Voices in a Vacuum: Exploring Podcast Horror

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Most scary stories start with a whisper, a mysterious bump in the quiet of the night, creeping into the victim's ear. While the thought of hearing strange voices that only you can hear is terrifying to most people, some willingly choose to enjoy it. Podcast listeners choose to listen to voices in their ears to supplement their daily lives, with most being drawn towards the horror genre. As such, there has recently been growing interest in horror podcasts, an emerging medium that immerses fans in terrifying worlds simply through sound. Popular narratives such as *The Magnus Archives*, *Lore*, and *Welcome to Night Vale* maximize the use of the audio-exclusive form to target inherent human fears — lack of control, isolation, and existential dread.

This essay discusses three popular and medium-breaking horror podcasts. *The Magnus Archives* (Sims, 2016-2021) is an audio drama that makes use of the tape recorder and found footage to deliver a spiraling epic on the nature of fears. *Lore* (Mahnke, 2015-present) is an episodic docu-series that is inspired by the campfire storytelling tradition. Lastly, *Welcome to Night Vale* (Craynor & Fink, 2012-present) is a horrific parody of a small-town radio broadcast. In the eyes of the town's radio broadcaster, the horrors that afflict the desert town of *Night Vale* are just part of normal life. Using these works, I will examine how contemporary audio horror creates worlds that provoke specific, eerie human fears. First, I will be discussing *The Magnus Archives* and the fear of losing control. Next, *Lore* will be examined to show how podcasts incite the fear of isolation. Lastly, *Welcome to Night Vale* will serve as an example for sparking the fear of existence.

Sensory Deprivation and the Lack of Control

By being completely audio exclusive, the genre of audio drama is limited to the use of only one sense to present a compelling story. However, this does not dampen the experience of good horror; it may even enhance it. Audio horror may be as old as the concept of storytelling itself. From engrossing monster epics to campfire ghost stories, the act of scaring others through the oral tradition has existed long before the invention of writing, film, and video games. The ancient oral storytelling tradition has evolved first into a robust Gothic radio industry and now the horror podcast form (Hancock, 2017). The essence of audio-dependent scary stories has not changed rather; it has only adapted to technological advancement. The fundamental appeal of audio exclusive horror is from the lack of visual input. While it seems that there is a certainty in visual proof, oftentimes, the most compelling horrors are the ones we manifest by ourselves.

The Importance of Auditory Perception

Sound is essential in crafting the average person's perception of the world. In a film, its ambient soundtrack dictates the mood of a particular scene. It does not change any of the visual information, but a change in music delivers the emotion, arguably the message of a

narrative. Sound has its own special impact in film, with each second meticulously crafted to exist independently from the visual aspect (Weis, 2008). The aural design of a piece of horror is crafted specially to evoke fear, and podcasts do so simply by making use of its only form of delivery.

For a podcast, in which the delivery of a narrative is based purely on the audio, the impact of a narrative must extend beyond the limitations of sound. Hancock (2017) believes that when we change what we listen to, "we alter our perspective upon, and perceived place within, the surrounding physical space: we alter the everyday" (p. 3). In other words, podcasts are immersive, not in a way that changes the physical world, but alters the perception of it. For horror, a genre in which fear is the imperative emotion, perception is everything. The suggestion of fear can make even the safest objects into terrifying figures, yet the source of that fear may only be a tiny voice in our ears.

Lack of Control: Moments of Detached Immersion

Immersion may provide effective horror, but the perceived lack of immersion may also terrify listeners in a different way. Immersion gives the listener a sense of control, so when that control is taken away, there is a helpless feeling that often leads to fear. The crackly feedback effect of each statement in *The Magnus Archives* subverts immersion as it distances the audience from the world, yet it also effectively hides legitimate imagery in moments of distress. An episode that illustrates this is *MAG39: Infestation*, where a high-pitched feedback follows Sasha's disappearance, hiding the fact that she has been replaced by a doppelganger at that moment. The execution of that plot point can only have been done with an audio exclusive medium, as it involves only employing a different, but similarly voiced actor. This creates a lack of visual certainty on whether the character has been replaced as the only evidence the audience have is a slightly different voice and the narration of an unreliable persona. The surreal experience of not knowing whether the voice was the same or not leads to a moment of self-doubt, a psychological horror inflicted upon oneself.

This detachment of the medium allows room for self-reflection, morphing the horror into something that exists only in one's own mind. The lack of visual stimulation is not a limitation of the medium; with the right execution, the audio-dependence can be exploited to be a narrative strength. Immersion and the strategic lack of it, as well as the loss of information due to its sound-based narrative medium, make podcasts an effective conduit for inciting sensory deprivation and loss of control.

Isolation

Another unique element of the podcast format is its solitary nature. Conventional forms of horror media such as films and games are intended to be shared among friends and other loved ones, while podcasts are meant to be experienced alone. The lack of physical comfort and support provides an experience that amplifies most fears, especially the fear of being alone.

Moral Isolation: Distancing Oneself from Humanity

Since the audio format encourages solitude, the medium consequently detaches itself from the warmth of community. There is a sense of emotional seclusion from the rest of humanity, and the themes of popular podcasts tend to support that concept. *Lore* by Aaron Mahnke incorporates historical events into a podcast reminiscent of a campfire story experience. However, unlike a typical campfire scenario, this one involves only two people: the listener and the storyteller. This subverts an experience most would consider joyful and comforting into one that feels mythic and solitary. The distance from humanity can also be seen in the content of the show, in which the stories, however gory and mysterious, are all true to life. Each episode often starts by stating a universal human experience, such as a love of safe spaces, a shared fear of diseases, or a yearning for a place to call home, but each ends with a creepy anecdote that highlights the darkness of the human experience. *Lore* reinforces the idea that humanity might be the truest monster of them all, further leaving the listener with a sense of moral isolation.

Pseudo-Intimacy: Companionship without the Companion

Podcasts are a medium that also encourages pseudo-intimacy. When one listens to a podcast, it is a one-way conversation: there is the narrator and there is the listener. Despite this, there remains a strong personal connection between the two. The listener is encouraged to be involved in other people's personal thoughts, which is what makes podcasting a medium of empathy (Sienkiewicz & Jaramillo, 2019). Hoover (2020) believes that podcasts reformulate the relationship of intimacy between the creator and the audience, due to its private nature. The one-sided intimacy of a horror protagonist and their listener is powerful when it comes to inciting a sense of isolation in the audience.

Psychic Identification: Wearing the Mind of Another

The relationship between the narrator and the listener may run deeper than just intimacy and empathy. Gist (2018) concludes that in *Welcome to Night Vale*, the shrinking of the narrative distance between the narrator Cecil and the listener is affected by psychic identification. She infers that the intimate presence of the narrator is one of the reasons for the podcast's eventual success. This psychic identification resonates deeply with people because it involves immersing oneself in a presence that is separate from their own. Rochester (2014) states that "the similarity of sound to individual internal monologue is such that it can seem to closely mimic an individual's own process of cognition" (p. 364). The intimacy of podcasts may directly affect a listener's train of thought, in which the act of listening can mean inhabiting the mind of another.

Individual Listening: Voices in your Head

Voice is also an integral part of what incites fear in podcast listeners. The narrator's voice quality, which is typically low, dark, and mysterious, adds to the terror of the medium. Human males have evolved deeper voices not to appeal more sexually viable, but to intimidate rivals (Puts et al., 2016). This evolutionary feature follows us to this day, with many popular audiobooks and music videos utilizing this classically scary voice in order to amplify the message of their content. Podcasts are no different: *The Magnus Archives*' sole narrator,

Jonathan Sims, has a rich and deep voice that accompanies every statement read. *Lore*'s narrator, Aaron Mahnke, has a sinister way of manipulating every episode with his mischievous and creeping cadence. The deep male voice is one constant in many fear-inducing media, the rumble of a male's vocal timbre eliciting fear more naturally than any other type of voice.

Welcome to Night Vale's narrator, Cecil, also has a deep male voice, but he subverts this pattern in that his is joyous and flippant. There is no intimidating rumble, but rather, there is a casual and animated aspect to his voice. Bottomley (2015) notes that Cecil's voice quality is much like a radio host — deadpan and serene. Bottomley (2015) also states that the contrast of the voice quality and the content of the narrative is part of the experience, and that Cecil's speech, often scripted yet informal, adds to the intimacy between himself as a narrator and the audience. The familiarity of an intimate and professional tone juxtaposes with the content of the podcast. Cecil's enthusiastic radio-broadcast tone, coupled with sinister news stories, provides a contrast that compels listeners as well as the usual horror standard. The voice that dominates every episode is the sole companion of a podcast listener, and that scary voice can create a sense of alienation and a uniquely individual fear.

The isolationist themes, the one-sided intimacy, the escapist nature into other minds, and the singular presence of a compelling voice altogether create an atmosphere of disconnect in horror podcasts. The artfulness of the horror podcast is evident as it not only compels the listener to be alone but also provides a detached presence lacking interaction, further encouraging isolation.

Mundane Horror and Existential Dread

Lastly, podcasts are often consumed in the dull hours of the day, often in cars, trains, airports, and other miscellaneous liminal spaces. Thus, the horror podcast brings excitement to an uneventful daily existence. Hancock (2017) explains that horror podcasts follow the listener as a portable and private companion that permeates the mundane life more effectively than any other Gothic form. This allows the listener to exist within the world of the podcast whilst living in their own reality. The connection between the perceived world and the existing one is a theme that podcasts often play with, as it is an inherent strength of the medium.

Everyday Suburban Nightmares

Welcome to Night Vale's radio broadcast show format situates the listener as a citizen of a town where malicious happenings are the most mundane things in the world. As the radio station announcer, Cecil, nonchalantly presents daily news of disappearances and strange horrors, listeners are moved to consider themselves as some of the townspeople. Cecil refers to the listeners as "citizens", associating the citizens of a fictional cursed town with the real-life listeners so that they are seen as one and the same. There is no separation between the fictional and the real, except for when a listener chooses to remind themself of that. Its immersion allows for audiences to practice escapism, to listen to a community radio show that twists the idea of what 'normal' is supposed to be like. However, this escapism is limited only to the audio aspect of a listener's life. Mundane horror manifests itself in the other parts of a life — in the

dull and dreary suburban routines and in the visual repetition of an everyday existence. A well-crafted mundane horror podcast asserts itself into the material world, allowing a listener to believe in the blurred line between perception and reality.

The themes of *Night Vale* also touch upon cosmic and Lovecraftian horror, but at its core, the strength lies in the themes of humanity within a supernatural context. In the show, normal residents are disposable and often nameless in the eyes of the community radio. Their supernatural plights often are reported in a factual, professional tone. This plays into the existential fear that humans are inherently disposable, while the show may also act as a mirror for the 21st-century fears of collective existence. One of the biggest fears and sources of guilt is that through the accessibility of information, it becomes easy for regular citizens to be surrounded by the suffering of humanity on social media (Reestorff, 2018). As naturally empathetic beings, humans have their innate fears triggered by seeing so many people suffer while being powerless over their fate, since they are behind the screen. The flippant treatment of supernatural happenings and disregard of human life in middle-class suburbia, coupled with the immersive nature of the show, boosts the fear of personal ignorance and of wondering if the privileged bubble of modern existence is the truest horror of them all. *Welcome to Night Vale*, amid its almost comedic treatment of the unknown, offers a horrifying view of the normalcy of everyday life. It reminds audiences that horror awaits us in the dull every day if we learn to look for it.

Existential Dread: The Fleeting Nature of a Memory

The medium of podcast strives to balance the opposing themes of immersion and detachment, distinct from other forms of horror. Films are naturally immersive, with the art form aiming to be as lifelike as possible (Jones, 2018). Podcasting, radio, and audio-dependent media exist in conjunction with the other senses. It is a complement to life's experiences, not usually a stand-alone artistic event. Books are physical objects, tangible evidence of the narrative, which exist only in the realm of space, while podcasts exist only in the realm of time. Due to the divided and ephemeral nature of the medium, most horror podcasts focus on fears that linger, the ones that show up in everyday existence, much like *Night Vale*'s mundane horror and *Lore*'s humanity-based horror.

The ephemeral nature of podcasting also opens the listener up to a question of existence: whether fear is valid only when there is something physical to be fearful of. Much like music and concerts, podcasts, when deleted, would only exist in the memory of a listener. There are no hardback covers or physical DVDs; they are a product of the abstract concept of the internet for media distribution. Another aspect of existential horror is knowing that a piece of art can only exist in the realm of time, make its mark, but never reappear. This concept of ephemerality rivals the experience of humanity and its one-sided relationship with time, the concept of existence fated to disappear.

Conclusion

Horror podcasts in their current form provoke humanity's primal fears of deprivation, isolation, and existence. As the genre evolves, so will the themes and innovations that

surround horror podcasting. In the coming years, there could be a wave of scarier and more immersive stories that further push the limits of the audio exclusive medium. Regardless, the essence of the medium still stands, allowing listeners to immerse themselves in private worlds and digest the horrors of existence, one episode at a time.

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