The *Blair Witch* Phenomenon:

Alternate Reality Games and Contemporary American Horror Cinema

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ABSTRACT

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In 1999, Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez' found-footage horror film *The Blair Witch Project* was released alongside a widely successful marketing campaign that made the world believe that three film students had disappeared in the Maryland woods. The campaign is often remembered as an internet sensation, a hoax, or simply a viral marketing campaign, while few consider its gamified components, or particularly its likeness to an alternate reality game (ARG). ARGs are collaborative, transmedia games which blur the boundaries between fact and fiction and hide their own game-ness through immersive puzzles, compelling mysteries and vast story-worlds. This thesis therefore offers a reading of *The Blair Witch Project* campaign through the lens of an ARG. More acutely, this thesis explores ARG-like marketing techniques, specifically within the horror genre, positioning *Blair Witch* as a trailblazer for other film-based ARGs and ARG-type techniques. The first chapter of this thesis formulates an ARG axis model, which is then used in the second chapter to reconsider *Blair Witch* through the framework of an ARG. The third chapter of this thesis showcases other horror film examples through this same ARG model, including *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008) and *Unfriended* (Levan Gabriadze, 2014) among newer examples, establishing the *Blair Witch* phenomenon as a contemporary trend within the genre. Finally, I consider how and why these novel industrial tactics work so well within the horror genre in particular, as they offer new modes of engagement and horror creation in the digital era.

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Introduction: A Game Only Exists When it is Played

On January 14th 2022, American cinemas saw the release of Matt Bettinelli-Olpin and Tyler Gillett's *Scream*, one of the most feverishly anticipated and feared horror sequels of the twenty-first century. Twenty-six years after the widely successful original with which it shares its name, Bettinelli-Olpin and Gillett's movie, released exclusively for theatrical exhibition, provocatively asserts itself into the digital age by yet again altering the metatextual rules on which the horror of the *Scream* franchise is built. Of course, the franchise began as one that foregrounded the conventions of the genre: "Don't you know the rules?" Randy asks in Wes Craven's original *Scream*, released in 1996. "There are certain rules that one must abide by in order to survive a horror movie". Randy, *Scream*'s beloved horror-expert who operates as an in-film embodiment of the horror fan, goes on to list the rules for horror film survival: you can never have sex, you can never drink or do drugs, and most importantly, "never ever ever, under any circumstances say 'I'll be right back'". The rules of *Scream* function as a sort-of epitaph to the horror genre as a whole - they remember horror of the past, reflect on horror of the present, and anxiously call upon horror of the future. Nevertheless, Craven's rules to horror film survival rang true to the particular era in which the original *Scream* arose, a reflection on the slasher flicks of the 1970's and 80's.

In true *Scream* fashion, Bettinelli-Olpin and Gillett revisit and revise horror survival in the age of the internet. In *Scream* 2022, the methods of survival have changed: "Delete social media, tape over your phone camera, and turn off your GPS". What once was a commentary on horror tropes of teenage sin becomes an explicit declaration of horror's shift towards digital anxieties. I begin with such a comparison not only to point out the obvious - that contemporary horror has indeed adapted to modern technologies - but to assert the prevalence of these contemporary technologies at the very heart and core of horror itself. This comparison just as well defines a period of shifting for the genre, from the original *Scream* released in 1996 to its newest iteration in 2022, where digital technologies became both the content and vessel through which horror flows. The dominant tropes of horror are no longer sinful bodies and teenage wastelands, but are now technological omnipresence and digital proliferation.

The ramifications of our digital era can be felt well beyond the horror genre. What we used to call "cinema" has necessarily adapted to contemporary modes of moving image production, exhibition, promotion and consumption. The emergence of new technologies, such as social media and the World Wide Web, has allowed us to expand the film industry as a whole, incorporating new spatial, temporal and narratological opportunities. More acutely, our experience of moving images and our conception of what cinema *is* has necessarily adapted to the internet's capabilities; what has traditionally occurred in a dark theatre may now occur in one's own bedroom through, for example, streaming platforms. That is to say, new digital technologies have come to impact the film industry as a whole beyond the film object itself. They also, as Gabriel Menotti Gonring and Virginia Crisp write in *Besides the Screen: Moving Images Through Distribution, Promotion and Curation* (2015), promote "a reorganization of its logic of circulation, modes of consumption and viewing regimes" (2). Likewise, fans may now "immerse in the film's marketing campaign, by reacting on the official website, downloading applications and exchanging comments on social networks". In the twenty-first century, "films are still avidly watched, but the ways they are experienced has dramatically changed" (Nolwenn Mingant et al. 1).

While the emergence of the internet and its digital technologies has transformed the industry at large, few genres have embraced its integration as readily as horror, a genre well-established for its engaged and innovative use of ever-emerging technologies. Through film format, content and promotional campaigns, contemporary horror has come to engage the internet in an increasing number of ways, including found-footage styles, viral marketing campaigns, and world-building tactics that extend the film's diegesis into new territory and across media platforms - the newest, most dynamic iteration of such tactics is the horror film's alternate reality game. Often abbreviated to ARG, or sometimes referred to as a "pervasive game," the alternate reality game is a contemporary multi-media phenomenon; in *Alternate Reality Games and the Cusp of Digital Gameplay* (2017), Antero Garcia and Greg Niemeyer posit that, at its core, the ARG operates as a "primary reflection of how the real world and imaginary narratives intersect" (2). Though ARGs are notoriously difficult to accurately define - this will become relevant later - it is nonetheless important that we begin with a basic

understanding of ARGs. Michael Andersen from *Alternate Reality Gaming Network* succinctly describes some core ideals of the ARG:

> Alternate reality games (commonly abbreviated as ARGs) are fictional narratives that unfold over time, using the real world as a platform to tell a story that gives players control (or the illusion of control) over the events that unfold. Some ARGs may ask you to follow narrative threads from one platform to another. If you see a business card while watching a YouTube video, check to see if the company has an online presence, or try calling the telephone number. Players typically work together to piece together bits and scraps of information to uncover larger stories, acting like narrative archaeologists.

In this way, we may understand the ARG to be an interactive, multi-platform story-world which travels and blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction. While such multi-media world-building exists beyond the cinematic horror genre, once applied to the horror film industry, the ARG format offers interactive marketing campaigns which turn horror film narratives into a series of puzzles and treasure hunts that seamlessly incorporate the thrills of fear into everyday life.

Perhaps no film is better known for adopting this phenomenon early-on than Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez' 1999 horror film *The Blair Witch Project*. Released to an audience of unsuspecting viewers, *The Blair Witch Project* features a group of three film students, Heather Donahue, Michael Williams and Joshua Leonard, as they venture into the woods of their hometown to investigate and document the mythology of the infamous witch of Blair. Due to its then-novel found-footage style, its use of the actors' real names, and its viral fabricated marketing campaign (some say the first of its kind), the film's authenticity was quickly questioned, with many viewers believing the tale to be true. The skeptical realism of Myrick and Sánchez' work was greatly embellished through the film's accompanying documentaries and websites; viewers would scour over hours of extra filmic content in order to decipher the nature of the Blair witch and her mythology, dating back to 1785. Whether the Blair witch herself ever did really roam the woods of Burkittsville, Maryland is of little importance here - what matters is how readily viewers immersed themselves into the history of the witch herself, digitally legend-

tripping through cryptic messages and mysterious images. Much like Heather, Josh and Mike, the faux filmmaker students of the 1999 feature, the viewers became the legend trippers, turning an interest in the supernatural into a desperate hunt for answers.

In this thesis, I aim to position *Blair Witch* as a kind of precursor to film-based ARGs and ARG-type techniques. The connection between alternate reality games and *The Blair Witch Project* becomes apparent the more we consider the ARG's idiosyncrasies; it has no rulebook, no explicitly directed gameplay, and offers little-to-no guidance, and yet, the ARG simply wants to be played. In their introduction, Garcia and Niemeyer open with a simple yet captivating probe: "If you weren't reading this book it would still exist. However, a game only exists when it is played." On the intersection of mediation and participatory consumption, they effectively note the fundamental role the consumer (or player) has on the very existence of games and game media. Garcia and Niemeyer's claim over a game's supposed nonexistence if left unplayed surely begs a better understanding of what a game *is* to begin with - this will be addressed in the upcoming first chapter. Nonetheless, its core idea rings particularly true to the topic of cinematic ARGs: If you weren't watching this movie it would still exist. However, a contemporary horror marketing campaign only exists when its website is scoured, its details dissected and its clues followed. A game only exists when it is played.

This thesis aims to explore the contemporary phenomenon of ARG-like marketing techniques, specifically as they present within the horror genre. In this thesis, I am adopting Finola Kerrigan's version of film marketing, as explained in her book *Film Marketing* (2010), which asserts that marketing "begins at the new product development stage and continues throughout the formation of the project ideas, through production and into distribution and exhibition" (9). Kerrigan's understanding of film marketing positions consumption as a fundamental portion of the marketing process, writing that "film consumption does not end as the credits come up on a film, as consumers may wish to extend their consumption though visiting online review sites, discussing the film with friends or progressing with their film consumption to consumer related films"(10). Moreover, Kerrigan writes that film consumption "may be inspired by other cultural products such as books, music, television, newspaper articles and so on" (10). This, according to Kerrigan, "necessitates any study of film marketing to

consider both the producer and consumer perspectives and to look at where these intersect" (10). Such methods of film consumption and promotion are increasingly era-dependant. By this I mean that the film industry, as was mentioned earlier, is constantly adapting to new technologies and by proxy, new ways of watching, selling, and experiencing films. Our digital era has opened several new marketing avenues, and offers a particularly pressing mediascape for Kerrigan's notion of marketing to be applied. The site of the horror ARG is one where Kerrigan's definition of film marketing can be fully executed in order to acknowledge the interconnected nature of ARG production, promotion and consumption.

While other notable ARG examples from outside the field of horror films will be referenced for historical or contextual purposes, I am here focused on the genre of horror in order to better understand how such ARG tactics impart horror's quintessential notion of fear in novel ways. This thesis, and its focus on the contemporary, will engage comparatively with historical conceptions of horror cinema in order to unpack not only the mere existence of cinematic horror ARG's, but also what role they play in the changing genre of horror itself. This will be facilitated by introducing horror-specific texts such as Isabel Pinedo's *Recreational Terror* (1996), J.P. Telotte's *The Blair Witch Project Project: Film and the Internet* (2001), and Linnie Blake and Xavier Aldana Reyes' *Digital Horror* (2015) which outline horror characteristics in the postmodern and contemporary ages and will be used comparatively to showcase changes within the genre. I will specifically interrogate how web-based game tactics are enacted in contemporary horror, primarily situating *The Blair Witch Project* as a trailblazer for this phenomenon and supplementing this discussion with subsequent examples. This thesis will showcase contemporary horror's tendency to produce fear in seemingly non-traditional ways which quite literally re-frame horror for the digital age.

A Review of Horror History and Literature

It is thus necessary to begin by establishing the parameters and critical history which will both motivate and guide this thesis. Horror has long been understood by scholars as an engaged, self-reflexive genre that frequently operates as allegory for contemporary anxieties (Carroll; Grant; Worland). Such scholarship, which makes up a large portion of all horror criticism, asks

what we are afraid of, and why we are afraid of it, drawing conclusions that often point outward to socio-cultural, psychological, or political answers. That is to say, horror's monster, whether it be a vampire, a crazed killer, or an otherworldly beast, is simply a placeholder or physical manifestation of society's greatest fears and anxieties. While these anxieties may change over time, and while their appearance in each horror flick may look different, much of horror scholarship argues that at their core, these monstrous figures are simply anxiety incarnate.

In "Towards an Aesthetics of Cinematic Horror" (2004), Steven Jay Schneider takes note of the academic blind-spot that arises when we look only at what is metaphorically represented in the horror film and overlook what is actually presented on screen:

> Extended investigations into what might be called the "aesthetics of horror cinema"—in which medium-specific and "middle-level" questions concerning those filmic (including narrative) techniques, principles, devices, conventions, and images that have arguably proven most effective and reliable when it comes to frightening viewers over time, across geographic and cultural borders, and even after repeated viewings—have been few and far between to date. (131)

Even still, scholarship that does prove to be concerned with the formal construction of fear in horror is often taken up by scholars using psychoanalytic frameworks that attempt to understand horror's appeal from a pleasure perspective, investigating the viewer's desire to be horrified rather than investigating how fear itself is formally and industrially achieved in the first place (Clover; Hanich; Schneider). Despite the age of Schneider's text, examinations into fearful tactics which avoid the path of psychoanalysis or metaphor, remain relatively scarce. I therefore aim to probe this area and its literary potential in order to question not what we are afraid of or why we are afraid, but how it is that we are rendered horrified. In other words, I will focus on the formal and industrial techniques of contemporary horror marketing campaigns and consider how those techniques are adapting, as what we used to consider a film has transformed into a type of multi-mediated gamified world.

Much recent work in the digital age has focused on the portrayal of advanced technologies as one particularly charged iteration of our anxieties, noting that contemporary horror turns new technology into a terrifying site of encounter with our everyday devices

(Duchaney). Such scholarship is also reflected in Blake and Aldana Reyes' collection *Digital Horror*, which posits that digital horror is "more than vaguely connected" to the technological capabilities that it uses within its own production. They write that digital horror "often exploits its own framing and stylistic devices to offer reflections on contemporary fears, especially those regarding digital technologies themselves" (Blake & Aldana Reyes 3). While much horror scholarship has interrogated the relationship between horror and technology, the interrogation often begins and ends with technology operating as the subject of the horror. I will move beyond the notion of technology as content. Rather, this thesis posits that the contemporary horror film's use of new technology as an expanded apparatus of presentation, narrative and address provides an opportunity to investigate how it is that fear is constructed and sustained, both traditionally and in the current gamified expanded world in which horror films operate. The internet in particular functions as a tool through which transmedia game tactics and aesthetics may be used to produce, manufacture, and manipulate fear in novel ways.

Though the use of the internet and new media formats is a foundational part of this thesis, it bodes well to also acknowledge the industry practices which predate the subjects herein and function as part of a larger history of horror marketing. The concept of transmedia narratives, for example, which is an essential element to the alternate reality game, is not a new one. Before the internet became a common-place tool for film marketing (and still to this day), horror campaigns used transmedia tactics, albeit in a different form, to franchise; through tie-in novels and games, merchandise, but primarily sequel films, the horror film franchising model predates contemporary transmedia tendencies and informs ARG methods in its pursuit to extend narrative bounds and expand story-worlds. Critically and academically, popular horror franchises have often been reduced to simple, formulaic commercial objects, accused of pumping out numerous repetitive sequels for profit while forsaking complex narratives and growth (McKenna and Proctor). Yet, much of this discourse on horror franchises fails to acknowledge the nuanced nature of sequel films and ignores the significant role each franchise instalment plays in building a larger story-world (Dixon). Conversely, Matt Hills argues that franchise sequels are not mere commercial copies of one another, but instead acknowledges how the films work to evolve the franchise narrative, each film adding to a larger whole, an ever-expanding mythology and lore:

> In the first Friday the 13th, the killer is not Jason, it is actually his mother … Only in Part III does Jason don the hockey mask that becomes his trademark. It could also be argued that once Jason has become a constant fixture of the series, he changes significantly across the franchise, developing superhuman strength in Part III, becoming more obviously zombie-like after Part V and Part VI, and displaying a capacity to inhabit other bodies in the 'possession horror' reworking of Part IX, Jason Goes to Hell: The Final Friday. (Hills in Mckenna and Proctor 4)

Through its twelve instalments, as well as its other franchised media, the *Friday the 13th* franchise continues to grow and adapt. That is to say, before ARGs, transmedia horror was not untypical; our notion of ARG transmediation is merely the newest iteration of industry practices which have long been standard.

Of course, innovative marketing stunts and promotional gimmicks did not begin with the rise of the internet either. Before film websites and social media profiles became popular tools for playful marketing tricks, horror campaigns could rely on other avenues to scare audiences beyond the silver screen. In 1958, William Castle's *Macabre* was released; those who purchased tickets to view the film were given a certificate for a $1000 life insurance policy to financially protect their families in the event of their untimely death due to fright (Leeder 780; Serafino). Another similar gimmick from Castle was featured during screenings of his 1959 film *The Tingler*, where audiences were exposed to sporadic jolts from the motors hiding under their seats (Leeder 773). The opening sequence to the film, announced by Castle himself, declared: "If at any times you are conscious of a tingling sensation, you can obtain immediate relief by screaming. […] Remember this: a scream at the right time may save your life" (Leeder 773-774). Some less exhaustive but no less effective stunts include the presence of ambulances nearby early screenings of *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), making sure that help was not far in the event that an audience member might be rendered so horrified that they would need medical attention (Mellor). These stunts, among others, are no less relevant to the overall conversation about how marketing may be used as a tool to playfully bridge the gap between film and audience. The examples herein are merely the newest evolution of marketing stunts, building upon and adapting from what has already been established before. This thesis, however, is

concerned with the most contemporary iteration of such practices - the ones which fundamentally stem from our ever-digitized, gamified, and interconnected era.

Also important is the broader field of gaming, which is no stranger to the horror genre; several earlier horror game formats predate the ARG and inform its operation. The horror game industry, which includes video games, board games, and role-playing games to name a few types, has a long-spanning history that has flourished before and beyond the rise of the internet and the popularity of the alternate reality game. One type of horror game that is particularly pertinent as a precursor to the cinematic ARG is the horror film tie-in video game, a frequent portion of the horror franchises mentioned earlier. In *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play* (2009), Bernard Perron takes note of how quickly the gaming industry latched onto horror aesthetics, stories and conventions, writing that "the horror genre emerges relatively early in the history of the video game with the famous *Haunted House* (Atari, 1981)". Despite limited resources and the industry's infancy, Perron notes that soon after, the horror video game readily integrates itself with the cinematic world:

> The horror video game attempted to measure itself against literary and film canons. Slashers like John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978 - game: Atari, 1983) and Sean S. Cunningham's *Friday the 13th* (1980 - game: for the NES: LJN Toys, 1989) were adapted. *Project Firestart* (Dynamix, 1989) Borrowed generously from the films *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979) and *Aliens* (James Cameron, 1986). […] Indeed, the first games of these series (*Resident Evil*, Capcom, 1996-2009; *Silent Hill*, Konami, 1999-2008) are true video game classics, using all the audio-visual tricks of horror film (camera angles and movements, lighting, deadly silences, eerie music, scary monsters, etc.) and showing a wide spectrum of effects, from horror to terror and from the visceral to the psychological. (5)

Moreover, given the popularity of the horror video game genre, there is, as I write this, no shortage of scholarly work on the intersection of horror and gaming. The abundance of horror game scholarship, including Perron's volume mentioned above, touches upon game aesthetics and sound (Kromand), gender relations (Kirkland), spectatorship and affect theory (Perron "Signs of a Threat") and national game industries (Marak) among many other topics relating to

the horror genre. This sector of academia has flourished since 2000, as has the industry with which it is concerned, and yet, there is still a dearth of scholarship on horror games that do not operate as traditional video games. That is to say that horror ARGs, while they are, in many ways, similar to horror video games, offer separate game models which have long been lacking in academic attention. We may expand upon existing horror game literature in order to flesh out what a horror ARG may look like, how it might work differently than a horror video game, and why horror ARGs are deserving of their own academic theory.

Towards a Theory of Alternate Reality Games

Given that a robust, unified ARG theory does not yet exist, I ask: what might ARG theory look like? Even simpler, rather, considering the nebulous nature of ARGs: how might we conceive of a fuller, more specific ARG model, which may over time help to formulate a workable theory? We may begin to glean information and answer these questions by first considering why the ARG is so difficult to define, and second, by looking at previously used ARG models, applying and adapting them to our case study. A definitive model for alternate reality games has often been difficult to pin down due to the novel, emergent, and adaptable nature of ARGs; ARG definitions, academic or otherwise, remain relatively sparse. Those that do exist, such as the definition used earlier herein, are often broad, loosely pointing towards few key components and leaving much room for interpretation, evolution and malleability; ARGs are, after all, “a lot of things to a lot of people” (Garcia and Niemeyer 8). Given their heavy reliance on varying media types, and more acutely, media which infiltrates our everyday life, it is of no surprise that ARGs are, too, constantly adapting and shifting with technology. In this way, ARGs may have successfully evaded constricting definitions for so long precisely due to their textually amorphous structure - we may conceptually grasp certain truths about the ARG, but the ARG cannot be pinned down taxonomically because it cannot be pinned down narratologically or technologically.

Sean Stacey, early ARG pioneer and the individual responsible for coining the genre’s very terminology, created and launched the website unfiction.com in 2002 in response to his own difficulty defining the concept; it operated as an encyclopedia of sorts, offering a glossary,

history, and an expansive guide through ARGs. In his website entry "Undefining ARG" (2006), Stacey notes that his reluctance to concretely define ARGs was because the definition "is both mutable in time and dependent upon the current, collective opinions of all of its participants" (2). He goes on to suggest that the ARG is best understood not by strictly defining its nature or properties, but by viewing each individual example through its placement on three axes - ruleset, coherence, and authorship - which together create "chaotic fiction" (3). Stacey's philosophy on the definition, or undefinition of ARGs is pertinent, not because his specific axes will be used throughout this thesis - I will later establish my own working definition using a similar principle - but because they allow us to understand the fundamentally nebulous nature of the ARG phenomenon. If the man himself who created the term "alternate reality game" cannot so easily define it, and in fact chooses distinctly to avoid strict defining boundaries, there is perhaps reason to give more credence to newer, more flexible models of taxonomy.

While it remains relevant that alternate reality games are difficult to define, it is nonetheless imperative that we create a working model of ARGs which makes sense for our purposes. I will therefore further consider and compile some of the ARGs commonly noted characteristics and, like Stacey, work with several axes in order to, not undefine, but re-define the alternate reality game in all its obscurity. These axes, as I will outline in the first chapter, work together to create the flexible model needed for our topic, and will then be applied to *The Blair Witch Project* to acutely study their power in marketing fear and the productive relations between ARGs and post-internet horror films.

***The Blair Witch Project*: Blazing the Trail**

Why, then, should *The Blair Witch Project* be our primary case study? *The Blair Witch Project* and its marketing campaign have long been a case of intrigue for a plethora of reasons. The film and its accompanying sites are firstly known for popularizing the use of low-key, handheld aesthetics in horror cinema - they are not quite responsible for inventing the found-footage style, but are oft noted as kickstarting the horror sub-genre which still flourishes today (Blake and Aldana Reyes 126). In *Found Footage Horror Films: A Cognitive Approach* (2019), Peter Turner discusses the brief history of found footage prior to *The Blair Witch Project*:

> There had been previous films in this style: *Cannibal Holocaust* (Deodato, 1980) contains the use of 'found footage' within its narrative structure, and *Man Bites Dog* (Belvaux, Bonzel and Poelvoorde, 1992) is a mock-documentary that purports to be completely filmed by a diegetic film crew. However, neither of these films had the cultural impact or box office success of *The Blair Witch Project*, a film that eventually spawned numerous imitators, and arguably the entire found footage horror subgenre that now consists of hundreds of films. (1)

Myrick and Sánchez' film is also known to be a financial success, becoming a blockbuster sleeper-hit over the years following its initial release. Though exact numbers are sometimes debated, *The Blair Witch Project* is said to have grossed roughly $250 million world-wide, with its meagre production budget of $60,000 and a total budget said to range between $200,000 and $500,000; for years to come, this feat reinforced the idea that to create a successful horror film, "you don't need $80 million budgets" (Lyons). This, undoubtedly, plays a role in the popularity of ARG-like marketing gimmicks given their low-cost to high-payout ratio. As *Blair Witch* has shown us, when these marketing stunts work, they offer an impressive return-on-investment unmatched by traditional marketing methods.

Despite *The Blair Witch Project*'s numerous accomplishments - these are only a few of its accolades - it is not often Myrick and Sánchez' use of shaky camera or their financial successes that is applauded. Rather, it is the film's ongoing status as the first movie to feature an internet-based viral marketing campaign which continues to earn *Blair Witch* significant praise. *The Blair Witch Project*'s use of the internet as a combined narrative and marketing space has remained of utmost importance to casual viewers, hardcore fans, and academics alike. In other words, *The Blair Witch Project*'s legacy lays in its ability to infiltrate and harness the internet at an early age, using its ambit to reach new levels of film consumption and interaction not seen before; this is primarily how Myrick and Sánchez' film is discussed, studied, and remembered.

This legacy is important, as it acknowledges the power of the film's marketing campaign pursued through the internet, but it also ignores the multitude of other mediated and unmediated sites which worked alongside the film's internet pages to create the so-called "larger picture" of the campaign. This larger picture, I argue, has not adequately been acknowledged or studied.

Few papers and interviews have touched upon similar ideas which point to the lack of attention given to other aspects of the marketing campaign; Dwight Cairns, who at the time of publishing was Vice-President of Sony's Internet Marketing Strategy Group, is quoted in Telotte's seminal text as making a similar claim. He writes: "People tend to forget that the offline campaign . . . was so well integrated into what they did on the Web—the missing posters of the unknown cast, the TV spots perpetuating the myth that missing footage was found and that they should go to the site to see more. The Web was just another channel to deliver the message" (33). It is here pertinent to note not only that *The Blair Witch Projec*t campaign offers a multitude of other mediated channels, but also that these mediated channels largely remain analytically overlooked. Moreover, Myrick and Sánchez' film and accompanying campaign is often considered to be a one-time phenomenon whose replication has frequently been attempted but never succeeded. I argue, to the contrary of most academic accounts, that similar marketing campaigns have run successfully which prove both that the *Blair Witch* ARG archetype continues to thrive in new internet spaces, and that film engagement as a whole has shifted so significantly that these practices are worthy of further discussion and attention.

As such, I will build upon older, internet-based readings of *The Blair Witch Project,* such as Telotte's text mentioned above, and apply a new framework to illuminate the proverbial larger picture at hand. I ask: What do we lose by reading *The Blair Witch Project*'s internet spaces in isolation from its total mediascape? Conversely, what might we gain by considering the use of the internet in *The Blair Witch Project* as, not the whole puzzle, but as merely a piece? I am dubbing this idea - my internet-adjacent reading of *The Blair Witch Project* - the *Blair Witch* phenomenon. The *Blair Witch* phenomenon, which I will lay out in the upcoming chapters, offers a new, separate reading of the 1999 horror classic which pivots away from its legacy as a viral internet sensation and more acutely describes how the World Wide Web operated as a portion of a larger system. This "larger system" I speak of is *The Blair Witch Project*'s lying, trickster, gamified, transmedia marketing campaign - or, as we will come to know it, an apt opportunity for an alternate reality game reading. To be clear, the *Blair Witch* phenomenon will not ignore or exclude the use of the internet as it played out within the campaign - to the contrary, the internet remains a vital component within the ARG phenomenon at large and for our particular case study

as well. Rather, I aim to re-examine the use of the internet as a portion which coexists and cooperates with varying media spaces and offline sites, taking into consideration its role within the alternate reality game model.

In order to accurately understand *The Blair Witch Project*'s larger system, similar to Stacey's ARG model, my first chapter will lay out five ARG axes: *digitization, decentralization, tethered gameplay, transmediation, and the This Is Not A Game philosophy.* These axes will be used in the second chapter to reconsider *The Blair Witch Project* not only as a viral marketing hit but also through the lens of an ARG, one which operates not only for promotional purposes but also as an experiment in horror creation. The third chapter will showcase contemporary horror films which will be read similarly, asserting the notion that *Blair Witch*-type campaigns and methods continue to exist in new ways. These include but are not limited to: *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008), *Unfriended* (Levan Gabriadze, 2014), *Candyman* (Nia DaCosta, 2021) and *The Black Phone* (Scott Derrickson, 2022). These cases, alongside others, will offer supplementary support, and while they each function differently from one another, they further speak to the adaptability and proliferation of ARGs in the digital age of horror cinema. The purpose of this thesis, therefore, is threefold: (I) to formulate an ARG model which will be used to revisit *The Blair Witch Project* through the framework of an ARG; (II) to showcase newer horror film examples through this same model, establishing the *Blair Witch* phenomenon not as a one-off incident but as a trend; and (III) to consider how and why these new formal and industrial tactics work so well within the horror genre, offering refreshing tricks and treats in horror creation for the digital age.

Chapter One: *This is Not a Game* and Other Lies

All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course.... The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e., forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.

-Johann Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*

The magic circle is a concept used by game scholars and in game design to describe and delineate the area, whether physical, mental, or digital, wherein any given game is played. More than simply a space, the magic circle describes the total separateness that comes with gameplay, where the rules and conventions of regular life are temporarily suspended, and a new set of regulations and characteristics emerges. First introduced by Johann Huizinga in *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, scholars Eric Zimmerman, Katie Salen, and Edward Castronova, among others, have expanded the concept to function as an illustration of the boundary or membrane that encapsulates gameplay. In their 2003 book *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals,* Zimmerman and Salen build upon the role of the magic circle, writing that while the magic circle offers varying degrees of closed-ness depending on each individual game, at its core, "the space it circumscribes is enclosed and separate from the real world" (2).

For an ARG, the magic circle's delineation is unknowable. In a traditional game setting, the game's narrative may prompt a player's in-game character with, for example, investigating paranormal events in the Black Hills Forest of Maryland - a clear quest set forth by the gaming powers that be, to be executed within the game realm. When the player walks away from the board, or shuts off their console - departing the magic circle - the game is effectively done. The game world is untethered from our own. Conversely, in an ARG, you may unknowingly stumble upon a website that details centuries of frightening, paranormal occurrences in those same Maryland Hills and the mysterious disappearances of several young adults in the area. What

remains of utmost importance here is the act of "stumbling upon", which signals a lack of separation between our own world and the world of the game. As traditional games largely remain autonomous from the real world, the ARG must be bound to it in order to work, offering a porous boundary wherein its contents may leak out and vice versa. In his 2005 book *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games*, media and game design scholar Edward Castronova describes this evolution of the magic circle as the "almost-magic circle" (159). Where video games, board games, and even role-playing games offer an escape from reality, ARGs offer a form of gameplay where reality and fiction fundamentally coexist. This necessary coexistence of reality and fiction offers an effective entry point into the peculiar workings of alternate reality games.

In order to unpack these peculiarities, the alternate reality game will be understood and applied as a phenomenon which operates on five axes: *digitization, decentralization, tethered gameplay*, *transmediation*, and the *This Is Not A Game* philosophy. Though each axis will be described separately, this should not negate their synergistic nature - that is to say, as we move through the axes, their coexistence and cooperation should become clear. The axes and terminology as described herein, will, in following chapters, be weaved throughout our preliminary case study *The Blair Witch Project* as well as applied to other recent films, unveiling contemporary horror's tendencies towards ARG tactics and the formative role these tactics play in creating the horror itself. More precisely, I will apply each individual axis to the case study at hand, illuminating the ways in which these ARG-like characteristics and methods help to foster the horror that lays at the heart of *The Blair Witch Project*. Before we may do so, let us outline the five ARG axes in order to establish the framework which will ground the remainder of this thesis.

Digitization

One of the most pertinent aspects of the ARG in general, and especially vital to our primary case study, is the importance of digital media and the internet - we will dub this first axis *digitization*. Though the ARG exists across and within varying types of media and non-mediated spaces (i.e. the real world), ARGs primarily arose from and were popularized through the

internet - as the internet and its digital networks grew, so too did narratological possibilities and communication opportunities. Often posited as the first ever ARG, *Ong's Hat* was an American project that began in the 1980's (no specific year is known due to its obscure origins and slow rise to popularity) which figuratively set the stage for following internet ARGs in its early use of the internet as a narrative platform. In the now-defunct UK based gaming magazine GamesTM, Chris McMahon describes *Ong's Hat*'s early use of the internet:

> The project, also known as the Incunabula Papers, was a selection of documents posted on The Well, a pioneering internet social site in the late Eighties. Having sat dormant for a decade, the documents provoked a widespread online investigation in the late Nineties, with participants immersed in a fictional story about alternate realities via bulletin board systems, old Xerox mail art networks and early eZines. (90)

Moreover, in an interview with Joseph Matheny, writer and creator of *Ong's Hat*, McMahon describes how Matheny "took the concept of 'legend tripping' - that is, the act of venturing to areas of some horrific and supernatural event a la *The Blair Witch Project* - and shifted it online" (90). We may, for now, set aside McMahon's reference to our primary case study and simply look at what is being said about *Ong's Hat* as an example of ARGs on the internet. Here, Matheny's creative concept for the ARG calls attention to the internet as its defining factor - that is to say, legend tripping is not an internet phenomenon, but by bringing legend tripping to the internet, a new phenomenon emerges. Alternate reality games were fundamentally created within and now primarily exist across the internet. Accordingly, Garcia and Niemeyer posit that ARGs may be considered "cultural processes that reflect society coming to terms with the liquidity of networked culture" (4). The ARG not only relies on digital media as a narrative platform, but also as inspiration - the ARG's fundamental nature operates as a response to the omnipresence and proliferation of digital spaces.

Decentralization

Such digital proliferation, or the "liquidity of networked culture" as Garcia and Niemeyer call it, has come to change more than the game mediation itself, but has also come to change

gameplay structures, the way players relate to the game world, and their relations to one another. Operating in a fundamentally different fashion than both traditional game and film consumer dynamics, the ARG changes our understanding of the relationship between game and consumer, or player, by shifting the traditional power dynamics of authoritative works. Comparative to traditional video game structures, for example, ARGs offer players more freedom to make their own decisions and traverse the narrative as they see fit. Video games must "always adhere to the code implanted before they leave the development studio, funnelling players along predefined narratives that offer only the illusion of choice" (McMahon 92). Garcia and Niemeyer explore the way in which new media and its connectedness has altered the implicit hierarchies of gaming:

> ARGs untether and embody the cultural changes provoked by increased mobile media access and social networking. Instead of keeping the political power of networking contained behind the screen, ARGs emphasize the collaborative nature of games that are mediated by the bodies of autonomous players rather than solely by flickering screens, keyboards, and controllers. (5)

In this way, the axis of *decentralization* will be used to describe the ARGs anti-authoritative tendencies.

With such shifts in game hierarchies also comes a proclivity for collaboration. Matheny describes such behaviour in ARG communities as the "collective detective scenario" (Matheny in McMahon 90). This particular aspect of the ARG can be most clearly observed by looking at the "Cloudmakers", the self-proclaimed title given to the loyal followers of the infamous ARG marketing campaign *The Beast*. Launched as a promotional campaign for Steven Spielberg's 2001 film *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*, *The Beast* is arguably the most well-known and popular ARG, garnering over three million active participants during its initial run (McMahon 89). The Cloudmakers, as they called themselves, often joined the game after watching the film's trailer which featured peculiar information about a "Sentient Machine Therapist", what we now understand to be an ARG teaser. This small, seemingly innocuous detail sent players down the proverbial rabbit-hole:

> Perform a Web search for Jeanine Salla, the curious-sounding 'Sentient Machine Therapist' credited in the trailer, and you start down an enormous, convoluted path of cross-references, puzzles, and red herrings: a science-fiction murder mystery that involves e-mail, faxes, voice-mail messages, at least 15 distinct Web sites (each with its own purpose and design aesthetic), and 'rallies' for a fictitious anti-robot organization that were held in New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago last weekend. (Wolk)

As the Cloudmakers worked to unravel the mystery spread across the multitude of mediated spaces, the puzzles progressively became "far too complicated for any one player to work out" (Wolk). *The Beast*'s creators, it seems, encouraged coordination, which far surpassed previous notions of co-operative gameplay. Here, it becomes clear that the ARGs mode of gameplay offers an alternative to game traditions where one may look outward to peers, instead of upward to the game-master for guidance and answers.

Tethered Gameplay

Despite the importance of the digital for alternate reality games, another fundamental aspect to the ARG is its use of the real world as a platform onto which its fictional world and narrative are built. For an ARG, this is more than simply having a story set on Earth, in our universe and timeline, but more specifically refers to the physical use of our real world as a place where the story may continue to unfold. A prominent example of this can be seen in the popular ARG *I Love Bees,* which was released in July 2004 as a marketing campaign for the Bungie video game *Halo 2*. The ARG's story involved a military spacecraft's artificial intelligence program named Melissa. After becoming damaged in a crash, Melissa began transferring herself to the web in an attempt to preserve her data, and in doing so ended up hacking the pre-existing bee-enthusiast website ilovebees.com. This takeover left the website's graphics corrupted and mysteriously scattered information unrelated to bees throughout its pages. Though information regarding the ARG was shared with the masses through the *Halo 2* cinematic trailer - it curiously featured the ilovebees.com link - select players were privy to a more intimate introduction to the ARG. In an exposé entitled *Halo 2: Remember the Bees* for IGN, Arun Devidas details the

peculiar real world launch of the ARG: “On the same day the *Halo 2* trailer premiered, members of the ARG community were Fedexed jars of honey with cutout letters leading them to the website and the countdown”. The jars, labelled Margaret’s Honey, offered a real world kickstart to the ARG player’s descent down the rabbit-hole.

Here, I posit *tethered gameplay* as the third axis with which ARGs may map themselves out. Tethered gameplay can perhaps be best understood as an example of the “almost-magic circle” introduced by Castronova earlier herein. While the image of the magic circle, or in our case the almost-magic circle, offers an effective visualization of tethered gameplay, we may supplement its definition by looking to Janet Murray’s metaphor of immersion, as seen in her 1997 book *Hamlet on the Holodeck:*

> Immersion is a metaphorical term derived from the physical experience of being submerged in water. We seek the same feeling from a psychologically immersive experience that we do from a plunge in the ocean or swimming pool: the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus. (99)

Immersion, then, offers us useful language for understanding the pervasiveness of ARGs, not in terms of their quantity, but rather in terms of their quality. Immersion calls attention to the all-encompassing mode of gameplay seen with ARGs, where one is surrounded by content and inundated with material.

While Murray’s term can be used to describe any form of immersive narrative and is not exclusive to ARGs, it seems to be particularly pertinent to the alternate reality game precisely in the way that ARGs operate within the real world. We may immerse ourselves in the multiplicity of narratives and media abound, jumping into their waters head-first and reemerging to the surface once the movie is over or the book is put down. Instead, an ARG player may fall into the ocean, suddenly float away from shore and remain submerged, swimming through the story-world. In other words, immersion is not unique to ARGs, but there is no fictional immersion more readily available than that which fundamentally permeates ones own life. The magic circle may never be fully and completely shut off from the outside world. However, there is no more porous and unstable magical membrane than the almost-magic circle.

Transmediation

Garcia and Niemeyer use similar terminology to describe narrative submersion and swimming through content in ARGs, writing that "the flotsam and jetsam of digital storytelling and the hidden nuggets of narrative in the real world - seemingly everywhere - make understanding any given ARG a process of staying afloat and treading through the gaming soup" (8). While the "gaming soup" offers a parallel understanding of ARG immersion, the "flotsam and jetsam" offers a fascinating point of entry into yet another key aspect that separates the ARG from most other game formats: transmedia storytelling. First introduced by Henry Jenkins in *Convergence Culture* (2006), Jenkins describes a transmedia story as a narrative which "unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinct and valuable contribution to the whole" (95-96). A prototypical transmedia example would utilize multiple forms of media, each working both separately and together, to unfold the greater story. Each portion of the franchise, Jenkins writes, must be "self-contained", so that one may enjoy each portion without requiring knowledge of the others. Despite its self-contained nature, the contemporary phenomenon is aptly named transmedia as it encourages and rewards "reading across the media", offering new knowledge, insights and a deeper experience of the story-world with each new media addition (96). While this point functions similarly to the above note of decentralization - both aspects favour the non-authoritative disbursement and sharing of information - it is nonetheless helpful to draw a distinction between the two, as decentralization represents the mode of gameplay between game participants and transmedia describes the multitude of media wherein the game unfolds. For this reason, we will call the fourth axis *transmediation*.

Transmedia storytelling is so pertinent to the operation of alternate reality games that ARGs are often considered mere examples of transmedia storytelling - that is to say that in some cases, the terms have been used synonymously. Instead, I posit that transmedia storytelling is a crucial, yet only partial element of the ARG format. It would appear that the main partitioning factor between transmedia storytelling and an ARG is the inclusion of the real world as a platform wherein a portion of the story unfolds. The ARG player, unbeknownst to them that they are even a player, stumbles upon a media artifact which begins their journey into the game.

Transmedia storytelling allows the player to jump from media to media, platform to platform, but it is the use of our own world which helps transform transmediation into an ARG characteristic.

To illustrate this point, we may look comparatively at an example of non-ARG transmedia alongside an ARG which uses transmediation and specifically uses the real world as a platform. The newest volume of the Netflix original reboot series *Unsolved Mysteries*, released over the course of several weeks in October and November 2022, features a unique QR code at the end of each episode alongside the words "join the search, unlock more clues". When the code is scanned using a cellphone camera, viewers are taken to the official webpage for the show which features extra information on each case, imploring audiences to become investigators from the comfort of their own home. Conversely, we may return to the exemplary ARG *I Love Bees* which used the real world as platform for its story in a number of ways. The jars of honey mentioned earlier were the first instance of tethered gameplay, but they were not the last - later on in the *Halo* ARG, players would search for coordinates and their accompanying timestamps on the ilovebees.com website, leading them to pay phones across the United States which would ring at specific times. The calls, frequently pre-recorded messages but sometimes operated by a voice actor playing the AI character Melissa, would ask the players questions and impose challenges. Of course, these calls were not mere marketing stunts but fundamentally fuelled the ARG's story: "When enough players gave the correct answers, the producers posted the latest instalment of a 10-hour audio drama that formed the heart of the *I Love Bees* narrative" (Shachtman). As the game went on, players became more and more willing to do whatever necessary to please Melissa and unfurl the narrative: "Players became increasingly willing to do whatever it took to get to those phones and convince Melissa that they were there to help her. That was why, on Oct. 12, Mr. Thorne was at a Kopper Kitchen restaurant near the Boise airport, taking a picture of a friend who was decked out in a futuristic combat uniform. Later that day, he persuaded hundreds of his fellow Idahoans to salute the camera, answering another challenge received by phone" (Shachtman).

Both of these examples utilize transmedia tactics, but only one of them is an ARG. *Unsolved Mysteries* plainly asks viewers to jump from one mediated space to another; while *I Love Bees* does the same, it also sends players out into the world beyond screens to continue the

game. The latter example indicates a number of other important truths about ARGs, namely the intensive dedication of its participants and the potential for narrative depth that they offer. What is of utmost importance to us here, however, is the way in which the ARG prioritizes back-and-forth movement, not just between mediated sites, but also between their laptop, their TV screen, or their mobile device and unmediated spaces in the real world. That is to say, for players of alternate reality games, the post-office and local payphones may now not just be places to collect mail and make impromptu phone calls, but are also grounds where gaming persists.

The "This is Not a Game" Philosophy

Lastly, and arguably most importantly, we must understand the heart of the ARG, its paramount axis, or rather, its philosophical nucleus: *this is not a game*. Frequently abbreviated to TINAG, "this is not a game" concisely describes the veil of illusion and trickery that lays over the alternate reality game. An ARGs main purpose is to present itself as real and deny its fictional, game-like status - Garcia and Niemeyer write that ARGs "cast the precise nature of reality into question, blur social boundaries, and encourage players to renegotiate its status" (47). Before we might understand how the TINAG principle works, however, it bodes well for us to begin by breaking down, for the purpose of this thesis, what we may consider to be a game in the first place.

Similarly to ARGs, games in general prove to be quite difficult to define. In his 2005 book *This is Not a Game: A Guide to Alternate Reality Gaming*, Dave Szulborski describes the four main paradigms he claims are responsible for making a game. Szulborski states that a game must have "defined rules for playing the game, a defined space where the game takes place, a given set of components and/or game pieces through which the game is conducted, and a set of win/loss scenarios which define the end of the game and the objectives for the players involved". In her 2010 book *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*, Jane Mcgonigal similarly notes four main characteristics which make a game, a game: a goal or clear purpose, rules which limit options and sometimes force creative exploration, a feedback system which notifies players of their progress through scores, points, levels, or simple prompts, and voluntary participation which means that all involved "knowingly and willingly"

accept the previous terms (21). ARGs, as they go, do not have most, if any of these typical game standards, and as such may not be considered games at all. And yet, as McGonigal writes, there is something "essentially unique about the way games structure experience" (21). We call them alternate reality games precisely because, despite their lack of traditional game paradigms, they structure experience in a similar fashion to the games we have come to know and love for centuries. "When we're playing a game," McGonigal writes, "we just know it" (20-21).

What happens, then, before we "know it"? How does the ARG engender the TINAG philosophy so necessary for its proliferation? Szulborski writes that ARGs accomplish this goal by "ignoring the paradigms" set forth by games and gaming traditions, the very paradigms quoted earlier from Szulborski himself. The ARG may function and propagate as a game precisely because it actively ignores what is expected of games. More specifically, it appears as though the allure of many ARG's lays precisely in their complete denial of gaming traditions while maintaining a game-like essence of camaraderie, pursuit, and survival. As such, the ARG may easily camouflage itself through its novel game structure, tactics and modes of gameplay, and may thereby perpetuate the TINAG philosophy.

Likewise, we may ask: what happens *after* we "know it"? If the ARG is but a game, and its players, once none the wiser, become aware of its fictional status, how do the ARG and its participants continue on? This question is explored, albeit indirectly, by Margrit Schreier in her text, "Please Help Me; All I Want to Know Is: Is It Real or Not?" (2004), which studies the reception of *The Blair Witch Project* and its purported authenticity. Though Schreier's text is not concerned with the concept of ARGs and never directly mentions the TINAG philosophy, it provides a particularly useful insight into the minds of those who come across such realm-bending texts and struggle to understand their status. As Schreier's text notes, many participants who engaged with the *Blair Witch* campaign around the time of its initial release did not realize it was, in fact, a fictional marketing campaign. However, most participants became aware of its fictional nature at some point along their way through the campaign. And yet, even after learning of the fictional nature of the campaign, many continued to play; or, as we might describe, they continued operating within the TINAG philosophy. Schreier describes the viewer's process of "playing the game" once the false veil of truth is lifted:

> There are some recipients who willingly enter into the game of the directors yet do so with a kind of double consciousness: they keep themselves deliberately ignorant of the fictional status of the film, with a view to a higher enjoyment of the ambiguities, yet knowing full well on a meta level that keeping themselves ignorant is necessary only because they already know that the film is fiction. (10-11)

This double consciousness lays precisely at the crux of the TINAG philosophy. It asks the viewer to step into a new consciousness that occupies the liminal space between reality and fiction. This liminal space, I argue, is optimally reached through ARG techniques, which allow the viewer to flow seamlessly from their own life into the narrative game world. What looking closely at *The Blair Witch Project* phenomenon will show us in the upcoming chapter is that a horror film campaign may also enact such tactics as a means of producing a new kind of fear, one which builds upon the effects of its found footage nature and the hyperrealism it exudes.

Because of their very nature, much of the literature on alternate reality games scrutinizes and questions their game status. Whether or not the ARG is, truly, a game is a redundant interrogation. This thesis is not concerned with evaluating the game status of an ARG or any marketing campaign that may look like one. The truth is that many ARGs may simultaneously be considered games and not games at all; the coexistence of these partial and shifting definitions operate as the fuel which allows the game itself to persist. In the upcoming chapter, I will therefore set aside such questions and will instead focus on applying our newly created axes for ARG games onto our primary case study in order to better understand the use of ARG tactics in contemporary horror. If a game truly does only exist when it is played, let us stop demanding proof of its game-ness and instead play along.

Chapter Two: Breaking the Magic Circle

"MISSING

On October 21, 1994, Heather Donahue, Joshua Leonard and Michael Williams hiked into Maryland's Black Hills Forest to shoot a documentary film on a local legend, 'The Blair Witch'. They were never heard from again.

One year later, their footage was found, documenting the students' five-day journey through the Black Hills Forest, and capturing the terrifying events that led up to their disappearance.

EVIDENCE EXISTS…

LOG ON TO www.blairwitch.com TO SEE AND HEAR…"

-*The Blair Witch Project* promotional missing poster

Above is an excerpt from one of *The Blair Witch Project*'s iconic "missing" posters, a foundational element from the film's viral marketing campaign. While some posters featured the words above, others came with detailed descriptions of each actor and a fake phone number linked to the Burkittsville police department, used to report information related to Heather, Josh, and Mike's disappearance. Formatted to look strikingly authentic with their large "MISSING" title alongside black and white images of the actors, the posters were plastered around nearby college campuses, film festivals, and continue to proliferate online since their debut in 1999. The posters were, and still are, arguably the most recognizable images from the campaign - they function as an emblem pointing both to the overall premise of the film, and to Myrick and Sánchez' gamified marketing campaign. The posters invite us into the story-world, by asking us to look at the images, and by pleading us to search the web for information. They tell us to log on "to see and hear", to witness the story, and to play the game. With their simple, yet beguiling statements, the *Blair Witch Project* missing posters effectively bridge the gap between the fictional world of the film, a small Maryland town haunted by the spirit of a witch, and the world in which we, the viewers, live. In this way, the image of the poster offers a fascinating entry point into the world of the horror alternate reality game, which seeks to create a horrifying

illusion of authenticity through various intersecting texts and media. This chapter will therefore, using the outline of the ARG set forth in the first chapter, reconsider *The Blair Witch Project* and its marketing campaign through the lens of an ARG. While the first chapter worked to establish the ARG format or model through several main characteristics as axes - *digitization, decentralization, tethered gameplay, transmediation, and the TINAG philosophy* - this chapter will apply the ARG model to the sites of *The Blair Witch Project* in order to read its spaces, methods, and tactics in a new light. Here, I will ask: What can we learn about *The Blair Witch Project* by applying the framework of an ARG to the film and its extra-textual spaces? How is *The Blair Witch Project*'s combined promotional and storytelling style different than traditional horror narrative and marketing techniques, and how do these differences reinvent what it means to watch horror for the digital age?

Transmediation: The *Blair Witch* Mediascape

In order to answer these questions, let us first begin with the axis of transmediation, which will allow us to establish the many sites and spaces related to the *Blair Witch* campaign. While our analysis of upcoming axes will surely require more information and context from specific sites, this first section will function as a basic outline introducing the reader to the *Blair Witch* mediascape. The *Blair Witch* website - www.blairwitch.com - was the first-released element of *The Blair Witch Project's* promotional campaign. The site was launched after the film's Sundance premiere screening on January 23rd 1999 but before its wide release on July 30th of the same year (Lyons). [1] The *Blair Witch* website primarily operates as if it is an archival, archaeological space which documents the history and mythology of the witch, as well as the disappearance of the three film students. Its primary purpose is to act as a space where viewers may search - as the poster asked, participants reach the website to see and hear about the missing. The dark, minimalistic website features a stark black background on each of its pages, has no music or sound, and only highlights information significant to the students and their

[1] The *Blair Witch* website remained live and accessible consistently from its initial publication until May of 2021; though now offline, the website is still available through the Wayback Machine, an internet archive which provides time-specific interactive captures of webpages so that they may be viewed, but also surfed in the site's format when the capture was taken.

mysterious case. The site features four main sections: Mythology, Filmmakers, The Aftermath and Legacy. Each section focuses on highlighting pertinent information which expands the *Blair Witch* world; Mythology, for example, curates a timeline of paranormal events in Burkittsville, Maryland since the eighteenth century, while the Aftermath section showcases fake crime scene and evidence images not featured elsewhere in the campaign, as well as screenshots of news segments discussing the disappearance and updates in the case.

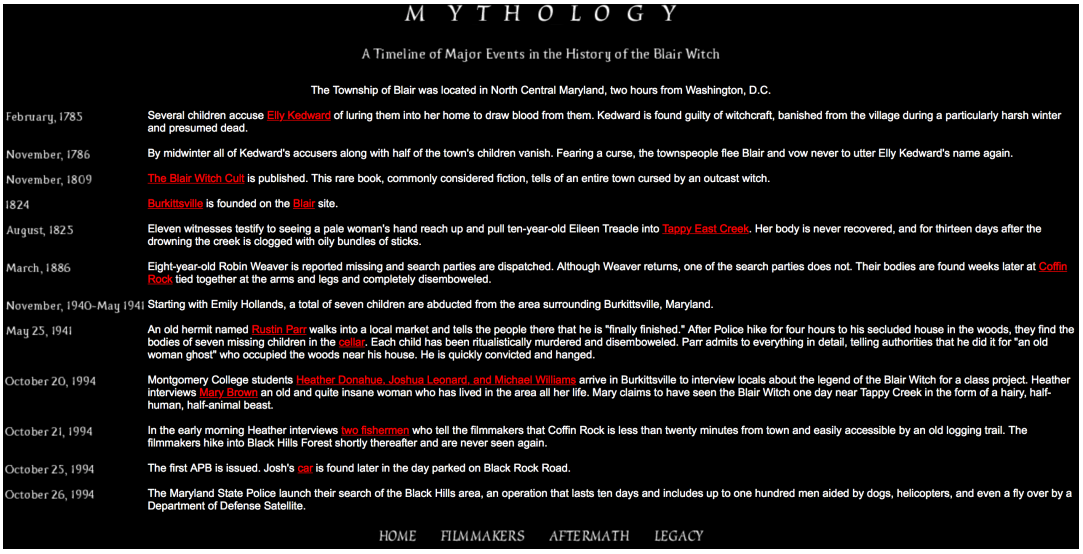

Fig. 1. The “mythology” section of the *Blair Witch* website.

Fig. 2. The “aftermath” section of the *Blair Witch* website.

Throughout early screenings of the film, the missing posters quoted above, among other variations like the one shown below, were circulated to audience members and festival-goers in an effort to convince viewers of the film's factual nature, though, as mentioned earlier, these posters were also seen around local college campuses and images of the posters have circulated online for decades.

Fig. 3. One variation of the promotional missing flyers (Cain).

On July 11th 1999, just weeks before both *The Blair Witch Project*'s limited and wide releases, the Sci-Fi Channel (now known as SYFY) aired the 45-minute mockumentary *Curse of the Blair Witch*. This short film operated as an extended advertisement for the film to come; it included interviews with Heather, Josh, and Mike's family members and teachers at their Maryland college, and introduced photographic and film footage of important people and places within the mythology. We must not forget to include the film itself, *The Blair Witch Project*, or the lesser known media artefacts which came after the film's release, such as D.A. Stern's collection of *Blair Witch* novels which took on the same faux reality perspective as the film and transferred it to print media. *The Blair Witch Project: A Dossier*, Stern's first *Blair Witch* novel published in 1999, offers a book version of the found footage film, a mock true crime treatise which included fabricated police reports, more information on the witch's mythology, and pages from Heather's journal among other *Blair Witch* lore. Several other books were published around

the same time which also embodied a similar documentary perspective, including *Blair Witch: The Secret Confession of Rustin Parr* (2000) which focused more heavily on the events of the 1940's, where Parr is said to have murdered several children at his cabin in the woods while possessed by the Blair witch. These items were largely only read by hardcore fans of the franchise, and remain mostly unknown to casual viewers, but they nonetheless work to expand the area of play, or the magic circle.

The Blair Witch Project also received two sequel films, Joe Berlinger's *Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2* released in 2000, and Adam Wingard's *Blair Witch* released in 2016, though neither of these sequels have received a fraction of the critical praise awarded to the original film. Berlinger's sequel, which drops the found-footage aesthetic, follows a group of *Blair Witch* aficionados as they tour the Black Hills Forest in Burkittsville, looking for evidence of the witch as well as evidence of the missing students. Despite its lack of critical praise and its general disapproval by the franchise's fanbase, Berlinger's sequel was not a financial success, earning roughly $47.7 million worldwide with a $15 million budget (Mosley; Box Office Mojo). Wingard's *Blair Witch*, on the other hand, returns to the found footage aesthetic and operates as a direct sequel to the original 1999 film, ignoring the events of Berlinger's entry. The plot of *Blair Witch* 2016, similar to the other two films in the series, revolves around a group of college students searching the Black Hills Forest for evidence of the supernatural and the missing. This time, one of the students searching the woods is the brother of Heather Donahue, one of the original three to go missing in the 1999 feature. Wingard's instalment was performed similarly at the box-office, earning $45 million worldwide with a much smaller budget of $5 million, but it was still considered to be a box office failure (Box Office Mojo). Though Wingard's film was criticized for issues with its script and special-effects, the negative feedback it received from fans of the original film indicate that interest and appreciation for the *The Blair Witch Project* remains (Flowers). Neither Berlinger or Wingard's films, however, have lived up to the popularity and praise of the original.

To this day, the *Blair Witch* franchise remains popular; new *Blair Witch* branded media is still produced and sold through new avenues. In 2020, Lions Gate Entertainment teamed up with the subscription-based entertainment company *Hunt A Killer* to release a series of mystery puzzle

boxes, entitled *Blair Witch*, which expands on the lore and mythology introduced in the original film through a new disappearance story set in Burkittsville. The mystery game, which features six episodic boxes sent to subscribers each month, provides an ideal format to play with the boundaries of fact and fiction given its premise and its game pieces. Much like the *Blair Witch* campaign, the tabletop game urges players to help solve the disappearance of Liam Kent who vanished in the Maryland woods, and provides participants with numerous items of evidence to aid in their search.

Fig. 4. The items featured in all six Hunt a Killer *Blair Witch* mystery boxes (Lionsgate).

Most of these newer pieces of *Blair Witch* media are not relevant to our analysis; I am largely focused on the original marketing campaign and the events which occurred around the time of the film's release. These products, however, such as the mystery box set, deserve brief mention as they help to further establish the embellished nature of the *Blair Witch* mediated world, not only as a franchise but as its own realm-bending mediascape. The box set also helps us to

visualize the act of playing the horror game. In this format, it is easy to imagine how solving a mysterious disappearance through case files, journal entries, evidence objects and images of supernatural occurrences can be just as much a playful game as it is a frightful experience. In this way, I include the *Hunt a Killer Blair Witch* box set not only to showcase another object within the franchise but also to help contextualize the aspects of play involved in this campaign.

Given the sheer number of media artefacts listed above, the utility of the concept of transmediation to the *Blair Witch* campaign is plain. Here, what becomes important is not only the number of media forms and texts but how each of these media pieces works both separately and together. Despite the film's purported status as the central and main text of the campaign, and the text which most viewers have likely seen in isolation from the rest of the campaign, what is most pertinent about the role of the film, *The Blair Witch Project,* is that it is also the text that offers the least amount of information regarding the overall story. More specifically, when viewed on its own, the movie leaves viewers with many questions, almost all of which can be answered through the adjacent media artefacts. Each becomes integral to a larger whole. An example that highlights the role of transmediation across the *Blair Witch* sites is highlighted when we consider how the supposed found footage belonging to the missing students became a film to begin with. The opening sequence to *The Blair Witch Project* acknowledges that the film is, in fact, comprised of found footage, but leaves much to the imagination: "In October of 1994, three student filmmakers disappeared in the woods near Burkittsville, Maryland while shooting a documentary. A year later their footage was found". Throughout the film, the viewer is told nothing about how or where precisely the footage was found; Myrick and Sánchez' mock documentary *Curse of the Blair Witch* provides this missing information. According to the short SYFY special, the *Blair Witch* footage was found by anthropology students at the University of Maryland, where they also discovered Heather's journal. Even more bizarre, however, is where the footage was found: the anthropology students supposedly found the footage buried underneath the foundation of a 100 year-old cabin - the same cabin in the Black Hills Forest where Rustin Parr is said to have murdered several children while possessed by the witch. This information is an important piece of the puzzle; it begs a number of questions about the witch's true abilities, as well as raises questions about what really happened in the woods, questions that

may never be answered through *Blair Witch* lore. Nevertheless, the information regarding the buried equipment remains inaccessible through the film alone, and can only be found by traversing other *Blair Witch* media sites, underlining once again the importance of the campaign's cooperative multi-mediated nature.

Much of horror film scholarship which investigates why horror movies are scary is focused on just that: the horror film as an individual text. What more might we understand if we shift this focus to include transmedia phenomenon? Similarly, how can we read transmediation as a tactic of horror? We may here look to Pinedo's text *Recreational Terror: Postmodern Elements of the Contemporary Horror Film* to understand the role of narrative closure in horror and how transmediation may allow us to view it differently. Pinedo asserts that there are five characteristics of postmodern horror which delineate its iterations from previous classical horror tropes, tactics and styles. Pinedo describes that the postmodern horror era began in 1968 as a result of "repetitive historical stresses," situating the prominently discussed counter-culture movement of the 1960's as a sort-of impulsion which fuelled similarly anti-authoritative, anti-traditional cultural works. Pinedo describes various repeating elements and tactics of postmodern-infused horror which served to create horror in new ways; these include a violation of boundaries, which conceptually manifests as the anomalistic monster who violates "the taken-for-granted 'natural' order, […] and the boundaries of the body through the use of violence against other bodies and through the disruptive qualities of its own body (21) and a violent disruption of the everyday, which describes the postmodern horror film's "fascination with the spectacle of the mutilated body, the creative death" indicating its "privileging of the act of showing" (21).

Pinedo's fourth postmodern characteristic, which describes a lack of narrative closure, can be amended and applied to understand the horror of transmediation. Pinedo describes that, in contrast to the secure closure of previous horror films, "violating narrative closure has become de rigueur for the postmodern genre. The film may end, but it is an open ending" (24). Pinedo continues, noting that for postmodern horror, "either the monster triumphs or, more likely, the outcome is uncertain. Highly ambiguous open endings in which danger and disruption are endemic prevail" (25). Applying this notion to the transmediation of the *Blair Witch* campaign

reveals the way in which the *Blair Witch* tactics, while they can be partially read through Pinedo's argument, cannot be fully understood through this lens. More specifically, the transmediation of *Blair Witch* demonstrates how the campaign's extra-filmic spaces work with the specific goal of filling the narrative gaps left by the film. While *The Blair Witch Project* as a film coincides with Pinedo's notion, the extra-filmic campaign spaces work against it. The film's ending, for example, though the majority of the violence occurs offscreen, clearly indicates that Heather, Josh and Mike have not survived their fight. That is not to say that the campaign does not leave any narrative questions unanswered; in fact, the largest question pertaining to both the film and the overall campaign - what *really* happened to the missing students? - remains unsolved. Nevertheless, the extra-filmic information concerning the *Blair Witch* story is so dense and plentiful that it begs the viewer to search for answers and make sense of the ambiguity. In this sense, the narrative of the *Blair Witch* can be considered both as wide open or as closed shut (or as closed as any film may be); it can also, depending on the combination of media artefacts viewed by any given participant, fall anywhere on the narrative closure spectrum. Viewers may revel in the fear that comes from an unexplained mystery, a story with no ending, while also finding themselves horrified at the sheer amount of information there is relating to the witch of Blair.

Decentralization: The Hypertext

As the axis of transmediation allows us to consider the role of each individual campaign text, our axis of "decentralization" helps us to understand multi-media tactics of networked collaboration and player mobility. Decentralization refers to the decentering of the game's authority, its narrative, and its player relations - it describes how the ARG works to unravel traditional gameplay structures. When we begin to view *The Blair Witch Project* through the axis of decentralization, most evidently, we should note the way *Blair Witch* viewers gain mobility through the story's dispersal across varying platforms; its transmediated nature is what allows viewers to have such liberties. This axis, however, is less concerned with the varying textual spaces themselves and more concerned with the shifting film viewers behaviours that they encourage - that is to say, while these two axes of transmediation and decentralization are largely

connected, they manifest at differing sites, transmediation being within the film and extra-filmic spaces, and decentralization within the viewer. Player mobility asserts itself in *Blair Witch* through the way the viewer is encouraged to traverse the story-world across media stitched together by a shared story. The missing poster, mentioned above, prompts viewers to visit the link to the film's official website; similarly, the website encourages users to go view the missing students' footage: *The Blair Witch Project*.

We might here build upon Telotte's employment of hypertext in *The Blair Witch Project Project: Film and the Internet* as a conceptual means of understanding, not the varying narrative spaces themselves, but the fluid movement amongst them encouraged within each text. Telotte describes hypertext simply as "a series of documents connected to one another by links" (38). Though there is much more history and context that could be said of hypertext - I need not delve too deep into its complicated origins - the connection here concerns hypertext as a way of moving to, from, and through texts. Drawing on the work of Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Telotte goes on to describe *The Blair Witch Project* as "a text of many fragments but no whole, no master text. And by virtue of its very lack of center, its absence of what Murray terms 'the clear-cut trail,' the hypertext invites us to find our own way, even to find some pleasure or profit in its very decenteredness" (38). Murray's concept of the clear-cut trail is used, both here and in her own text, as an antithetical concept to "the intricacies of hypertext", or "the twisting web" - in other words, the clear-cut trail becomes an important concept as it describes exactly what *Blair Witch*, and ARGs in general, do not offer (88). Looking specifically to the sites of the *Blair Witch* phenomenon, there are over eight different canonical[2], diegetic spaces across print, web, and film and television media which can be viewed, moved through, or even ignored, in any number of ways. Though each text is linked with one another - hyperlinked, if you will - there is no one clear path through the texts, nor is there, as Telotte noted, one "master text". This denial of a clear-cut path and master text speaks similarly to the point made earlier about the internet and digital media forms asserting their status alongside film as a privileged form. Decentralization essentially flattens and equalizes the playing field; it allows us to explore

[2] "Canon" refers to a piece of media or information relating to a story-world that is accepted as authentic, official, and considered to be true.

the multiplicity of opportunities available to consumers who engage with such ARG-like tactics. The participants of the *Blair Witch* phenomenon have been invited to find their own path, to travel the links and cut their own trail, and to find pleasure, or perhaps torment and fear, in the process.

Similarly, our application of ARG decentralization should illuminate the networked collaboration which lays at the heart of the unofficial, non-diegetic *Blair Witch* spaces through its online community. This can be seen clearly through varying social media networks and forum sites, the most notable of which is the fan-operated site blairwitch.net. The *Blair Witch* forum can be traced back as early as October of 2003, though an exact launch date is unknown. Despite its blurry origins, the site's statistics show that it remains live and active to this day, and since its inception, has garnered over 24,000 posts relating to *The Blair Witch Project*'s story and mythology. Following alongside its growth have been the film's sequels by Berlinger and Wingard, and its extra-textual spaces such as the subscription mystery boxes mentioned earlier and comic books. These films and media tie-ins further encourage decentralization in the way they prioritize and encourage collaborative communication between *Blair Witch* participants about each and every detail relating to the campaign.

What is it about the notion of hypertext, the decentering of the film experience, that lends itself to horror? In *Digital Horror*, Blake and Aldana Reyes briefly touch upon the way in which the *Blair Witch* campaign fostered a out-of-film environment whereby viewers were encouraged to interact with, question and speculate on the story told and information shared. They write that *The Blair Witch Project* "employed the virtual community as the domain for its assertion of the 'truth' of the events as both a narrative and a marketing tool" (116). Here, Blake and Aldana Reyes refer to the way *Blair Witch* campaign participants became a fundamental tool supporting the film's overall premise as a mystery needing to be solved. This, I argue, was only possible through the very decentering of the film's narrative, form, and viewership. Moreso, I would expand Blake and Aldana Reyes' idea even further to consider the way the scattered narrative spaces and the disordered movements of the participants involved crucially mirrors the film's narrative itself. Just like Heather, Josh and Mike, we too stumble from location to location, and

in this way, the actions of the participants further asserts the "truth" and the horror of the *Blair Witch*.

The *Blair Witch* forum, for example, offers playful language to describe itself and its community. The term "conversations around the campfire" is used to describe the forum posts and threads on the site; similarly, to describe the number of users currently active on the webpage, the forum says x number of people are "lost in the woods right now". Such language, though seemingly inconsequential and not an official part of the campaign, substantiates the role these spaces play in embellishing the horror tropes of the film. The very decenteredness of the campaign, its lack of clear-cut path and encouraged collaboration, reiterates the very nature of the *Blair Witch* story that make it so terrifying. Like the participants of early ARG *Ong's Hat*, the online participants in the *Blair Witch* phenomenon are participating in a sort-of digital legend trip of their own, as they are left alone to bounce from horror text to horror text, with no clear indication of how these texts should be traversed or where they may lead. The participants of the campaign, like Heather, Josh, and Mike, seemingly have nowhere to turn but towards their companions with whom they are digitally lost in the woods.

Digitization: The Source and Site of Horror

The Blair Witch Project's ongoing status as a viral internet sensation has become typical in the age of the internet, but let us specifically delve into and apply digitization as an ARG tendency: how do the various sites of *The Blair Witch Project* embody digitization in their use of digital media platforms and in their adoption of internet characteristics? Our notion of ARG digitization can be applied first, quite clearly, to the film's website, but can also be applied to the film's overall concept and its delegation of information. Looking at the *Blair Witch* website through the lens of digitization, it should become clear that the website's use of digital media is more extensively intertwined with the film's overall narrative than the average contemporary horror movie. Noting a similar observation, Telotte's text, written in 2001 provides a comparative analysis of several horror film websites released within the same few years as *Blair Witch*. His analysis dissects the websites of films such as *The Haunting* (Jan De Bont, 1999), *Stigmata* (Rupert Wainwright, 1999), *House on Haunted Hill* (William Malone, 1999), *The*

Mummy (Stephen Sommers, 1999), *Lake Placid* (Steve Miner, 1999), and *Urban Legend* (Jamie Blanks, 1998), noting that most websites of this time, though they contained varying degrees of information and interactivity, operated as "press kits for the digital age" (34). These sites were often "advertisements with little animation, offering basic data about the story, opening dates, and advance ticket-ordering information" while some other sites encouraged more engagement through "background on the filmmakers, clips from the films, various electronic giveaways (such as downloadable screensavers and electronic postcards), chat rooms, and games keyed to the films' plotlines" (34). That is to say, most websites, operating similarly to traditional film advertisement, are "basically 'teasers,' lures suggesting that the real thrills are to be found in the movies themselves" (34). Moreover, Telotte continues: "They *guide* our experience by situating their films in the context of the film industry and pointing to the entertainment power of the movies, particularly their special ability - one implicitly unmatched by the Internet - to transport us into another realm" (34).

The Blair Witch Project's website diverges from this path in its denial of Telotte's final point here - that the internet cannot offer a similar ability to transport the reader into another realm. Unlike other movie websites at the time, the *Blair Witch* website functioned as an extension of the film's narrative, adopting the cinema's ability to transport its viewer by, in an essence, becoming part of the film itself. The site contained vital information embellishing and extending the narrative of the film, which includes but is not limited to: evidence photos from the area where the filmmakers supposedly disappeared; several interviews with key characters, including Heather's mom and private investigator Buck Buchanan; fake news segments which reported on new information about the case; and images of the *Blair Witch* film canisters and reels which were said to have been discovered by anthropology students from the University of Maryland. Thus, unlike most other film websites of the time which offered non-diegetic promotional content, the *Blair Witch* website maintained, supported, and extended the film's diegesis; the *Blair Witch* site therefore not only used digital platforms but prioritized the use of digital media forms, and particularly the internet, as an extended narrative space and format.

Moreover, the *Blair Witch* website offers a response to a blossoming digitized world by reflecting and reiterating its very essence through, not just its form, but through the mere

delegation of information across media channels. The use of digital media sites speaks to our age of interconnection, transmutability and the constant, seemingly inevitable flow of information. These ideas further manifest through the decentering of the film as an privileged media format, which Telotte describes as the "project" of the *Blair Witch* campaign sites:

> The *Blair Witch* site, in contrast to those noted above, points in various ways away from the film's privileged status as a product of the entertainment industry. Or more precisely, its "project" is to blur such common discrimination, to suggest, in effect, that this particular film is as much a part of everyday life as the Internet, that it extends the sort of unfettered knowledge access that the Internet seems to offer, and that its pleasures, in fact, closely resemble those of the electronic medium with which its core audience is so familiar. (35)

While Telotte is saying that this "project" works to keep film relevant, updating and adapting it to the digital age, one of the many ways this is possible is through campaign gamification and the use of ARG practices. The *Blair Witch* site can be understood as embodying ARG-like tactics through a proclivity for digitized forms which challenge media text hierarchies and push narrative boundaries.

Why does this matter? More specifically, how might a horror film benefit from adopting these tactics? To answer this question let us first look at how *The Blair Witch Project*, in isolation from its marketing campaign, set the metaphorical stage for its audience to be filled with technological dread. Though the found-footage style of the film is not digital per-se - Heather, Josh, and Mike are seen using CP-16 film and Hi8 video cameras - the handheld aesthetics nonetheless evoke a sentiment of anxiety over technological advancements and our ever-emerging everyday devices. After all, Heather, Josh, and Mike would still be alive and well today had they not gone out into the woods in pursuit of video evidence of the witch. I mention this first not to harp on ideas which have long been examined, ideas which I have already noted as prevalent and set aside, but to assert, if only briefly, that our paradoxical love and fear of digital proliferation is merely a new, albeit more dramatic iteration of our technological anxieties and pleasures which came before. That is to say, though not inherently digital, the use of handheld footage aesthetics lends itself perfectly to a project which seeks to embody a burgeoning digital,

technologically-reliant world. We might consider these aesthetics to function as a sort-of precursory horror or prologue to the more explicitly digitized aspects of the *Blair Witch* mediascape.

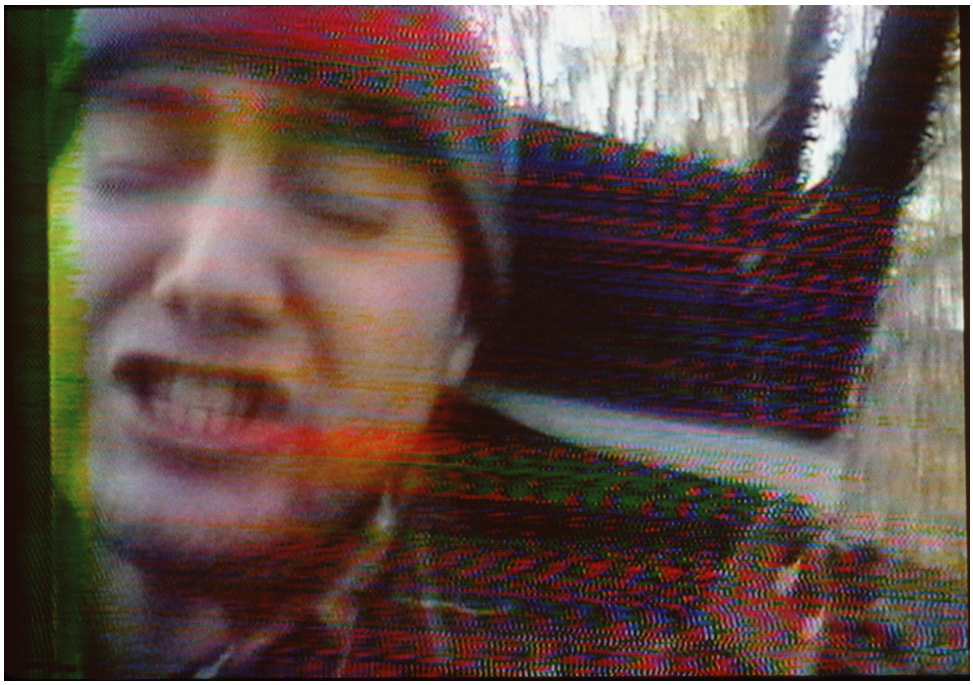

Fig. 5. A distorted image of Mike's face foregrounds the film's materiality (Kring-Schreifels).

Moreso, when noting the impact the internet has had on contemporary horror cinema's formal and narrative characteristics, Blake and Aldana Reyes write that the World Wide Web in particular has opened up "a whole new source and site of horror" (2). As such, we may consider the *Blair Witch* website to offer an early, but nonetheless extreme version of this concept by showcasing the horrors of the internet vis-a-vis asking viewers to surf the web themselves, optimizing its narrative spaces as both sources and sites of horror. The *Blair Witch* site manufactures a fear of technology through its film and internet formats, but also through its reflection of digital proliferation and technological ubiquity in its disbursement of the story-world across the internet (and later, other non web-based media). That is not to say that the story of the *Blair Witch* is an explicit tale of technological anxieties, but rather that the use of these technologies, particularly the internet, as a vessel through which the horror narrative is told offers a sneaky kind of tech-horror which shows the horror through its format, rather than telling the viewer through its story. By this, I mean that while the witch of Blair is the titular monster of

the film, the intended source of horror, it appears that the mysterious website and the propagation of supposed found footage across the internet, is just as much a source of horror as the monster itself. In other words, the axis of digitization shifts our perspective to consider not that *The Blair Witch Project* made use of the internet and digital technologies simply as novel marketing strategies - this remains true, but is not the only truth - but more significantly that these technologies offer new, terrifying narrative opportunities that are best explored, as *Blair Witch* did, when they become a fundamental tactic of the film form.

Tethered Gameplay: Horror Unleashed

Applying the axis of tethered gameplay to the site of *Blair Witch* illuminates the many ways its narrative permeates our everyday spaces through its use of real-world artefacts. The missing posters, mentioned at the top of this chapter, were an important physical, real world element to *The Blair Witch Project*'s marketing campaign which can, through our analysis, be revisited as a real-world artefact of an ARG. These posters were primarily placed around college campuses and film festivals, including at the film's premiere Sundance festival screening. Despite their relatively short-lived and short-spanning real-world integration - this will be expanded upon later - the posters continued to proliferate online and can still be found in all corners of the web. Despite their relatively small nature, comparated to feature-length films and multi-faceted websites, the *Blair Witch* poster has often been noted as a key item within the marketing campaign that fuelled its complicated status as a real occurrence. We must also consider some lesser known, but still vital non-digital narrative sites which, through this lens, can be re-read as ARG-type artefacts. In print media, Stern's novels remain important elements to consider through the lens of tethered gameplay as they offer canonical expansions of the *Blair Witch* diegesis, embodying the same perspective as the rest of the marketing campaign in order to further perpetuate the illusion of authenticity. As mentioned earlier, they featured journal entries, crime scene photos and information on key figures in the *Blair Witch* world, including Elly Kedward, the woman behind the witch, and Rustin Parr, a man responsible for murder in the name of the witch.

Our axis of tethered gameplay fundamentally subverts another common conception of postmodern horror, Pinedo's fifth characteristic, dubbed "a bounded experience of fear," which describes the postmodern horror tendency to induce fright in a limited setting, disconnected from the real world, allowing the viewer to experience their fears and anxieties through fantasy so as to keep them at a safe distance; the experience of fear is encouraged, but is bound and leashed. Considering the contemporary landscape of horror, I argue that this characteristic is no longer the standard. I suggest that our socio-cultural surroundings have shifted to such a degree that such tactics of bounded fear may no longer represent the predominant horror experience. That is not to say that no bounds or constraints remain, or that these bounds no longer play a role in the experience of horror. Rather, I encourage us to reconsider the solidity of these boundaries and perhaps take note of their increased permeability. How can the concept of bounded fear remain a primary mode of experiencing contemporary horror, at least as Pinedo has described it, when the boundaries of our current world have become increasingly porous and penetrable? The boundaries separating the viewer from the source of horror have not disappeared, but have instead become a less fixed version of what they once were.

Pinedo describes that the bounded experience of fear manifests through a number of channels; here, in looking at *The Blair Witch Project* through the lens of tethered gameplay, I am considering how the film's narrative has evaded the notion of bounded fear in its use of real-world artefacts. Pinedo writes that "A film promises a contained experience. Regardless of how open a film's ending may be, the film ends and in this there is a modicum of closure […] the borders of the screen establish parameters that free the viewer to engage in fantasy" (27). With this, Pinedo is referring to the fantasy horror, meaning the viewer may freely revel in their fears within the contained environment of the film, and once the film is complete, the viewer may walk away unharmed. In this way, Pinedo's notion of bounded fear operates similarly to the concept of the magic circle - they allow a closed, confined space where reality may not penetrate in any significant way, preserving the fantasy of the enclosed space and the real-world integrity of those involved. In applying the concept of tethered gameplay to the site of the *Blair Witch* campaign, we can see how the magic circle, and concurrently the bounded experience of fear, have dissipated, or shape-shifted into something far less rigid. The *Blair Witch* campaign offers

fear which infiltrates our everyday life through varying texts, like the posters, novels and websites mentioned above, which take on the horror narrative, allowing it to seep into every corner of the real world; *Blair Witch* broke the magic circle.

Though we are here demonstrating how ARG tactics may break down the notion of bounded fear, we must not ignore that certain boundaries may remain. One of these boundaries, concerning the axis of tethered gameplay in particular, is the physical bounds and reach of this ARG tactic - how far, geographically speaking, can the game really go? How far does its reach span? Consider the *Blair Witch* missing posters, for example. A boundary presents itself when we acknowledge the real world limitations of placing these items in a locally-defined area; *Blair Witch* participants in the Maryland area might have a richer real-world experience of the game given that they have the opportunity to stumble upon those real-world elements, whereas those elsewhere did not. Of course, there are many who did not live close enough to Maryland to experience the missing posters in person, or who simply did not have the means to travel to Burkittsville to search for the supposed site of the disappearance. This, in turn, means that there are varying levels of intensity when it comes to participating in ARG techniques like those of *Blair Witch*. While this is true, and should be expected of such tactics that takes place in one particular location, it is also important to note the ways in which said tactics may be altered and affected by digital networking and the internet. Despite limitations, many *Blair Witch* participants did just that, breaking through real-world boundaries through the reach of the internet. Lara Westwood from the Maryland Center for History and Culture notes one prevalent way distant participants found a way to embrace the real-world artefacts related to Elly Kedward, the witch of Blair:

> The film claimed that The Blair Witch Cult, a book published in 1809 which recounted the tale of the town doomed by Kedward's curse, was held at MdHS and even featured in a exhibit. The movie's website points out that the book was returned to private hands before the film was released but that didn't stop curious moviegoers from inquiring about the dreaded book. Our wonderful reference librarian, Francis O'Neill, fielded phone calls about the fictitious tome from all

> over the country and even from as far away as Belarus for many years after the movie came out.

Similarly, a virtual trip over to the *Blair Witch* forums will demonstrate how numerous fans from across the country travelled to Burkittsville in the hopes of finding clues, solving the mystery, and maybe even taking a piece of Burkittsville back home as a memento. Interestingly, despite *The Blair Witch Project* actually being shot in a different town of Maryland, the town of Burkittsville was frequented by *Blair Witch* legend trippers who were so eager to participate in the real-world campaign that their town welcome signs had been stolen and replaced several times. Faye Fiore from the *LA Times* catalogued the never-ending cycle of Burkittsville town signs:

> The wooden welcome signs, suddenly an iconic symbol of the movie, were promptly stolen. […] The town replaced the signs with four more. Three were stolen before Larry Beller, then-city councilman and a cement truck driver, took the fourth to his house for safekeeping. Burkittsville switched to metal signs, a little too 20th century for residents' tastes but harder to steal, or so they thought. […] Thieves cut down one with a hacksaw. Another was discovered wrapped in chains, as though someone intended to rip it from the ground with a truck.

While thievery and property damage are not encouraged modes of ARG participation, such engagements do indicate the contemporary filmgoers proclivity towards real-life, immersive experiences which open up, rather than shut out, the film's world from our own. Rather than, as Pinedo argues, searching for a bounded fantastical experience of fear, audiences in the digital age are chasing after horrors more intertwined with reality than ever before.

This is Not a Game: The Transmutation of Fiction into Fact

While the four previous axes can clearly be effectively applied to the site of *Blair Witch*, it appears to me that this final axis, the TINAG philosophy, is the axis which holds the most weight in its ability to completely transform our understanding of the *Blair Witch* campaign into a game-inflected experiment of horror. The illusion of authenticity embodied by the campaign has been called many things, and is often dubbed an internet hoax. When the TINAG philosophy

is applied to the *Blair Witch* campaign, it offers language and purpose which illuminate the essence behind each individual element, as well as the overall story, in a way that is unmatched through other concepts and models. The *Blair Witch* campaign embodies the TINAG philosophy in its complete denial of its fictional status, and through its perpetuation across all platforms that the tale of the missing students is true. This is partially due to the found-footage aesthetics of the film, which pre-establish a level of intimacy and rawness; but, as we will come to see, the found-footage framework does not adequately consider the other sites of the *Blair Witch* campaign.

The found footage horror sub-genre embodies the same concept at the heart of the TINAG philosophy. Before we consider these concepts side-by-side, however, let us first establish the history and defining characteristics which have upheld the sub-genre. Blake and Aldana Reyes briefly acknowledge the film styles and movements which came before the horror found-footage boom, such as the hand-held aesthetic, which is distinctly different from found-footage but informs its operation:

> Although initially pioneered by Italian and French neo-realists from the1940s, adopted by John Cassavetes in the 1950s and 1960s, and reiterated by the Dogme 95 movement in the 1990s, the use of hand-held cameras has, in fact, only become a core device of horror cinema in recent years. Challenging both the budgetary implications and ideological circumscriptions of classic Hollywood realism, hand-held cinematography has its origins in documentary stylistics and, like the documentary, attempts to convey the affective truth of that which it depicts. (3)

In *Found Footage Horror Films: A Cognitive Approach*, Turner wrestles with a similar history of the sub-genre, rather focusing on the term itself as opposed to the aesthetics and technologies involved:

> Originally, the term found footage referred to a moving image collage of non-fiction footage. The films now being labelled as found footage and, in particular, those that are the subject of this book fictionalise this conceit. They are comprised of footage that has supposedly already been shot by someone (a character within the film) and has now either been edited or left as it was found, and finally released as a film product. (4)

Similarly, Scott Meslow, in "12 Years After 'Blair Witch,' When Will the Found-Footage Horror Fad End?" describes the found footage horror genre 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 sometime after the events of the film" (*The Atlantic*). From this, we should understand the core aesthetics and characteristics of a found footage horror film. More acutely, however, we should begin to understand the narrative implications that arise from these styles when we consider how these techniques shift traditional cinematic boundaries. In *Found Footage Horror Films: Fear and the Appearance of Reality* (2014), Alexandra Heller-Nicholas writes that "Found footage horror seeks (not always successfully) to create a space where spectators can enjoy having their boundaries pushed, where our confidence that we know where the lines between fact and fiction lie are directly challenged" (4). The found footage horror film and the ARG axis of TINAG offer the same sentiment of blurred boundaries, challenged notions of reality and fiction, and further, a deliberate attempt to make the viewer, or player, believe that the fiction within is real.

It is of no surprise, then, that the found footage format and style lends itself rather effectively to an ARG reading, given their shared predilection for false authenticity. This therefore begs the question: how might *The Blair Witch Project* be read differently by applying the TINAG philosophy? What might we gain by reading the *Blair Witch* campaign not only as a working of found footage horror, but through the lens of the TINAG philosophy? The TINAG philosophy allows us to view how the false authenticity of the *Blair Witch* existed well beyond the confines of the film but infiltrated each of its accompanying sites. It considers the notion of found footage as more than a stylistic choice for the film but as one which fundamentally permeates each aspect of the narrative, including how the viewers react to the faux reality nature of the film and campaign.

Here, I will reapply and expand Margrit Schreier's concept of double consciousness as a means of looking beyond the aesthetics associated with found footage and more specifically to examine the effect these aesthetics and narratives have on *Blair Witch* viewers. Double consciousness was firstly introduced in the previous chapter to broadly describe the dual experience of ARG participants as they explore, challenge, and pass through the border of reality

and fiction. Schreier's original use of the term specifically emphasizes the player's agency when choosing to remain ignorant to the reality status of *Blair Witch.* This concept, however, can just as easily be applied here to describe how, not only the *Blair Witch* film, but its extra-filmic spaces also encourage a similar duality. Double consciousness offers an apt concept for us to consider the effects of the TINAG philosophy across all platforms, but at the same time reminds us that the philosophy is not infallible. *This is not a game* describes the ARG's effort to mask its own game-ness - whether it effectively works, either initially or as the game continues, is equally up to the player's desire to step into this new consciousness. In this way, we may consider double consciousness and the TINAG philosophy to operate as two sides of the same trick coin; double consciousness and *this is not a game* both require a certain willingness to believe that *The Blair Witch Project* is not, in fact, a game, and yet still continue playing.

Why might the aesthetics of false reality function as contemporary horror tricks? To answer this question we may return to Pinedo's characteristics of postmodern horror, again asserting that, in contrast with these characteristics, we may continually find ourselves in a new age of horror where these previously established characteristics require amendments. Pinedo argues that horror "denaturalizes the repressed by transmuting the 'natural' elements of everyday life into the unnatural form of a monster. This transmutation renders the terrors of the everyday world at least emotionally accessible" (26). David Robert Mitchell's 2014 horror film *It Follows* features an ambiguous supernatural creature that follows its victims wherever they go, occupying various human bodies so as to appear innocuous in plain sight. Each new victim becomes "followed" by having sex with an affected victim, leaving a trail of sexual partners afflicted by the creature. The nameless monster of *It Follow*s offers a clear metaphor for the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases - it does exactly what Pinedo claims many postmodern films do, in order to create horror and encourage its viewers to experience fear in a bounded setting. The natural world is terrifying, but we must render these terrors into supernatural stories and otherworldly figures in order to access, experience, and maybe even process our fears.

The case of *The Blair Witch Project* offers the witch as the unnatural form; she serves as the primary monster and the image of horror. Yet, there is no image of the witch. Despite her unnatural nature, the witch's presentation, alongside the presentation of all her damages is

natural to an uncanny degree. We do not see the witch at all throughout the entire film or on any accompanying site. There are no special effects, digital or practical, which create a visualization of the monster or her supernatural powers for us to fear; perhaps only the brief moments where we see the witch's stick figure totems comes close to demonstrating her paranormal abilities. *The Blair Witch Project*'s unnatural form exists conceptually, but is seemingly nowhere to be found physically manifest in the film and its accompanying spaces.

Instead, what viewers see is the realistic images of the missing students, and the newspaper clippings that detail the horror of the crime scenes. We fear the very idea that this terrible occurrence did actually happen. When one is watching the film and sees the close-up view of Heather's face as she sobs alone in the dark woods, are we scared of the witch and her frightening abilities or are we afraid of witnessing Heather's demise? This is not to say that it need be one or the other - in fact, I argue that it is both at the same time. My position does not negate the horrors of the unnatural form, but rather argues that the witch of Blair does not successfully fulfil this role to begin with. The witch does not function as a supernatural figure allowing viewers to tap into their real world fears. Instead, *The Blair Witch Project* highlights the painstakingly natural ruins she leaves behind. These ruins stretch out across multiple platforms, negating our ability to feel bounded fear and instead fostering a fear of plain reality. The transmutation of Pinedo's horror characteristics has been reversed: our most visceral fear when watching *The Blair Witch Project* stems from watching the supernatural become natural, and the surreal converge with the real. The transmutation not of fact into fiction, but of fiction into fact is most unsettling, and is how the TINAG philosophy, the illusion of reality embedded in every site and frame, renders *The Blair Witch Project* truly horrifying.

To conclude, let us return to the image of Heather Donahue and her frightened gaze towards the camera. Heather's face, second only to the posters mentioned at the top of this chapter, is the most recognized iconography associated with *The Blair Witch Project*. Her face, much like Pinedo's unnatural monster, has granted emotional access to a special kind of fear. It does not, like *It Follows*, incite a fear of sex and disease, nor does it, like Jordan Peele's 2019 horror film *Us*, provoke a clear reference to the horrors of classism and privilege. For many, *The Blair Witch Project* is largely a film whose primary source of fear is sometimes the witch herself,

but also the technology it uses to proliferate; the handheld cameras, the viral website and the TV specials all perpetuate this fear. Yet Heather's face and her look of dread as she scans the empty woods and looks back at us in desperation, instigates a different kind of fear. The hyperrealistic image of terror imbued in her gaze radiates through to us; as she gazes through the camera lens and towards the viewer, she imparts not a fear of technology or the paranormal, but a fear of witnessing horror, and of fear itself. The intimate nature of her confessional closeup, where she apologizes to her mother and the mothers of her companions, not only blurs the bounds of reality and fiction but also of witnesser and witnessed. As we watch Heather sob, her face contorted in close-up and her tears illuminated by the flashlight's glow, we feel her pain, and fear for her life as if it was our own.

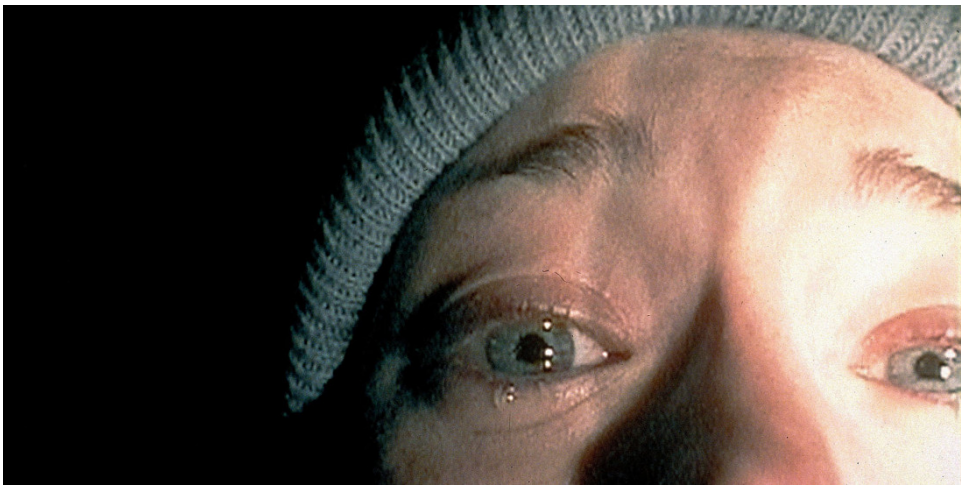

Fig. 6. Heather's gaze

Her proximity reminds us of the camera she holds; she is too close to ignore. All she wants is to escape this moment, and yet, her too-closeness conversely pulls us into the moment with her and into her world. Heather hyperventilates and finally declares her fear; it is not that she is afraid of the witch, or that she is scared to die, but instead, she insists "I'm scared to close my eyes. And I'm scared to open them". Standing in the face of horror, and confronted with the crushing weight of ruination, the scariest sight to be seen is the truth.

Chapter Three: The *Blair Witch* Legacy

AN OPEN LETTER

YOU WILL DIE IN SEVEN DAYS

Watching this video is like a hypnotic spell, it keeps you from moving, you just watch.

The mental blast sends a jolt right into the brain,

does the phone really ring, or do you just think it does?

[…]

If you have a television there is no escape.

-*The Ring* promotional website

The above text is foregrounded on the front page of the viral website anopenletter.com, an ominous and elusive portion of the marketing campaign accompanying Gore Verbinski's 2002 American horror feature *The Ring*. Verbinski's film, adapted from the Japanese horror film *Ring* (Hideo Nakata, 1998) and Koji Suzuki's 1991 novel of the same name, tells the story of a cursed videotape which, once watched, prompts the viewer to receive an anonymous phone call promising their death within seven days. The marketing campaign prominently featured the publicly accessible website ahead of and during the film's initial theatrical run, which detailed the malevolent effects of the cursed videotape, as evidenced by the passage above. According to the Wayback Machine, the website was first recorded as active on July 24th 2002; by November 24th of the same year, roughly a month after the film's release on October 18th, anopenletter.com had been converted into a standard film website advertising Verbinski's feature. Nevertheless, for those four months, *The Ring*'s website operated as one of many extra-textual spaces which worked to create a marketing campaign that infiltrated into the everyday life of its viewers. Another instance of this effort was launched alongside the original website in the summer of 2002 - the infamous cursed videotape central to the film's narrative was aired during the commercial breaks of late night programming with no title, information or context attached. Further fuelling the curiosity attached to the film and its mysterious tape, physical VHS copies of the tape were left on the rooftops of cars belonging to film audiences, shoppers, and concert

goers. Just like the late night screenings, these tapes featured only the cursed video and no other information claiming them to be promotional objects. Those who happened upon the late night airings or found a VHS tape on their car were lead to believe that the cursed tape really did exist, and here it was, right in front of them, about to curse them too.

Three years after *The Blair Witch Project*, *The Ring*'s marketing tricks provocatively follow in the footsteps of Myrick and Sánchez's campaign. It is clear that these campaigns have their differences. Though they both make use of the web and nameless television spots, they use different media formats to ambush potential viewers in the real world. *Blair Witch* favoured paper flyers while *The Ring* made use of VHS tapes. Both also implicate their audiences in vastly different ways; the *Blair Witch* campaign motivated viewers to solve the mystery of the missing students, while *The Ring*'s promotional gimmicks prompted viewers to fear for their own lives. Nevertheless, *The Ring*'s promotion echoes that of *Blair Witch* through its radical merging of reality and fiction and the expansion of its diegesis across digital platforms and the real world.

Thus, in this final chapter, in order to establish a continuation of the phenomenon examined in the previous chapters, I will trace a lineage of ARG-like horror marketing tricks which proceeded *The Blair Witch Project.* While we might consider *The Blair Witch Project* mediascape to be a full game-like experience, it is important to note that several of these newer examples operate on a smaller scale, offering not full games but instead one-off gamified, ARG-like experiences. I will outline the clear ways in which these campaigns draw from *Blair Witch*'s tactics, while also acknowledging the ways in which these tactics have evolved and adapted to new technologies and methodologies. I will offer an analysis that, like in my second chapter, applies the same ARG concepts - digitization, decentralization, transmediation, tethered gameplay, and the TINAG philosophy - more broadly to the site of newer films which utilize similar techniques and methodologies. This includes several examples spanning from 2002 to 2022, across several sub-genres of horror including supernatural horror, psychological horror, found-footage horror, and slashers, highlighting a consistent and adapting lineage of ARG-type phenomena in contemporary horror.

With this analysis, my goal is twofold: first, to demonstrate that *The Blair Witch Project*'s marketing strategies have since adapted and been replicated successfully in newer horror film

campaigns and; secondly, to use these newer examples to demonstrate a general shift within the horror genre towards ARG-like tactics which offer innovative manifestations of horror and alternative methods of producing fear. Similar to my treatment of *Blair Witch* in the second chapter, I aim not to make claims about the status of these films as alternate reality games, but rather through an ARG reading hope to illustrate how these techniques do more than simply earn the film recognition, viewership, and profit, but also work to expand the narrative of fear beyond the screen. Moreover, I aim to illuminate how similar narrative and marketing techniques are more present within the genre now than ever, in this way unearthing and curating a lineage in the horror genre.

The Legacy

In order to do so, it is pertinent to first address how it is that *The Blair Witch Project* became so successful, and how its marketing in particular has been memorialized. As has previously been noted, *The Blair Witch Project* is often considered to be the first film to boast a viral internet marketing campaign, not only within the horror genre but within the industry at large. Though film websites had been used prior to *Blair Witch*, none had quite incorporated the internet into playing such a fundamental role within the film's promotion and narrative. After its success, the *Blair Witch* campaign was not lacking in admirers and copiers. Though I will later unpack a number of successful viral marketing campaigns which came after and were clearly influenced by *Blair Witch*, several early attempts were not as successful in their ambitions to cash in on the emerging phenomenon. David R. Ellis' *Snakes on a Plane* (2006), for example, stirred up major internet craze before the film's release; this was in part due to a lengthy blog post written by the film's screenwriter Josh Friedman, who described his, and *Snakes on a Plane* star Morgan Freeman's, obsession with the film's kitschy title and ridiculous premise (Kornhaber). In fact, the film's name in particular and its B-movie essence fuelled the intense fanbase for the film. Fans became so obsessed with the film that numerous fan-made trailers, fan-fiction stories and short parodies flooded the internet before the film had even been released. The inflated confidence of the film's marketing campaign and its dedicated fans swiftly fizzled out once the film proved it simply could not live up to the hype it had garnered online. As such, it

appeared that for years to come, no other film marketing campaign could reproduce the feats accomplished by *Blair Witch*. Telotte's text broadly explores why the many early attempts to mimic the *Blair Witch* campaign may have failed at recreating the same popularity and buzz:

> After a number of studios tried to emulate the Internet-heavy approach of *The Blair Witch Project*, usually without reaping the same benefits, many in the industry recognized that its success derived from the way the Web site and film function together, *share* certain key attractions. As Marc Graser and Dade Hayes explain, an initial industry frenzy to mimic the *Blair Witch* Internet campaign has given way to a recognition "that the '*Blair Witch*' site was not an added-on marketing tool but was designed as part of the film experience - one that tapped into fans of the horror genre" in a special way. (36)

It seems, therefore, that *The Blair Witch Project's* internet marketing campaign worked so well precisely because it was intended, from the start, to be much more than merely a marketing campaign. The internet was not just used as a tool to stir up hype - though it did accomplish this too - but was also implemented as an extension of the film apparatus, allowing the story to unfold seamlessly across the silver screen and the desktop monitor. The use of the web was not merely motivated by the desire for publicity and profit, but was too motivated by a desire to push the boundaries of cinema as a form of entertainment. Noting a similar idea in the foreword to *Guerrilla Film Marketing: The Ultimate Guide to the Branding, Marketing and Promotion of Independent Films and Filmmakers* (2018), *Blair Witch* director himself Daniel Myrick describes the devotion and innovation required to successfully market a low-budget film:

> Successful low-budget filmmakers tend to combine a fundamental knowledge of the tools and techniques of filmmaking with a thorough knowledge of and passion for their audience and genre. And they seem to intuitively understand that branding, marketing and promotion must be integrated into every step of their film's production - from development, pre-production, principal photography and through post-production and release. This is what truly differentiates the successful filmmakers from the wannabes and the never-weres. When done well, these

> filmmakers' marketing and promotional campaigns often become entertainment experiences in their own right.

In this way, similar to Telotte's point mentioned above, perhaps the fact that many *Blair Witch* proceeders could not mimic its success stems from the notion that anything which came after merely attempted to cash in on the buzz-factor of the rising internet without sharing the same marketing ingenuity and passion for experimentation.

It appears too that the function of the horror genre was not incidental to the online success of *Blair Witch*. That is to say, the passage above, which notes that the use of the internet "tapped into fans of the horror genre", suggests that there is something particular to the horror genre and its fans which promotes and encourages these tactics to thrive. In *An Introduction to the American Horror Film,* film critic Robin Wood describes how the horror genre has a particularly polarizing effect on its audience:

> The horror film has consistently been one of the most popular and, at the same time, the most disreputable of Hollywood genres. The popularity itself has a peculiar characteristic that sets it apart from other genres: it is restricted to aficionados and complemented by total rejection, people tending to go to horror films either obsessively or not at all. (82)

Similarly, in the 2009 book *Horror*, film academic Brigid Cherry echoes Wood's notion, writing that the horror film "might be expected to have a discrete and strongly loyal audience, the vast majority of people either showing a strong liking for the genre or a total dislike, with little feeling in between these extremes" (36). Both Wood and Cherry describe horror as a fervid genre, one which demands impassioned fandom or enthusiastic dismissal. Horror fanatics, not in spite of, but because of the genre's divisive nature, are often dedicated to the genre to such a degree that, for most other genres, remains unmatched. Likewise, Turner mirrors this sentiment while adding that horror fans "have always been particularly notable for their obsessive fan activities and the internet helps them to share their passion (and hatred) with others. *The Blair Witch Project* therefore perfectly captured its target audience by giving horror fans more to talk about, discuss, debate and explore through the unconventional promotional website" (82). We

may therefore consider horror to offer an ideal fanbase for *Blair Witch* inspired campaigns to reemerge and for alternate reality game techniques to succeed.

Given that horror seems to offer an apt environment for these techniques, it should come as no surprise then that several contemporary horror films have adopted similar tactics. Despite claims to the contrary, since the release of *The Blair Witch Project* and its campaign in 1999, several horror films have enacted similar marketing gimmicks, across numerous platforms. Yet, while these newer examples are considered to have used marketing tricks that pique the public's interest, there is little done to acknowledge what exactly it is that is so special about these tricks. Most often they are plainly labelled as instances of guerrilla marketing, a term used to describe unconventional, and often low-cost marketing tactics. These techniques, when they work, generate buzz and awareness for the service or product being promoted, frequently with minimal cost. Based on this definition, it is clear that the *Blair Witch* campaign, as well as other upcoming examples, utilized guerrilla techniques to their advantage, namely due to their low-cost nature. Though ARGs can drastically range in cost, when curated carefully, ARGs can cost just a fraction of what traditional marketing practices might. Szulborski outlines one pertinent example of this cost efficiency in practice, explaining that a sample ARG he launched, *Errant Memories*, garnered 350,000 thousand views in just two weeks and cost less than $50. While this is not a hard rule, it is possible for ARGs to cost less than common-place marketing techniques since the ARG participants are largely responsible for circulating information. Rather than, for example, paying for thousands of traditional billboards advertisements, with an ARG format, paying for one single captivating billboard is enough for word to spread amongst the curious.

While the concept of guerrilla marketing is helpful in understanding the promotional value of these methods, it is less helpful in acknowledging how marketing approaches may become film experiences of their own. In this way, I am applying the ARG lens in order to shed light on the ways in which these marketing tricks can be viewed as more than mere promotional content, but also as attempts to explore new avenues of horror creation. While varying in their manifestation and role within the overall campaigns, they demonstrate a shift within the genre towards newer, more engaged methods of marketing which move beyond their status as promotional content and become experiments in horror creation.

It appears, then, that the marketing influence and legacy of *The Blair Witch Project* has yet to be adequately studied; while *Blair Witch* has been remembered for its own innovative campaign, it is not often acknowledged as an influential, trailblazing campaign when newer, similar campaigns are launched. Even still, when *Blair Witch* is acknowledged as an influence, it is typically only used to showcase how the influenced films simply did not live up to the standards set by *The Blair Witch Project*'s successes. Telotte's quote above, which mentions an industry blitz to emulate *Blair Witch* marketing tactics, notes that most of these attempts failed. Therefore I ask: what about the films and campaigns that did not fail?

To further prove this point, we may look towards the other ways *Blair Witch* has been memorialized as influential. Blake and Aldana Reyes take note of *The Blair Witch Project'*s long-lasting influence on horror aesthetics and style, writing that "Since *The Blair Witch Project*, the phenomenon of found footage horror has proliferated and mutated to incorporate CCTV, mobile phone, laptop camera and footage obtained through other filming devices" (126). What is important here is that, although *Blair Witch* did not invent the found footage aesthetic or sub-genre, it is nonetheless, over and over again, credited with popularizing its use to such a degree that it is also acknowledged as a clear influence of its adaptations; as novel techniques and technologies emerge within the sub-genre, *Blair Witch* remains foundational to their proliferation. In fact, several of the upcoming examples fall into the category of found footage as well, perhaps because, as *The Blair Witch Project* established, the found footage sub-genre lends itself particularly well to the alternate reality game process. Nevertheless, this mutation that Blake and Aldana Reyes write about, I argue, is equally applicable to the reproduction of *Blair Witch* marketing tricks. Therefore, through an inclusive ARG reading, I will use this space to reinstate the relevance of *Blair Witch* promotional tactics as fundamental to several contemporary marketing approaches.

In an effort to curate a legacy which appropriately acknowledges the influence *The Blair Witch Project* has had on contemporary horror, I begin by asking: what would the next iteration of a *Blair Witch* type campaign look like? I posit that the parameters for which we should be looking for a new *Blair Witch*-type campaign can be found in our ARG axes. The legacy of *Blair Witch* can be found in the replication and emulation of its gamified components of digitization,

decentralization, transmediation, tethered gameplay, and the TINAG philosophy. As I chronicle the examples herein, I will highlight each one through the axes it prioritizes and exemplifies, given that each campaign is gamified through differing sites, tasks, and engagement methods. It is my position that the ARG model, once applied to *The Blair Witch Project* and now to these more contemporary films, allows us to view a lineage of innovative horror marketing trends. Through this reading, *The Blair Witch Project* will be viewed not as an irreproducible rarity but as the catalyst for a phenomenon that continually morphs and adapts to new narratives, environments and ages.

Transmediation and Decentralization: *Cloverfield*

Let us begin with a campaign that prioritizes transmediation, the use and cooperation of several media spaces, and decentralization, the participant's movement and the flow of information between these spaces. These particular axes are especially co-dependant; how could a participant travel through campaign spaces if a multitude of these spaces does not exist? Likewise, how could one experience the plethora of spaces if not by moving between them? I am therefore grouping these two axes together in order to best reflect their purpose. A prime example of these two axes in action is Matt Reeves' 2008 found-footage sci-fi horror feature *Cloverfield,* which also happens to be one of, if not the most well-known viral horror marketing campaign of the twenty-first century. While several of the upcoming examples offer vignettes of ARG experiences rather than total gamified campaigns, *Cloverfield*, like *Blair Witch*, offers a more complete game where players must decode puzzles and follow clues to solve the mystery at the heart of the campaign. *Cloverfield* follows six twenty-something New York residents as they fight to survive the brutal attacks of a mysterious, gigantic creature taking over the city. Reeves' film and its accompanying campaign offers a robust example of a viral marketing scheme which enacted a number of ARG-type techniques, a promotional experiment of-sorts that we may consider to be the closest to emulating *The Blair Witch Project'*s depth, reach, and popularity.

Cloverfield first initiated its campaign through a cryptic teaser trailer that was played ahead of several screenings for Michael Bay's 2007 summer blockbuster *Transformers*. The trailer, which featured footage excluded from the film, played with no title attached, immediately

drawing the audience's curiosity. The teaser featured minimal information about its production and forthcoming release, though it did include a release date stylized as "1-18-08". This particular method of writing the release date later became important to the film's marketing campaign as the campaign prominently featured the website 1-18-08.com. The website hosted a collection of time-stamped photos - visitors could use these images to try to put together the story of the film, and the images could be flipped over for clues. Purportedly, if the webpage was left open for over five minutes, viewers could hear the roaring sound of the *Cloverfield* monster. Similarly, viewers could text the number 33287 to receive that same monster's roar as a ringtone alongside a cellphone background showcasing Manhattan in ruins (McCoy).

The mystery surrounding the film did not dissipate with its release as several other cryptic websites and social media profiles continued to pop up and circulate. Each of the film's characters had their own detailed MySpace profiles featuring photos, blog posts and interactions with the other characters' profiles (Reyes).

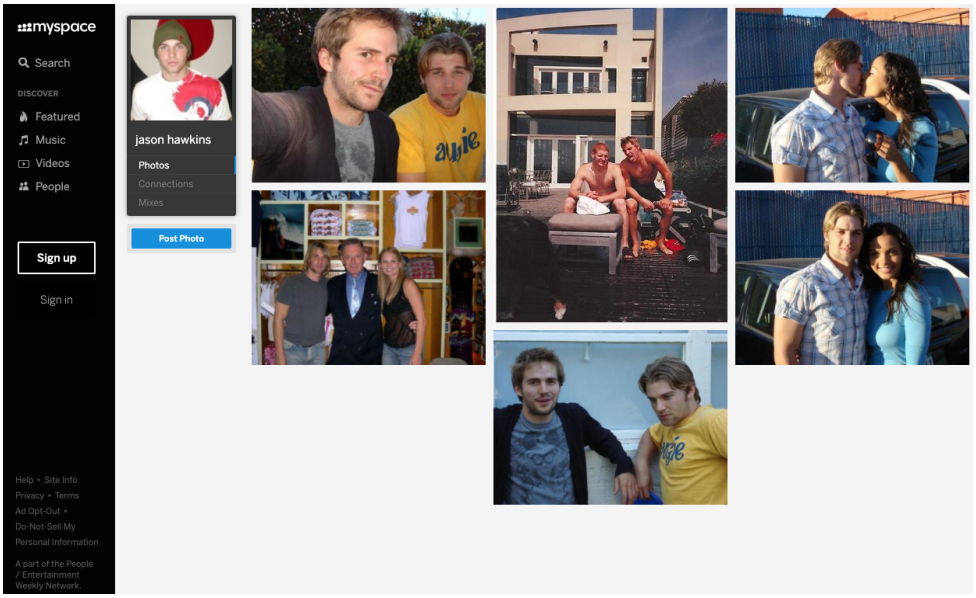

Fig. 7. A *Cloverfield* MySpace page (@DinosaurDracula).

The *Cloverfield* marketing campaign also included a plethora of information on the fictional secretive company featured in the film, Tagruato. According to *Cloverfield* lore, Tagruato is a Japanese deep-sea mining company with numerous subsidiaries, the most prominent of which is Slusho, a brand specializing in cold beverages. Dedicated participants of the *Cloverfield*

campaign posit that Tagruato's Slusho is responsible for the monster's escape, and therefore the destruction seen in the film, due to a Slusho ingredient called Seabed's Nectar which they harvested and stole from the deep-sea monster (Sonnack). There was a phone number viewers could call to reach the fictional headquarters of Tagruato where, though they would not be able to speak to a real employee, they could hear a recorded message declaring that the lines were too busy to answer your call. Much of this information, among other details, was shared on the several fan-run blogs and forums where, like those for *The Blair Witch Project*, enthusiasts gathered, piecing clues together and working to solve puzzles related to the film and its campaign.

Cloverfield, therefore, offers an apt example of ARG transmediation and decentralization through its expansive multimedia world, which exists both online and offline, where the story continues to unravel and the game, so to speak, may be played. *Cloverfield* utilized multiple webpages, social media profiles, phone numbers, text messages, and cryptic cinematic adverts to expand its story and allow fear to infiltrate across several platforms. Viewers are encouraged to navigate the world's spaces, jumping from the MySpace profiles and the cryptic websites to their own telephone to make a call or send a text message, all in an effort to enter into the *Cloverfield* narrative and collaboratively solve the mystery of the sinister Tagruato and its monster. Most importantly, *Cloverfield* uses all of its sites to dissolve the veil between fact and fiction, asserting the fictional narrative into the viewer's everyday reality.

Digitization: *Unfriended*, *The Black Phone* and *Candyman*

Contemporary ARG transmedia tactics often require the use of digital media formats and the internet in order to reach viral depths; our previous example of *Cloverfield* offers an apt example of how many different digital platforms and sites can be used cooperatively, exemplifying not only the role of transmediation and decentralization but also digitization. The axis of digitization describes digital spaces as ARG tools of address, where narrative horror may move through our everyday devices and infiltrate the viewer's realm. Here, I will unpack a number of film campaigns which, unlike *Cloverfield*, offer particularly potent examples of ARG digitization in that they have specifically curated one digital avenue. By this, I mean that the

upcoming examples prioritize small-scale ARG-like interactions between marketing spaces and participants as opposed to total game experiences. These examples are no less important to our study, and instead showcase the varying ways ARG techniques have, over the years, reshaped and remodelled themselves around differing sites of address. The first popular example of this is Levan Gabriadze's 2014 desktop horror film *Unfriended*. Gabriadze's film, though it is not the first desktop feature film, is arguably the most popular within the subgenre, offering a fresh take on found-footage horror aesthetics in the age of Skype and YouTube. Simulated to look as though it was a recording of a desktop screen, a type of visual storytelling sometimes referred to as the screenlife format, *Unfriended* tells the grim tale of several high school students being haunted via Skype by their classmate Laura, who, after being cyber-bullied on social media, took her own life. Given the format of the film, it becomes immediately apparent that *Unfriended*, like *Blair Witch*, embeds its technologically-cautious narrative into the very fabric of the film, as well as the overall campaign; a cautionary tale about the potential dangers of social media, *Unfriended* uses these same platforms to host the film and the majority of its marketing. *Unfriended*'s promotional campaign is largely known for being an internet sensation; Universal Pictures claims that 60% of *Unfriended*'s marketing budget was spent on the internet and digital platforms (Langley).

The *Unfriended* campaign notably included a live and active profile on the minimalistic social media platform Kik, where viewers could send messages to and receive answers from Laura's ghost; those who dared message the spectre would receive one of several automated responses (Storton). The video of Laura taking her own life, which according to the film was circulated heavily among her peers, could be found and watched on YouTube. Similarly, Laura, alongside other characters from the film, received their own official Facebook, Skype and Twitter accounts filled with photos, posts and friends or followers (Lee). Unlike the sites from *The Blair Witch Project* and *Cloverfield*, the *Unfriended* extra-diegetic spaces offer much less information and lore about the story-world. The *Unfriended* digital spaces each served a much more pointed purpose - the Kik profile, for example, offered basic one-on-one communication with Laura's digital ghost, and the haunted Facebook profile served to spook viewers through , for example, unexpected friend requests by those who ran the page. In this way, they served not

to add detail to the story or help viewers solve any mystery, but instead worked exclusively to stir up fear ahead of and outside of the film's release.

Fig. 8. The first post on Laura Barns' official memorial Facebook page.

One of the newest entries within the horror genre to adopt similar ARG-like tactics and prioritize digitization is Scott Derrickson's 2022 film *The Black Phone*. Based on the 2005 Joe Hill short story of the same name, Derrickson's feature chronicles the 1978 kidnapping of a thirteen year old boy, Finney, who was taken from suburbs of Denver, Colorado by a masked killer named The Grabber. While being kept locked up in the killer's basement with nothing but an old mattress and a defective telephone, the boy begins receiving phone calls from the killer's previous victims - that is, now-deceased victims - who try to help Finney escape. The phone, in this way, is Finney's only key to escaping, his sole tool for survival. Fittingly, the film's official trailer, released in April 2022, prompted viewers to text the phone number 303-529-2166 with the keyword "ESCAPE". Though the trailer included the prompt with no further detail about

what texting this number might entail, according to a SYFY article reporting on the newly released trailer, viewers may text the above number "for clues, links, and other bits of teaser material leading up to the wide theatrical release" (Weiss). Those who have texted the number have revealed further information on forum sites like Reddit; according to several players, the number would periodically text back, sometimes asking questions and providing secret information to those who answered correctly, and sometimes randomly revealing numbers that would become relevant to the film's narrative, such as the five digit code which eventually unlocks the door keeping Finney hostage ("Potential ARG"). *The Black Phone*'s campaign went one step further than that of *Unfriended* in the way that it incorporated details from the film and encouraged viewers to engage with these details to illuminate new or early information pertaining to the narrative. Not quite as plentiful as the *Cloverfield* campaign, *The Black* Phone's promotional stunt nonetheless encouraged the use of one specific digital format in order to expand the horror of the film into the real world.

Yet another example of a campaign which prioritizes digitization is Nia DaCosta's highly anticipated *Candyman* (2021), a direct sequel to Bernard Rose's 1992 horror classic of the same name. The *Candyman* films are directly inspired by Clive Barker's short story *The Forbidden* (1985), which itself is inspired by catoptromancy[3] urban legends such as "Bloody Mary" which ask players to say the spirit's name three times while looking in the mirror; gazing at one's own reflection while repeating her name is said to conjure her spirit. Both Rose's film and DaCosta's sequel explore themes of racism, classism, and anti-black violence through the tale of Daniel Robitaille, a black artist who is brutally attacked and murdered for his relationship with a wealthy white grad student. Robitaille becomes Candyman, a vengeful spirit who kills those that summon him, fuelled by an intense desire for his story to be remembered.

Playing on the tropes of urban legends and adapting mirror divination to the digital world, DaCosta's *Candyman* marketing campaign reimagines the looking glass as a desktop monitor. The campaign features a website, idareyou.candymanmovie.com, which as its name suggests, dares its viewers to say Candyman's name five times. In the film, doing so would conjure the spirit of Candyman and he would take the life of those who dare utter his name; on

[3] Catoptromancy is the practice of mirror divination.

the website, viewers who enabled access to their camera and microphone would have their screen temporarily turned into a mirror with a "Candyman" counter in the top left corner. With every "Candyman" uttered, the counter rises as the screen flickers and bees begin to appear, a frequent motif for Candyman himself throughout the films. Once his name has been said five times, the mirror shatters; instead of conjuring Candyman, saying his name five times unlocks the final trailer for the film (Squires). Players may also choose to "share and dare a friend", inviting others to step into the horror through the digital looking glass. The *Candyman* site takes the importance of digitization to new heights by asking viewers not to send a text message to a murderer or accept a friend request from the dead, but use their own voice to speak the same pattern of words which has proven to be detrimental in the film. The site asks the participant to put themselves in the role of soon-to-be-victim, inciting a type of thrill unmatched by hearing someone else say those same words.

Though *Unfriended, The Black Phone* and *Candyman* all used different digital technologies and platforms, as well as used these spaces to enact different forms of engagement, they nonetheless all offer apt examples of the utility of digitization as a tool of ARG marketing. These films chose not to use a traditional website format but instead used digital platforms to mask their promotional nature. That is not to say these products are not promotional; it would be foolish and misguided to say so. Rather, these tactics use the very devices and programs we have come to trust the most with our everyday worlds and use them as spaces to expand the horror that makes the horror film. When watching *Candyman*, we know he does not really exist and chanting his name five times will not conjure him, and yet, when the website asks us to do just that, just like those in the film, we wait on the edge of our seat, in fearful anticipation for something to happen, not in the movie itself, but on our computer screen.

Tethered Gameplay: *Hereditary* and *Smile*

No less important than the marketing gimmicks which prioritize digitization are the ones which prioritize the axes of tethered gameplay. The examples above have indeed satisfied the ARG axis of digitization in that they utilize and prioritize varying forms of digital spaces to enact ARG tactics. Nonetheless, however, are the contemporary examples which do not prioritize the

use of digital media but instead focus on enacting their ARG techniques in the real world. These campaign tactics, much like the digital ones mentioned earlier, also focus their efforts on creating one-off ARG experiences, but instead do so on an even smaller scale, at least initially, since they are enacted in real world spaces where only a select few may experience the play first hand. Interestingly, though these examples are far less concerned with utilizing digital platforms, they frequently end up achieving similar prominence on the internet since those who encounter the real world tactics share their stories online. Ari Aster's 2018 hit film *Hereditary* is a prime example of this phenomenon; it featured a marketing campaign that, while it was not launched online, became an internet sensation due to social media conversation about the immersive offline marketing tricks.

Hereditary chronicles the grim life of the Graham family after their mysterious and reclusive grandmother passes away; shortly after her death, the family begins experiencing supernatural phenomenon and discovers that they have been unknowingly attached to a demonic coven through their grandmother. Several of the Graham family members are artists and use their art forms as a means of working through these traumatic experiences; the Graham matriarch Annie, is a miniature artist who creates renditions of her own life experiences, while Charlie, her 13-year-old daughter creates bizarre dolls from random craft supplies and various recycled materials. Just as these artworks are often depictions of previous trauma, they too sometimes function as omens foreshadowing bad things to come. For example, in the film, Charlie is seen cutting the head off of a dead bird; later in the movie, Charlie has her own head violently taken off by a street pole as she's hanging out of the back seat of her brother's moving car. In this way, the art pieces themselves are physical manifestations of the emotional trauma that has passed, or is imminent.

Given the importance of these pieces, it is no surprise then that the production team A-24 decided to use them as horrifying marketing tools. Sam Angelo from popular horror blog iHorror describes the tactic: "Following the night of the *Hereditary* premier, viewers opened their doors to find these tiny, little, hellish 'toys' sitting upon their door steps. The dolls were accompanied with tags and labels inscribed with the viewers name, along with "Will you take care of me?". Though these dolls were only sent to select viewers, images of the dolls immediately began

circulating on social media, particularly on Twitter. Barry Jenkins, director of the 2016 Academy Award Best Picture winner *Moonlight,* another A24 feature, tweeted a photo of the doll he received with a caption that read: "After seeing the TERRIFYING @Hereditarymovie at a midnight screening last night (and checking every shadow of my room before going to bed), I woke up to THIS waiting outside my hotel room" (@BarryJenkins). To further accentuate the reality of the dolls, a fake Etsy storefront was created in Charlie's name; though dolls could not actually be purchased, the shop showed previous dolls purchases and even had reviews, further adding to the authentic nature of the creepy trinkets (N. Clark)

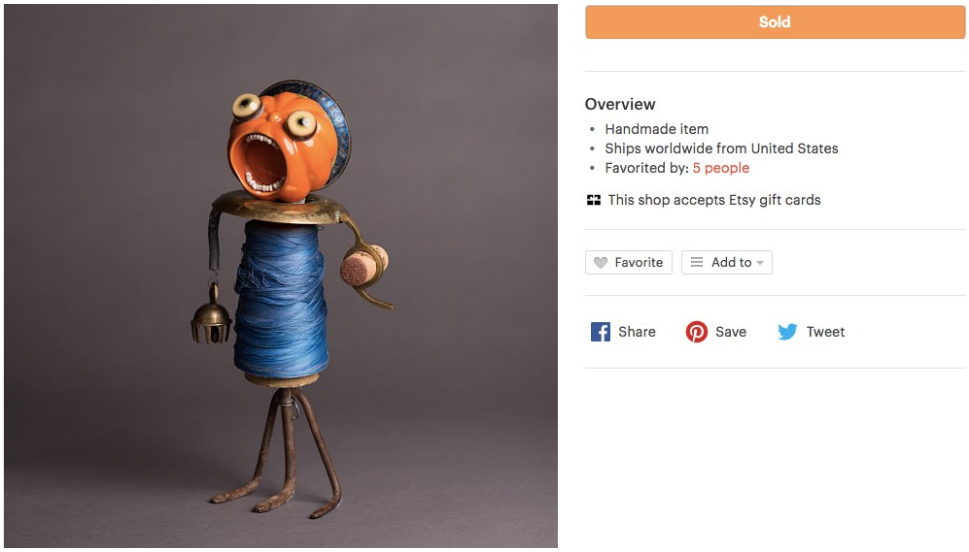

Fig. 9. Charlie's doll from *Hereditary*, named "The Biter" (N. Clark).

Another example of such real-world tactics can be seen in the marketing campaign for Parker Finn's 2022 psychological horror film *Smile*. The film follows Dr. Rose Cotter, a therapist who witnesses the bizarre and violent suicide of one of her patients, Laura; before taking her own life in Rose's office, Laura glared at Rose and smiled. Shortly after her death, Rose begins seeing and experiencing unsettling occurrences, and soon pieces together a horrifying trail of seemingly-contagious suicides wherein being the unfortunate witness to a suicide causes one to take their own life within seven days with an eerie smile plastered across their face. Rather than employing an unnerving prop from the movie to act as a scare tactic, the *Smile* campaign tasked unknown actors with this role. In late September 2022, several photos and videos began circulating social media showing individuals standing stoically in the rowdy crowds at several

National Baseball League games, staring directly into the broadcast camera and eerily smiling. The smilers sometimes donned a bright yellow shirt with the word “smile” written across the front, and sometimes assumed an inconspicuous outfit, camouflaging themselves amongst the group of strangers. An article written for media and marketing company *The Drum* claims that “Clips depicting the unsettling smiles garnered thousands of ‘likes’ on Twitter. Meanwhile, four TikToks alone generated more than 18m views of the stunt, catalyzing more buzz about the new film online” (K. Clark). After pulling out their phones to photograph and share the creepy stunt, viewers could then report the smiles they had seen at the official site smilesightings.com, where unfortunate smile viewers are warned: “once you see it, it’s too late”. Viewers are encouraged to call the number 201-365-4067 to report a smile, and are also encouraged to upload images of their sighting to the website’s “submit your smile sighting” feature.

Fig. 10. Actress paid to promote Finn’s film by smiling caught on camera (Perry).

Similar to the way in which *Unfriended, The Black Phone,* and *Candyman* exploit the everyday, trusted nature of our devices, *Hereditary* and *Smile*, like many ARGs before, take advantage of real world spaces we consider safe and turns them into spaces of gameplay, and in the case of horror, sites of fear. The *Hereditary* dolls, carefully delivered to viewers residence, briefly invited emotional turmoil and unease into the safety and comfort of home. *Smile*’s campaign makes use of a benign, if not benevolent space, a space that is often the source of fun and excitement, and turns it into a place of trepidation; the baseball stadium becomes a dangerous space where each and every face, familiar or not, is a potential threat. Unfortunate

passers-by, hoping to simply enjoy a baseball game or wake up to a peaceful home, accidentally stumble upon a realm-bending gimmick and find themselves caught in the web of a terrifying game.

This is Not a Game: *The Ring*

Lastly, but certainly not least, is the axis of TINAG, the *this is not a game* philosophy. Here, I will return to *The Ring* as a prime example of this philosophy. As we have already established, *The Ring* utilized a number of platforms and spaces, including untitled late night TV spots, VHS tapes mysteriously left on people's cars, and a website which details the daunting effects of watching the aforementioned videotape. While *The Ring* may not have as plentiful a game as the campaigns of *Blair Witch* and *Cloverfield,* it still offers a playful experience where viewers are encouraged to look and to search; motivated by curiosity and eagerness, participants who found the VHS tapes take them home, place them in the VCR and hit play. Each of *The Ring*'s marketing tricks work extensively to camouflage their fabrication and dissolve the veil between reality and fiction; they remove the markers that we have come to recognize as indications of the boundaries of the diegesis. *The Ring*'s campaign fuses the film's diegesis with our own world through a forced ignorance to its own film status. Instead of, for example, screening a more traditional format teaser trailer during late night programming revealing the movie's plot alongside a release date and urging viewers to come see the movie in theatres, *The Ring*'s promotional television spots remove any and all traces of their promotional nature. To those who came across the screening, it did not look or feel like a film advertisement but instead looked like it might be a terrifying prank or a sinister broadcast hack, like the Max Headroom signal hijack of 1987. [4] Likewise, rather than circulating flyers detailing where people could see a screening nearby, or plastering posters around town that include the movie's title with cast and crew credits, the mysterious VHS tapes make no reference to their own or the film's production and instead assert themselves as authentic pieces of media. The methods used to circulate the

[4] The Max Headroom signal hijacking was an incident that occurred on November 22nd 1987 where two local Chicago television broadcast channel were hijacked by someone wearing a Max Headroom mask (Bishop). Though the signal intrusion only lasted a few shorts moments, the incident is remembered as a highly publicized prank, and remains an important moment of broadcast history.

ominous videotape and the fake expositional website are threatening and assertive, insisting that the video is incredibly dangerous and yet, that it continue to be seen.

The aesthetics of *The Ring*'s videotape are reminiscent of *The Blair Witch Project*: A blank screen gives way to television snow. The flickering static rolls as the tape begins to crackle with the soft sound of white noise. The snow dances on the screen, a display of the videotape's medium, not unlike the *Blair Witch* title card's mechanical bouncing, revealing its preoccupation with the materiality of cinema. The performance of the materials of cinema is one of many ways these films shrink the space between film and viewer. A pulsing bright circle - a ring - appears on a dimly lit background. The image is so simple, and yet feels so uncanny.

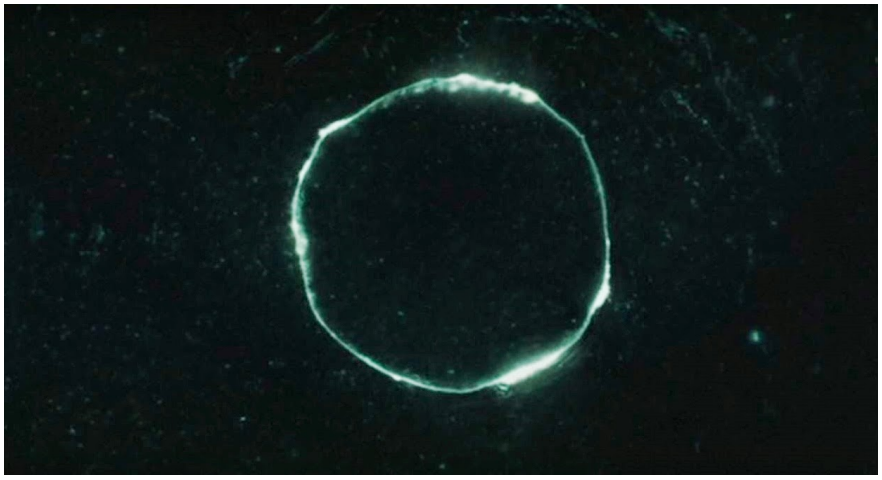

Fig. 11. The namesake of *The Ring*'s cursed videotape.

The uncanniness is amplified by the video's context - or sometimes the lack thereof. Those who encountered the video in 2002 likely knew that it was a supposed cursed video attached to a new horror film, but some also saw it during late night programming or found the VHS tape sitting on their cars with no explanation - yet another display of the film's fixation with the medium. This simple image, just like the *Blair Witch* missing posters or the image of Heather's sobbing face, functions as an icon or symbol of the increasing tendency towards a new horror of immediacy. The assertiveness of *The Ring*'s methods, not unlike many other contemporary horror ARG tactics, implicates the viewer in a violently intimate way, but does so to such a degree that it reaches contiguity with the viewer. *Blair Witch*, for example, uses its promotional sites to position the viewer in an investigative role. The fake crime scene footage,

the manufactured timeline of events, and the cries for help from all who knew the missing students encourage us to study the mythology and immerse ourselves in the lore in order to find answers. As we peruse the campaign spaces and experience the promotional media, we are encouraged to gather information and become a sleuth; the horror, as it seems, is something we might be able to solve. We are pulled into Heather, Josh and Mike's world of terror, but remain at a slight distance, just enough to witness the horror as it happens to someone else. Conversely, *The Ring*'s campaign increases its proximity to the viewer, forcing them into a much more precarious role. The viewer is immediately positioned, not as an investigator, but as a victim.

We find a sensibility of too-closeness, of the terrifying collapse of reality and fiction, in the image of Heather's terrified gaze and *The Ring*'s cryptically mesmerizing video. We might also find this same sensibility in the uncanny images of strangers smiling sinisterly, captured on the cellphones of random sports fans, or in the social media messages sent from Laura's ghost. It is present in the Twitter threads where recipients of the *Hereditary* dolls shared their terrifying figurine encounters, and in the recorded phone messages from *Cloverfield*'s fictional company Targuato. At the end of *Blair Witch*, as Heather declares her fear of witnessing her horrifying reality and gazes back at us, our roles as witnesser and witnessed become increasingly blurred. We are reminded not just of her proximity but also of her distance from us. She is too close, but it remains true that she is the victim, and we cannot save her. Instead, the cursed videotape of *The Ring*, the grinning strangers of *Smile*, and the taunting mirror of *Candyman* feel just a little bit closer. Distance between film and viewer is reduced even further and viewers are pointedly threatened: once the video begins to play, or when you have already seen the smile, it is too late. As the video plays, the strangers stare, and the fake looking glass shatters, it becomes clear that we are no longer bystanders. In the new era of ARG horror, we are now the one's experiencing the imminent horror, and like Heather, we, too, are afraid to close our eyes, and open them.

Conclusion: Do You Want to Play a Game?

"I see why you like this video camera so much.
It's not quite reality.
It's totally like a filtered reality, man.
It's like you can pretend everything's not quite the way it is."
-Joshua Leonard, *The Blair Witch Project*

On August 18th 2022, the streaming platform Disney+ released the first episode of its newest Marvel Cinematic Universe series *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law*. Several days before the premiere, an official profile was launched for She-Hulk, also known as Jennifer Walters, on the popular mobile dating app Tinder. The dating platform presents users with brief profiles of potential suitors, including a few photos and a short biography, and asks users to swipe right to like a profile or left to dislike - both users must swipe right in order to match. As several Tinder users surfed through their potential matches, the Jennifer Walters profile would spontaneously appear in their profile rotation, revealing the following quotation in the profile biography: "I know what you're thinking. This can't be real…and guess what, it's not! But suspend your disbelief for one second and pretend you just matched with She-Hulk. Excited?" (Jirak). We are invited into the *She-Hulk* narrative and asked to participate in the game. The prompt that tells viewers to pretend we have matched with She-Hulk feels almost like a dare, a challenge presented to the player by the game master. If those who came across the profile accepted the quest and swiped right, they would match with She-Hulk and receive a direct message that reads as follows:

> I knew we'd match! There's plenty to love in She-Hulk Attorney at law. Lawyers, Hulks, cameos, dating, happy hours, yoga, magic, fashion….the list goes on. Now stop reading this, message your match below and set up a date to watch She-Hulk: Attorney at Law, August 18th on Disney+. (Felt)

Upon seeing the account and its subsequent message, it is immediately obvious that the promotion of *She-Hulk* functions differently than our previous case studies. Unlike many of the

horror campaigns listed in the third chapter, the profile does not try to hide its true nature or mask its promotional intent behind the guise of a realm-bending gimmick. Many of these previously-established horror campaigns, though they may not have been fully believed as real, maintained their facade of reality; keeping with Schreier's point about *Blair Witch*, viewers often knew, at one point or another, that it was merely a campaign and yet continued to play along - as did the campaigns themselves. In fact, in complete opposition to these previous examples, the *She-Hulk* profile is ultimately, if not initially explicit with those who encounter it about the fact that it is an advertisement. Despite this difference, the profile does, as many ARGs and ARG tactics do, act as a site where we may unknowingly stumble upon an expansion of the film's narrative with play, or perhaps with playfulness as a prominent goal. The Tinder profile is not like a billboard one drives by on the side of the road, or a poster seen in the lobby of a movie theatre. Rather, the profile exists in a space and in a format that is more readily integrated into our everyday life. It infiltrates our personal devices in an intimate and immediate way that is unmatched by many traditional marketing techniques. Its provocative bids for engagement help to turn what might otherwise be an ordinary task into a miniature game.

Also important here is the thematic overlap with the program. In the series, the modern dating world is central to the show's narrative, and Walters herself is seen using the Tinder app. Likewise, the profile is a site where, even just temporarily, diegetic boundaries are obscured and our everyday spaces are infiltrated. While this particular stunt may not seem to be a case worthy of an ARG reading, at least according to the axes established herein, it nonetheless points to a growing desire, both on the parts of the marketing industry and consumers alike, to expand fictional worlds and film experiences into new, immersive spaces in playful ways. I include this example as a concluding remark not to deter from the overall argument of this thesis but instead to end on a note which opens up this field of study towards other genres, subjects, and sensibilities.

Earlier, it was established that the horror genre is particularly adept at forming enthusiastic fan communities. Though this remains true, it is equally true that some other genres also encourage committed fan-bases for differing reasons and therefore offer environments where these methods may flourish. One certain example of this is the superhero genre; following

the rise and steady popularity of *Marvel Comics* (1939-) and *DC Comics* (1934-), and their subsequent contemporary film adaptations, the superhero genre has since become one of the leading film genres, in terms of financial success and fan engagement. Due in large part to the longstanding history of Marvel and DC, alongside the extreme world-building efforts expended to create fictional realms like the Marvel Cinematic Universe, superhero films offer a fan-driven environment, similar to horror films, which encourage ARG-like tactics to thrive. It is of no surprise, then, that the Disney/Marvel conglomerate has begun adapting boundary-pushing tactics; the above example of *She-Hulk* is just one iteration pointing to this impulse towards more engaged methods of promotion. Likewise, though this thesis specifically examined the role of these tactics in generating modes of fear and play, readings of similar ARG techniques across different genres will surely work to incite different emotional and sensorial responses. While this thesis was curated especially for the horror genre given its aesthetic and spectatorial idiosyncrasies, the marketing of *She-Hulk* is just one recent example which points to the emerging need for adjacent studies which make space for the particularities of other genres and emotional experiences.

The first chapter of this thesis formulated a five axis model to describe the major pillars of contemporary ARG phenomenon. These five axes - transmediation, decentralization, digitization, tethered gameplay, and the *this is not a game* philosophy - each embody the most important traits of alternate reality games that have consistently proven to be foundational to their operation. By assigning names to these concepts, their utility is highlighted and better understood within both the concept of ARGs and later, within the horror genre too. In fact, these axes proved to be particularly pertinent to the horror genre and its marketing campaigns in the way that the genre is preoccupied with inciting fear. Further, while the ideas behind each of these axes remains vital to the ARG experience, perhaps other genres of motion pictures and their accompanying campaigns might benefit from slight variations in this taxonomy. It seems, for example, that throughout the horror case studies, the axis of decentralization was mostly employed to describe the movement of participants between campaign spaces, though as we established in the first chapter, this axis can also be used to describe the congregation and collaboration of participants. While the collaborative nature of some horror campaigns was

explored, collaboration did not prove to be a foundational element to the majority of these cases. However, perhaps other film genres which use ARG tactics may lend themselves more readily to the collaborative and co-operative nature of ARGs.

In the second chapter, the previously-established axes were then applied to the site of *The Blair Witch Project*'s mediascape, the many sites and spaces associated with its promotional campaign. The application of these axes revealed the way in which *Blair Witch* marketing techniques may be viewed as more than mere promotional stunts, but also as alternate reality game phenomena which fostered fear in novel ways. As each axis was considered and each text was explored, it became more and more apparent that the *Blair Witch* marketing campaign enacted several techniques which mirrored those of an ARG. By the end of the third chapter, the contemporary trend towards ARG tactics, specifically within the horror genre since *Blair Witch*, were documented. The contemporary film campaigns outlined herein have demonstrated that horror techniques which rely on ARG characteristics have continued to thrive within the genre in a multitude of different ways. By looking towards several more newer horror marketing campaigns which utilized similar techniques, I sought to illuminate the contemporary horror film's tendency towards ARG tactics in the digital age's shifting film industry. Many of these examples, rather than offering total "games" like *Blair Witch* and *Cloverfield*, instead offered mini, short-form ARG experiences. Since each of the previous examples seemed to operate in different ways across different spaces and platform, this study should encourage us to consider which of these tactics was most effective at engaging audiences. In other words, we should ask: in what ways did these examples work, and in what ways did they not?

It seems as though the biggest potential issue with these tactics is accessibility, both in terms of time and space. For those who could not experience the selective real-world experiences, like the grinning strangers promoting *Smile* or the creepy dolls from *Hereditary*, seeing these images secondhand through social media simply does not create the same fearful experience as it did for those who were there to witness them. By the time the videos and images had been spread across Twitter and TikTok, there were already several comments by other users and articles declaring the strategic nature of these gimmicks. Those who experienced the *Blair Witch* campaign as it happened were caught in the game before it was widely known that there

even was a game to begin with. Though we can pour over the campaign texts and the personal testimonials of those who lived through the *Blair Witch* campaign truly believing it to be real, within months and years of its release, it became increasingly difficult to deny its fictional status. Though there remains value in viewing these promotional objects and strategies after their primary window of operation, it is clear that the alternate reality game experience is one which fundamentally requires being in the right place at the right time; rather, in the case of ARG horror, one must be in precisely the wrong place at the worst possible time to experience the fear. The horror ARG is a space of contradiction - an ideally chilling serendipity.

The practices and ideas presented here are, like the film industry itself, consistently evolving and expanding. As established in the introduction, methods of producing, exhibiting, promoting and experiencing moving images are constantly shifting. As we saw herein, the last few decades has seen the industry grow to include a number of new technologies and innovative methodologies especially pertinent to ARGs that are becoming increasingly typical. Looking forward, we can expect such tactics to continue to thrive and evolve given the ample opportunity and demand in our increasingly digitized, immersive world. This thesis therefore looks forward to further dissections of contemporary horror marketing strategies as they continue to shift, as well as further examinations of ARG phenomenon in other film genres and differing industries as a whole.

In the introduction, we also noted the new rules of horror according to *Scream* 2022: “Delete social media, tape over your phone camera, and turn off your GPS”. These rules, in their original context, function as guidelines for how to survive in the contemporary age of horror. They describe the technologies and modes of address that have taken over as horror’s dominant tropes. In the new era of horror, audiences are now more implicated than ever; like the hunted victims and the final girls, through these ever-present technologies and media spaces, we, too, are the one’s experiencing imminent horror. Just as the horror film has rules for survival, the horror ARG has its own guidelines that may help you survive - if you want to play the game and make it out alive, simply follow along. Rule number one: keep your social media active, have your phone camera at the ready, and use your GPS wisely. Rule number two: do as She-Hulk says - suspend your disbelief and play the game. Most importantly, rule number three:

to avoid fainting, keep repeating, it is only a game,

…only a game,

…only a game,

…only a game.

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