“Can you survive the horror?” asks the cover of the interactive game Resident Evil 2 (Capcom/Virgin Interactive, 1998), a question that explicitly positions the game within the rhetoric of the horror film genre. Yet something greater than generic familiarity with horror is needed to survive the specifically interactive nature of the horror game—the player must summon the willpower to learn the skills needed to withstand the onslaught of evil monsters and restore equilibrium. In contrast to film, games place a central emphasis on the act of doing that goes beyond the kinetic and emotional responses that might be produced in cinema. Espen Aarseth proposes the term “ergodic” to identify forms in which “nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text,” an effort greater than that involved in watching a film; games’ interactive requirement situates them squarely in the “ergodic.” In this article I will explore how interactivity, with its concomitant emphasis on doing, affects the shape and pleasures of the horror-based videogames, and in so doing begin to elaborate on games’ formal differences from cinematic horror.

Given the recent release of several films based on games, such as Lara Croft: Tomb Raider (2001), Final Fantasy (2001) and most pertinently Resident Evil (2002), such an analysis into such media cross-fertilization is a timely intervention. Each of these films bears only a superficial relation to the games, however, and although there are some references (particularly in Resident Evil) to the games that inspire them, the films do not attempt to recreate the interactive aspects specific to the formal nature of their game counterparts. This spate of game-to-film remakes indicates a closing of the circle of the cross-media exchange from horror film to games and back to film. But the overwhelmingly disappointing and unengaging nature of most of the films so far seems to suggest that while media interaction works in multiple directions, it is in the realm of games (and how they adapt and exchange templates inherited from cinema) where the most exciting innovations in the
cross-media circulation of the horror genre are taking place. And thus it is from the perspective of games that the most insight into changes in horrific forms across media can be mapped and most productively considered.

Two games, Resident Evil 3: Nemesis (Capcom/Eidos, 1999) and Clive Barker’s Undying (ELEA/EA, 2001) will be used as examples of how horror games organize and manage the game-playing experience to create suspense and tension. The first is a console-based (PlayStation) game, which has proved popular; the second is played on a PC and has had more limited commercial success. In both games, magic has unleashed evil on the world, disrupting the status quo. Resident Evil 3 is a sequel to two earlier games, each set in an imaginary but contemporary American city. To “beat the game” (and defeat evil) the player must explore the virtual city, solve puzzles, accumulate and use different objects and weapons, and do battle with—or run from—a range of undead monsters. Undying requires the player to perform similar actions, although within a rather different environment: the game is set on an imaginary island, complete with labyrinthine castle, ancient monastery complete with crypts and caves, and includes a number of embedded magical spatial dimensions that defy physical laws.

The formal structures of the two games will be addressed first, with attention placed on certain important differences from and similarities to the horror film; this material will then be used to indicate the specific types of pleasures offered in this interactive intersection of “horror” and “games.” The analysis is framed by my argument that these games are structured at deep and surface levels according to the principles of a “manichean” moral duality, a factor that the games share with many horror films. This binary structure is embedded within the interactive dimension of the games. Its presence suggests that the pleasures of playing such games hinge on a dynamic experience that oscillates between doing and not doing. In each game there are periods in which the player is in control of the gameplay, and at others the player is not, lending a resonant rhythm between self-determination and pre-determination. This rhythm is present in most videogames, yet in these particular games it takes on a generically apposite resonance within the context of horror 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. The surface level and deep manichean structure further operates as a containing safety net for the experience of being out of control. My main contention is that the interactive dimension of these particular games is organized to intensify and extend the types of emotional and affective experiences offered by the horror film.

Interactive Evil and the Moral Occult

The horror genre has made the transition to videogames for a number of reasons. Horror offers death as spectacle and actively promises transgression; it has the power to promote physical sensation, and the genre appeals to the youth market that is central to the games industry. Many constitutive aspects of the horror film genre are also present in horror games, primarily in the way they are marketed, their graphic and iconographic styles, their shock tactics, themes and storylines. Like many horror films, many horror videogames deploy very basic notions of good and evil. In both Undying and Resident Evil 3, the avatar (the character that represents the player in the game) has to restore balance to a world corrupted by evil forces that threaten humanity and rationality, and the aim of these games is to defeat the manifestation of such forces. Both games deploy surface story lines and concomitant aesthetic strategies that reference the good-versus-evil format of many horror films; however, in the games this dualism is even more deeply embedded in the infrastructure that shapes the dynamic nature of games’ interactivity. This infrastructure works as a form of “moral occult,” Peter Brooks’s term for how a transcendent moral order is deployed and articulated in late 19th-century melodrama, which he proposes is defined
by the project of making an invisible moral order apparent at a surface level, an idea that can also be applied to many horror films (elaborated on by Harmony Wu in the introduction to this issue).

Brooks’s model is also useful in thinking about the ways Undying and Resident Evil 3 structure their interactive gameplay. All horror videogames are resolutely grounded in a hidden “occulted” or metaphysical dimension, determined by programming, that shapes gameplay. What is important to note here is that the resulting virtual dualism—a simulated manicheanism—is fixed: while players can interact with aspects of the surface dimension and the space of the game, they cannot interfere with the determining sub-strata of the game. Whatever players do in most horror games, they still have to occupy the position of an avatar of good, not evil. This predetermined transcendent force of the horror games’ moral occult is at work in the way these games channel the player through their labyrinths. As a player travels through the space of the games, he/she encounters aspects that both restrict or promote agency. Examples of these include cut-scenes (pre-rendered sequences that can only be watched and not “interacted” with), physical barriers such as locked doors or blocked pathways, or helpful power-ups (that boost an avatar’s “life” which becomes depleted in battles) and the strategic location of new and agency-enhancing weapons. The moral occult is also evident in other types of help offered to the player, such as clues to where to go next planted along with way, and in the series of rewards given for overcoming obstacles. Throughout the game the effects of a higher power are always in evidence.

The element of pre-determination, which lies outside the sphere of player agency, is therefore linked to the metaphysical dimension in which manicheanism operates. The concept of the moral occult plays a central role in horror-based videogames’ fundamental dependence on allowing players to experience a dynamic between states of being in control and out of control. This affective attribute links the deep structure of the games, provided by their programming, to the range of pleasures they offer, specifically in terms of the dynamic tension between periods of passivity and activity.

Charting Generic Crosscurrents in Horror Films and Games

The range and popularity of games based on horror suggests there are aesthetic and marketing advantages in translating cinematic horror to interactive media. Existing horror-based videogames draw on a number of familiar pre-sold horror sub-genres. The Resident Evil cycle, Nightmare Creatures cycle, Evil Dead: Hail to the King (HeavyIron/THQ, 2001), The Typing of the Dead (Sega/Empire, 2001) (an innovative use of the zombie genre to teach touch-typing: “type or die,” as the slogan goes), and The House of the Dead cycle (Sega, 1998, 1999, 2001) all draw heavily on Romero-influenced zombie movies. Vampire-based games are also common, such as Dracula Resurrection (Canal/Multimedia/Dreamcatcher, 2000), Legacy of Kain: Soul Reaver (Crystal Dynamics/Eidos, 1999) and Vampire: The Masquerade (Nihilistic/Activision, 2000). Phantasmagoria (Sierra, 1995), Silent Hill, Silent Hill 2 (Konami, 1999, 2001) and Clive Barker’s Undying also employ aspects of the zombie theme, alongside more traditional gothic and Lovecraftian themes. These also have a strong connection to the “old dark house” format, common in horror films since the 1920s, and enhance this by deploying extra, alternative dimensions within the space of a house or urban environment. The Alien games (Acclaim/Probe, 1996; Argonaut/Fox, 2000) use the monster-in-space theme, presold by the films. The Mummy (Universal Office/Konami, 2000) takes a slightly different take on the zombie theme, and that too is a direct movie tie-in game. Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation (Core/Eidos, 1999) draws on the spectacle of Ancient Egypt for its monsters (the flesh-eating beetles of the game appear in The Mummy—both the film and the game). Cyberspace-based gore-fests of shoot-em up carnage characterize Half-Life (Valve/Sierra, 1998), Quake (id, 1996)
and *Unreal Tournament* (Epic MegaGames & Digital Extremes/GT Interactive, 1999).

What impact does interactivity have on the rendering of horror genre tropes, strategies and formats? As the name implies, Clive Barker’s *Undying* trades on the auteur principle, thereby leaning on a pre-sold brand that includes the *Hellraiser* films (1987-2001) and Barker’s novels and comics. *Resident Evil 3*, as with the whole cycle, uses many elements from George Romero’s *Living Dead* cycle (1968, 1978, 1985). These two games have very different ways of handling interactivity, however, which impact their structure and the kind of experience offered to the player. A comparison between the two provides a useful way of understanding how interactivity is used to solicit and manage horror. Both use different forms of restriction to create the type of suspense that underpins the genre, in accordance with Eve Sedgwick’s (1986) claim that gothic horror hinges on the metaphorical and literal trope of burial alive.

**Spatial Orientation and Tension in Horror Games**

The first-person shooter mode of *Undying* affords the player the freedom to look around the 3D virtual space, providing a radical point of departure from film’s use of restrictive framing to manage what the viewer sees. The environment of *Undying* is extremely detailed, encouraging the player to spend time taking in architectural details and to explore the vast house and grounds. This investigative mode is aided by the first-person mode and the scope of the 360-degree view that allows players to look where they wish. This freedom to look and explore in *Undying* marks a departure from the way horror films use editing and framing to create tension and claustrophobia. On the other hand, *Resident Evil 3*’s third-person shooter mode is closer to film, as the player’s ability to look around is more heavily managed by its game engine. *Resident Evil 3* imposes different camera angles onto the viewer’s perspective, withholding visual information and creating a pronounced effect of enclosure. Like a film, *Resident Evil 3* structures space and the player’s experience through editing and fixed framing, which is often used to create shock effects. The intrusive effect of pre-rendered camera angles within gameplay reminds the player that control is limited and that the gameplay is highly predetermined. As well as helping to shape the aesthetic experience of the game, this and other aspects of inevitability built into the programming infrastructure operates, like occulted fate, to ordain the path that must be taken.

Because *Undying* does not use editing and fixed framing, it must deploy alternate tactics to contrive suspense and atmosphere. One way this is achieved is directly related to its expansive playing arena. As befits the gothic nature of the house, there are many dark corners and masked spaces that can harbor
helpful power-ups and spells or monsters and other dangers. Because the game is in first-person mode, there is increased visual proximity to what lurks within such shadowy places, heightening the sense of contact. This heightened proximity to potential danger builds disquietude and tension and, because exploring such places is central to the game, Undying handles horror in a markedly more uncinematic way than Resident Evil 3. Undying makes direct use of the specific qualities offered by an open environment, actively encouraging an investigative approach. Therefore, interactivity, with its emphasis on doing, has a significant impact on the way the game constructs apprehension and its particular ambience. Further, it shapes the organization of the story and the experience of gameplay, marking a qualitative difference from the way the horror film organizes space. Resident Evil 3 often allows the avatar the option to run from enemies, and thereby draws more strongly on slasher movie formats, whereas Undying, with its shifting environment and vertiginous abysses, renders space itself as threatening, thereby following in the footfalls of the gothic trend of using mise-en-scène to create brooding eeriness and make things not what they seem. Here the gameplay space becomes a direct articulation of the intrinsic and extrinsic occult forces at work in the game. Both games make use of horror-based occult themes, and these mirror the predetermined and restrictive occulted nature of the games’ own deep structure: “as above, so below,” as the magico-alchemical axiom goes.

Game Narrative: Cut-Scenes, Point of View and Control

Increased computer power has allowed the story-telling element of games to become more complex, leaving designers to find new ways to integrate predetermined storylines into gameplay. Undying has a convoluted story and, like many games, uses cut-scenes to help it unfold. The cut-scenes provide a significant formal connection with the conventions of film horror as they use cinematic conventions of editing, framing and camera movement to manage the spectator’s view and emotional engagement with the text. Although cut-scenes are often referred to as “cinematic,” in many games no “real” camera, or image re-production, is involved. Instead the cuts, the angles and camera movements are generated digitally, either pre-rendered or generated “on the fly;” the effects of tilts, zooms and tracking shots are manufactured through the authoring software used to produce the games. Referencing cinematic conventions, yet manufactured in a different way, these narratively loaded cut-scenes as such are often less “anchored” by the real environmental factors that influence the way that most live-action is filmed. Unlike the conventions of most narrative films, the camera positioning used in interactive sequences is always linked to the avatar, moving with it through the space of the game (seamlessly in first-person mode and rather less so in third-person modes). The flexibility of digitally-produced camera movement found in cut-scenes is often markedly more mobile than that found in non-animation-based cinema, thereby permitting a greater continuity between cut-scenes and the relatively rapid speed of the avatar’s movement during most of the gameplay. But what is most important to the terms of my discussion of control and interactivity is that the cut-scene wrests control away from the player and reinforces the sense that a metaphysical “authorial” force is at work, shaping the logic of the game. This evocation of helplessness in the face of an inexorable predetermined force is crucial to maintaining horror-based suspense, in that the game world often operates outside the player’s control. Without this sphere of pre-determination, the traditional pleasures of horror are denied us.

The pre-rendered nature of cut-scenes make them appear closer to cinema than other parts of a game, yet they have a very specific function in relation to gameplay and, importantly for this analysis, are an integral part of how a game creates a dynamic between being in
control and being out of control. Within the narrative of a game, the inclusion of a cut-scene allows for the marking out of important plot points. Cut-scenes often function as a means of rewarding players for a mini-victory. They are also used to book-end games, setting up the backstory and framing the motivation of play. At the end of a game, a cut-scene often underscores the resolution provided by the final battle. While the cut-scene, alongside other aspects of a game’s inherent moral occult, is beyond player control, there are, of course, various ways in which other in-game events are determined by the player’s actions. *Resident Evil* 3 (like *Silent Hill*) offers points at which the player decides how to proceed. In *Resident Evil* 3, the choices made along the way determine the ending of the game. At these nodal points, *Resident Evil* 3 stops the action and presents a list of written options, whereas *Silent Hill* and its sequel integrate choice through action, more seamlessly structuring it into the real-time flow of the gameplay. In both cases, the storyline offers a variety of potential routes, something not available in conventional film forms. *Undying* does not deploy multiple endings: the final showdown is presented in traditional linear fashion, culminating, after the death of a “boss” (the most powerful enemy on a level), in a pre-rendered scene. Smaller decisions and actions help to shape the way the game is experienced, however.

Some cut-scenes have a more direct relationship with gameplay than the telling of the story or the movement of players from one domain to another: they play an important role in confirming the presence of a dimension of the game that is beyond a player’s control. Near the start of *Undying*, for example, a cut-scene intrudes on the action as the player walks down a corridor. This is likely to take the player by surprise because it is not linked to a conversation or to the end of a mini-quest, as is more usual in this and other games. An edit places the camera back down the end of the corridor, which then tracks swiftly towards the avatar, accompanied by the sounds of slamming doors and a supernatural wind. This happens whatever the player does, underscoring the player’s sense of the existence of an unseen force—in this case, hostile—at work in the matrix of the game. At the end of the scene the player is trapped at the end of a corridor and cannot escape, unless he/she has procured a particular spell in advance. Here discontinuity between being in control and out of control produced by the cut-scene works to suspenseful effect because it is rapid, unexpected and integral to the gameplay.

In *Undying* the juxtaposition of the first-person framing of gameplay and that of the cut-scene heightens and signifies the difference that lies between the sphere of agency and the sphere of predetermination. The camera movement and first-person framing used in the cut-scene described above, as distinct from the first-person framing anchored to the avatar in the majority of the game, is synonymous with the occulted...
Othered power lurking in the house and in the infrastructure of the game: the player can do nothing in these sequences but helplessly watch them unfold. In this particular use of such framing, the cut-scene clearly borrows from horror films which deploy the iconic anthropomorphized “I-cam” moving camera as representative of a demonic, threatening force used to great effect in such films as *The Shining* (1980), *Friday the Thirteenth* (1980), *Halloween* (1978) and *Evil Dead II* (1987).¹¹ Explored in terms of suspense, mastery, sadism and masochism by horror film critics such as Steve Neale, Linda Williams and Carol Clover.¹² In *Undying*, the cut-scenes that use fast tracking I-cam shots operate in contrast to the fairly sedate walking pace at which the player travels through the house, creating a rhythmic differential dynamic that works at a number of levels. This specific use of the cut-scene is one of many strategies used in horror games to warn players that they must be ready to deal with a threatening situation, creating suspense and expectation, and refreshing players’ levels of alertness. It further demonstrates the way the games establish a dynamic between self-determination and a manichean-structured pre-determination.

Although games may give the player the freedom to look, first-person framing in gameplay is nonetheless, in cinematic terms, “restricted.” Often the point of view shot in the horror film is synonymous with that of the killer or monster, a useful strategy which simultaneously keeps the identity of the monster under wraps and as well as sets up complex relationships between the viewer and a monster.¹³ The first-person strategy in *Undying* is deployed in a very different way from the conventions of I-cam in horror film. Unlike its film equivalent, the first-person shot in *Undying* is not used to create an uncomfortable complicity with the film’s monster; instead it facilitates a more benign connection between player and the hero-protagonist avatar, working to place both on the side of good, a coincidence of perspectives that is consolidated by the game’s first-person mode. Because of this the game is, in many ways, less complex in terms of the gaze—and its politics—than in many horror films that use a range of enunciative viewpoints (wherein the viewer is marshaled into different, and sometimes conflicting, perspectives and identifications). In *Resident Evil 3*, the connection between player and avatar is diminished by the use of a third-person perspective and the game’s heavily managed, shifting and pre-rendered framing, which distances the player from close contact with the horror. Yet even here there is a less complex pattern of viewpoints than occurs in film, precisely because shots are always oriented around the avatar.

The net difference in horrific effect due to the use of either first- or third-person can be illustrated in two comparable events in the respective games. When attacked in *Resident Evil 3*, the player is often not able to effect any actions and can only watch impotently as...
Nemesis, the archvillain of the game, swings the helpless avatar over his head. By contrast, in Undying, the particular form of restriction provided by the first-person mode heightens the illusion that it is the player sitting before the game screen who is being attacked, rather than an abstracted virtual self. When a monster makes a direct hit on the avatar, for example, the framing becomes shaky and the player’s aim becomes unstable—the player’s visual field and ability to act is directly affected by the blows. The impact of attack in Resident Evil 3 is rather different. The PlayStation’s “dual-shock” handset registers the effects of the attack through actual, felt vibration administered to the physical body of the player, but because the avatar’s and the player’s viewpoints are not correlated, there is an odd disjunction between sensation and what is seen—though the player experiences the rumble, equated with the attack, of the handset, the player sees his/her game avatar as a separate figure, visually as distinct from him/herself as any other character on the game screen. The jarring effect of this discontinuity actively encourages players to become increasing skilled in the use of handset controls so they are able to dodge attacks and become better able to minimize the intrusion of “end-of-life” cut-scenes (albeit that cut-scenes do provide visual reward in other parts of the game). The reward for increased skill in battle is greater visual continuity, therefore enabling more cinema-like experience of gameplay. The dynamic in play is towards greater control of the game environment, yet this control is localized and is always qualified by a game’s broader infrastructure. Film offers no equivalent. It is unable to exploit the potential of interactive devices to intensify an awareness of the dynamic between being in control and out of control, and this aspect is key to the specific types of suspense and emotion-based pleasures offered by horror games.¹⁴

**The Horror Experience: From Film to Games**

The horror film derives much of its power to thrill from the fact that the viewer cannot intervene in the trajectory of events. While viewers might feel an impulse to help beleaguered characters in a horror film, they can never do so directly. The horror film viewer might offer cries of warning to the hapless teenagers who ignore all diegetic warnings and persist in entering into the spook house. The formula is well rehearsed, soliciting groans and verbal advice, yet the pleasure entailed in this process is founded on awareness of the inevitability of the events that will unfold. Characters and action ultimately remain isolated from the sphere of the viewer, regardless of the extent to which he or she might “identify” with them. When watching a horror film, viewers are always subjected to the flow of events (unless they decide to turn away or cover their eyes—a familiar reaction of some viewers to moments of heightened horror or suspense). In this sense, I concur with Steve Shaviro’s argument that horror film suspense trades on a masochistic economy of delicious passivity, visceral affect and expectation.¹⁵ The spectator’s experience of a restrictive inability to act on situations is often underlined in horror film thematics. Zombification, various types of possession and bodily invasion are typical horror film scenarios that represent a loss of autonomy and self-determination.¹⁶ Theme reflects reception here, the viewer—like the beset characters on screen—is also helpless, unable to alter the trajectory of on-screen action.

Yet film is less able than games to build into their deep structure a concrete experience of being in control and out of control of onscreen events. None of this means that the film viewer is entirely “passive” in the reception of the film, however (a rhetorical trap that game-critics often fall into when discussing the differences between gaming and cinema). Viewers constantly engage, rationally and irrationally, with the material presented on screen; as Bruce Kawin puts it: “we interact with the signs in the generation of meaning and … our attention is selective.”¹⁷ The horror film often plays more overtly with the viewer’s inability to affect the action, however, which is the key to some of its pleasures. What, though, of the horror videogame? Does the interactive dimension and the resulting
ability of the player to control the action prevent horror games from replicating the terrors and ecstasies of losing control?

It is my contention that the interactive dimension of horror games enables a more acute experience of losing control than that achieved by most horror films. This is achieved partly because, at times, the player does have a sense of self-determination; when it is lost, the sense of pre-determination is enhanced by the relative difference. As I have shown, game events are often taken out of the player’s hands, a stratagem which allows the deployment of horrific pleasures closer to those of the horror film. Control and autonomous action, which are always qualified, does not mean the player is simply in a position of mastery, however. The repeated actions, continual “dying,” the intrusions of the sound field, the cause-and-effect structure, the operations of the “authored” structure, and the cut-scenes, each work to offer the player a sense that they are being acted upon by the game’s deep structure. Like the horror film, it is sharply apparent that the game’s virtual world is a closed system: the authored aspect of narration governs the fabric of game and film, channeling the way we negotiate and experience it. As Andrew Darley notes, and I build on this to underpin my argument about the moral occult, there are points in a game at which its pre-programmed nature means that the “element of control and choice... is revealed as illusory.” Unlike Darley, however, I do not see these moments as “formulaic” game flaws. Instead, these moments actively work to produce the crucial sense of being out of control that is inherent to the experience of horror. Although this experience of being out of control is handled in a different and deeper manner from that of the horror film, there is a sense that the virtual world, and its structuring moral occult, is beyond a player’s control (even if

Do you dare investigate the threat lurking behind the toilet doors in Silent Hill 2?
the player resorts to cheats and walkthroughs, unless the cheat allows a player to defy the game’s boundaries, in which case the sense of immersion is lost).

There are some significant differences borne of interactivity, however. Games are organized around the traversal of space, to which narrative is often secondary; in a film, narrative is primary and always drives the organization of space. This distinction provides a further important difference between the two media in terms of the way that “looking” is treated. Unlike that of the horror film, the operation of the moral occult in videogames is rarely oriented around the punishment of curiosity. Visual investigation becomes central to the trajectory of a game as well as to the way the story unfolds. Many horror films also deploy an investigative strategy in the service of narrative, yet it is at one remove from the viewer, and is far more directed than in games, which rarely deploy ellipses to eliminate “dead” time. In some respects the more open economics of looking in games unravels the predetermined, ideological systems codified in looking patterns of the horror film. Most games, and specifically Undying, depend on a player searching areas to find clues, power-ups and other equipment that open the way to the next level. As the game guide to Evil Dead: Hail to the King warns, “Don’t be afraid to look around and check out the area. Otherwise, you might miss something important.” Therefore, space is something to be actively, physically, investigated if the player is to “beat” the game. Looking in games can mean that the player encounters danger, as with Old Dark House-style horror films, yet the difference is that (outside cut-scenes) the player is encouraged to assert an active, rather than passive, mode of looking.

Through the juxtaposition of being in and out of control, horror-based videogames facilitate the visceral and oscillating pleasures/unpleasures of anxiety and expectation. The interactive dimension heightens this fluctuating sense of anticipation, implicating the player in his or her fate. Failure to progress in games necessitates repetition (being “stuck,” with all its wider mythic and therapeutic meanings). What is “punished” in videogames is not so much curiosity, as in the horror film, but the failure to make it into the next scene. Through the active mode of investigation facilitated by interactivity, the player may place his/her avatar in peril, yet the trade-off is access to new thrills and the promise of continued gameplay. These are withheld if a player does not pursue active investigation. If a player fails to get through a set task, or fails to explore effectively, the narrative itself is withheld (no story before bedtime), a dimension that is conventionally not available in film. Darley usefully comments on this exploratory aspect of games by suggesting that “once a game is under way the player is compelled continually and immediately to respond.” Horror-based games are designed to compel the player to investigate and overcome dangerous encounters if they are to uncover the game story and fully “colonize” the game space. While the investigatory mode might appear to be self-determined, it demands a ritualized, mechanical response to events. The moral occult of a game’s internal structure pulls the player towards its goal of defeating evil. Along the way, it solicits contradictory desires for intensity, prolonged tension, anxiety, compulsion and resolution. The creation of such an emotionally discrepant scenario fits quite neatly into Julia Kristeva’s view that the experience of horror is bound into “a vortex of summons and repulsion.” The deployment of extrinsic, Othered forces (akin to Lacan’s notion of the “Big Other”) provided by the games’ programming that impinge on the player’s freedom to act are rendered within horror’s remit to provoke and intensify feelings of powerlessness, offering an important media-specific modulation of the generic paradigm provided by the horror film and affirming the value of looking at horror from the perspective of games.

Potentially, interactivity presents a problem to horror genre dynamics because its inherent ability to allow players to drive the way that they investigate the space of the
game means the loss of authorial control, to some extent, of the narrational strategies used to create suspense, which is crucial to the development of the horror experience in film. It is for this reason that videogames mix interactivity with predetermined boundaries and intrusive interventions that channel the player’s engagement with the game. The pleasure-suspense dynamics of horror-based games are, as I have shown, very much dependent on this combination. Both Undying and Resident Evil 3 allow the player to act on events, but only in a manner determined by the game’s internal structure. Both games create scenarios in which the erotic economics of masochism can be experienced, which the on/off dynamics of interactivity create and heighten. As such it seems mistaken to call games “promethean”: there is no transgression of higher powers; players remain by and large dependent on the tips bestowed, the gameplay path is fated and predetermined. At times during gameplay a player is dutifully, sublimely, in their service, and the pay-off is, precisely, the experiential gain of suspense and tension. Yet this is always balanced against a sphere of interaction that promises self-directed agency.

Unlike their film counterparts, and in spite of an often simplified moral framework, horror-based videogames create a complex interaction between bounded choice and determinism that reflects, to some extent, the way in which individuals interact with social constraints. Within the safe context of the fantasy arena of videogames, which are modularly marked as “fantasy” rather than reality through their production values and generic intertexts, the determinism of the game accrues for the player a direct and heightened experience of being acted upon. Games are carefully designed and authored to take us to emotional places that would perhaps be avoided if full interactivity were available. The manichean-based safety net actively allows the games to invoke “dangerous” and liminal experiences. Horror games interface with the way in which technology is often imagined as demonic and Othered; the player is offered the challenge to defeat the technologically-based demon (aided by the “good” elements of the technology), which, if achieved, can offer a pleasurable sense that the technology has been mastered. The contract drawn up between hands-on interaction and hands-off pre-determinism works, therefore, in part with the emotional and erotic economics of masochism as much as with the drive to act, colonize, and take charge. The switching between the two intensifies the experience of being both in control and out of control, a strategy that is not fully available to the horror film. This is because such switching is grounded in the unique and dynamic interactive nature of gaming media.

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22 Steven Poole,
21 Julia Kristeva,
20 Darley, 156.
19 For example, Kawin states that the horror film “emphasizes the dread of knowing, the danger of curiosity” (8).  A
18 Andrew Darley,
17 Bruce Kawin, “The Mummy’s Pool,”
16 See Tanya Krzywinska,
15 Steven Shaviro,
14 Other formal differences and similarities between film and games operate.  The presence of altered realities in
13 See Neale, Williams, Clover.
12 Steve Neale, ”
11 The game version of the
10 The term is used in a programming context, which is, necessarily, a collective activity.
8 Romero was slated to direct the Resident Evil film, but pulled out during production.
7 Unless, like Star Trek’s Captain Kirk (who once tampered with the programming of a “no-win” training simulation,
6 The horror genre has played an important role in targeting videogames to young adults (most games fall into the 15 rating bracket).  The genre also has an established and very active body of fans, which makes them an ideal grouping for videogames’ marketing.
5 Silent Hill 2 (Konami, 2001) is an example of a horror-based game that, in drawing from psychological-based horror, makes an attempt to disrupt the conventional good-evil paradigm. This is achieved by building questions about the “good” status of the avatar.
4 The term refers to a model of the universe formulated by a 3rd-5th century sect, the Manichees, for whom the cosmos is a site of an endless dualistic battle between good and evil. Many popular texts are structured around a battle between good and evil, good usually winning out in the end (see Tanya Krzywinska, “Hubble Bubble, Herbs and Grimoires: Magic, Manichaeanism and Witchcraft in ‘Buffy the Vampire Slayer,” “Fighting the Forces: Essays on the Meanings of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, David Lavery and Rhonda Wilcox, eds. [Lanham, Boulder, New York and London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002]).  The way in which good and evil is defined in a given text is, of course, subject to dominant, and often fundamental, ideological values.
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2 The term was first used by Peter Brooks to describe the way in which melodramas often work to literalize and make visible in a text an ideologically constructed metaphysical order of universe, which is mainly organized in terms of manicheanism: good versus evil. As Brooks puts it “Balzac and James need melodrama because the deep subject, the locus of their true drama, has come to be what we have called the ‘moral occult’: the domain of spiritual forces and imperatives that is not clearly visible within reality, but which they believe to be operative there, and which demands to be uncovered, registered, articulated” (The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess, 2nd edition [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995] 20-21).
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5 Unless, like Star Trek’s Captain Kirk (who once tampered with the programming of a “no-win” training simulation, thereby beating an unbeatable scenario) players are able to interfere with a game’s programming.
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7 Romero was slated to direct the Resident Evil film, but pulled out during production.
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12 See Neale, Williams, Clover.
13 Other formal differences and similarities between film and games operate. The presence of altered realities in Undying helps to sustain visual and narrative interest and may help to compensate for the absence of what in cinema would be supplied through the use of cross-cutting, a key device used to create tension and signal threat. Sound also plays a crucial role in both media to invoke the emotional impact of horror, and is often linked to the operation of the moral occult. Many videogames deploy sound as a key sign of impending danger, designed to agitate a tingling sense in anticipation of the need to act. The effect can be produced through changes in the type of music being played or through sounds that have their sources directly in the space of the game. These aural cues, present in both Undying and Resident Evil 3, help to create an increased level of expectation and play a significant role in the creation of atmosphere as well as in emotional and structural dynamics of the games.
15 See Tanya Krzywinska, A Skin For Dancing In: Possession, Witchcraft and Voodoo in Film (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 2000) for a discussion of possession in the horror film.
18 For example, Kawin states that the horror film “emphasizes the dread of knowing, the danger of curiosity” (8). A very literal rendition of this appears in Opera (1988), where the eye is literally and graphically punished.
19 Darley, 156.