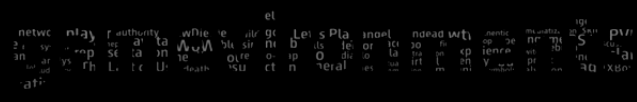


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# A Review of the Video Game *The Medium*

Jordan Wood

## Abstract

Review of the video game *The Medium* (2021).

**Keywords:** The Medium, Game Review, Polish Video Game, Surrealism, gameenvironments

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*The Medium* (2021) is a game that wears its influences on its decaying, fungal sleeve. As an homage to the Capcom and Konami classics of survival horror, *Resident Evil* (1996-2017) and *Silent Hill* (1999-2004), *The Medium* works convincingly, with its fixed camera perspectives, evocative interiors, and claustrophobic soundscapes. Like those games from which it draws inspiration, *The Medium* leverages its atmosphere and slow pacing to explore vulnerability – or more precisely, to produce vulnerability in the player and exploit accordingly. But *The Medium's* narrative interests and cultural influences turn out to be at odds with its generic commitments and formal choices, making for an experience that may leave players feeling left out.

## The Medium, Beksiński, and Aesthetic Duality

The cultural influence that looms largest in *The Medium* is the work of late Polish surrealist, Zdzislaw Beksiński, whose haunting blend of organic structures and hellish landscapes collapsed the erotic with the pestilent. Guillermo del Toro, whose own



Marianne's lived experience to the level of form. This move, though tempting to read as a gimmicky tech demo for the fledgling new Xbox's speedy Velocity Architecture, helps center Marianne's perspective in a way that that makes something more of *The Medium* than empty, if affectionate, homage to survival horror classics of yore. Marianne grounds the game in a sober and sincere exploration of national trauma and personal healing as the story's one reliable conduit bridging the gap between spirit and matter. And while the game's conclusion veers off-track in a murky appeal toward generic expectations, *The Medium* still manages to feel surprisingly compassionate in its scope. There is something of Beksiński's "secret poetry" (Blair 2018) to Marianne, stained with blood and rust as she is.

**The (In)Vulnerability of Marianne and the Refusal of Vicarious Kinesthetics**

Vulnerability is the bread and butter of the survival horror tradition that *The Medium* carries on. Playing those older games is an exercise in disempowerment. You sneak past doors hiding horrible noises, hoping whatever flesh-rending nightmare lies within ignores your pounding heart. Survival horror has long been a prime example of what Veli-Matti Karhulahti (2013) has called *vicarious kinesthetics*. In Karhulahti's view, the player's actions within a game are "essentially meaningless – there is no decipherable message to be understood – it is not senseless: there is a sensation to be understood" (Karhulahti 2013). The sensation to be understood in the co-performance of players and their avatars in survival horror games is exactly that feeling of vulnerability. The scarcity of ammunition, the limited ways in which a player can affect their environment, the claustrophobia of third person camera systems in interior environments – these are all ways that survival horror games like *The Medium* work to disempower their players.

While *The Medium* certainly deploys these strategies throughout, the protagonist, Marriane, rarely telegraphs helplessness back to the player. She is, in other words, much less helpless than she appears, but curiously she is at her most powerful when the game wrests control away from the player. Later, as she wanders the halls of Niwa’s abandoned children’s center and the gut wrenching story of her ghost child companion unfolds, Marianne – and we, the players – glimpse the gargantuan, grasping fingers of a monster the size of a city block outside the window. I remember seeing flashes of this creature, the Beast, here and there through the glass and wondering how a game like *The Medium* would fit such a massive figure into the playspace it had built for me, given that its interest in providing play experiences I associate with big boss battles had been virtually nil. The answer, it turns out, is to first take the resolution out of Marianne's hands and then to take it out of the player's. In the sequences leading up to the encounter with the Beast, Marianne first discovers this monster through the consciousness of her quarry, a troubled man named Thomas. Though these sequences play out with few meaningful interactive differences for the player, it's clear that the peril for Marianne is at a distance. Rather than encounter the Beast directly, Marianne relives the memory of someone who has already risked life and limb.

Once this memory sequence concludes and the story returns to Marianne in the present, the Beast appears in full and the game withdraws all control from the player, leaving pre-rendered cutscenes to carry the story forward as Marianne, caught up in the Beast’s horrible grasp, talks it into dispersing.



Figure 2. Vicariously passing through memories, *The Medium* © Bloober Team.

It's a harrowing scene, well-acted and animated, that unfolds once again across a split screen. But more importantly, it signals this game's inversion of the survival horror push-and-pull. When players are at their most vulnerable, Marianne is often actually quite distant from danger. And when the kinesthetic vicarious connection between players and Marianne is at its weakest – that is, when players have set the controller down to watch a pre-rendered sequence – Marianne is in grave danger.

## Conclusion

The inspiration that *The Medium* draws from the dialectic of decay and healing found in the Beksiński's work underwrites a delicate balance of player empowerment and disempowerment. With this balance, *The Medium* attempts to tell a story that





Figure 3. Exiting a long, underground sojourn, *The Medium* © Bloober Team.

collapses national and personal traumas into an exploration of compassionate living, and dying, amid unmistakable horror. The cost, unfortunately, of this balance is a game with a murky relationship to the play experience it wants to deliver to its players. *The Medium* never figures out how to integrate the game's most powerful moments of absolution and reckoning with the player's co-performance alongside Marianne. That is, while the art direction and innovative split screen play communicate the game's themes well, they do so at the expense of delivering on the promises of survival horror in a compelling way. While I enjoyed my time with *The Medium*, and would recommend players to try it out on the basis of its formal experimentation and effective atmosphere, the game's fails to bring the player along for its most moving narrative moments, resulting in a play experience that never feels quite complete.

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