and gameplay, the franchise is able to give and take control from the protagonists and, by extension, the players. Moving away from the directed experience of cinema, (horror) videogames allow their audiences to interact with the material, yet this supposed agency is often manipulated. The *Outlast* games use the framing and aesthetics of found footage films to establish and remove player agency, both allowing and removing control as the game progresses. In doing so, they position the player as filmmaker, witnessing and recording everything, but never able master their experience or retain authorship of the footage. The games answer the question as to who has made the recording, but what has happened since remains unclear. The result for each protagonist remains the same: the footage is out there, somewhere, as is the evil they wished to record: all too real and not yet beaten. As for the players themselves, they have met the inevitable ending of most found footage films, finding themselves missing, presumed dead.

Notes

[1] Steffan Powell, "Hideo Kojima says games and films will merge together," *BBC Newsbeat*, January 26, 2017, accessed March 1, 2017, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/article/38737220/hideo-kojima-says-games-and-films-will-merge-together>

[2] Red Barrels, *Outlast*, 2013.

[3] Red Barrels, *Outlast: Whistleblower*, 2014.

[4] Scott Meslow, "12 Years After 'Blair Witch', When Will the Found

Footage Fad End?" *The Atlantic*, January 6, 2012, accessed: March 1, 2017,

<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/01/12-years-after-blair-witch-when-will-the-found-footage-horror-fad-end/250950/>

[5] Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, *Found-Footage Horror Films: Fear and the Appearance of Reality* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2014), 14, author's emphasis.

[6] Xavier Aldana Reyes, "Reel Evil: A Critical Reassessment of Found Footage Horror." *Gothic Studies* 17:2 (2015), 129.

[7] Heller-Nicholas, *Found-Footage Horror Films*, 24.

[8] Aldana Reyes, "Reel Evil", 128-129.

[9] Neil McRobert, "Mimesis of Media: Found Footage Cinema and the Horror of the Real," *Gothic Studies* 17:2 (2015), 138.

[10] McRobert, "Mimesis of Media", 140, author's emphasis.

[11] Aldana Reyes, "Reel Evil", 130.

[12] Heller-Nicholas, *Found-Footage Horror Films*, 23.

[13] David Bordwell, "Return to Paranormalcy," *Reflections on Film Art*, November 13, 2012, accessed March 1, 2017, <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2012/11/13/return-to-paranormalcy/>

[14] Heller-Nicholas, *Found-Footage Horror Films*, 23, author's emphasis.

[15] Aldana Reyes, "Reel Evil", 130.

[16] Douglas Brown and Tanya Krzywinska, "Movie-Games and Game-Movies: Towards an Aesthetic of Transmediality," in *Film Theory and Contemporary Hollywood Movies*, ed. Warren Buckland (London: Routledge, 2009), 86.

[17] Brown and Krzywinska, "Movie-Games and Game-Movies", 87.

[18] Brown and Krzywinska, "Movie-Games and Game-Movies", 86.

[19] Brown and Krzywinska, "Movie-Games and Game-Movies", 87, author's emphasis.

[20] Krzywinska, Tanya, "Hands-On Horror", in *ScreenPlay: Cinema*

Videogames / Interfaces, eds. Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (London: Wallflower, 2002), 207, author's emphasis.

[21] Krzywinska, "Hands-On Horror", 207.

[22] Krzywinska, "Hands-On Horror", 207.

[23] Krzywinska, "Hands-On Horror", 208, author's emphasis.

[24] Krzywinska, "Hands-On Horror", 208.

[25] Phillipe Morin, "Horror in the Making: How Red Barrels Outlasted *Outlast*," *Gamasutra*, January 29, 2015, accessed: March 1, 2017, http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/234588/Horror_in_the_Making_How_Red_Barrels_outlasted_Outlast.php

[26] Morin, "Horror in the Making".

[27] Morin, "Horror in the Making".

[28] Red Barrels, *Outlast*.

[29] Red Barrels, *Outlast*.

[30] Red Barrels, *Outlast II*, 2017.

[31] Red Barrels, *Outlast*.

[32] Red Barrels, *Outlast*.

[33] Red Barrels, *Outlast*.

[34] Red Barrels, *Outlast*.

[35] Red Barrels, *Outlast*.

[36] Red Barrels, *Outlast II*.

[37] Red Barrels, *Outlast II: Demo*, 2016.

[38] Red Barrels, *Whistleblower*.

[39] Red Barrels, *Outlast*.

[40] Bordwell, "Return to Paranormalcy," author's emphasis.

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