Chapter Four

"Evil Will Walk Once More"
Phantasmagoria — The Stalker Film as Interactive Movie?

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"The Intertextual Arena" and Cross-Media Convergences

Two distinct tales of horror. Two heroines. Two psycho-killers. Two small-town communities. In the first story, the horror begins when a deranged murderer (possibly also the bogeyman himself) interrupts the peace of a small town. Lurking in the shadows, he emerges only to butcher a stream of unsuspecting young victims. At the end of the tale, the story’s victimized and only surviving character, Laurie, rises to status of hero as she confronts the “bogeyman” head-on. Trapped in a house with him, her life balancing on a fine line, she has no option but to bring him out in the open and lure him to his own destruction. In the second story, the horror emerges when the heroine-to-be’s husband develops psychotic, serial killer tendencies. The peace of their idyllic home and community is shattered and the psycho-killer’s victim list builds up. Then Adrienne, the killer’s wife, is left with no other option: she must engage him in final battle and, likewise, set him up for his own bloody annihilation. Two defeated psycho-killers. Two female victors.

Laurie and Adrienne’s dilemmas and conquests sound like classic plot actions belonging to the stalker film tradition. A psychotic killer stalks members of a small community; a (usually) female hero is left as sole survivor of the story’s main cast; and after a bloody and gory fest of mayhem and carnage, he hunts her down in an enclosed space (often a house), forcing her to meet his attack head-on. There is,
however, one small difference: where Laurie belongs to the realm of the cinema, being the main protagonist in the stalker film *Halloween* of 1978, Adrienne belongs to the realm of the CD-ROM “interactive movie” and is the hero of the horror game *Phantasmagoria* of 1995. The exchange of character types, settings, sound effects, plot structures, and thematics present in these two media examples reveals the complex interchange occurring between contemporary entertainment industries.

At first glance, this exchange seems to involve the simple transfer of codes and conventions from the cinema into the world of the CD-ROM, but this “simple” migration entails complex transformations that unsettle film form and the interpretative approaches that are applied to horror cinema—and to film spectatorship in general. The first part of this essay will explore the intertextual and cross-media nature of contemporary entertainment media through an exploration of *Phantasmagoria*’s influences. In particular, I will draw on Carol Clover’s and Vera Dika’s examinations of the slasher/stalker film to emphasize the applicability of film models for CD-ROM interactive movies. Having acknowledged the convergence of two separate media by drawing on similar theoretical and critical models, I suggest that, despite the affinities shared by one genre across two media formats, CD-ROMs call for more fluid responses that can encompass the fluid and multilinear nature of this new technology. I will employ the concept of the hypertext as a means of examining the implications of multilinearity in *Phantasmagoria*.

As is the case with many examples of contemporary cinema, games like *Phantasmagoria* (much like slasher films) are aware of their own historicity. The intertextual referencing reveals a medium steeped in the history of its own conventions. When tackling *Phantasmagoria*, we need to consider how this CD-ROM game positions itself in the context of the array of conventions and traditions the game emerges from and consciously draws upon. As Jim Collins states in relation to the current proliferation of Batman texts, one characteristic of popular culture is its increasing “hyperconsciousness about both the history of popular culture and the shifting status of popular culture in the current context” (1991, 165). *Phantasmagoria* is no exception. An awareness of generic and stylistic antecedents is nothing new. The difference is that post–1970s examples place themselves in what Collins calls an intricate “intertextual arena.” Focusing on the array of the “already
said” (a term he extends from Eco), contemporary examples of popular culture not only draw on examples specific to their own genre in all stages of their historical development, they also reconfigure and negotiate the “already said” of popular culture, moving across different genres and different media, and revealing the fluid nature of the array (167).

While media examples like Phantasmagoria are the result of “multinational, profit-oriented media giants,” we need to consider both the producers' and the audience's complex “intertextual frame,” which is formed by a series of diverse sources (Pearson and Uricchio 1991, 2). Like the “bat-texts” that Collins speaks of, Phantasmagoria’s meaning depends on its negotiation of a variety of traditions past and present, including literary, cinematic, and computer games. From a literary perspective, in addition to the impact of a gothic sensibility, there are distinct echoes of the works of Edgar Allan Poe, in particular the haunting and eerie themes and atmosphere of tales like “The Fall of the House of Usher.” Similarly, the small-town, familial crises that prevail in many of Stephen King’s novels also find their way into the CD-ROM.

A precinematic heritage, evident in the game title’s reference to the phantasmagoria, is also present. Phantasmagoria were especially popular in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and were included in the magician’s repertoire. This precinematic entertainment form also revealed a predilection for themes of horror. The device, which relied on magic lanterns, could conjure illusions and phantasms that lured the audience into its horrific and fantastic representations. In addition, the success of the phantasmagoria was further enhanced by the nineteenth-century love of things gothic (Heard 1996, 27), and its special effects and themes influenced early photography and the cinema—both of which dabbled in effects trickery through fantastic and horror themes. The CD-ROM calls on this tradition not only through the game title, but through Carnovasch, the demonically possessed first owner of the house in Phantasmagoria, who was also a nineteenth-century magician versed in the “magic” of the phantasmagoria. As such, the CD-ROM game Phantasmagoria is acknowledging its history, acknowledging the precinematic impact on horror cinema, and acknowledging its own place in redirecting this horror tradition into new, computer game directions.

Traveling through diverse media such as print media, the preci-
nema, and the cinema, the game also produces meaning by interacting with its computer game heritage. In the case of computer games, however, rather than being influenced by horror games alone, *Phantasmagoria* turns to other CD-ROM games like *Under a Killing Moon, Gabriel Knight, Return to Zork, Critical Path,* and *The Seventh Guest* for the interface, the use of full video motion, the ability to move the characters, and “filmic” presentation of events; and to games such as *Myst* for the depiction of dazzling and haunting computer-generated environments. The result of this complex web of intertextual references is that the narration is not simply limited to completing the plot, or to becoming involved in the “syntagmatic axis of the narrative” (Collins 1991, 168). Instead, the “layering of intertexts that occurs simultaneously deforms those same topos along a paradigmatic axis of antecedent representations” (Collins 1991, 169). The “hyperconsciousness” permits us to become engrossed in the narration in a more conventional sense, with the plot and themes unraveling along “syntagmatic” lines, but the viewer/player is also encouraged to extract meaning that lies in the audience’s awareness of the multilayered, intertextual references (Collins 1991, 173). Story concerns, therefore, are not the primary drive; allusions to other media examples that have had an impact on *Phantasmagoria*’s construction of meaning are just as integral to the player’s involvement in the game. We see this fluid, intertextual motion when we consider *Phantasmagoria*’s technological, hypertext status. Before dealing with the concept and technology of the hypertext, however, I will now turn to the horror intertext.

**Stalker Film Meets Stalker CD-ROM “Interactive Movie”?**

Recently horror has found a popular and lucrative home in the CD-ROM format. Horror film conventions have migrated and mutated into computer games like *Phantasmagoria, Phantasmagoria 2: A Puzzle of Flesh, Harvester, Ripper,* and *Alone in the Dark I, II and III. Phantasmagoria*—which was created, written, and designed by Roberta Williams and directed by Peter Maris—has proved to be one of the most controversial games released. The game’s horror themes and gory displays of violence, while common to the world of horror cinema, were unprecedented in computer games. In terms of the new representational realism provided by the technology that is the CD-
ROM interactive movie, *Phantasmagoria* was groundbreaking. In fact, it was the combination of realistic imagery and interactive technology in the context of horror that proved a controversial issue among critics who viewed the game's gruesome and realistic effects as capable of producing real-life incidents of horror.

Censorship and controversy aside, the game made advances in the interactive potential of horror games by abandoning the animated environments (familiar to games like *Doom, Alone in the Dark*, and *Quake*), incorporating instead real actors (twenty of them), settings, and cinematography and stylistic devices traditionally associated with the cinema, including five hundred camera angles. In the game, not only is it possible for characters to move around a realistic 3-D environment—aided further by the incorporation of full-motion video—but the level of character motivation and character development had not been witnessed before in computer games. The recent surge of horror games like *Phantasmagoria* actually allows the game designers to showcase the new, creative and atmospheric potential of computer games; this is made possible by CD-ROM technology's capacity for producing advanced, high-resolution graphics (Foster 1995: 32). The production of a game like *Phantasmagoria* also reflects a recent trend that involves the blurring of boundaries between making a film and producing a computer game. As a result of this shared generic, stylistic, and intertextual experience, to a certain extent it is useful to consider the horror games from the perspective of horror cinema. However, as will be discussed later, more flexible forms of interpretative models need to be incorporated—models that take into account both film traditions and the different interactive possibilities provided by CD-ROMs.

Parts of the game—especially chapter introductions (of which there are seven), flashback fantasies, and nightmares—are articulated in a movie format (in full-motion video); in this instance it isn't possible to manipulate the action unraveling before us. The rest of the game, however, is interactive. By using our mouse we direct Adrienne to make explorative choices that slowly untangle the narrative web mapped out by the game designer. These two modes of representation come together to produce an interactive environment that allows the player (who is responsible for guiding Adrienne through the game) to move around in the house, its gardens, and the town by clicking in the direction we want Adrienne to take. It is possible to examine and
collect various objects along the way (which are saved in an inventory), and which are put to use at later stages in the game. For example, a letter opener is retrieved from the inventory to remove a loose brick in the fireplace; this allows Adrienne access to a mysterious chapel that has suspiciously been sealed off from the rest of the house. A bone that Adrienne collects from the general store permits her to coax the ferocious dog guarding Malcolm’s house, and therefore gain crucial information about the history of the horrors that have befallen Adrienne and Don. And a Christmas tree snowman plays a fundamental role in the demise of mad Don at the end of the game.

Phantasmagoria shares many generic concerns with evil possession films like The Shining (1980) and Amityville Horror (1979). The couple, Adrienne Delaney and Don Gordon, arrive at their new gothic-style home in the small town of Nipawomset. While exploring her new home, Adrienne discovers a secret chapel hidden behind the fireplace in the library. In the chapel she unwittingly unleashes an evil demon, who possesses her husband, Don; his frame of mind slowly shifts from testy to unpredictable to deranged. In attempting to unravel the secrets of the house, Adrienne discovers that a century earlier the house was inhabited by the magician Zoltan Carnovasch—otherwise known as Carno. Finding the trickeries of magic insufficient to quench his magician’s thirst, Carno turned to the black arts in the hope of producing “real” magic. Purchasing a spellbook that opened the way to the gates of hell, he summoned an evil being into our world. In unleashing the demon, Carno’s spirit became possessed, with the result that over the span of a decade he married then brutally murdered his five wives. The last one, Marie, plotted with her lover Gaston to murder Carno by trapping him in one of his magician’s traps. The result, however, was that all three died, finally putting an end to the evil in Carno’s host body—that is, until the arrival of Don. Mimicking his soul mate of the nineteenth century, Don proceeds on a bloody killing spree that puts an end to most of the supporting cast—including Adrienne’s cat, Spazz. Thrust unwillingly into a state of horror and disbelief, Adrienne discovers—one by one—the dead bodies of Don’s victims. She also witnesses the nineteenth-century phantom slayings of Carno’s five wives, who he disposed of in inventively gruesome ways.

While the game owes a great deal to possession films, it is the game’s links with the stalker tradition as portrayed in films like Hal-
Fig. 4.1. One of Carno’s unfortunate wives experiences the ultimate gardener’s nightmare: a garden trowel thrust viciously into her mouth by her possessed husband.

Halloween, Prom Night (1979), and Friday the 13th (1980) that remain my primary concern. Both Vera Dika and Carol Clover have outlined the basic formula of these popular examples of the horror film. In Games of Terror, Dika provides an analysis of the stalker film, which she suggests dominated in popularity between 1978 and 1981; the most influential instigators of the formula were John Carpenter’s Halloween and Sean Cunningham’s Friday the 13th. Her formula focuses specifically on a combination of plot, setting, character types, stylistic components, and production values that dominated and were obsessively repeated in the subgenre during this period. Clover, in Men, Women and Chainsaws, dubs these films “slasher” films and extends the temporal limits to include earlier examples such as Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974) and Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2 (1986). Rather than focusing on Dika’s more formalist concerns, Clover’s slasher definition emphasizes the dynamics centered around the “slash” and the relationship that eventuates between psycho-killer and what she calls the “final
girl," who is the final survivor and hero of the films. Despite differences of opinion between the two writers, the fundamental logic of the stalker/slasher film remains the same: it concerns shifts of power and, in particular, the narrative (and spectatorial) reasoning behind the shifts of power away from psycho-killer to final girl hero. Four elements present in this subgenre of horror are also applicable to Phantasmagoria: plot structure, character types, structures of the gaze, and the gore factor.

Dika locates a dominant pattern in the stalker film. The narrative divides into two separate temporal frameworks: one set in the past, and the other in the present. Yet both are linked in the way the killer (whose initial crime is depicted in the past) and the victim/hero (who we are introduced to in the present) are to be brought together thematically in the film’s present temporal frame (1990, 59–60). Phantasmagoria does operate on this past/present principle. However, rather than demarcating abrupt structural separations between past (which frames the opening) and present (which constitutes the bulk of the narrative), the game intersperses the past throughout the game. The present scenario of Don and Adrienne is intermingled with the past, which consists of a series of flashbacks that appear to Adrienne as phantom visions of Carno’s wives appearing to “retell/show” their gruesome deaths. Despite the tampering with the sequence of events—which, as will be outlined later, is the result of the game’s technological nature—past crime still provides an answer of sorts to the heinous crimes taking place in the present.

Phantasmagoria’s other point of contact with the stalker film is its attitude to gory special effects. The stalker/slasher tradition parallels the birth of gore in contemporary horror cinema. It was the stalker/killer’s murderous acts that sparked horror’s infatuation with splatter and a “buckets of blood” attitude to special effects. In the many moments of bloody destruction, gore-effects often compete with narrative progression and character motivation. Phantasmagoria, as inheritor of this tradition, is no exception. Hortencia, Carno’s first wife, dies in her greenhouse: we look on with Adrienne as Carno thrusts a garden trowel into her mouth, slitting her lips further apart into a Joker grin, and continue to watch as he stuffs her morbibly wide-grinning mouth with soil. Victoria, his second wife, had a predilection for the vino bianco—and Adrienne/we look on aghast, intent on every gory detail, as Carno ruthlessly plunges a wine bottle into her
eye socket. And at the hands of a bad game player, we even see Adrienne herself sliced right through—head and torso—by a giant axe, her blood and flesh splattering outwards and filling the inner space of our computer screens. Such scenes of vivid, horrific violence would find a welcome niche in splatter classics like *Friday the 13th*, *Happy Birthday to Me* (1981), and *Slumber Party Massacre* (1982). During those minutes of splatter-fx, narrative concerns are put to one side, and the focus becomes the display of special effects themselves. Interestingly, due to censorship issues and the controversy that surrounded the game, the designers included a button that permits the player to “censor” the game (and therefore remove the display of the violence and gore-fx scenes). Of course, the censor button was introduced to appease the censors—the assumption being that the conscientious and morally bound game player (or parent of a game player) would opt to censor the game of its grosser and more vivid moments. In some respects, however, to put this censor button into action (and which game player in their right mind would?) is to deny the game its place in this post-1960s splatter horror tradition.³

With regard to the spectator’s investment in the slasher film, Clover argues that these films are more victim-identified than traditional film theory has allowed for. Rather than operating according to a voyeuristic gaze that is about control and mastery, the spectator of the slasher film responds to and “identifies” with the main character—the final girl.⁴ In the process he (and it is the male spectator who interests Clover) becomes embroiled in a position that, for most of the film, thrusts him into a state of powerlessness in the face of evil (Clover 1992, 8–9). It is only in the final stage of the narrative that the powerlessness shifts to a position of control through the female protagonist’s transformation into hero and active instigator of narrative action.

Clover explores Jurij Lotman’s analysis of character functions in myth and arrives at a similar conclusion: the character functions of the victim and hero are gendered (1992, 12). Like myth, slasher films reveal only two character functions: society codes mobile, heroic functions as masculine, and immobile, victim functions as feminine (13).⁵ Arguing that the slasher film reflects an older tradition that saw the sexes not in terms of differences but in terms of sameness, she suggests that the main characters (hero and killer) encapsulate the one-sex model. Both sexes (and their accompanying functions) are contained in the one body. *Phantasmagoria* fits quite neatly into this argument.
Secondary characters, for example, exist in the slasher film in order to be "killed off," their status as "function" remaining in the victim/feminized mode.

These "feminized"-victim characters—who included the vagrants Harriet and Cyrus, the telephone repairman, even the five murdered wives of Carno the magician—serve a narrative purpose in highlighting Adrienne's heroic properties when they finally emerge. Unlike the characters doomed to be victims, in the final girl and psycho-killer both sexes (and their accompanying functions) are displayed. As the killer moves toward defeat he becomes feminized, and as the final girl moves toward victory she shifts from role of victim to that of masculine hero (Clover 1992, 50). Dika concludes in a similar fashion in stating that both the killer and the heroine are masculine in their "dominance of the film's visual and narrative context" (1990, 55). In all, the complex processes of character empathy or identification engaged with in the slasher film reflect the fact that identification in the cinema is a fluid process, one that need not rely solely on same-sex identification, or on an equation that correlates the male gaze of the spectator to one always centered around mastery and control. As Clover states, the slasher film reveals a fluidity and theatricality of gender often ignored by traditional film spectatorship theories.

The theatricality of gender is highlighted further in Phantasmagoria. Adrienne's victim status in the initial stages of the game is quite typical of the final girl. Her suffering at the hands of her victimizer is seen, for example, in the final chase scene through the house, and in the noninteractive rape scene that takes place in the bathroom in chapter 4. The absence of interactivity in the presentation of this scene further highlights her passive victim status—a passivity also experienced firsthand by the player in his/her inability to interact with the dramatic action. But Adrienne's passive elements are always doubled (and finally overshadowed) by an assertiveness and refusal to slip unquestioningly into the role of victim. Despite Don's threatening ravings and growing violence, Adrienne remains inquisitive, assertive, and active—traits that allow her to take on the status of hero in the end. Likewise, in the final "Don confrontation scene," the full-motion video mode is abandoned; Adrienne's greater active, heroic function is asserted by our capacity to now interact with the events. In addition to the "one-sex" character function that sees Adrienne transform from
victim/feminized function to hero/masculinized function (with Don following a reverse transformation), similar fluidity is witnessed in the possibility of cross-gendered identification that is provided to male game players. As with the slasher film, since the final girl is the only fully developed character, and the one who drives the game narrative forward, the male player has no option but to “identify” with Adrienne’s character. In fact, the investment in the female character is more prominent in the game than in film examples. A film unravels itself in a linear manner beyond our control, and the viewer can choose to reject identification with the main protagonist. The viewer, for example, may choose to “identify” with the ritualist and highly repetitive narrative conventions of the stalker film, or with the subgenre’s equally ritualized displays of gory special effects—both of which take attention away from primary focus on the main character. However, the point-of-view structure of the games makes identification (in the sense of narrative interest) with a character more crucial. On a fundamental level, the game would not progress if the player chose not to “play the part” of Adrienne.

The final girl is the “undisputed ‘I’ on which horror trades” (Clover 1992, 45), and her central role is reflected in the camera work that the films use to construct point of view shots. The construction of point-of-view shots is more crucial to the interactive environment of CD-ROM technology. The stalker/slasher tradition favors combining more objective, third-person shots with the subjective points of view of both killer and hero, where the camera often represents the vision of these characters. As Clover points out, the “eye” of the camera is collapsed into the “I/e” of these characters. While the killer’s point of view dominates in the first part of the film, in the latter part (when the final girl shifts from victim mode to that of hero), she gains control of the gaze. Phantasmagoria reflects a similar structure of gazes that unravel and transfer the power of the gaze as the narrative progresses. However, as will be discussed later, the strict linearity of this unraveling need not necessarily be adhered to. The game presents the player with four structures of the look. The first two are more interactive modes involving first- and third-person views—usually in combined form. For example, Adrienne’s examination of environments (seen in third-person, more objective mode) often also leads to a more subjective shift where her vision merges with that of the camera/computer eye. For example, we look on as Adrienne moves toward the window
Fig. 4.2. An objective third-person view of Adrienne as “final girl” attempting to solve the mystery.

in the tower room, then our viewpoint is collapsed into Adrienne’s/the camera’s as she/we look through the window toward the greenhouse.

The two final structures are characterized by a “movie”-style (and therefore noninteractive) cinematography that is again both objective and subjective in method. More objective, third-person camera work includes the opening scenes to each introduction. The more subjective shots, on the other hand, reveal the layered complexity of this intertextual array, including the so-called fly-by shots, which are rapid tracking shots (where the camera reflects the player’s/game character’s vision) made popular in the computer game world by the mystery/horror game *The Seventh Guest*. Interestingly, the “fly-by” shot finds its most famous film parallel in the stalker film, particularly in the articulation of the killer’s point-of-view shot as he (and sometimes she) stalks his victims. *Phantasmagoria* acknowledges this tradition. This cinematographic convention as staple of the subgenre was initiated by *Halloween*, finding almost poetic expression in Michael Myer’s stalking, invasive gaze. However, later in the film, just prior to Laurie’s discovery of the blood-fest (and as she crosses the street to the house of death), she is also associated with this viewpoint—and its
accompanying associations with control of the gaze and narrative action. *Phantasmagoria* also permits us access to Don's and Adrienne's visions through this more subjective camera work, although, interestingly, the game tends to favor Adrienne's gaze. True to the stalker/ slasher subgenre, Don's gaze is privileged when the game emphasizes Adrienne's impending victim status. For example, in chapter 3, after Adrienne returns home from town (and after Don has undergone the early stages of his nasty transformation), she arrives in the BMW, parks the car, gets out, and a "fly-by" tracking shot begins, quickly and menacingly making its way toward her. Adrienne's viewpoint then takes over, and we discover that the menacing gaze, which (true to the *Halloween* tradition) had been collapsed into our own, had been Don's.

The game, therefore, follows the structures of the look according to the slasher/stalker tradition, and ultimately it is Adrienne's gaze that remains prominent. Adrienne's point of view is framed by two kinds of shots. The first is the tracking shot that reflects the operations of her mind's eye, the most powerful instance being the opening nightmare "scene" that has the first-person eye/camera eye flying through a dark, atmospheric environment filled with torture instruments and horrors of all kind. The tracking viewpoint travels restlessly past surreal, abominable images, then stops suddenly as viewpoints change and Adrienne looks on at her own torture—a foreboding warning of the chaos that lies ahead. The second is a point of view more traditionally associated with the stalker film; for example, the tracking shot that follows her gaze as she glances down the second floor staircase. However, the speed of the tracking point-of-view shot implies that it could in no way be associated with a character's vision. As mentioned earlier, the complex intertextual play entails the game situating itself in the context of the horror tradition "array." The result is that the structures of these looks may imply a direct point-of-view shot associated with the late 1970s stalker film, but the shot also extends itself, replacing character point of view with camera point of view. This subjective shot depicting camera in frenzied motion is a convention developed by Sam Raimi in his *Evil Dead* (1983), a film that took to excessive, parodic limits the conventions of the stalker film. The game, therefore, creates links with aspects of the stalker film across its history (as well as horror conventions of computer games like *The Seventh Guest*), and this fur-
ther complicates the saturated quality of allusions and intertextual references present in the game.

The Hypertextual Array

Such interpretations that draw on film criticism and theory are important in placing CD-ROMs like *Phantasmagoria* in the context of their intertextual filmic and generic traditions. However, in exploring the web of influences, we must also consider the significance of the generic migration of horror into the realm of the computer. Clearly Clover and Dika never intended their interpretations to be applied to CD-ROM games, but the issues they raise are significant, given the interrelationship of two media forms bound by similar generic concerns. However, when drawing on film critical models, critics will need to transform their interpretations in order to accommodate the radically different narrative forms suggested by CD-ROM game technology.

The convincing application of Clover’s and Dika’s approaches to *Phantasmagoria* would depend on the fixity of the text—a text that relies on a story progression that shifts in a linear fashion from problem to resolution. In both instances, the static, linear structure of the stalker/ slasher film allows these writers to view the films’ plot structures (and the stylistic codes that support the plot structure) as a membrane. When delving below the surface, one exposes the “meaning” of the text and along with it its social, psychological, or mythic significance. In Clover’s case, for example, much is to be gained by a male spectator identifying with a female hero. Since the film “run[s] identification through the body of a woman” (who serves a dual function as victim-hero), castration anxieties associated with the loss of power, and with “being feminized” find a safer outlet in the female hero. The final girl functions according to a “politics of displacement” and the woman is used as a “feint, a front through which the boy can simultaneously experience forbidden desires and disavow them on the grounds that the visible actor is a girl.” (Clover 1992, 18). For Dika the repetitive, formulaic features of the stalker film—and their peak popularity between 1978 and 1981—reveal a ritualistic logic. The films engage the audience in a game about genre and the conventions of the stalker film, the underlying intention being a social ritual that
addresses a collective dream. On a psychoanalytic level, the Oedipal conflict underlying the film narratives addresses the needs of adolescent spectators (Dika 1990, 16). On a broader social level, the films provide an outlet from social traumas such as post-Vietnam anxieties, inflation, unemployment, and the like (Dika 1990, 131).

Indeed, the CD-ROM "interactive movie" has been criticized for its greater emphasis on linear form, especially when compared to games like *Quake, Alone in the Dark*, or *Duke Nukem 3D*. Unlike *Phantasmagoria*, the latter are not dependent on video imaging and a game design that requires the use of real actors, film cinematography, and a presentation more in common with television and the cinema. The CD-ROM "interactive movie" format, which is still in its early stages, is seen as limiting the player's interactive and participatory options. Gary Penn, for example, has complained that the detailed environments of CD-ROM interactive movies limit the interactive potential of the game, making the games more closed and linear; for Penn, "linear footage is not the way forward in creating detailed interactive environments" (1994, 86). However, as Keith Ferrell states,

> On a purely pragmatic level, the creation of open-ended, wholly interactive, fully explorable worlds that still possess some sort of structured story and character content may be too much to ask. . . . How do you anticipate every possible scenario or player action? How do you ensure complete narrative consistency no matter what the actions are? How many millions of words of dialogue must you write in order to accommodate all the conceivable conversations? Add the creative, technological, and budgeting challenges and you're looking at an undertaking that daries even the biggest of motion pictures. (1994, 30)

A more participatory and interactive mode of presentation encompasses incredible creative and technological demands. Yet despite the logistical limitations, a strict linear structure is nevertheless ruptured, and we are presented with possibilities totally alien to a cinematic experience. Like many CD-ROM games, *Phantasmagoria* unsettles traditional modes of interpretation, operating instead according to the logic of interaction—specifically interaction that depends on hypertext, web-like narrative forms that present multiple rather than singular narrative possibilities. While the seven chapters of the game remain more or less linear, in each chapter multiple plot directions are presented to the player depending on the choices he/she makes. Therefore, despite clear parallels between cinema and computer game
genres and themes, we need to make adjustments when applying film
models to computer games.

Espen Aarseth has noted that the development of the computer as
both cultural and aesthetic form of expression challenges the para-
digms of cultural theory (1994, 51). When film experience is applied
to computer game experience, the linear, closed, and passive should
now be replaced by the multilinear, open, and interactive. Interactivity
is made possible by hypertext technology that calls into play alterna-
tive metaphors to those traditionally conceived for the film spectator.
A hypertext system consists of a series of blocks or “lexias” that are
connected “by a network of links or paths” (Snyder 1996, 49). In the
case of Phantasmagoria each block presents only one possibility of a
narrative sequence; a variety of story possibilities branch off into nu-
merous directions. The narrative is not limited to a static, spatial fixity;
instead, it is an open, dynamic structure that moves beyond the linear.
According to Ilina Snyder, just as the technology itself abandons fixity
through its hypertext links, so critical theory must follow suit, and the
new metaphors must “evoke features of hypertext-technology.” The
three most familiar metaphors for the new experience of narrativity
are navigation, the labyrinth, and the web—and Phantasmagoria real-
izes all three metaphors.

We, for example, are responsible for making decisions as to how
and where to guide Adrienne. As navigators of the story, we select
the sequence of events and the sequence in which the narrative unrav-
els before us. Certainly, reflecting the structure of the labyrinth, some
aspects of the narrative action are closed off to us until we have
explored others; this labyrinthine format also implies—to a certain
extent—a linear attitude to narrative form. For example, it is not until
chapter 5—after the seance held by Harriet in which Carno appears
to Adrienne—that we can operate the dragon lantern in the conser-
vatory; this, in turn, allows us to access a secret passageway in the
room, which leads us to the previously out-of-bounds theater. How-
ever, we are still instigators in organizing narrative events in a way
that is unique every time we restart the game. The overall effect is the
creation of a web of plot scenarios that undermine notions of singular,
linear progression. For example, while in the kitchen, we/Adrienne
may trek off to explore Carno’s bedroom (where Adrienne later lies
on the bed and has a nightmare sequence about multiple, decaying
hands emerging from the bed to capture her). But to get to the bed-
room we may choose to go via the dining room; or first go outside and explore the gardens; or go through to the adjacent bedroom that belonged to Carno's last wife, Marie, and so on. Each decision, of course, is accompanied by its own narrative implications—and conceivable interpretations.

If we choose to apply both Dika's and Clover's arguments to Phantasmagoria we need to reevaluate the conclusions they draw based on film texts. In the crucial shift in the relocation of power away from the psychotic killer and to the final girl, the shift from victimization and passivity to mastery and control can alter dramatically. Certainly, if we play the game "properly", ensuring Adrienne's success in the end, we could argue that Dika's and Clover's assertions are still applicable. Regardless of the hypertextual structure, in one sense there is still a core, binding narrative that we are required to play. And chapter 7, the final chapter of the game, may unravel to reveal classic "final girl" material. Don corners Adrienne in the dark room, she (and we, her alter ego) struggles with him, then she ingeniously chooses to throw drain cleaner on his face. Escaping to the nursery, she finds a shard of glass from a broken frame, and hides behind the door waiting for Don to come. When he does, Adrienne plunges the broken glass into him, then makes a run for it into the theater dressing room downstairs. She finds Don's jacket on the floor, searches it, and discovers a Christmas tree decoration in the pocket (which has sentimental value because Don proposed to her on Christmas Eve). Hiding in the closet, she waits out her fate. Don enters soon afterwards, opens the door, and drags Adrienne to the chair of torture. He manacles Adrienne's right hand to the chair and, as he leans over to manacle her feet, she/we select the snowman from the inventory and give it to Don, as she pleads with him to remember how things once were between them. As Don begins to lift himself from a crouching position, with her free left hand we make Adrienne pull a lever that is situated to her left. This lever sets the wheels in motion: the giant blade situated above them—which was meant for Adrienne—plunges explosively and memorably through Don's upper body.

According to one of the hypertext series of links, this narrative possibility—and the interpretations that accompany it—is still viable. However, it remains only one of the narrative possibilities present in the game. This narrative ending depends on us playing the game through without making mistakes, remembering to search through
environments properly, discovering all necessary bits of information, and picking up all useful objects. The above mentioned linear scenario is but one of many web-like plot formations that can envelop us. The unraveling of the game depends on “traversal functions” (Aarseth 1994, 61) that exist across blocks within the hypertext link. According to hypertext theorists such as Aarseth, the concept of the hypertext entails nonlinear structures. However, despite this seeming randomness and lack of linearity, when we play a game it unravels before us in time; as Liestol argues, the possibility of the nonlinear in time is an imaginary construct that is impossible because “time is linear” (1994, 106). Liestol continues, “However discontinuous or jumpy the writing or reading of a hypertext might be, at one level it always turns out to be linear...nonlinearity exists only as positions in space, different alternatives of which one may choose only one at a time....Nonlinearity, one might say, is never actually experienced directly” (106-7). What Liestol suggests, therefore, is the formation and experience of multiple rather than singular narrative strands that branch outwards. And with each new strand of the narrative web we, in a sense, need to alter our interpretation to follow suit. When I played Phantasmagoria a second time, I searched the theater dressing room in a different sequence—before Don had visited and left his jacket. The result was that Adrienne was strapped to the blade-chair without the snowman. No snowman, no way of coaxing Don to strategically position himself in the line of the giant axe. No snowman, and the final girl becomes final in the sense that she dies: the axe plunges mercilessly through Adrienne’s body, narratively leaving her in the position of feminized/victim. In such a scenario, when applied to the CD-ROM game, Dika’s and Clover’s assertions about mastery at the end no longer remain fixed, and conclusions need to be reevaluated. Our critical models and methods of interpretation need to be just as hypertextual and dynamic as the narrative webs the games present.

Phantasmagoria can further unsettle the static quality of the linear text, taking multilinearity in yet more directions. For example, we can access video files (*.VMD, “Video and Music Data” files) from each of the seven CD-ROMs, and copy them onto our hard drive. This allows us to view these scenes at different temporal points in the story. For example, Don’s rape of Adrienne in chapter 4 can be shifted into an earlier chapter. This can radically affect questions of character motivation—especially if the rape takes place prior to Don’s demonic
Fig. 4.3. Adrienne as literal “final girl,” her head sliced by an axe—compliments of an inept game player.

possession (implying different kinds of narrative motivations that would suggest that the evil events that took place were reflections of a problematic relationship that existed between Don and Adrienne prior to the release of the demon). Likewise, those not interested in the narrative elements at all can copy all the *.vmd files onto their hard disk. This option is a gore and effects junkie’s dream because the fx scenes of gore and grueling violence can be accessed at will—and removed from any narrative logic. In this instance, the game “meaning”—and the linear path we choose to create—focuses around the unraveling of special effects spectacle. As a result, our critical response to it must follow suit in that, in this instance, narrativity is put to one side and the spectacle of special effects dominates as source of meaning.

Horror cinema is renowned for its obsession with rupturing the closed, linear structures of its film spaces—particularly through its endings that refuse the closure of many Hollywood films—and Phantasmagoria is clearly aware of this convention. For example, after a possible stalker/killer ending (and assuming Adrienne’s successful destruction of Don), Adrienne moves on to a second ending, one that addresses itself to the possession/evil spirit tradition of horror. When
she kills Don, the spirit that possesses him drifts from his body in a
green mist, then solidifies into an enormous blue monster who hunts
her down through the house. Again, Adrienne’s success depends on
how we play the game. If we run to the chapel and use the spellbook
(which we should have picked up in the dark room), then chant an
incantation after sacrificing some of our blood by pricking our finger
with a broach we should have in our inventory, the demon will be
trapped, unable to harm anyone again. But if we fail to do any of the
above, again we shift to loser status and the game ends with Adrienne
dead and us anything but victorious.

This double climax is a convention of horror cinema: one ending
appears to end, while another opens up. In Halloween, for example,
John Carpenter made popular the classic ploy of opening up a seem-
ingly closed narrative structure. The story of the demise of Michael
Myers appears to end (and he appears to be dead), then the final
sequence of the film opens up this resolution by presenting the audi-
ence with Michael’s disappearance. The cinema can certainly manip-
ulate and rupture closed narrative form, suggesting the multiple nar-
rative possibilities found in the hypertext. Similarly, the intertextual
nature of genre has parallels with a hypertext structure in suggesting
links that move beyond the limits of the enclosed text and across
popular culture. However, where Phantasmagoria is different from
the cinema is that much of its intertextual and hypertext structure is
the result of the technology that drives it. The hypertextuality of CD-
ROM technology realizes the process of intertextuality in more literal,
technological terms. In the case of the horror double climax in Phan-
tasmagoria, multiple options are open to us as a result of the fact of the
medium itself: we may never get beyond the first ending; we may get
to the second ending but fail to complete it successfully; or we can
rein victorious and survive both endings. Whatever the scenario—
and no matter how “open” the final ending of a film may be—in
hypertext fiction no final, static version exists that can be replayed in
the same way as film over and over again.

The multilinear and open narrative form can lead us into all
sorts of other directions. If linearity and character motivation tradi-
tionally associated with Hollywood cinema are not the player’s pre-
dilection (or if the player simply can’t work out how to access all
options present in the game design), it is possible to produce a narrar-
tive that has more in common with art cinema and avant-garde cin-
ema forms of narration and nonnarration. In the case of bad game play, not only is it possible to miss entire portions of narrative action (thereby creating narrative gaps), but it is also possible to focus on actions that are in no way concerned with unraveling a narrative. We can make Adrienne wander aimlessly around the house and in town; we can make her eat in the kitchen or look at herself in the numerous mirrors littered around the house; she can go to the bathroom, comb her hair, put on makeup, and go to the toilet. In the last scenario, the usual procedure is that we click on the toilet seat, she shuts the door on our face, and then we hear the flushing sounds of the toilet, and water running in the hand basin before she opens the door. But one of the cheat-tricks fans of the game have discovered is that if we click seven times on the chair next to the toilet before clicking on the toilet, Adrienne shuts the door and we hear all sorts of gross sound effects—moans, groans, plunks, and "aaahs"—coming from inside as Adrienne goes about her business. All these actions—from the mundane to the comical—are more aligned with the "dead time" of art cinema. They are actions that are not concerned with progressing narrative action. In many of these nonincidents I was reminded especially of the mundanity of everyday life represented in Sally Potter's feminist avant-garde film Thriller. Despite Liestol's perceptive comments about the multilinear as opposed to nonlinear in the hypertext, these moments of "dead time" do emphasize nonnarrative patterns. While events such as these do unravel in a sequence that mimics the linear, they remain nonnarrative in the sense that they serve absolutely no story function.

Landow has suggested that the hypertext redefines the beginnings and endings of linear narratives in nonlinear—or, rather, multilinear—ways (1994, 34–36). In the case of computer games, not only are we confronted with multiple story avenues in each game session, but every time we recommence a game we are, in a sense, starting another beginning. In addition, as the above examples reveal, the hypertextual embraces multiplicity in other ways, allowing Phantasmagoria to unravel along the lines of Hollywood narrative form (with emphasis placed on cause-and-effect structures and character motivations); art cinema narrative form (which loosens up linear, causal relations); or avant-garde cinema nonnarrative structures (in the focus on "nonincidents" that undercut narrative concerns).

Depending on the game player's choices and interests, therefore,
the possibilities are as labyrinthine as the hypertext structure that supports them. Each game player can alter the order and articulation of events in distinct ways. Even if other games similar to *Phantasmagoria* emerged, following along similar slasher paths (for example, its sequel *Phantasmagoria 2: A Puzzle of Flesh*), the intertextual array, interactive possibilities, and hypertext form would shift and change so dramatically that no theory or critical approach predicated on homogeneity and stability could be applied in any sustained or beneficial manner. As Snyder suggests, the hypertext “discounts any final version” (1996, 57). The search for singular interpretations in a sea of hypertext links becomes nearly impossible; the original text is “no longer inviolate” (Snyder 1996, 76). Not only are traditional conceptions of narrative and the original unsettled, but assumptions of authorial control also stand on shaky ground. While the game programmers are the creative voice in that they design the game structure and devise all possible hypertext scenarios, the game player also has an integral creative role to play in navigating and selecting the narrative (or nonnarrative) paths that give life to the game action in configurations specific to his/her methods of game play. An “original” version of a game is rewritten each time it is played and replayed. In the words of Aarseth, “As long as we are able to imagine or reconstruct an ideal version, everything appears to be fine, and our metaphysics remains intact. But what if the flawed version interferes so deeply with our sense of reception that it, in more than a manner of speaking, steals the show?” (1994, 56). What if, indeed? What happens when traditional narrative structures that theories have depended on are removed? Is the auteur truly dead? Is the original forever lost? Is the ideological purpose of popular narratives removed? Is their mythic function nonexistent? Perhaps, as Foster suggests, these new technologies (and changing forms of popular culture) are merely rearticulations of past forms, which nevertheless still serve a social purpose. Previous “tales of horror and fear . . . dealt with our basic human concerns—survival and protection against what was an uncontrollable world. Now . . . although modern society buffers the human race against the horrors of nature, we still crave the experience of controlled fear, induced for entertainment” (Foster 1995, 33). Is *Phantasmagoria* an example of such entertainment? Perhaps. Whatever the case may be, the new critical and theoretical approaches that we
refine will need to be as fluid and multifarious as the media examples we analyze.

NOTES

1. Philipstal’s *Phantasmagoria* shown in Edinburgh in 1802 included the fantastic horror effects that revealed the sudden apparition of ghosts and skeletons (see McGrath 1996, 15). The most famous presentation of the phantasmagoria was the *Fantasmagorie* by Étienne Gaspard Robert (known as Robertson). In 1797 Robertson performed the *Fantasmagorie* in Paris in an abandoned chapel surrounded by tombs. Crowds flocked to the dimly lit tombs to see magic lantern effects that included skulls, atmospheric lighting, sound effects, and ghostly apparitions (see Barnow 1981, 19).

2. On early photography and cinema’s relationship to ghostly imagery, see Gunning (1995).

3. It is conceivable that the censor button can also function as a CD-ROM game variation of the spectator who closes his/her eyes at the scary and bloody sequences in horror cinema. Of course, this is an option also open to the game player.

4. On the theorization of the spectator along the lines of gendered identification and male mastery, see Mayne (1993), especially chapters 1 and 2.

5. Clover admits that some slasher films do have male protagonist heroes; however, in these rare instances—The *Evil Dead* (1983) being one case—the male character retains elements of both masculine and feminine traits.

6. There are, of course, problems with this almost essentialized correlation of masculinity with the active and heroic. For the sake of argument, I am interpreting Dika’s and Clover’s models as functions imposed by social convention.

7. I am aware that the question of identification in the cinema is a complex and problematic process. Rather than using the term according to the psychoanalytic model of identification as posed by post-1960s film theorists like Christian Metz and Laura Mulvey, I am using the term to suggest that the films (and games) present their final girl as a character to identify or empathize with, in the sense that this character remains the primary narrative focus, and we are invited to invest our interest in her.

8. See especially the “Introduction: Carrie and the Boys” and chapter 1, “Her Body, Himself” Laura Mulvey would, of course, be the most influential proponent of more traditionally aligned spectatorship models, arguing for the hierarchization of gendered looks and power structures; the male spectator is placed in a position of spectatorial control that allows him to identify with the
dominant, diegetic male characters—and thus reaffirming the passive nature of the female character (see Mulvey 1975). Even her revision of same-sex identification reinstated this power structure. While the female spectator was acknowledged, Mulvey argued that she was often forced into cross-gendered forms of identification in that this was the only option that allowed her narrative control akin to that of the male spectator (see Mulvey 1981). The possibility of the male spectator opting for similar cross-gendered forms of identification was not considered. As Clover argues, the fascinating feature of the slasher film is that it invites the male spectator to identify with characters who fail to submit to Mulvey’s formula.

9. While it is beyond the scope of this essay, a number of writers have, in fact, questioned the viability of such approaches for film analysis itself. Scott McQuire, for example, has expressed concern over the way critics and theorists have prioritized thematic readings that obscure any sense of difference in examples of horror. Film examples are mapped out through ahistorical approaches; the methodology consists of “mapping the surface elements of different discrete texts onto an underlying meta-narrative which is then presented as the real meaning of the various symbolic and iconographic devices” (McQuire 1987, 24). Eileen Meehan has similarly stated that these kinds of cause-and-effect approaches require “an assumptive leap that reduces consciousness, culture, and media to reflections of each other” (1991, 48). In many ways, computer games highlight a problem already inherent in film theory and criticism; and the inadequacy of this form of criticism becomes even more overt when one applies similar interpretations to computer games.

10. Landow has suggested that hypertext theory parallels post-structuralism and other theoretical traditions in its concerns with the open text—suggesting Kristeva on intertextuality, Bakhtin on dialogism and multivocality, Foucault on networks of power, and Deleuze and Guattari on rhizomatic and nomadic thought (1994, 1).

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