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Horror 2.0 (On Demand): The Digital Convergence of Horror Film Culture

Abstract:

This article examines the horror movie industry's mobilization of web content and digital distribution outlets, such as video-on-demand, and how specific fan practices get encoded into business models shaping web 2.0 strategies. Specifically, it examines the emergence of the multiplatform brand Fearnet, a joint cable channel, website and video-on-demand service owned by Comcast, Lionsgate, and Sony Pictures Entertainment. It argues that the service, which features horror movies taken from the Sony/MGM library and includes a host of interactive features, not only illustrates the changing impact of new media technologies on film distribution, but also the growing industrial utility of video-on-demand services for both cable and film industries. By relying on subcultural practices and discourses specific to horror fandom, digital services like Fearnet act as branded media conduits for the various markets and commerce that sustain niche-oriented categories of horror as a commodified experience.

Keywords: media convergence; digital television; video-on-demand; web 2.0; political economy; horror film

Horror 2.0 (On Demand): The Digital Convergence of Horror Film Culture

The October 18, 2010, cover of the trade publication *Multichannel News* features an illustration of an outstretched arm surfacing from the underground, imposed against a dark moonlight sky, and grasping what appears to be a rather sophisticated remote control device. In a style evoking the now iconic horror movie cliché of the undead returning to life, the image presents the reader with a host of familiar fright-flick scenarios, among them, the premise of unnatural rebirth and untimely resurrection. The headline reads: "Why Horror Shows Have Come to Life on Cable." The article goes on to spotlight a number of non-traditional cable services that have sprung up around the genre, including Comcast's multiplatform brand Fearnet, a joint venture with Sony Pictures Entertainment and Lionsgate. In doing so, it highlights a number of emerging, non-traditional distribution outlets for horror, touting in particular the video-on-demand (VOD) services provided by these platforms, and how they potentially benefit cable subscribers. As one executive put it, "horror has a huge following and it's not traditionally super-served by television—it's a great form of entertainment that deserves a slightly broader platform than [traditional] TV can provide" (Umstead 2010a, 21). Accordingly, the infrastructures of digital film delivery and emerging VOD cable service are offered here as a model for revitalizing a distinct film/genre culture.

This essay argues that the rhetoric of consumer choice and customization surrounding such infrastructures, and particularly digital cable channels like Fearnet, belies the broader institutional conditions underwriting such platforms. Rather, these services represent extensive changes in media distribution, as well as concomitant strategies for navigating the digital convergence of film, television, and the internet at the corporate level. In particular, on-demand services represent a strategic response on the part of cable and film industries to mitigate the increasingly fragmented media environment represented by post-network television—wherein viewing habits and consumer practices are individuated and customized as a function of branded entertainment (Lotz 2007). In short, these services are not so much a "reflection" of consumer choice, taste or convenience,[i] but rather an indication of the profound institutional shifts taking place throughout contemporary media industries, and affecting in particular cable's multiple system operators (MSOs) and Hollywood's major studio-distributors.

Within this context, multiplatform services like Fearnet, which allow consumers to either download or stream digital content as a function of digital set-top boxes, mobile devices, and/or broadband connections, take on increased (economic, cultural, and commercial) value in terms of the way they afford cable companies the opportunity to both innovate and respond to changes taking place in the world of digital media convergence. In addition, VOD services like Fearnet, which features a rotating slate of licensed horror movies and original series taken from the Sony/MGM library (the largest in Hollywood), afford studio-distributors the chance to maintain tight oligopolistic control over the commercial "life-cycle" of feature films, while also providing the opportunity to permeate new markets. The result, as this essay will show, is an emerging distribution system for digitalized horror film culture that benefits not only the major studio-distributors and producers of horror-themed content, but also the various cable operators, infrastructural companies, and media conglomerates that maintain a vested interest in the proliferation of ancillary horror film markets.

The following sections will sketch the different industrial strategies and promotional activities that currently underwrite horror's digital media convergence. The goal is to underscore the sorts of economic and institutional convergences happening at the macro level of corporate transindustrialism and overlapping oligopolies (Meehan 2010, 250), while also illustrating some of the particular competitive challenges faced by studio-distributors and cable companies as they attempt to negotiate—and profit from—new forms of digital delivery. To that end, the first section outlines the benefits of such joint ventures to the US cable industry, suggesting that multiplatform brands like Fearnet provide cable operators with a way to distinguish their services from competitors in both satellite and telecommunications. The second section concentrates on the film industry, and in particular the forms of commercial interactivity and digital film delivery favored by studio-distributors, as these have become increasingly reliant on VOD television services. The crucial point here is that while these services supply incremental revenue to studios, they more importantly provide a viable distribution model for the digital age, and hence function to preserve officially sanctioned channels of digital film delivery. Furthermore, these types of "strategic alliance" (Hesmondhalgh 2007, 267) across different sectors of the industry underscore the idea that, in the age of media convergence, corporate consolidation is in fact driving advances within the cable and film industries (e.g., Farrell 2009), and that furthermore, the growth and acceptance of interactive services like VOD represent relatively "safe" spaces for media conglomerates to mount forays into the digital mediascape (cf. Bennett 2011, 14). In this light, the corporate convergence of cable and film industries illustrates the way established media powers attempt to position themselves within and against the market for new media forms.

Meanwhile, as this convergence increasingly takes the form of non-linear cable channels and corporate "web 2.0" portals (such as Fearnet.com), it unavoidably encompass broader debates over post-network television as an emblematic site of old/new media synergy and emergent models of consumer interactivity. As the third section argues, while emergent VOD services like Fearnet inevitably take on the air of "new media," they nonetheless function as opportune modes of “critical industrial performance” (Caldwell 2003 and 2006)—that is, they serve as branded media conduits through which the dominant corporate powers might attempt to ingratiate themselves within digital media culture via displays of “real” interactivity and distinct types of (sub-) cultural capital. Herein the discourse of web 2.0 becomes crucial to shoring up extant institutional practices and proprietary strategies, enabling the brand management of “user flows” among the major media conglomerates. The article thus concludes by arguing that joint ventures like Fearnet operate chiefly as means of preserving the oligopolistic structure of media industries in a digital age, particularly through enabling the corporate development of digital convergence as an embryonic (yet profitable) system of media distribution vis-à-vis web 2.0 strategies of virtual community and audience labor.

The Benefits to Cable: Joint Ventures and Bundled Services

For little more than a decade, VOD has been hyped as the ultimate consumer service in interactive television and “living room convergence” (Ulin 2010, 330). As Lucas Hilderbrand points out, VOD initially surfaced as a competitive strategy for media conglomerates looking to navigate the impact of digitization vis-à-vis new media outlets; since then, it has been used to identify two distinct kinds of video offerings: downloadable/streaming of web-based video and cable television content (2010, 26). However, to the extent cable operators have successfully appropriated this double meaning, specifically as a means of promoting their own business model which seeks to integrate VOD and high-speed internet in a bundle package “according to the logic that its all a matter of digital delivery” (ibid), web-based video and online content is more often understood as instant-play streaming. As a result, VOD has become the primary preserve of cable and satellite distributors.[ii]

Nonetheless, VOD offers the kind of product/service distinction that is typically associated with corporate strategies of media conglomeration (e.g., branding and repurposing, segmented markets, specialty labels, genre tiering), which, as John Caldwell (2006) points out, increasingly function to rationalize sites of consumption in order to mitigate institutional change and market instability. For this reason, VOD's rise to prominence via the cable industry is often said to have more to do with the supposed competitive advantages it offers *over* satellite and telecom companies (see Dempsey 2005; Mermigas 2005b; Grant 2006; Zeitchik 2007; Farrell 2009). Accordingly, VOD is central to the cable industry's overall branding strategies, as well as their institutional performance of market distinction: it is a way to position their conglomerated services within emerging, highly competitive and volatile digital media markets.[iii]

In terms of convergence initiatives like Fearnet, digital movie service offers renewed opportunities for transindustrial cooperation among the major content providers (studios) and cable's multiple system operators. Thus, on the one hand, VOD affords cable companies a way to distinguish their services in terms of sheer capacity of programming titles made available via strategic alliance with major studio-distributors and networks. For instance, Comcast, which now has a majority stake (fifty-one percent) in NBCU, as well as twenty percent share in MGM, has more than quintupled the amount of full-length movies and television shows made available on its VOD platforms—up from approximately 12,000 titles in 2006 to 75,000 in 2012 (Winslow 2012). This comes partly in response to threats posed by satellite and telephone companies, as well as to so-called "over-the-top" providers that seek to bypass the pay TV model altogether by offering content directly to consumers via internet streaming (e.g., Netflix, Hulu, Amazon on-demand). On the other hand, Comcast has been able to leverage these partnerships in its attempts to negotiate lower licensing fees with movie-dependent basic cable networks (such as FX and TBS) on the basis that on-demand rights paid directly to studios are substantially less than those paid by cable operators to networks for the right to carry a channel (Dempsey 2005). As a result, this strategy has arguably strengthened the position of dominant MSOs like Comcast and Time Warner Cable, whose biggest expense remains the various carriage fees paid to the cable networks.

At the same time, cable operators have sought to entice potential and already existing subscribers to sign up for enhanced digital packages through various VOD television services. The promotional value of these services is envisaged as a way to convert analog customers to digital packages or possibly corral the "next generation" of cable subscribers through premiere digital video features (Spangler 2010; Umstead 2010b). In this sense, the goal of VOD is not simply the increased revenue streams made available via the expansion of digitalized content, but rather the *affective brand attachments* generally imagined to be derived from digitally enhanced cable TV subscription. As Rogers Communication (Canada's largest MSO) executive director David Purdy put it recently at the international On Demand Summit 2.0: "everything we do at Rogers is about extending the existing customer relationship…offering free VOD is key to sustaining and nurturing our customer relationships" (quoted in Spangler 2010). For this reason, cable's "free" (that is to say, no extra charge) VOD television service is increasingly figured as a crucial component of industrial practice within the cable industry, which concurrently reinforces the experiential value of cable TV subscription while (potentially) reducing the overall rate of viewer "churn" (that is, the rate of cancellation for another pay TV or broadband service; see Lieberman 2009). As one industry trade report put it, "The goal of Comcast is to keep all the

VOD [movie and programming titles]…free and thus make it such a powerful attraction to digital customers that they won't be tempted by the siren calls of satellite TV or phone companies" (Dempsey 2005, 17).

Within this context, the added market pressure of competing with alternative pay TV providers (satellite and telecoms) in a new converged media environment has compelled cable operators to increasingly offer bundled—or so-called "triple-play"—services in conjunction with VOD platforms (Reardon 2006a and 2006b). The goal of such packages is two-fold: on the one hand, cable companies offer a combination of pay TV, high-speed internet access, and voice/data service in order to aggressively compete with telecom providers (e.g., Verizon and AT&T)—meanwhile these providers seek to leverage their fiber optic systems in order to co-opt the video market, and thus convert their own subscriber base as a way to directly compete with MSOs. By contrast, satellite distributors remain at a distinct disadvantage in this equation, given their inability to match the triple-play offer (i.e., phone and internet service); instead they emphasize features such as high-definition programming (HDTV) and advanced personal video recorders (PVRs), as well as transactional access to "the virtual video store."[iv]

On the other hand, cable operators have begun to offer more video programming via "authenticated" online video sites (e.g., Comcast's Xfinity, Time Warner's Roadrunner service, and Cox Communication's Cox.net). In turn, this becomes a way to head off challenges from the broadband video environment, as the main strategy here is to preserve established pay tiers from online encroachment through broadband initiatives (e.g., "TV Everywhere"), which specifically promote a cable provider's (and/or programmer's) own proprietary websites via strategies that combine triple-play packaging into single delivery. In effect, the triple-play service is designed to preserve long-standing business practices tied to maintaining exclusive access to media content vis-à-vis cable programmers.[v] Thus, while the underlying supposition driving these strategies is that content made available on multiple platforms (via internet streaming) will be more preferable to consumers than content made exclusively available to cable and satellite customers,[vi] the key issue surrounding authentication of digital media service seems to be about extending control *over* the online environment vis-à-vis cable's existing pay structure and subscription model. Hence the industry has responded to online encroachment in two principal ways: first by developing a subscriber-fee structure that aims to incorporate "the convenience and flexibility of the web without sacrificing exclusivity" (Sapan 2010); and second, by developing their own converged media platforms (e.g., Fearnet) for carriage on other cable systems.

In this context, services like Fearnet have been at the forefront of licensing deals with Time Warner and Cox as part of their ongoing push to entice digital cable subscribers to bundle their services. As one analyst explained: "cable operators pay a monthly fee to Fearnet and use the service as a lure to get more subscribers to buy digital boxes;" these boxes in turn function as "portals for new revenue generators such as high-speed internet access, telephone service, and high-definition VOD" (Dempsey 2008). In short, digital set-top boxes are configured as the be-all-end-all of programming services like Fearnet, which function *primarily* as a way to resell cable subscribers on the triple play package.[vii] Again, convergence initiatives like Fearnet, which combine digital cable and internet access as part of their on-demand television service, ostensibly allow MSOs like Comcast greater opportunity to pursue their goal of becoming "the nation's largest residential ISP *and* content developer" (Whitney 2007), all through the vertical integration of digital content and delivery.

The Benefits to the Film Industry: Second-Shift Cinema

Meanwhile, cable companies have responded to online encroachment by stockpiling free on-demand movies in the hope that promotional and distribution partnerships with major film studios will not only help to maintain existing customer relationships but also make each of their triple-play services more "sticky"—or less susceptible to viewer churn. As John Caldwell writes in this context, the inherent "leakiness" of textual appropriation in a digital age means that media companies not only "try to partner and cobrand [with other entities] in order to steer users to corporations with shared economic interests," but also, and more importantly, that "cable executives now strategize (and program) degrees of 'stickiness' in the second-shift world" [i.e., the world of unstable user-flows and network-website synergies] in order to induce users to stay with a package of services in spite of constantly developing (and potentially volatile) digital media markets (2003, 139). Moreover, as Caldwell points out, "this notion (of diverse packaging/singular delivery) mirrors the ways that branding (in the age of digital) works by producing diversity and difference within a single uber-brand" (ibid). Thus, cable providers are obliged to adopt "looser" forms of brand management in order to better negotiate the "textual dispersals" and "user navigations" that are characteristic of the second-shift mediascape (ibid, 136).

Put another way, while new technologies may have disrupted traditional distribution patterns and programming strategies for both cable and film, the market for movies on-demand remains a relatively stable, if not to say crucial, foundation for maintaining corporate brand management ("diverse packaging/single delivery") within the existing infrastructure. In this respect, then, film studios have been forced to relinquish traditional notions of movie distribution and textual dispersal, and to find new ways of producing revenue and controlling consumption after a film leaves a theater (cf. Tryon 2011). Here the notion of sequential commercial release patterns (or "windowing"[viii]) in the face of online and new media applications seems to be at once untenable—if not to say structurally obsolete—as well as crucial to preserving business models and institutional relationships with traditional distributors. The goal of digital video distribution, in other words, at least in its on-demand capacity, is most importantly about preserving the commercial "life-cycle" of feature films, while also taking care to enfranchise the market potential of subscription-based digital delivery systems.

Hence, VOD has increasingly become an important distribution platform for studio-distributors during a time of transition. As numerous commentators have pointed out, the film industry is not only looking to the medium as a relatively cost-effective mode of film distribution, but also as an approach to immediate revenue sharing through simultaneous release patterns (Snider 2012; Umstead 2010b; Friedman 2011; Hilderbrand 2010). For this reason, studios are looking to gain further ancillary revenue for both current theatrical releases and catalog titles by urging cable operators to engage in multimillion dollar marketing campaigns aimed at building awareness of VOD (see Umstead 2010c); these services in turn ensure studios officially sanctioned venues for digital film distribution. At the same time, these industries become increasingly integrated and more dependent upon one another at the level of shared-revenue agreements, the pooling of rights, and collaborated antitrust behavior.

Thus, while cable systems have been developing joint ventures in marketing and distribution, which aim to restrict (rather than open up) when and where certain films are made available to consumers via digital platforms, studios entering the digitalized cable market are afforded valuable resources for delivering licensed content via cable's proprietary infrastructure:

to wit, they are provided everything from technical delivery and marketing awareness, to the decoding software of digital set-top boxes, to physical installation and preexisting market organization, to the critical mass of cable subscribers already cued into the industry's digital access systems.[ix] The result has been increased commercial viability for programming entities like Fearnet, which allow major studio-distributors to more effectively regulate how, when, and where audiences are able to access their licensed feature films, thereby affording these companies a way to navigate emerging digital media platforms while also maintaining distribution channels and pricing models.

All this is to suggest, then, that just as release windows are closing around motion pictures, the cable industry is playing an increasingly prominent role in transforming the home video business, specifically to the point where cable VOD now potentially serves as the first home video release window for movies either immediately following or concurrent with a theatrical release (Umstead 2010b). In this context, studios have been moving ahead to deliver motion pictures through ostensibly "interactive" digital systems that (quite ironically) end up affording the major conglomerates even *more* control over the conditions under which commercial films are made accessible. In this context, on-demand ventures like Fearnet are not only premised on the differential degrees of user access associated with digital delivery and online cinema (see Lobato 2009); but they also compel forms of audience interactivity and lifestyle segmentation that correspond with the commercial imperatives of marketers. Here, the idea that "people like to confront their fears in the comfort of their own living room" (Umstead 2008), for example, is supplemented by the notion that media convergence appeals to a core group of "millennials"—or eighteen-to-twenty-four-year-old "early adopters"—who move fluidly among digital distribution platforms and new media technologies (Umstead 2010b).

And yet, while these postulations take care to highlight the promotional value of non-linear programming and user/viewer interactivity for a particular consumer market, they less often take care to stress the more calibrated reasons why cable companies undertake such web 2.0 style innovations in their business models. As former president of Fearnet, Diane Robina, explained to *Multichannel News* regarding Comcast's initial decision to forego a twenty-four hour cable network in favor of a combination website and non-linear cable TV service: "Horror fans are picky, choosing what to watch when they want to watch it. They're not interested in a 24/7 program schedule pushed at them by a network programmer" (quoted in Dempsey 2007).[x] Thus changing modes of cable distribution are regularly offered as an emergent site of consumer empowerment and user control; rather than truly shift the power of cable TV from networks to viewers, however, such strategies merely renew the importance of those who own and control the distribution systems upon which viewer choice is made both conditional and accessible. What's more, they increase the brand value of the carrier aggregating that content via digital delivery.

Hence, rather than enable a truly interactive media environment, digital cable channels like Fearnet reveal a wider industrial strategy aimed at harnessing the subcultural tastes patterns and customized interactions of VOD as a way to potentially "herd and manage user flows across multiple platforms in the service of particular objectives" (Bennett 2011, 19). As we shall see below, this strategy includes the pursuit of niche, on-demand viewing audiences as a function of web 2.0 strategies, wherein attempts to incorporate user-generated content and social networking as a means of promoting audience interaction winds up capturing the "ethical surplus"—or shared communal meanings and values (Arviddson 2006, 10)—of a particular branch of horror film culture. In doing so, channels like Fearnet ostensibly promote the freedoms of "what to watch and when to watch" associated with VOD, yet ultimately serve to rationalize interactivity as a form of “work” on behalf of online commercial spaces and virtual communities (Andrejevic 2002).

Cable Television 2.0

The move to incorporate interactive platforms as part of the overall television experience is perhaps nowhere more evident than in discourse surrounding “Television 2.0,” which is the name given to digital distribution systems that combine television and internet technologies to offer consumers allegedly unprecedented amounts of viewing and listening materials so as to personally customize their own viewing habits in terms of individualized taste patterns (see Horowitz et al. 2007). Speaking of these shifts in the context of post-network television, Lisa Parks has described the rise of personalized television in terms of the industrialized practice of “flexible microcasting,” wherein audiences are solicited as having greater control and digital access to any number of movies and TV shows via interconnected digital platforms. Specifically, she writes that flexible microcasting is where “computer and television technologies are combined to produce the effect of enhanced viewer choice in the form of a stream of programming carefully tailored to the viewer’s preferences, tastes, and desires” (2004, 135). In this way, post-network television utilizes both digital cable and broadband technologies—while also deepening the continuities between film, television, and the internet—so as to cultivate an increasingly fragmented aggregation of niche audiences. As Parks writes: “the personalization of TV is ultimately about developing narrowly defined yet infinitely flexible content that commodifies layers of individual identity, desire, taste, and preference” (ibid). These layers of choice and viewer individuation, in turn, compel new programming entities designed to capitalize on "flexible" networks of distinction and viewer interaction.

In terms of Fearnet, which advertisers "the web's #1 genre site and online horror community," this model of flexible microcasting applies most readily to the host of interactive features associated with the website. In line with Park's discussion of commodified taste cultures and lifestyle distinction, Fearnet.com offers users opportunities to customize their own viewing habits and taste preferences in terms of the broader subcultural community. For instance, users are solicited to identify (and interact) according to media groupings that break down according to stylistic and intra-generic categories (e.g., "Supernatural," "Horror Make Up and Effects," "For the love of horror and gor," "horror comedies"), conventional cult figures and monster types (e.g., "ghost hunters," "Zombie Lovers," "Deranged Lunatics," "The Vampire Brotherhood") and popular horror movie franchises and television series (e.g., "Saw lovers," "A Nightmare on Elm Street," "True Blood," "living dead era"). In effect, genre distinctions operate not so much to designate a fixed class of texts, but to classify different categories of users; at the same time, these distinctions invite audiences to interact in ways that encourage more efficient forms of interactive, digital media consumption.

For example, not only are users invited to participate in these flexible microcast communities, they are also interpellated to construct their own viewing queues, subscribe to cross-marketed VOD television services, and to screen programming options in a manner that essentially reinforces the overall multiplication of consumption categories, or what Joseph Turow calls "lifestyle segregation" (1998, 7). Such tactics are in keeping with broader marketing strategies aimed at sustaining narrowly specific groups of consumers according niche-oriented media markets, while also extending the logic of market segmentation down to the individual user/viewer. As Turow explains, the aim of such marketing is “to package individuals, or groups of people, in ways that make them useful targets for the advertisers of certain products through certain types of media” (ibid, 1). Not only are consumer tastes and lifestyle preferences thus exploited and commodified, they are also packaged according to specific *types* of inter-related media culture (e.g., horror film culture). This strategy has implications not only for the major studios and cable companies, but also, as Amanda Lotz (2007, 43) points out, for a host of other media platforms associated with post-network TV’s emerging status as a “subcultural forum”—an idea that resonates quite nicely with Fearnet’s attempts to target and deliver narrowly specific taste demographics according to the logic of media convergence.

It also appears to resonate with horror film culture’s predilection for markets and commerce that openly sustain niche-oriented lifestyle categories of cult distinction (see Jancovich 2000 and 2002). Indeed, these categories afford members of the online horror community the chance to build and perform subcultural-like distinctions in their relatively distinctive media buying habits (cf. Cherry 2010). For instance, at the level of intrageneric conflict (Jancovich 2000, 28) the emphasis on individuated difference is evident in the way the site pits fans of particular sub-genres in relation to broader subcultural hierarchies in order to privilege certain taste preferences as more “authentic.” Whereas Fearnet stockpiles movies that ostensibly crosscut “horror, thriller, and suspense” categories, for example, it nevertheless appears to favor those types of graphic horror that are oftentimes associated with “real” horror subculture (see Waller 1987 and Jancovich 2000). And this, in turn, facilitates the notion that the digital horror community constitutes an alternative taste culture.[xi]

Meanwhile, Fearnet’s digital media convergence allows Comcast and Sony to exploit differences in horror film culture as a means of connecting circuits of distribution and sites of consumption. For example, web users are invited to choose from a wide stream of horror-related news, reviews, video clips, trailers, music videos, full-length movie titles and short films as they access licensed content. Furthermore, they are encouraged to buy or rent musical ringtones and background wallpapers for mobile phones; peruse photo galleries and video blogs documenting the latest "behind-the scenes" action and news items taking place on the sets of the latest horror movie productions; read exclusive interviews with film directors and other genre celebrities; or simply "interact" with the site's many promotional offers, giveaways, commercial sweepstakes, and corporate gifts. Most recently, Fearnet's 2012 "St. Patty's Day Sweepstakes," for example, invited users to "make your friends green with envy" by registering "once a day, everyday" for the chance to win, among other things, "a pot of DVD gold," including the Final Destination DVD Collection, a product of the Sony/MGM video library. Not only do such marketing events work to shore up the subcultural experience of Fearnet's user-base, they also provide company executives with precise techniques for measuring user demographics. St. Patty's Day Sweepstake participants were thus required to fill out forms asking not only for basic demographic information (name, age, gender, etc.) but also an approximation of the number of "hours logged" on the site.[xii]

Such tactics are clearly aligned with the sorts of digital media surveillance documented by Mark Andrejevic (2002), as new media technologies that allegedly grant consumers greater choice and customization are offered here in order to obtain more detailed information about consumption and viewing habits. However, these regimes of surveillance unevenly align the interests of media corporations and consumers; as Andrejevic points out, far from offering a more open, dialogic engagement with media producers, such technologies oblige users to "enter into a relationship of surveillance-based rationalization" as a condition of ostensibly greater convenience and mass customization (ibid, 238). Hence convergent modes of digital television entice users to perform the "work" of generating their own demographic information, while at the same time affording corporations and marketers the ability to more efficiently catalog and aggregate that information in order to develop custom-tailored niche products and services.[xiii] In this sense, the development of post-network television as "an aggregator of a broad range of niche and on-demand viewing audiences" (Lotz 2007: 34) holds significant implications for the construction of film/genre communities in a digital age—particularly in the way sites like Fearnet emphasize specific features of that community so as to demarcate certain consumer identities and subcultural traditions as more (commercially) valuable.

However, they also represent cable's renewed attempts to mobilize online branding and niche advertising as a way to maintain existing business models; as former president and general manager of Fearnet, Diane Robina, explained to *Forbes* magazine, "it's about finding a more robust ad model for the web. I think that means more creative ads. There's got to be a different type of advertising that caters to this screen that's 12 inches away from you and has a lot of interactivity to it…Really, the biggest keys on the web side are both using social media in an authentic, dynamic way and employing this concept of search engine optimization effectively" (Rose 2009). The latter reference to search engine optimization (SEO) is particularly telling, for it refers to strategies aimed at improving the visibility of a website vis-à-vis algorithmic search results; however, as an internet marketing strategy, SEO also involves aspects of website design, including "gift guides" and "shopping carts," which increase the number of backlinks from one site to another via features associated with a target audience (see Segal 2011). In other words, commercialized modes of audience participation and interactivity are here "customized" as a way to reinforce the overall market rationalizations of service providers; the goal, as Robina concisely put it, is to "get in places where the consumer is" (Rose 2009).

As a result of these overtly commercialized web attractions, registered users—or "victims," as the Fearnet site appropriately dubs them—are encouraged to participate directly in the creation and circulation of web content. The site thereby allows users to produce galleries of individual material, to upload videos and mash-ups, and to create and manage custom video playlists as a featured component of online membership. This is partly a way to mimic and internalize seemingly unruly fan behaviors (e.g., digital piracy, consumer mash-ups) while also creating buzz around branded entertainment properties; as Robina says of the site's mash-up software, Fearnet can post copyrighted material and say, "Here's *Saw III*, so make us a new trailer, and *legally*" (quoted in Moss 2007; my emphasis). To that end, Fearnet has also taken care to cultivate a virtual online community of horror fans as part of its overall web 2.0 business model, while also incorporating participatory fan practices as a way to capture increasingly detailed information about audience patterns and digital media use.[xiv]

Thus, whereas the site's social networking capacity allows Fearnet users to chat in open forums, create their own personalized web pages, tag or remix licensed movie materials, and upload user-generated content (including photos, poems, artwork, and fan fiction), it also fulfills the rather complicated (yet no less essential) task of market research in a digital age. By combining digital interactivity and VOD content as a means to improve upon existing audience measurement-techniques, Fearnet mobilizes emergent media technologies as a way to enfold user/viewers into the "digital enclosure" (Andrejevic 2002), and hence make their interactivity and fannish enthusiasm both productive and commercially valuable—something that can be more efficiently managed and recorded.

In this way, the site accomplishes the dual objectives of web 2.0 discourse as a corporate strategy: first, “to capture and harness the creative energies and collective intelligences of their users” (Jenkins 2010) and, second, to go back and sell access to that community via forms of commercial interactivity and paid service. Referring to this type of online fan input and its overall importance for creating a more tailored media experience for the Fearnet brand, Robina said: “We wanted to give the user lots of different ways to communicate with us, and with each other. When you post a video or post a story or photo, people can comment on that, and they’ll chat together as well” (quoted in Moss 2007). Despite the rhetoric of community and collaboration, however, the marketing team at Fearnet continues to define its users primarily in terms of their relationship to *the brand*, as opposed to the broader online horror community. As Robina commented in another context: “The web turns out to be a really great platform…It’s very much appealing to our 18-to-34 target viewer who wants to watch what they want when they want to, and it’s important to say to our [that is to say, *Fearnet*’s] fans that we are a breathing, live brand that makes content” (quoted in Umstead 2008, 15). Hence a fundamental anxiety about the legitimacy of corporate web 2.0 portals is allayed here, paradoxically through strategies of convergence that seek to capitalize on the perceived authenticity of online brand engagement and audience participation. It is against this background then, that user/viewer interactivity becomes the crux justifying a conglomerated digital entertainment platform.

As Adam Arvidsson (2006, 10) argues, one of the most important tendencies in contemporary media culture is the progressive inclusion of forms of sociality and community associated with subcultural practice, as these often provide the “contexts of consumption” that make possible the production and realization of brand value. For this reason, one might consider Fearnet’s user interactions a form of “free labor” (Terranova 2000), which not only permits companies like Comcast to integrate participatory components into their own convergent business models (in order to better exploit users for profit), but also to generate considerable feedback for brand executives and advertisers seeking to court Fearnet's "victims." In this way, Fearnet's VOD service is only secondarily concerned (if at all) with granting users real input into the programming procedure; rather, they are more concerned with appealing to consumers in a manner that maintains corporate control over the circuits of film/TV distribution and consumer interactivity.

As a condition of "free" viewing and interactive engagement, in other words, user/viewers are asked to submit to the commercial dictates of personalized, post-network television; however, in exchange for this, they are obliged to have their tastes commodified in a manner that is consistent with "social network exploitation" and the contradictions of user-generated labor (Andrejevic 2011): as Andrejevic puts it, "users are offered a modicum of control over the product of their creativity in exchange for the work they do in building up online community and sociality upon privately controlled network infrastructures" (ibid, 94). As such, Fearnet's "victims" play a key role in facilitating the flexible rationalization and commercialization of digital horror film culture.

Conclusion

When Fearnet launched in 2006, it was hailed by industry-insiders and observers as sound business practice—an example of the kinds of strategic partnerships and transindustrial alliances demanded of major media corporations in a digital age. More precisely, it came to represent a "safer" model of channel creation: that is, a way to avoid the pitfalls of a traditional startup, while capitalizing on the non-linear advantages of "virtual networks" and digital television (Crupi 2006; Moss 2006; Dempsey 2007). Accordingly, whereas the popular and business rhetoric surrounding Fearnet continues to stress the conveniences of digital television and customization for paying subscribers, the basis for such developments is economic policy, and specifically the vertical integration of digitized content and distribution systems.

Within this context, Comcast's own video subscription services, including "free" VOD channels like Fearnet, are seen as emblematic of the company's attempts at "future proofing" the cable industry against the encroachment of both satellite and telecom competitors (Grant 2006); more broadly, they are understood to represent the changing corporate strategies and emergent business models that characterize digital cable television. In short, these strategies aim to consolidate power within the cultural industries by emphasizing existing catalogs of licensed entertainment and intellectual property, alongside the corporately-owned distribution systems that allow access to that content. Here increasingly competitive pressures from satellite and telephone companies (as well as the broadband environment more generally) have compelled "the industry's attempt to position itself at the heart of digital culture, against the competition posed by new digital media forms" (Bennett 2011, 6). Thus the continued importance of Fearnet's multiplatform brand speaks to the major media conglomerates' strategies for creating and controlling interactive media users: while it purports to offer the types of niche programming that consumers allegedly want (nay "demand") in a fragmented media environment—specifically by catering to the individual taste preferences and cultural distinctions of genre fans—it also affords cable systems like Comcast the added value of being able to showcase the consolidation of multiple services (digital cable, internet access, mobile phone applications) into a single delivery system. Additionally, it remains tightly circumscribed by the various licensing agreements and revenue-sharing deals negotiated by the major studio-distributors involved in "windowing" Fearnet's media content.

As a result, it is not so much that Fearnet users are able to choose "what they want to watch when they want to watch it," but rather that they must choose from a menu of acquired movie titles and independent features that are negotiated at the institutional level of joint ventures and corporate partnerships, including contract deals and distribution arrangements between copyright holders. In this sense, Fearnet may indeed represent what Amanda Lotz calls "a truly post-network environment"—that is to say, "television without networks," or at least without a centralized networking service that determines (absolutely) programming, scheduling, and the temporal flow of content (2007, 117). However, as this article has sought to make clear, this process of assembling distinct genre programming ostensibly at the hands of individual user-consumers is nonetheless predetermined at the macro-level of transindustrial convergence and corporate structure. It is here that Fearnet's custom-tailored commercial interactivity allows for the increasing rationalizations of niche marketing and digital programming, services which are not so much about assuring "post-network" customization and viewer convenience, but marketplace discipline.

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Notes

[i] In a variant on this theme, both media executives and entertainment journalists are quick to rely on what Robert Kapsis (2009) has referred to as the "reflection of society perspective" for thinking about and explaining trends in commercial horror entertainment. For instance, *Multichannel News* reports that "TV viewers weary from the real-life horrors of high unemployment numbers, poor economic news and the worries of war are looking for the escapist thrills and chills that the horror genre provides" (Umstead 2010, 20). The article goes on to indicate that cable providers are eager to exploit this popular cultural anxiety in order to distinguish their services: they are "looking to capitalize on the escapist feeling the genre provides viewers during uncertain socioeconomic times" (ibid, 21; see also Umstead 2008; Umstead 2005; Dempsey 2007). In this way, horror-themed cable programs are purported to be mutually beneficial to both audiences—who, in accordance with the rhetoric of consumer choice and customization, ostensibly reveal their cultural tastes and preferences through increased subscription rates and niche services—and media executives, who ostensibly respond to consumer demand by producing content that reflects audiences' alleged desire to escape the horrors of real life. As this essay suggests, such reflectionist perspectives—albeit articulated to a rather canonical understanding of the genre—belie the institutional conditions underwriting such shifts.

[ii] However, one might include here categories of subscription VOD (e.g., Netflix), advertising supported VOD (e.g., Hulu), transactional VOD (e.g., Amazon or iTunes), internet protocol television (IPTV, e.g., Verizon's FiOS), and non-residential VOD (e.g., airlines). For the purposes of this article, I employ the shorthand VOD to refer to cable/"free" on demand.

[iii] Due to technological limitations of bandwidth capacity, satellite distributors such as DirecTV and DISH have historically been unable to offer the kinds of extensive, no extra-charge VOD packages that underwrite digital cable channels like Fearnet (see Schiesel 2003; Dempsy 2005; and Reardon 2006a).

[iv] For instance, satellite-TV provider Dish Network is now bundling its television service with streaming video from Blockbuster, which it acquired in 2011. Nonetheless, cable appears to be winning the battle for triple play. As of the time of this writing, for example, Comcast currently ranks as third largest residential voice/data provider in the US, whereas the number of US homes wired for cable in 2011 (61.5 million) far outpaces those signed up for satellite TV (32.4 million) and IPTV (8.5 million). Meanwhile, the largest broadband providers in the US are MSOs (at a combined 44.3 million subscribers) followed by telephone companies (at a combined 34.3 million subscribers) (see Leichtman Research Group 2012).

[v] As media industries scholar Alisa Perren (2010, 74) reminds us, "a cable (or satellite) service's value to subscribers comes in part from its offering programming unavailable elsewhere; however, this service is diminished if an entity such as News Corp.-owned FX opts to stream their programming online for free." Accordingly, while some networks have been able to mitigate the potential issue of "cord-cutting" (or bypassing cable service entirely) by arguing that streaming merely serves promotional purposes, the major MSOs have vociferously objected to *free* streaming of content on the grounds that it not only diminishes their status as exclusive content providers but also jeopardizes the economic value of cable programming itself, which is supposedly based on a networks' proprietary restrictions (see Sapan 2010).

[vi] Industry reports show that the growing anxiety over cord cutting, which has led the cable industry to heighten its call for authentication of "TV Everywhere" initiatives such as HBO GO,

may in fact be overblown. A January 2, 2012, report in *Multichannel News*, for instance, indicates that spread of online video and social media actually corresponds to *increased* levels of television consumption over the past six years; moreover, the heaviest online video viewers are also reportedly the heaviest TV viewers, suggesting that the availability of content on multiple platforms and mobile devices actually helps to build the TV audience. Finally, the profile of "cord cutters"—or those who dropped cable subscriptions over the past year—is not in fact the young, affluent, tech savvy viewers who are purportedly "opting out" of the pay TV model, but rather low-income, less-educated denizens of rural areas (Winslow 2012).

[vii] Cf. Dempsey 2007 on the comparable strategy of utilizing high-definition niche channels like MonstersHD and Chiller as a similar means to upgrade to digital packages and HD hardware.

[viii] Here it is perhaps useful to recall the system of distribution "windows" that a film must go through in order for studios to maintain control over the consumption process (see Ulin 2010, 30-6). For instance, distributors will protect the rights to show films in various formats in order to strategically maximize revenues from paying customers. The distribution "life-cycle" thus typically consists of a theatrical release followed by DVD or Blu-ray, pay-per-view television and domestic VOD, premium cable, and eventually basic cable and broadcast television. However, since the introduction of digital cable on-demand platforms in 2005, the release window between DVD and VOD has begun to narrow considerably. For example, it used to be the case that VOD service providers had to wait 8 to 12 weeks after movies were made available on DVD; however, as recently as 2009, studios have begun to experiment with "day-and-date" releasing, or making movie titles available simultaneously in both DVD and VOD home markets (Umstead 2010b). Moreover, in some cases, such as independent video releases (IFC films), distributors have utilized VOD in order to make available simultaneous home video release

alongside (or even in advance of) theatrical distribution. Partly, this has been a way for studio-distributors like Twentieth Century Fox and Sony to capitalize on "long tail" niche products associated with specialty film divisions, i.e., those "alternative" films that might not garner a major box office debut (Marich 2010). However, this release strategy is also a way to protect the overall financial interests of studios who are growing increasingly wary of online piracy and unofficial digital delivery.

[ix] As of 2010, more than 52 million households were equipped with VOD television service; furthermore, projections have suggested that by 2015, more than 64 million households will have VOD access and nearly 55 million homes will have a DVR (see On demand landscape 2012). In a related note, *Variety* reports that total VOD movie rentals rose from $23 million globally in 2006 to $259.4 globally in 2010, with 41% of that revenue stemming from the US market (Marich 2011).

[x] The service has since launched a linear, twenty-four hour cable channel.

[xi] Perhaps for this reason, the site has found favorable reception among the ostensibly "underground" online horror community, as represented by such independent sites as Bloody-Disgusting.com and Dread Central.com (see, e.g., SpookyDan 2006; Uncle Creepy 2011).

[xii] Similarly, the site's signature "Gift Guide" and "Fear Market" features a wide swath of brand-name merchandise and lifestyle accessories, which are taken from various affiliated commercial and social networking websites—everything from toys, T-shirts, DVDs, and video games, to comic books, soundtrack albums and genre music downloads, which ostensibly represent the "coolest and creepiest gifts on the web." Indeed, these sorts of digital cross-promotions and merchandising efforts help to foster new modes of flexible microcasting while providing

customized access to online markets; in effect they turn the web into "a self-service vending machine of cultural commodities" (Schiller 2007, 141).

[xiii] It should also be noted that MSOs are likewise able to generate a treasure trove of user/viewer data through digital technologies of VOD software and digital set-top boxes in addition to internet content delivery portals (see Splangler 2011). In this way, cable providers like Comcast operate not only as vertically integrated content providers and distributors, but also as quasi-market research organizations with proprietary access to interactive consumer-database systems.

[xiv] According to *Advertising Age* and Rentrak, the data-gathering agency that specializes in the VOD market, Fearnet maintains over 270, 000 registered online users and logs an average of 12 million VOD views a month (see Cable Guide 2012).