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Spectres des Monstres: Post-postmodernisms, hauntology and creepypasta narratives as digital fiction

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Abstract

Horror has always been adaptable to developments in media and technology; this is clear in horror tales from Gothic epistolary novels to the ‘found footage’ explosion of the early 2000s via phantasmagoria and chilling radio broadcasts such as Orson Welles’ infamous *War of the Worlds* (1938). It is no surprise, then, that the firm establishment of the digital age (i.e. the widespread use of Web2.0 spaces the proliferation of social media and its integration into everyday life) has created venues not just for interpersonal communication, shared interests and networking but also the potential for these venues to host a new type of horror fiction: creepypasta. However, much of the current academic attention enjoyed by digital horror fiction and creepypasta has focused on digital media’s ability to remediate a ‘folk-like’ storytelling style and an emulation of word-of-mouth communication primarily associated with urban legends and folk tales. Here, I intend to argue that creepypasta should primarily be considered a form of digital fiction due to its ability to spread narratives in a way distinct to digital textuality and intrinsically linked to the affordances of digital media. In this article, I will treat creepypasta narratives as a genre specific to the form of digital fiction – specifically a ‘fourth generation’ of digital fiction – in which ‘the [social media] platform is a significant part of the aesthetic expression and the meaning potential’ of these stories. I will argue that the affordances of social media, and the way in which they are taken advantage of by creepypasta narratives situate the phenomenon as an example of post-postmodern storytelling that embodies traits of Jeffrey Nealon’s ‘Post-postmodernism’, Alan Kirby’s

‘Digimodernism’ and Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker’s ‘Metamodernism’. I will suggest that this postpostmodern cultural turn works hand in hand with the resurgence of a cultural ‘hauntology’ to coalesce in creepypasta as a unique type of text. While creepypasta’s hauntological qualities have previously been noted by Line Henriksen, this article will explore a relationship between creepypasta and post-postmodernism that has not yet been acknowledged. Ultimately, I will attest that the above theories describe (sometimes overlapping) symptoms of an emerging cultural period that relate to creepypasta’s meaning potential and its formal and aesthetic properties. Observations from all three theories of a post-postmodern age coalesce in creepypasta narratives, from the specific qualities of digital textuality and the unique properties of different social media platforms on which these narratives are hosted (YouTube, Reddit, webforums and so on) to the metatextuality of creepypasta works and how they depart from and retain a dialogue with postmodern horror narratives. While the cultural landscape is still in flux and what will come after postmodernism has yet to be determined, creepypasta narratives tell us that a post-postmodern age has already arrived.

Keywords

creepypasta

digital fiction

hauntology

metamodernism

post-postmodernism

digimodernism

Introduction

We are living in an age of inescapable and exponential developments in communication technology both in hardware and in software. The telephone has moved from walls, into pockets and further still from a plastic keypad and LCD screened ‘brick’ to sleek glass and metal all-screen devices. Similarly, the communication networks that these devices connect to have moved from SMS and e-mail to a slew of networked apps and websites under the definition of social networking platforms. However, the widespread integration of these communication technologies and platforms into daily life has not only brought people closer together, but it has also produced a new form of haunting, with ghosts and monstrous entities lurking alongside the real people we communicate with through social media text spaces.

This digital haunting is a hallmark of creepypasta: an emergent horror genre that manifests through the form of digital fiction, characterized by unsettling paranormal and horror content copied, pasted and remixed on social media and Web2.0 platforms under the guise of real and lived encounters. In their book-length study of *The Slender Man*,¹ Shira Chess and Eric Newsom characterize creepypasta as a mutation of cospypasta; ‘the practice [...] where people cut and paste anecdotes and fiction from around the web, mixing and remixing them without citation or explicit links to the original’ (2015: 102). This term then switched to ‘creepypasta’ for anecdotes that dealt with paranormal or horror content. Line Henriksen similarly finds creepypasta’s etymological root in cospypasta, describing the latter as ‘short pieces of prose, sometimes accompanied by an image or a video [...] meant to be copied and pasted [...] and spread on the Internet via social media, e-mails and message boards’; she adds, ‘whereas cospypasta can be about almost any subject, creepypasta is usually aimed at scaring the reader and/or viewer’ (2013: 408).

Although always novel and engaging (if done well), the use of contemporary media and communication technology to usher the paranormal into our world is not a new phenomenon, with roots in the ‘mock exercises in scientific demystification’ of eighteenth-century phantasmagoria’ (Castle 1988: 143). These displays used technology to disprove the existence of ghosts, showing them as projections and other tricks of visualization technology to ‘reinforce the strict division between “fact” and “fiction”’ (Henriksen 2013: 406) – the hosts proclaiming spirits ‘figments of the imagination projected onto the surface of reality’ (Henriksen 2013: 406). The advanced technologies used to reinforce this boundary and keep the spirits at bay, however, ‘became the mediums through which these creatures could be summoned’ (Henriksen 2013: 407). Henriksen writes:

Explaining mythical monsters through projection – whether the projection of machinery or the projections of the mind – had not made them go away. On the contrary, monsters were still there, firmly situated within the technological and scientific projects of the Enlightenment – but they had changed. No longer roaming the streets at night, they now roamed minds and screens, moving into the realms of the in-between rather than taking sides in the dualism of fact and fiction. They were neither fully in your mind, nor fully outside of it: they were that which was both a hoax and an actual encounter, that which was neither imagination nor reality. (2013: 407)

Indeed, the technologies and media of communication, and the space between a message sent and a message received is a gap in which myth and the paranormal thrives. Examples can be found in Orson Welles’ infamous *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast (1938), in which an

alien invasion occurred between a recording studio in the Columbia Broadcast Building in New York, and the minds of countless terrified listeners. Further back, the ‘found documents’ – retellings of ghostly encounters and epistolary delivery of Gothic novels – brought hauntings into the space between the words on the page and the readers’ minds. Beyond even that, the creatures of folklore were formed and moulded in the space between the words of the storyteller and the minds of the listener (who may then become the next storyteller and so on).

Of course, the use of communication technology to conjure spirits into the ‘in between’ space has been most popular in recent times through the ‘mockumentary’ and ‘found footage’ horror explosion in television and cinema, which use ‘the aesthetics of documentaries to tell fictive stories, thus blurring the boundary between fact and fiction’ (Henriksen 2013: 407). There are many films and television shows that potentially fit into this bracket, starting with the BBC’s *Ghostwatch* (1992 - 1992) ‘live’ television broadcast, which used household names and faces in broadcast journalism to tell the tale of ‘true’ poltergeist activity happening on air, and continuing through the next two decades and beyond in cinema with the wildly successful *The Blair Witch Project* (Myric, Sánchez, 1999), *Paranormal Activity* franchise (2007–15), the *REC* franchise (2007–14) and many others.

However, a distinction must be made between those that simply use the aesthetics of documentaries or news footage to foster immersion and those that are presented, without irony, as real events. Films that fall into the former camp, such as such as *Cloverfield* (Reeves, 2008), still feature the marketing of a conventional Hollywood film with links to the director, cast and production team. The handheld camera in *Cloverfield* and other films like it functions as a device for immersion, and yet there is no pretence that the events portrayed had ever really occurred (we would notice a giant monster rampaging around New York city, after all). Although a conceit in many of these films is that the footage shown may have been

found or recovered, their presentation as a work of fiction suggests that the term mockumentary may be a more suitable designation for them than found footage as the term gestures towards an inherent fictionality and a postmodern awareness of its medium. On the other hand, films in the latter camp set out to completely deceive viewers and create a sincere belief and engagement in what is presented on the screen without a self-awareness of media or genre conventions. For example, *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) was promoted through an online campaign that seeded the mythology of the film as real events and listed the actors as ‘missing’ from the end of production until after the release of the film – hence *found* footage; as in, this footage was found in the real world, edited and then distributed.

Although following in this tradition of the mythic and paranormal manifesting in the ‘in-between’ spaces of technology and the mind, creepypasta departs from oral folkloric storytelling and later found footage narratives while retaining elements of both. The affordances of digital textuality democratize the monster-making effects of technology, while the networked social media spaces that host these stories promote a sincere engagement with the myths and monsters that they conjure. It is this mix of sincere reader engagement, ontological ambiguity and digital textuality that distinguishes the creepypasta narrative as a unique form of horror fiction, and places this new generation of paranormal encounters in part of a ‘post-postmodern’ cultural turn.

Post-postmodernisms

The ‘death’ of postmodernism has been proclaimed by many theorists (Brooks and Toth 2007; Timmer 2010), with the commonly accepted date of departure being September 11 as ‘the sense of a cultural threshold of some kind having been crossed on 9/11 is strong and widespread’ (McHale 2015: 174). Arguing that we experienced no real ‘end’ to

postmodernism and instead a tangible shift in its nature, McHale notes that ‘it has not prevented the proliferation of proposals for *naming* it [...] crucial to the *branding* of a cultural development, which in turn helps set the agenda for further development and reflection’ (2015: 175, original emphasis). Although not allegiant to any singular current ‘brand’ of theory, the combination of textual and narrative traits that make up creepypasta’s generic territory shows that it is indicative of this general cultural shift. There are three current theories of post-postmodernism that identify (sometimes overlapping) symptoms of this emerging period that relate to creepypasta’s meaning potential and formal and aesthetic properties. These are as follows:

- Post-postmodernism through Brian McHale’s (2015) understanding of Jeffrey Nealon (2012)
- Alan Kirby’s Digimodernism (2009)
- Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker’s Metamodernism (2010).

Nealon uses post-postmodernism to describe our current cultural phase as an ‘intensification and mutation’ (2012: ix) of postmodernism’s hallmarks – suggesting not an entirely clean break or something definitively new, but a notable shift in the fabric of what had come before. Nealon focuses on post-postmodern intensifications in late capitalism, which are, in his words, a ‘turning inward towards existing resources until the final product is you and me’ (2012: 31), indicating how personal data, biometrics and online user behaviour are sold and analysed to effectively market to us on an intensified individual level. Already in Nealon’s post-postmodernism, the notion is in effect that it is the proliferation of digital media that in part fuel an intensification and mutation away from postmodernism.

Brian McHale adapts Nealon’s concept of intensification and mutation to describe areas that he considers textual symptoms of an emergent postmodernism. Crucially, most of these could

be used to describe textual and thematic traits of creepypasta. These include the widespread uptake and intensification of ‘uncreative writing’ (2015: 179) as an experimental literature, echoing Nealon’s consideration of how a post-postmodern literature functions: ‘intensifying certain strains within postmodernism in order to render it a kind of hyper-postmodernism of positive usage’ (2010: 168). McHale focuses on ‘flarf’ poets, who ‘use online Google searches to comb through the Internet for literally unimaginable [...] word combinations, patching them into collages’ (2015: 180). While this particular example of ‘uncreative writing’ focuses on a specialist group of experimental artists, his description of their use of ‘sampled’ text to ‘unrepentant plagiarism’ (2015: 179) facilitated through networked online digital media is a suitable description of the participatory, remixable and uncredited copying and pasting of creepypasta narratives around the Internet – although, as I will show later in this article, terming such writing practices as ‘uncreative’ is something of a misnomer.

McHale then goes on to remark on how digital media has intensified and mutated our relationship with virtual realities, stating that while we have always engaged with virtual realities through narratives, pictures and enactments of all kinds, digital media – especially Web2.0 and social media platforms – have created a scenario where ‘the erosion of ontological stability and the topping of paramount reality, staples of the postmodern imagination since at least Borges, are becoming sobering facts’ (2015: 181). McHale draws examples that suggest the porousness of the boundary between the virtual and paramount reality, observing how ‘we project ourselves into cyberspace’ (2015: 180) using game-world avatars, Second Life representations of ourselves and other virtual representations. Similarly, McHale suggests that movement between the real and the virtual is a two-way street through ‘such portals as “reality television”’ (2010: 180) that extend control in the real world over a virtual scenario, and are even capable of superimposition through (albeit still fledgling) technology such as Google Glass, ‘which makes it possible to access the Internet while at the

same time continuing to interact normally with one's immediate environment – to operate in cyberspace and the real world simultaneously' (2015: 181).

Of conspicuous absence in McHale's choice of examples is social media, which has exploded in popularity in the years beyond 9/11. Through the integration of social media apps and smartphone use, one can argue that it is the exemplary venue for McHale's erosion of ontological stability as it provides a way to interact with a virtual environment where a projected (and arguably constructed) version of oneself is maintained while also nearly anywhere in the real world. The undermining of ontological stability through social media and smartphones is twofold when creepypasta narratives are considered. Due to social media and Web2.0 platforms' role as virtual environments for the meeting of 'real' people, the injection of fictional people and storyworlds into those spaces occurs as a second breach of ontological borders – between a virtual space that acts as a mediation platform for real existing people, and an entirely virtual and fictional storyworld.

Alan Kirby's digimodernism offers a complementary insight into our relationship with the reality of social media. He characterizes digimodernism as being 'where digital technology meets textuality' (2009: 1), allowing 'the reader or viewer to intervene textually, to physically make text, to add visible content, or tangibly shape narrative development' (2009: 1). He, like McHale, suggests that rather than being the result of any great social schism, the proliferation and integration of digital technology into everyday life has resulted in digimodernism gradually becoming the cultural norm out of postmodernism to the point where discernible differences between the two can be observed. Crucial to understanding the relationship between readers, creepypasta and social media is 'the rise of the apparently real' (2009: 139) – that is those texts that 'proffer what seems to be real [...] and that is all there is to it', and importantly allow 'the participants [to] improvise the immediate material' (2009: 141). Kirby clarifies the ontological status of the apparently real by explaining how it is 'the

outcome of a silent negotiation between viewer and screen: we know it's not *totally* genuine, but if it utterly seems to be, then we will take it as such' (2009: 141, original emphasis).

Casting that view towards the entire operation of Web2.0 sites and social media platforms, Kirby claims that 'Wikipedia, message boards, and social networking sites clearly require, in order to function at all, a level of sincerity in their users' (2009: 150); he illustrates the point by highlighting that when businesses try to pass themselves off online as 'real' to go viral for advertising, they are often met with outrage when they are found out (2009: 150). Kirby uses Facebook as a profound example of this erosion and how it marks a distinct change in how we interact with digital text:

As a modification of an existing digital mode, the Web page, not of a predigital form like the diary or encyclopaedia, Facebook suggests that the drift of information technology is now toward the phenomenological elimination of the sense of the electronic interface, of the text. Increasingly, perhaps, people will feel that the gulf separating their 'real' and their 'textual' lives has disappeared; the thoughts, moods, and impulses of our everyday existence will translate so immediately into the electronic textual digimodernist realm that we will no longer be conscious of transference. It won't be a question then of oscillating between offline and online, but of hovering permanently between those extremes. (2009: 123)

Kirby's ideas recall McHale's remarks on the 'erosion of ontological stability' (2015: 180–81), perhaps increasingly so since from the time of *Digimodernism*'s publication (2009). Web pages and organizations that model, mimic and modify Facebook's quest to eliminate the sense of the interface have appeared and become widespread. Twitter has become

emblematic of the instant translation of thought, mood and impulse into the electronic textual realm, the brevity of the format encouraging a merging of 'real' and 'textual' life. Similarly, Instagram, Reddit, Snapchat and other formats allow the integration and conversion of real experience into digital text at a near instantaneous rate. Crucially, these social media and Web2.0 platforms all require a level of sincerity to function, a trust that the digital text that we consume on them comes from the thoughts, experiences and impulses of other 'real' people. Therefore, if we accept and participate within the realm of the apparently real online, then it stands to reason that a folkloric style of storytelling exists in the same realm. It then functions and gains its effectiveness in being scary by taking advantage of the sincerity required for those platforms to function and the assumption that digital text consumed through them has its roots in the thoughts and experiences of a 'real' person.

Metamodernism, on the other hand, does not explicitly cast an eye towards digital media but can provide an understanding of the sincerity required for Web2.0 and social media platforms to function, and an understanding of creepypasta's contemporary relationship with horror. Vermeulen and van den Akker consider metamodernism a 'structure of feeling' (2010: 2) that permeates contemporary culture characterized by an 'oscillat[ion] between the modern and the postmodern' (2010: 5) to progress and move towards something new. One such oscillation is a shift away from postmodern 'aesthetic precepts of deconstruction, parataxis, and pastiche in favour of [...] reconstruction, myth, and metaxis' (2010: 2). Metamodernism is also characterized by an 'informed naivety, a pragmatic idealism' (2010: 5), a shift away from the guarded irony and cynicism of postmodernism towards something more positive and sincere, while also maintaining that a *true* sincerity cannot occur due to our contemporary culture still being steeped in irony, self-reference and cynicism. In that respect, the easiest way to describe metamodern texts compared to postmodern texts is that they are self-aware, but *not* self-deprecating. Tropes are played sincerely rather than ironically, but something of

postmodern forms is retained. This, they claim, is representative of a metamodern ‘performatism’ (2010: 6), characterized by ‘the wilful self-deceit to believe in – or identify with, or solve – something in spite of itself’ and ‘an oscillation, an unsuccessful negotiation, between two opposite poles’ (2010: 7) of sincerity and irony, in short, the reconciling of two apparently incompatible extremes.

For an example in popular culture, Vermeulen and van den Akker reference the ‘quirky’ cinema of Michael Gondry and Wes Anderson as ‘an attempt to restore, to the cynical reality of adults, a childlike naivety – as opposed to the postmodern ‘smart’ cinema of the 1990s’ (2010: 7). However, while considerable focus on metamodern texts has been on the sincere in terms of the unironically ‘soft’ and ‘happy’ tone of those films and similar texts, an argument could be made that creepypasta represents a shift away from the ‘smart’ and deconstructed horror films that straddled the turn of the century, such as the arguably seminal *Scream* franchise (1996–2011), *Final Destination* franchise (2000–11) and *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), towards a more ‘sincere’ type of scare.

Through the sincerity required for social media and Web2.0 platforms to function, creepypasta narratives pull from the wide pool of horror’s generic tropes, not (from a postmodern perspective) to use their falsehood to ironically play up or deconstruct them, but instead to use a decidedly fragmented and deconstructed way of telling stories to elicit a sincere feeling of believability; to get readers to engage (emotionally and textually) with the narrative and characters; to play on our knowledge of falsehood to create a new way of engaging with horror genre markers; and – to invoke metamodernism – to re-establish mythic and ‘larger’ narratives and devices in the wake of postmodernism. This, of course, means a return to a sincere re-engagement with the supernatural and horror.

From remediated folklore to digital fiction

Academic attention towards creepypasta has mostly been diverted towards one narrative: *The Slender Man* (2009) (Boyer 2013; Chess and Newsom 2015; Peck 2015). The story gained notoriety after two 12-year-old girls stabbed their friend in 2014, sparking a short-lived moral panic (Chess and Newsom 2015: 2), and a recent HBO documentary *Beware the Slenderman* (2016). In addition to the tragic event in Wisconsin, the Slender Man is a prolific monster at the heart of a narrative that has forked and branched out across the Internet into a patchworked mythos of various texts and iterations sharing the same eponymous creature more than any other creepypasta narrative, including notable YouTube web series *Marble Hornets* (2009), *EverymanHYBRID* (2010) and *The Tulpa Effect* (2011), and innumerable examples of fanfiction and fanart. *The Slender Man* mythos, then, is an unrivalled site for academic analysis of digital horror and narrative variance. Unfortunately, in his success, the Slender Man turns the limelight away from creepypasta more generally and his fellow networked ghouls, thus resulting in limited scholarly perspectives and studies.

Most current approaches to creepypasta privilege a folkloric analysis of the spread and variance of these narratives – mostly with a focus on *The Slender Man* – stressing how their site of occurrence suggests that they are an example of ‘remediated folklore’ (Boyer 2013; Chess and Newsom 2015: 92; Peck 2015). This view of social media and Web2.0 spaces, however, significantly underplays the impact that they have on shaping a narrative and a reader’s interaction with it, especially since current analyses do not stress the significant differences between face-to-face communication and digital textuality, let alone the Web2.0 spaces on which these stories propagate. It is, however, worth considering the ways in which digital media, and in particular contemporary social web platforms, carry out the remediation of face-to-face communication to establish these differences.

Remediation, and specifically digital remediation, is set out by Jay Bolter and David Grusin in their book of the same name. They describe remediation as simply ‘the representation of one medium within another’ (1996: 339), noting that the act of remediation is not at all a new practice, but is instead a ‘defining characteristic of digital media’ (1996: 339). From this, the assertions of Peck and Boyer about how creepypasta and other social media-based fictions function ring true as social media facilitates the instantaneous interpersonal communication of face to face through a digital setting. However, Bolter and Grusin’s definition of remediation warrants further exploration as Bolter sets out a ‘spectrum’ of remediation based on the ‘degree of perceived competition [...] between the new media and the old’² (2000: 65). He plots four distinct points on this spectrum, referring to different intensities of remediation and tension between the media in question, the two extremes of which are transparent remediation (2000: 65) and absorptive remediation (2000: 67).

Bolter describes transparent remediation as when ‘an older medium is highlighted and re-represented [...] without apparent irony or critique’ (2000: 65), such as a scan of a printed page or painting on a computer screen. Through this form of remediation, the desire is for the new medium to be rendered ‘transparent’ (2000: 65), to experience the old without influence. However, as a new medium may require a new way of interaction – for example, the use of a mouse with a computer or the user interface for whatever program may host the old medium – the new medium ‘makes its presence felt in some way’ (2000: 66). In opposition to transparent remediation is absorptive remediation. This form of remediation, much like the first, seeks to represent a seamless or a transparent experience. However, unlike transparent remediation, which attempts to represent the old medium while minimizing the existence of the new, the new medium here attempts to ‘absorb the older medium entirely, so that the discontinuities between the two are minimized [...] however [...] the new medium remains dependent upon the older one in acknowledged or unacknowledged ways’ (Bolter 2000: 67).

In this sense, the new medium retains something of the old. It is in this form of absorptive remediation that we must regard Boyer and Peck's perspective of folklore in a digital setting.

Although Peck is aware of the differences between traditional folklore and storytelling in a networked digital space, he stops short of acknowledging that this is due to a certain *type* of remediation taking place, one in which folkloric and face-to-face communication methods are absorbed completely by the digital medium. As noted by Kirby, Web2.0 functions through the use of an electronic interface and, crucially through *text* (2009: 123), and that through social media 'thoughts, moods, and impulses [...] translate immediately into the electronic, textual [...] realm' (2009: 123). Because of what Kirby views as a perceived drive towards 'the phenomenological elimination of the electronic interface, of the text' (2009: 123), it is perhaps easy to overlook the textually dominated digital medium in which face-to-face and folkloric communication is remediated. However, it is essential to understand that creepypasta and other narratives that behave in a folkloric fashion on Web2.0 and social media platforms exist in a strictly textual form as digital fiction, and that an understanding of digital textuality is necessary for an in-depth analysis.

Peck recognizes some of these characteristics, such as archived 'post and respond' (2015: 335) interaction with others; the ability for 'perfect replication' (2015: 334) of text while also being mutable for personalization; and 'elements of oral, written, and visual communication' (2015: 334), situating them as points of departure from face-to-face storytelling (2015: 355). However, each of these are traits of digital textuality, the dominant medium into which folkloric face-to-face communication has been remediated via Bolter's fourth (absorptive) form of remediation. With this in mind, the way in which digital communication is 'dependent upon' (Bolter 2000: 67) face-to-face communication is exactly that: communication. Networked digital spaces facilitate the communication between people in a near instantaneous way, and crucially, this communication takes place entirely in the digital

medium through, and with the affordances of, digital textuality. Therefore, while something of oral folkloric storytelling traditions is retained through the mechanisms of networked digital communication, the absorption of these traits into the new medium without any disconnect or discontinuity highlights creepypasta's place as digital text and digital fiction 'whose structure, form, and meaning are dictated by, and in dialogue with the digital context in which it is produced and received' (Bell et al. 2014: 4).

Despite observations that creepypasta narratives are a product of a networked Internet community – an environment that is undeniably digital – there is a peculiar absence of association between digital fiction and creepypasta texts in current scholarship. This is particularly strange when, if mapped against the definition for digital fiction, creepypasta is a perfect fit. Digital fiction is defined by the Digital Fiction International Network as:

Fiction [that is] written for and read on a computer screen [and] that pursues its verbal, discursive and/or conceptual complexity through the digital medium, and would lose something of its aesthetic and semiotic function if it were removed from that medium. (Bell et al. 2010 quoted in Bell et al 2014: 4)

The crucial distinction here is the inseparable relationship between digital fiction and the medium upon which it is read. This distinction directly applies to creepypasta as there is no doubt that any narrative would lose its potential for direct interaction, sharing or remixing if it were presented outside of the digital medium.

Like Peck, Chess and Newsom seek to characterize the development of *The Slender Man* narrative as a sort of twenty-first-century folklore, stating that 'though the storytelling has

moved from traditional storytelling places to online spaces, the folkloric qualities remain when stories are told around digital campfires' (Chess and Newsom 2015: 77). However, they neglect to consider the specific modalities and affordances of the medium in which the Slender Man resides. They refer to different online communities and Web2.0 platforms as 'digital campfires' (Chess and Newsom 2015: 78), characterized as 'online arena[s] where users gather for the specific purpose of story swapping' (Chess and Newsom 2015: 78). This may very easily describe the entire operation of Web2.0 platforms, although the stories are often non-fiction, primarily concerned with our day-to-day lives: blogging, tweeting and updating our Facebook. However, Chess and Newsom's wording and positioning of their 'digital campfires' as sites of folkloric exchange and narrative development suggest a far more specific application. In fact, given the focus of their book, such a designation may only be applicable to the initial thread on the somethingawful.com forums in which the Slender Man first appeared, and the focused sites of narrative development set up in its wake that were analysed and discussed by Peck.

Since, for example in the case of *The Slender Man*, the majority of actual storytelling takes place on YouTube.com (*Marble Hornets* [2009]; *EverymanHYBRID* [2010]; *The Tulpa Effect* [2011]) or corresponding blogs and Twitter pages of characters featured in the YouTube series, the 'digital campfires' of creepypasta narratives are less the sites of specific discussion and development of the narratives, and more the co-opting of social media and Web2.0 platforms to present narratives with the same level of realism as a user would assume of any other post on such platforms. A result of this, often intended and integrated into the narrative, is a prevailing ontological ambiguity around creepypasta narratives.

The co-opting of existing social media platforms also allows the use of the numerous modal possibilities that come with various social media platforms – long-form text posts (blogs),

video (YouTube and others), user interaction (Twitter, Reddit, message boards, etc.) – and taking advantage of the different ways in which users operate, read and interact with content on each platform. As such, creepypasta narratives subtly and flexibly change their discursive traits between platforms, integrating seamlessly into people’s streams alongside posts by ‘real’ people. A creepypasta narrative told over Twitter will abide by the discursive conventions of a tweet; a narrative told over Reddit will adhere to ‘reddiquette’ (the rules and formatting for posting agreed by the Reddit community) when posting; and a creepypasta narrative told over a blog page will read as such rather than simply as a short horror story in that text space. Web2.0 spaces function as the sites of narrative exchange and dictate the form of each narrative, in addition to directly enhancing the verisimilitude of the narratives written on it. The use of these digital spaces, then, certainly characterizes creepypasta as a form of digital fiction.

This widespread usage of various Web2.0 platforms to maximize the narrative capabilities of their various properties thus puts creepypasta in the realm of what Hans Rustad refers to as a ‘fourth generation’ of digital fiction – that in which ‘the [social media] platform is a significant part of the aesthetic expression and the meaning potential’ (Bell et al. 2014: 10).

Rustad expands on the particularities of this generation of digital fiction as follows:

[It is] literature that is created on and needs to be read on a networked computer and on a social media platform, take the structure and shape of a platform that is already defined, and defined for different purposes. It has similarities with other generations, but at the same time it intensifies the social media aspect. This play of similarities and intensities in the affordances of social media is of importance in the appearances of the aesthetic and semiotic aspects of the social-digital work, as well as it constitutes

the reading environment – somehow different from reading environment/felt readership in other media, including hypertext etc. (2015: n.pag.)

Although creepypasta does not necessarily need to be created and read on a social media platform,³ it is essential for creepypasta narratives to be spread further outward through copying and pasting. The networked computer and social media platform also facilitate the potential for narratives to expand, become remixed and develop as they are spread, not just across one particular platform, but multiple social media sites.

The spreading and expansion of narratives across social media platforms, especially in creepypasta narratives that move beyond the copying and pasting of body text, is where creepypasta then begins to ‘take the structure and shape of a platform that is already defined, and defined for different purposes’ (Rustad 2015: n.pag.). Narratives such as in Eric Heisserer’s *The Dionaea House* (2004) co-opt blogging platforms, taking the structure and shape of that platform as a character chronicles their paranormal experience as readers comment on updates before jumping to the next post or platform. Others, such as the anonymously written *The Interface Series* (2016), are constructed *through* the structure and shape of popular message boards such as Reddit, with the text being comprised of sporadic comments across a networked social media space. Reddit in particular allows multiple ways for creepypasta narratives to take its shape, with whole communities (known as subreddits) dedicated to tales of horror that preserve both the shape of the platform and the verisimilitude that comes with participating in person-to-person discourse on that platform, despite the potentially fantastical or paranormal content (the subreddit ‘NoSleep’ is one such example).

Situating creepypasta narratives within the conventions of fourth-generation digital fiction/social media fiction means that, while providing an evocative image, Chess and

Newsom's 'digital campfires' are a false characterization of these online spaces. Rather than being huddled round the glow of their networked monitors, inviting an atmosphere for telling creepy tales – and crucially presenting the image of an *invite-only* social space – the sites of creepypasta narrative exchanges are more often the equivalent of a 'digital plaza' or 'digital coffee shop', or a digital version of any other space for open and free person-to-person communication. While digital campfires may be where these texts are initially created, it is not where they stay. Movement outwards are essential for these texts to find readership, to vary and to be copied and pasted further. Much like oral or non-digital folklore, creepypasta narratives are most effective once they leave a site of exchange and development where encountering one is expected, and instead begin to appear in everyday conversation, anecdotes and alongside what is regarded as real.

Hauntology

As well as operating on principles that can be considered emblematic of post-postmodern cultural theories, the open digital spaces in which creepypasta narratives can also be considered as 'hauntological' spaces. Originally coined by Derrida in *Spectres de Marx* (*Spectres of Marx*) (1994), 'hauntology' – a deliberate pun on ontology – is used to describe a 'spectral' state of being, a distinct 'in-between' of time, history, and existence, as the figure of the spectre 'comes by *coming back* [...] it figures *both* a dead man who comes back and a ghost whose expected return repeats itself again and again' (1993: 10, original, emphasis).

Henriksen borrows from Derrida, describing hauntology as 'the ontology of the virtual' (2016: 61) and suggesting that it best explains the ontological state of networked, virtual sites of interpersonal interaction through its 'focus on the agency of the absent present' (2016: 99). Henriksen uses the ghosts and monsters of creepypasta to engage with Derrida's hauntology

in relation to a contemporary understanding of ethics, suggesting that the spectral figure of the ghost allows us to ‘think beyond the moment’ in response to ‘border-fences and (national identities) increasingly set in stone’ (2016: 21). Henriksen continues in the tradition of Derrida by using contemporary tele-technologies as ways in which to ‘engage with spectres and the spectral without necessarily asking that the ghost materialises or disperses’ (2016: 22). While, for Derrida, these technologies were cinema and telecommunication, Henriksen quite rightly recognizes that perhaps more than any other medium before it, networked digital space is most fertile for conjuring and ‘provid[ing] homes for some strange creatures indeed’ (2016: 22).

Thinking about digital spaces in terms of hauntology leads us back to post-postmodernisms as the ‘agency of the absent present’ (Henriksen 2016: 99) is precisely how Web2.0 platforms function. Henriksen positions the agency of the creatures of creepypasta and the effects of their ‘promises or curses’ (2016: 99) that exist without *being* as the focus of this consideration. Instead, I argue that since the social media platforms on which these monsters propagate function through ‘a level of sincerity in their users’ (Kirby 2009: 150) and these spaces convert every indication of a presence of a real user into digital text (2009: 129), both the creepypasta monsters of an ontological fiction (storyworld) and the assumed real user of an ontological fact (physical reality) are ontologically flattened to meet in a hauntological middle represented purely through digital textuality on a screen. As such, all users are an absent presence in digital spaces, and they have agency through the sincere assumption that the text/image/video represents the ‘thoughts, moods, and impulses’ (Kirby 2009: 129) of a real person. Networked digital spaces, then, make spectres of us all, only ‘conjured away [...] by making [us] materialise’ (Henriksen 2016: 16) when we physically meet and can verify that there is a real (and the same) person behind the text. The other option – to make our spectral selves ‘dissolve completely’ (Henriksen 2016: 17) – would go against the sincerity

needed for Web2.0 platforms to function as a mistrust of all text and whoever is behind it would cause the entire operation to collapse.

The only reason networked digital spaces function is due to an ‘informed naivety’ (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010: 5) towards the apparent reality that it presents to us. We assume that the text that we see represents the thoughts and actions of another real person behind a screen, but we can never be sure until we meet them. We simply trust it (with varying levels of guarded sincerity) to be true. This sincere reading can then be hijacked by the monsters of creepypasta who, through real users, spread through and across platforms through the same means of textual representation, seeming real and undermining and disturbing our sincere readings of these spaces.

This, however, is just one way in which the concept of hauntology relates to cultural postmodernisms. Mark Fisher situates hauntology as a theme and presence in contemporary cultural output as much as a mode of thought and ontology. Like Henriksen and Derrida, Fisher reads hauntology as ‘*the agency of the virtual*, with the spectre understood not as anything supernatural, but as that which acts without (physically) existing’ (2014: 18, original emphasis). Although Fisher, like Henriksen, recognizes the hauntological component of what he calls ‘digital communicative capitalism’ (2014: 16) that manifests through networked social media, he focuses on the temporal trajectories of the hauntological: that which is ‘*no longer or not yet*’ (Hägglund quoted in Fisher 2014: 18, original emphasis). He describes the former as ‘that which is (in actuality is) *no longer*, but which *remains* effective as a virtuality (the traumatic ‘compulsion to repeat’, a fatal pattern)’ (2014: 19, original emphasis), and the latter as ‘that which (in actuality) has *not yet* happened, but which is *already* effective in the virtual (an attractor, an anticipation shaping current behaviour)’ (2014: 19, original emphasis). The effective virtual in this temporal sense manifests most notably for Fisher in contemporary electronic music⁴

suffused with an overwhelming melancholy [...] an implicit acknowledgement that the hopes created by postwar electronica or by the euphoric dance music of the 1990s have evaporated – not only has the future not arrived, it no longer seems possible. Yet at the same time, the music constitutes a refusal to give up on the desire for the future. (2014: 21)

This state of melancholy created by ‘lost futures’ (2014: 1) and particularly a lost optimism is arguably a precursor to a metamodern sensibility. The metaxis that characterizes metamodernism’s ‘structure of feeling’ (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010: 2) is the oscillatory swing towards such lost hopes with the knowledge that, while spectral and unrealizable, those lost hopes will affect and influence our drive towards something new that might resemble them.

Such a focus on something unrecoverable and lost creating an effect in the present can be found in the creepypasta narrative *Candle Cove*. As an illustrative example of creepypasta as an intersecting site of digital fiction, post-postmodernisms and hauntology, it is compelling and vivid. As it spread, it played on both that which was and is no longer and that which is yet to be, and the hauntological nature of Web2.0 platforms and their post-postmodern underpinnings.

***Candle Cove* as case study**

Candle Cove is a short creepypasta narrative written by Kris Straub and published on his website Ichor Falls in 2009. Presented on a plain HTML webpage formatted to look like a

message board, it takes the form of a conversation between the denizens of the fictional 'NetNostalgia Forum'. The exchange takes place in the 'Television (local)' sub-board. In it, the participants of the conversation piece together their recollection of an obscure children's marionette and puppet TV show called *Candle Cove*⁵ about a young girl called Janice and her group of pirate friends, including Pirate Percy (who 'looked like he was built from parts of other dolls') and his cowardly living pirate ship called *Laughingstock* ('the bow of the ship was a wooden smiling face, with the lower jaw submerged'). As the forum members reminisce about the unsettling tone of the show – with 'calliope music constantly playing' – and the creepy villain *The Skin-Taker* ('what kind of a kids show were we watching?'), they come to the realization that they all shared the same disturbing memory of an episode:

Where the opening jingle ended, the show faded in from black, and all the characters were there, but the camera was just cutting to each of their faces, and they were just screaming, and the puppets and marionettes were flailing spastically, and just all screaming, screaming. The girl was just moaning and crying like she had been through hours of this. (Straub 2009: n.pag.)

The forumgoers then debate whether what they remembered was an aired episode, a dream or a manufactured memory before the final revelation that the programme that they all seemingly watched as children was instead half an hour of television static.

Already, the narrative plays on the 'silent negotiation' (Straub 2009: 141) between viewer and screen of the 'apparently real' (Straub 2009: 139) found in Kirby's digimodernism and the level of sincerity needed for Web2.0 platforms to truly function. This can be seen both in the interaction between the fictional denizens of the fictional forum, and our own viewing of

this fictional forum to give the story a degree of verisimilitude – as we are to take the page the story is originally hosted on as an excerpt of a ‘found’ conversation between real people. Hauntological themes are also present in the narrative, both in the spectral setting of a Web2.0 space and the monstrous spectral TV show itself that exists virtually between the static of the television and the minds of those who believe they watched it. The show also embodies hauntological agency in a temporal trajectory both by being that which was and is no longer, at least in the minds of the characters of the initial narrative until it is disrupted by a revelation that it never *was*, and that which is yet to come through narrative spread.

As creepypasta narratives are wont to do, the story was spread across the Internet, with people copying and pasting the link to the original story with its appearance as a fictional webforum. However, more interestingly, people began spreading the narrative by performing it on real forums and message boards. This then brings another factor of digimodernism into the narrative that is allowing ‘the reader or viewer to intervene textually, add visible content, and shape narrative development’ (Kirby 2009: 1) while also showing how creepypasta narratives exploit the hauntological nature of Web2.0 platforms.

Those who performed *Candle Cove* most likely copied and pasted their particular parts of the script bringing about a creative use of direct copying and pasting found in McHale’s ‘uncreative writing’ and ‘unrepentant plagiarism’ (2015: 179); the other members of these forums may have replied and intervened in the narrative, reshaping it for each ‘performance’ on each message board. In the cases of these performances, the spectral self of Web2.0 and the sincerity upon which it needs to function is hijacked by those who are allowing the fictional characters to speak through them ‘to the confusion and discomfort of the forum regulars who are now wondering if Candle Cove was a real children’s program’ (Straub quoted in Henriksen 2013: 415). Here, the ontological flattening of reality and storyworld into a hauntological space recalls McHale’s remarks on ‘the erosion of ontological stability

and the toppling of paramount reality' (2015: 181), although the breach is twofold: between physical reality and digital space, and within that space, the flattening of storyworld and projection of real people into the same text state.

As the narrative gained steady popularity, this erosion of ontological stability became a wholesale collapse as fans began to create and upload 'episodes' of *Candle Cove* to YouTube, remixing clips from old puppet-based children's programmes with calliope music and even constructing and filming their own footage to conjure into existence a fictional television show that, even in the narrative originally featuring it, never existed in any recordable sense. This existence, although now visual and more concrete than a conversation between spectral forumgoers, was still spectral through the hosting on YouTube; we are able to see the spectre, but not verify its ontological status as fact or fiction. This new visual state for the show does, however, bring a new level of horror to *Candle Cove* as users browsing YouTube might come across an 'episode' only to find out after some research that it *should not* exist in a visual or a recordable form, disrupting their engagement with virtual spaces as if they had seen a ghost.

This is a phenomenon seen time and time again with creepypasta narratives, most notably with *The Slender Man*, and has a metatextual element to it. *The Slender Man* incorporates ideas of the 'Tulpa'⁶ and that widespread belief in the initial *Slender* narrative somehow brought it to 'life' (Henriksen 2013: 415). Similarly, the belief in *Candle Cove* brought the show to life in the minds of the fictional forumgoers of Straub's initial narrative, which then spilled out, allowing visual manifestations of the malevolent TV show to appear in hauntological digital space, threatening to spill out into reality. This metatextuality, rather than being a knowing, self-aware nudge-and-wink to the audience as in "'smart" cinema' (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010: 7) and contemporary postmodern horror, is instead an integral part of the narrative, urging readers to propagate the story further around the Internet.

Similarly, *Candle Cove* and other creepypasta narratives require a tension and oscillation between sincerity and irony to function, a metamodern ‘informed naivety’. To engage with the narratives, we must either truly believe them, or, as suggested by Kirby, accept with sincerity the ‘apparent reality’ presented to us or suspend our disbelief entirely and enjoy them for the fiction that they are, engaging in a metamodern ‘wilful self-deceit to believe in [...] something in spite of itself’ (Vermeulen and van den Akker 2010: 7). At the same time, for them to spread, develop and change, they must be remixed, performed and shared by users willing to take advantage of that sincerity for narrative effect and allow the spectral narrative to speak through them.

Conjuring away the Cove

The spread and development of creepypasta narratives can end in two outcomes. Either they rise and fall in popularity on the Internet as spirits being periodically reawakened into restlessness as they are copied and pasted, remixed and spread until they are forgotten, or they are conjured into a fictional existence away from the hauntological state of the Internet through screen adaptations that bring the narrative – and crucially its status as a work of fiction – into reality. Such is the case of *Candle Cove*, as the narrative was adapted, remixed and expanded by Nick Antosca into a six-part series for the Syfy channel, premiering on 11 October 2016. With this series, the narrative may well have found a wider audience and *Candle Cove*, ironically, may have finally played on television screens across the world, but both the show and its narrative’s ability to haunt social media have dissipated. Instead, just as knowledge of someone’s existence outside of the Internet allows us to confidently interact with their spectral, textual projection when online, knowledge of *Candle Cove*’s non-existence – its fictionality – causes its textual digital presence to be known as a falsehood.

While it still inhabits the same spectral space of digital textuality as real people and their textual projections, it no longer upsets, challenges or forces us to confront our sincere readings of the apparent reality presented to us through Web2.0 and social media platforms. The same fate awaits the Slender Man, who is set to star in a Hollywood horror film in 2018 bearing his name, and will no doubt conjure away his ability to haunt the Internet and disrupt the post-postmodern sensibilities through which he functions as effectively as he does now.

This article has illustrated the effectiveness of considering creepypasta primarily as a form of digital fiction with an approach attuned to its traits as a piece of digital text in the networked Web2.0 spaces on which it is read and spread. In reading these digital spaces as reliant on various post-postmodern traits, and being hauntological spaces in which digital textual representation renders fact and fiction, person and character spectral concepts, I have shown that the ways in which creepypasta narratives exploit the traits of and move through these digital spaces make them a literature uniquely emblematic of this new, uncertain post-postmodern age.

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Notes

¹ Throughout this article, I will use *The Slender Man* (italicized) to refer to the collection of various texts that make up *The Slender Man* mythos. I will use the Slender Man (non-

italicized) when I am referring to the monster shared across those texts and featured throughout the mythos.

² Here, new media refers to the media in which the old media is represented, rather than the distinction between digital 'new media' and 'old' media.

³ As is the case in Kris Straub's 2009 narrative *Candle Cove*, which is a straightforward text story, although presented on a webpage designed and laid out to look like a message board (therefore a fake social media setting).

⁴ Fisher lists 'William Basinski, the Ghost Box label, The Caretaker, Burial, Mordant Music, Philip Jeck, amongst others' (2014: 20) as his hauntologically musical guides. To this list, I suggest Boards of Canada as a prototypical example, whose song 'Music is Math' from the album *Geogaddi* (2002) contains an electronically effected voice reciting 'the past inside the present' – a line that I feel is emblematic of Fisher's reading of twenty-first-century hauntological music.

⁵ As with *The Slender Man*/the Slender Man, italicized *Candle Cove* refers to the narrative, while *Candle Cove* refers to the TV show within the narrative.

⁶ A 'Tulpa', or thoughtform, is a sentient being that is meditated into existence. Initially a form of Buddhist meditation, the term found widespread use online (particularly 4chan) both as a source of horror in creepypasta narratives and as a legitimate practice. The term has since become a way to describe individual or collective belief in something functioning to perpetuate a mythology or further belief – or, in the case of *The Slender Man* address how belief earlier *fictional* narratives brought forth an *actual* Slender Man in later iterations.