

Digesting creepypasta: social media horror narratives as gothic fourth-generation digital fiction

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DIGESTING CREEPYPASTA: SOCIAL MEDIA HORROR NARRATIVES AS GOTHIC FOURTH-GENERATION DIGITAL FICTION

JOE ONDRAK

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Sheffield Hallam
University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

October 2022

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Abstract

This thesis examines, recontextualises, and provides a new methodology for analysing a collection of Internet phenomena known as ‘Creepypasta’. Critically engaging with its form and participation in the Gothic and horror literary traditions, I argue that creepypasta should be considered as an emergent genre that manifests through the form of digital fiction and derives a renewed horror and Gothic affect through that form.

Existing as unnerving tales written for and spread across social media and Web2.0 websites, creepypasta is an acknowledged, but under-studied genre of fiction. The majority of scholarly attention has analysed creepypasta through the lens of folklore studies which, while aware of the affordances of its digital form, considers creepypasta as folklore first rather than being attentive to media specificity or situating its form and unnerving affective qualities at the centre of its definition. I attest that creepypasta is emblematic of fourth-generation digital fiction and a continuation of horror and Gothic literary traits. In particular, I forward that creepypasta leverages its form to reinvent and renew ways of engaging with the Gothic traits of threats and ontological ambiguity. This, I argue, is primarily achieved through what I define as “ontological flattening”, whereby real users and their responses, and the fictional story they are reading and responding to exist in the same textual space without borders, implied hierarchy, or explicit indicators of fictionality in the story text. Throughout my analyses of *Candle Cove* (2009), *The Slender Man* (2009), and *The Interface Series* (2016), I demonstrate how ontological flattening is central to how creepypasta renews Gothic characteristics. In chapter 4, I forward a development on Isabelle Klaiber’s “double plot model” of collaborative interactive fiction to take into account collaboration in ontologically flattened spaces. In chapter 5, I also introduce the concept of the techno-Weird as a new form of contemporary Gothic fiction that uses ontologically flattened spaces as a way to emphasise characteristics of weird fiction. I conclude by presenting my model of the relationship between readers, creepypasta, and ontologically flattened spaces, and indicating where future applications may lie.

“On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.”

Peter Steiner

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1. Introduction: A Recipe for Creepypasta

This thesis examines, recontextualises, and provides a new methodology for analysing a collection of Internet phenomena known as ‘Creepypasta’. Referred to by Thomas M. Stuart as “the playful idiom for copy-and-paste literature with a horror bent” (2018, p. 154), creepypasta is a type of horror fiction that leverages the qualities of digital text, partially shown through Stuart’s emphasis on it being “copy-and-paste literature”. In my thesis, I argue that creepypasta requires a more attuned definition than simple descriptions forwarded by Stuart and others I examine in this chapter. I also demonstrate that creepypasta is an emergent genre that engages with the Gothic literary tradition, manifests explicitly through the form of digital fiction, and derives its horror and Gothic affect through this digital form. As I demonstrate in chapters 3, 4, and 5, this specific definition provides a robust framework for the repeatable analysis of creepypasta narratives, which then illuminates further new concepts found in the genre that can be applied elsewhere.

My research aims and contributions to knowledge in this thesis are to forward a robust and clear definition of creepypasta that can be used for future studies and cast light on this genre as a site of novel narrative techniques worthy of further research, and to situate creepypasta as a genre that is best considered as part of the horror and Gothic literary tradition and one that is form-specific to fourth-generation digital fiction. In doing so, I aim to fill the research gap around creepypasta’s limited scholarly attention while also proposing a new methodology for continued study of narratives not chosen in this research.

In this chapter, I will introduce creepypasta and critically engage and evaluate current approaches to the term beyond Stuart's epithet above. I will then use these current approaches to establish my position relative to gaps in scholarship, drawing on research in digital fiction, Gothic and horror studies, and folk studies and demonstrating how an appropriate conceptualisation and analysis of creepypasta requires an awareness of the interconnectedness of these fields in creepypasta.

In section 1.1, I examine current approaches to creepypasta, highlighting similarities between these approaches and any shortcomings present in current scholarship. From here, I will set out my definition of creepypasta as an emergent genre of Gothic and horror fiction that leverages its form as digital fiction to enhance the affective qualities of its horror and Gothic traits. In section 1.2, I approach scholarship in the fields of electronic literature and digital fiction to demonstrate why creepypasta can be regarded as an example of digital fiction before developing these connections further to argue that creepypasta should specifically be considered a form of fourth-generation digital fiction that uses networked computers and social media platforms as storytelling venues. Finally, in section 1.3, I examine approaches to networked textual spread and scholarship around the terms viral and meme as ways in which content is shared across the Internet.

1.1 – Current Approaches to Creepypasta

Despite a dearth of existing material that directly addresses creepypasta, a starting point exists in Chess and Newsom's book length study of *The Slender Man*, a particularly well-known example of a creepypasta narrative, and the ongoing work of Line Henriksen. Both discuss creepypasta explicitly and set out their own definitions of the

term that move beyond Stuart's short definition, while recognising the same core elements of digital text – specifically emphasised through an awareness of copy-and-paste mechanics and digital textual spread – and the necessity for this fiction to resemble horror in some way.

Chess and Newsom trace creepypasta's name as an etymological derivative of the neologism "copypasta," that is "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" (Chess and Newsom, 2015, p. 102). Here, 'copypasta' is a mutation of the act of copying and pasting that shifts from a verb to a noun to describe texts indicative of the practice. This practice suggests an emphasis on the affordances of digital textuality, taking advantage of the ease at which text can be copied and pasted into different settings or across platforms, as well as the mutability, speed, and ease at which such text can be edited and remixed. This definition of copypasta also highlights a lack of agency in the original authors of these anecdotes and fiction, as their texts are freely cut from any original source with no effort to cite or indicate where they come from in subsequent 'pastes.'

Chess and Newsom trace the coinage of creepypasta back to the '/x/' (paranormal) message board on 4chan.org, where the "community often posted and reposted horror fiction, characterizing it as 'creepypasta'" (2015, p. 102). This characterisation illustrates how the content has undergone a genre-specific shift, with text with "a horror bent" (Stuart, 2018, p. 154) earning the fictions the moniker of creepypasta as opposed to copypasta's conventionally anecdotal content. The posting and reposting (or, more appropriately for the name, copying and pasting) of text with no privileging of named authorship or citation is retained as part of its digital textuality, circulating freely on the Internet.

Chess and Newsom then, however, attribute the term to the archiving site ‘creepypasta.wiki’, which was set up due to the impermanence of posts on 4chan’s message board system (p 102). In doing so, they limit their designation of what is and isn’t creepypasta by what is or isn’t archived by the site’s community; they note that “fiction posted to the Creepypasta web site must go through wiki editorial review that checks against deliberate ‘quality standards’” (2015, p. 103). Therefore, they define creepypasta as a community that produces/remixes/archives horror fiction, rather than the fiction itself. This definition places the site’s moderators as gatekeepers to what can be considered a creepypasta narrative, undoing any emphasis on copy-and-paste spread across the open Internet that is found in the etymology of creepypasta.

Linking creepypasta to one site and its community also limits the ways in which creepypasta can take advantage of digital textuality’s multimodal capabilities as creepypasta.wiki is a Wiki style website and therefore restricted by the formatting and templates of the Wiki software. As such, limits are imposed on how a creepypasta narrative can look or feature additional multimodal content when compared to the wider Internet where creepypasta may spread freely. The primary forms of creepypasta submitted to the wiki that Chess and Newsom list are “anecdotes, ritual lists of instructions, or descriptions of ‘lost episodes’ of a popular television show that take on a newer, creepier tone” (2015, p. 102). While there is an interesting link between the subjects and forms of what the wiki designates as acceptable narratives, it is worth noting that despite the multimodal capabilities of digital textuality, these stories and the site that hosts them seem to be distinctly linked to a purely text-based mode of storytelling.

In isolating the term creepypasta to a two-page section of their book, and further restricting it by focussing solely on an archiving site as an indicator of what is or isn't creepypasta, Chess and Newsom's assessment of creepypasta is simply a side-note in their study of *The Slender Man* mythos. The Slender Man is a contemporary mythological monster born online from posts, reinterpretations, and remixes over social media, and featuring in numerous spread narratives that form an overarching mythos of the character. Unfortunately, Chess and Newsom do not expand the term creepypasta as a larger genre of digital horror fiction that could then include *The Slender Man* mythos, but instead conceptualise it as a small sub-category of ways in which *The Slender Man* narrative is told. This thesis seeks to rectify this inside-out approach to the relationship between *The Slender Man* and creepypasta by considering *The Slender Man* as a particularly successful example of creepypasta rather than creepypasta on creepypasta.wiki being one facet of *The Slender Man*.

Line Henriksen, like Chess and Newsom, acknowledges the roots of the term creepypasta by describing it as a mutation of 'copypasta.' She then goes on to describe copypasta as "a short text, sometimes accompanied by an image or a video that is intended to be copied, pasted and circulated online" (2016, p. 22). Here, Henriksen's definition of 'copypasta' immediately widens the scope for potential variability in forms of creepypasta narratives by acknowledging the computer's capacity for multimodal storytelling, and noting that text may be used alongside image or video to create a story. In doing so, she moves towards horror/paranormal narratives that span across different web sites and have the potential to include still and moving images to enhance them.

Like Chess and Newsom, Henriksen observes that creepypasta's movement beyond cospypasta comes from "often intending to unnerve the reader and/or viewer, and typically engaging with the horror genre or the paranormal" (2016, p. 23). This trait is indicative of the genre-specific shift in the content that is circulated – that while cospypasta is any text that is "copied, pasted and circulated online," creepypasta must contain content that earns the 'creepy' modifier. Henriksen expands further on the potential scope of variation between creepypasta narratives inherent in the chosen platform of initial posting and spread, and the intended initial audience (native to those platforms) by stating that:

Some creepypastas are the product of message boards such as SomethingAwful and 4chan /x/. These are often created and spread by multiple authors, making it difficult to establish their origins as well as credit who came up with the original idea. Other creepypastas have been written and posted by named authors, often taking the shape of a more traditional short story. Such creepypastas are usually collected and published on websites such as www.creepypastaindex.com and www.creepypasta.com.

(Henriksen, 2013, p. 408)

Here, Henriksen highlights the variability of authorship for creepypasta. She distinguishes between those stories with known authors, and those which are "created and spread by multiple authors" which obfuscates any single originator. In doing so, she also begins to highlight a crucial variable in creepypasta's central 'copy-and-paste' mechanic; that is, those creepypastas in which the text itself is copied and pasted as new posts on a different platform to share and spread the story, and those where a url or hyperlink to a site that hosts the story is copied and pasted. Henriksen lists evidence for this variability between anonymous and named authors, as well as text-based spreading and link-based spreading, by referencing a number of popular narratives, observing that "whereas [creepypasta narratives] The Curious Case of Smile.jpg and The Rake are

created by anonymous authors, most creepypasta tend to take the shape of traditional short stories, which are published under the usernames of the authors” (Henriksen, 2013, p. 410). This variability in copying and pasting either text or a link is important, as the fact that static web-page URLs (rather than text itself) are considered creepypasta means that links to video and image hosting sites, such as YouTube or Imgur, can be considered part of or complete creepypasta narratives. Henriksen’s definition, then, expands the forms creepypasta can take from various text-based narratives as observed by Chess and Newsom when examining popular narratives archived on creepypasta.wiki to truly multimodal narratives that may be YouTube videos accompanied by descriptions, static webpages hosting sound clips and texts, or other multimodal forms that are not easily or quickly copied and pasted as whole text.

Therefore, while the two main academic studies on creepypasta differ on the scope of what creepypasta can be, both acknowledge and foreground that at its heart, creepypasta must retain a copy-and-paste mechanic – an ability to be spread across multiple platforms by a variety of users while also engaging with the horror or paranormal genre. Both studies also refer to the variability in creepypasta – both in how stories originate from named or anonymous sources, or through collaborative storytelling that is mixed and remixed without explicit links or citation. These characteristics of copy-and-paste, and remixability are intrinsically linked to creepypasta’s use of digital textuality, and the mutability that comes with digital textuality – each iteration of a narrative being freely editable by a user at the stage between pasting and posting, allowing for subtle or dramatic changes as they see fit.

As shown through Chess and Newsom’s study, *The Slender Man* is a narrative that has managed to gain a foothold in the wider cultural imagination as something of a

‘breakout’ creepypasta. Because of this, *The Slender Man* has enjoyed more academic attention than creepypasta as a wider concept. However, since this thesis seeks to treat *The Slender Man* as an example of creepypasta (albeit a particularly successful one), such perspectives on that narrative also prove useful in providing insights to examine creepypasta more widely.

In the *Journal of American Folklore*, Andrew Peck suggests that *The Slender Man* is representative of an emergent “digital legend cycle that combines the generic conventions and emergent qualities of oral and visual performance with the collaborative potential of networked communication” (2015, p. 334). The traits and conventions noted by Peck echo those observed by Chess and Newsom, to the point where both use the term “crowd sourced” (Peck, 2015, p. 337; Chess and Newsom, 2014; p. 62) to describe how the monster came to be. However, while Chess and Newsom situate *The Slender Man* as a “unique collective creation” (2014, p. 9), Peck sees the narrative as part of a new series of digitally mediated folk narratives he refers to as “digital legends” (2015, p. 335).

The term creepypasta does not appear anywhere within Peck’s work. However, while I contend that *The Slender Man* is primarily an example of creepypasta, as I will show below, the definition Peck sets out for digital legends, as well as their apparent emergence and cycle, gives a valuable insight into *The Slender Man* as a specific narrative, as well as concepts applicable to creepypasta as an emergent genre, with the two terms being close to interchangeable.

Peck sets out his definition for the term digital legend as one that draws upon contemporary socially focused perspectives on folkloric discourse, with each iteration

of a legend, or creepypasta narrative, being regarded as an individual performance. In a clarification of his term, Peck states:

When I refer to Slender Man legend performance, I am referring to the ways in which individuals, acting as part of a networked group, use the character as a resource for creative expression and discourse that ‘*challenges accepted definitions of the real world and leaves itself suspended, relying for closure on each individual’s response*’ (Ellis 2001a: 60; emphasis in original).

(Peck, 2015, p. 335)

Peck suggests that the character of the Slender Man is a shared resource for multiple networked performers to use in individual performances. He thus makes a case for a folkloric perspective on *The Slender Man* and other works of creepypasta. Crucially, Peck draws upon the work of folklore scholar Bill Ellis on legend telling, establishing ambiguity as a feature of creepypasta, challenging fact/fiction boundaries by being left “suspended” in a state between the two at the point of telling, only being restored to one side of this border by the closure of “each individual’s ‘response’” (Ellis, 2001, p. 60 qtd Peck, 2015, p. 335). Peck does not develop this point further or connect how creepypasta’s form or participation in horror or Gothic genres impacts this quality. However, the ontological ambiguity of creepypasta is of critical importance to the methodology that I develop in this thesis.

In setting out his methodology for an analysis of *The Slender Man*, Peck casts a light on its comparative academic popularity to other creepypasta narratives, stating that “contemporary legends, jokes, and chain e-mails tend to have nebulous origins [...] [W]hat the case of the Slender Man offers, then, is the opportunity to observe this process of legend creation, negotiation, and circulation from its inception” (2015, p. 334). Therefore, unlike many creepypasta narratives which emphasise and encourage the obfuscation of an original post, and as such join contemporary legends, jokes, and

chain e-mails in having “nebulous origins”, *The Slender Man* enables scholars to trace the evolution of a narrative from an initial starting point, offering up more opportunities and perspectives for analysis by being able to identify key points from the narrative’s introductory post.

Focussing on the digital representation of oral folk storytelling methods, Peck draws on the work of Jay Bolter and David Grusin and their concept of remediation, described simply as “the representation of one medium within another” (1996, p. 339). Bolter sets out a “spectrum” of remediation based on the “degree of perceived competition [...] between the new media and the old[1]” (2000, p. 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 (p. 65) and absorptive remediation (p. 67). Bolter describes transparent remediation as when “an older medium is highlighted and re-represented [...] without apparent irony or critique” (p. 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” (p. 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” (p. 66). In opposition to this is absorptive remediation. This form of remediation, much like the first, seeks to represent a seamless or transparent experience. However, unlike transparent remediation which attempts to represent the old medium while minimising 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” (p. 67). In this sense, the new medium retains something of the old.

It is through this lens of absorptive remediation that Peck frames his analysis as “a study of how digital communication remediates traditional methods of everyday face-to-face performance” (334), thus joining other folkloric perspectives (e.g: Boyer 2013; Chess and Newsom, 2015) that place an emphasis on digital communication’s remediation of the qualities of face-to-face communication and oral storytelling.

However, Peck does suggest four ways in which “digital communication departs from face-to-face performance” (2015, p. 335). First, he notes an asynchronous occurrence of performance “in the post-respond style” (p. 335) rather than as a fluid and immediate dialogue, allowing narratives and conversations around them to take place over a potentially limitless span of time. Peck observes a further advantage to this in that while “an oral performance disappears into ephemera once delivered, nearly all iterations of the Slender Man legend remain catalogued in their original contexts across the network” (p. 336), thus highlighting the comparative permanence and record created through online communication when compared to oral performance. Second, is the “encouraging imitation and personalization while also allowing perfect replication” (p. 334). Here, in recognising that these legends are spread, and crucially spread in part via a copy-and-paste method, it becomes clear that Peck is talking about the same creepypasta narratives as Chess and Newsom, and Henriksen. Peck recognises and draws attention to variance in how these stories are spread – either replicated perfectly via copy-and-paste, or iterated upon, imitated, and subtly or radically changed by the user at the point between pasting into a platform’s text box and posting. Third, Peck notes the combination of “elements of oral, written, and visual communication” (p.

334), which is a recognition of the multimodal capacity inherent in digital communication. Fourth, he remarks upon the generation of “shared expectations of performance” (p. 337) among a non-physically present group who may be aware of or ‘in on’ the legend as it is developed and told. This can, as Peck demonstrates through his study, be the group interaction limited to the single message board thread that led to the creation of *The Slender Man* and the evolution of expectation as the thread progresses. However, as I will demonstrate through chapters 3, 4, and 5 of this thesis, a group’s shared expectations of individual ‘performances’ on network locations such as social media platforms can be co-opted and subverted by those creating or spreading creepypasta narratives.

In setting out the ways in which digital communication departs from face-to-face and traditional oral communication, Peck highlights certain properties of digital textuality of particular importance to an analysis of creepypasta, even if this connection is not made explicitly in his assessment. For this reason, many of Peck’s insights into *The Slender Man* from his folkloric perspective are valuable in systematising knowledge about creepypasta and can easily be applied to other narratives in the genre.

A notable absence in all of the above analyses is an extrapolation of the specific affordances of digital communication and a discussion of the place creepypasta – or digital legend – holds within digital fiction more broadly. This next section seeks to rectify how digital fiction as a framework for analysis has been overlooked by scholars examining creepypasta through a discussion of creepypasta in relation to digital fiction.

1.2 – Creepypasta, Digital Fiction, and Electronic Literature.

As I show in section 1.1, most current approaches to creepypasta privilege a folkloric analysis of the spread and variance of creepypasta, with a large focus on *The Slender Man* and a regard for the textual intricacies at play as no more than “remediated folklore”. This approach towards spaces of digital communication, however, significantly underplays the impact these platforms and spaces have on shaping a narrative and a reader’s interaction with it.

Moreover, the broad gesturing to digital communication in existing scholarship fails to cast nuance on the variety of websites, platforms, and manifestations of that digital communication. Key here are concepts of Web2.0 and social media. Web2.0 refers to the development of websites and their characteristics broadly after the “bursting of the dot-com bubble in the fall of 2001” (Tim O’Reilly, 2005, n.p). This event prompted a rethinking of how the internet as a commercial and social entity could exist. According to Tim O’Reilly, who popularised the term, “Web2.0 doesn’t have a hard boundary, but rather a gravitational core” (p. 1). This core is a set of organising principles that emphasise user participation and interactivity, finding an exemplar in blogging as “one of the most highly touted features of the Web2.0 era” (p. 1). In addition, and key to the behavioural dynamics of creepypasta are the traits of “the right to remix” and “emergent: user behavior not predetermined” (p. 1). Such traits reinscribe the principles of user generated content and participation and differentiates Web2.0 from earlier forms of the Internet that were characterised by static, read-only websites and pages; repositories for knowledge rather than interaction. As explained by Techopedia, “[t]here were exceptions for early bulletin boards and technologies like IRCq chat rooms, but on the mainstream internet itself, interactivity was not built-in” (n.p).

From these Web2.0 principles, social media platforms emerged as a homogenised facilitation of digital interpersonal interaction. In their introduction to the “Governance of Social Media” issue of *Telecommunications Policy*, Jonathan Obar and Steve Wildman identify commonalities among various social media platforms and define social media broadly as thus:

- 1) Social media services are (currently) Web2.0 Internet-based applications,
- 2) User-generated content is the lifeblood of social media,
- 3) Individuals and groups create user-specific profiles for a site or app designed and maintained by a social media service,
- 4) Social media services facilitate the development of social networks online by connecting a profile with those of other individuals or groups.

(Obar and Wildman, 2015, p. 2)

Social media stands in contrast to forums and message boards by being created and maintained by the service, which is often a large company such as Facebook, YouTube, or Twitter solely for the development of social networks and hosting user generated content. Forums and message boards, on the other hand, emerged as a refinement of the bulletin boards of the early Internet and are often created around an existing community or interest rather than facilitating the development of multiple communities on a single platform.

In an attempt to reframe these various spaces of user interaction and user generated content, Chess and Newsom, and Peck, characterise the development of *The Slender Man* narrative as a type 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, p. 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 platforms as “digital campfires” (p. 78), characterised as

“online arena[s] where users gather for the specific purpose of story swapping” (p. 78). This may very easily describe the entire operation of social media platforms, though 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 suggests 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 are analysed and discussed by Peck.

The co-opting of existing social media platforms also allows 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.), as well as taking advantage of the different ways in which users operate, read, and interact with content on each platform. The use of these digital spaces, then, suggests the need for digital-specific approaches to creepypasta, as 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; 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, as well as directly enhancing the verisimilitude of the narratives written on it.

Despite observations that creepypasta narratives are a product of a networked Internet community – an environment that is undeniably digital – there is an absence of scholarship connecting creepypasta to the study of fiction in the digital medium. This seems like a notable omission when, if mapped against the definition for electronic literature, it is clear that creepypasta can call this form of literature home. Scott Rettberg defines electronic literature as “new forms and genres of writing that explore the specific capabilities of the computer and network – literature that would not be possible without the contemporary digital context” (2019, p. 2). The emphasis on creepypasta’s defining characteristic copy-and-paste spread across the Internet and between communities and websites explored in section 1.1 shows that creepypasta clearly “explore[s] the specific capabilities of the computer and network” (p. 2) as the affordances present in networked digital text are inherent to that medium and “could not easily be produced or consumed in print-literary contexts” (p. 5).

Rettberg acknowledges the broadness of the term electronic literature, which encompasses all forms and genres of “born digital” (Hayles, 2008, p. 3) writing including poetry, suggesting that its “generality” (p. 4) is a potential reason for the term’s longevity. Rettberg also states that “[o]thers prefer that ‘digital literature’ should refer to roughly the same body of work” (p. 3) but does not offer much in the way of analytical reasons why this should not be the case.

A more specific term attuned to creepypasta can be found in digital fiction, which, when explored alongside Rettberg’s electronic literature, provides the crucial medium-specific framework for understanding creepypasta missing in previous scholarship. Digital fiction is defined by the Digital Fiction International Network (DFIN) 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, n.p).

As well as foregrounding *fiction* as the topic of analysis rather than *literature*, Bell et al. argue that “[r]eading texts in digital environments still involves critical practices that have been developed in print scholarship: it still involves analyzing linguistic, structural, semiotic, intertextual and semantic elements. However, it also involves digital literacy” (n.p). Here, Bell et al. emphasise how the “verbal, discursive and/or conceptual complexity” of a work of digital fiction can be understood through established frameworks and methodologies for the analysis of fiction, but an attenuation to the digital medium is essential for these analyses to function. Key here is an understanding of the position of the reader in relation to a digital text which results in a different kind of relationship with the text. Bell et al. state that:

We sit in front of a computer, bodily integrated with the machine, and at the same time ontologically separated from the world that it describes. We are dually embodied – embodied proper, as “actual” users of hardware and software, and re-embodied through our (fictional) representations as implied readers in the virtual domain. In experiencing digital fiction, we become part of a cybernetic feedback loop, in which we feed and are fed back perpetually.

(Bell et al. 2010, n.p)

As such, verbal, discursive and/or conceptual complexities are received and processed by the reader in a different way due to the way in which they engage with the hardware and software required to access the text – which, in turn, become part of the text and subsequent analysis. Indeed, they argue that “digital fiction isn’t just ‘read’, or ‘watched’, or ‘played’ – it is ‘experienced’, and these experiences have to be seen as all-encompassing phenomenological processes” (n.p). Digital fiction, then, can only be

read holistically – that is, experienced through the totality of digital and physical systems and processes that are activated to present that text to a reader, and this totality of systems must also factor into the analysis of such texts.

As with Rettberg's definition of electronic literature, a key element of Bell et al.'s definition of digital fiction is the inseparable relationship between digital fiction and the medium in which it is written and read. Bell et al. move further from dependency on the medium to an explicit recognition of a symbiotic relationship where, through the affordances of the medium, a work of digital fiction's "structure, form, and meaning are [...] in dialogue with" its digital context (Bell et al, 2014, p. 4). Indeed, creepypasta's very name is in dialogue with its digital context, derived from a core mechanic to spread out and be put in front of wider audiences that, as I will show in my case studies analysing *Candle Cove* (2009), *The Slender Man* (2009), and *The Interface Series* (2016) in chapters 3, 4, and 5, also affects the structure, form, and meaning of narratives.

Though Rettberg and Bell et al. focus specifically on born digital writing, they do so with an emphasis on different traits, factors, and genres within that broad category. As such, while there are areas of overlap, and that creepypasta may be categorised and analysed either as electronic literature or digital fiction, the two terms are not interchangeable as a homogenised group. Both Rettberg and Bell et al. discuss the importance of networked platforms and the Internet as part of the text, but again, they place the emphasis of their analysis on different factors.

The reliance on distributed and networked platforms on the Internet places creepypasta within what Rettberg describes as a specific genre of electronic literature: network writing. Rettberg defines network writing as:

[E]lectronic literature created for and published on the Internet. It may require readers to visit multiple sites to experience the narrative, it may interrogate the nature and materiality of the network itself, it may use the Internet's potential for collaboration, or use the network as a site for performance.

(Rettberg, 2019, p. 152)

Much like the definition of electronic literature discussed above, Rettberg's description of network writing takes a broad stance, with many possibilities for variation in how such writing takes shape and the stance it takes. However, the facets of collaboration or performance can be applied to the genre of creepypasta as a whole. Collaboration online is necessary for both viral spread (if one considers the act of copying and pasting a text exactly to a new platform a collaborative act) and memetic spread (where the spreader embellishes, alters, or otherwise puts their own variation on the previous iteration). Rettberg's definition of the network as a "site of performance" recall the work of Peck referenced in section 1.1, as we can read both the initial writing and publication of a creepypasta narrative onto a platform as well as subsequent memetic and viral *re*-tellings as performances of that narrative analogous to orally retelling a story.

In their analysis of networked platforms and the Internet as part of a way to experience digital fiction, Bell et al. forward that texts that take advantage of the Internet and social media platforms belong to a "fourth-generation" (p. 10) of Digital Fiction. Here, "the [social media] platform is a significant part of the aesthetic expression and the meaning potential" (Bell et al. 2014, p. 10). Hans 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[s] 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.

(Rustad, 2015, n.p)

Although creepypasta does not necessarily need to be *created* on a social media platform, it is essential for creepypasta narratives to be spread further outward through copying and pasting. As I demonstrate in my analysis of *Candle Cove* in chapter 3, texts can be spread ‘into’ the genre of creepypasta by being pasted and spread across social media platforms, at which point, the social media aspect of the text becomes a key component in the reading environment and felt readership, as well as shaping the way in which the text is experienced. 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 any one platform, but multiple social media sites. The spreading and expansion of narratives across social media platforms 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.p).

The way in which creepypasta embodies the traits fourth-generation digital fiction through taking the structure and shape of different platforms can be seen in narratives where the text is copied from one platform and pasted into the text box of another to become a post taking its structure and shape much like the aforementioned *Candle Cove*, as well as in narratives where the platform informs the structure and shape of the narrative to start with. 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), which I analyse in chapter 5, are constructed *through* the structure and shape of popular message boards like 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 apparent authenticity 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 network writing and fourth-generation digital fiction means that, while providing an evocative image, Chess and Newsom’s “digital campfires” (p. 77) are an inaccurate characterisation 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 intimate and *invite-only* social space – the site of creepypasta narrative exchanges are a social setting unique to social media – where people who might not know each other talk freely in open and porous communities, and where new voices are expected to join conversations. While digital campfires may be where some of these texts are initially created, it isn’t where they stay. Movement outwards is essential for these texts to find readership, to vary, and to be copied and pasted further.

As I discuss in chapter 2, it is precisely this movement outwards that enhances the creepiness of creepypasta narratives. Creepypasta narratives achieve a greater creepiness because they leave sites of narrative exchange and development where encountering such a story is expected, and instead begin to appear in everyday conversation, anecdotes, and alongside what is regarded as real – taking the “structure

and shape” (Rustad, n.p) of platforms designed for the purpose of interpersonal communication rather than hosting fiction.

1.3 – Networked Textual Spread: Virals and Memetics.

As shown above, the act of copying and pasting is an inherent part of creepypasta – reflected in its name. Copying and pasting, in the literal sense of the command in a computer – enacted either through a keyboard shortcut or mouse clicks – and more generally as the movement of text from one webpage to a text box on another platform, is the predominant way in which creepypasta narratives are spread. However, spread may also include the download and re-uploading of video, audio, or photograph. In their study of *The Slender Man*, Chess and Newsom move further into theories of digital culture as well as textuality, remarking that the narrative (and therefore creepypasta more widely) is linked “to qualities and affordances endemic to digital culture... [such as] meme culture and the value of *spreadable media*, both of which draw on immediacy and variability inherent in digital media” (Chess and Newsom, 2015, p. 18 - emphasis mine). Clearly then, an understanding of the meme – and its sister-term viral – is necessary to understand the mechanics of network spread and how this then relates to creepypasta.

The entanglement between memetic and viral media is complex, as are the conflicting perspectives on how to examine media that is spread across networks. In this section, I will examine scholarship into these terms, and explore how that can be applied to creepypasta and serve as an integral point to analyse creepypasta narratives.

While it is now a term firmly established within digital culture, the term “meme” was originally coined by Richard Dawkins to describe “a unit of cultural transmission, a unit of imitation” (1976, p. 192), with examples being “tunes, ideas, catch-phrases... that propagate themselves... by leaping from brain to brain” (p. 192). The definition of a meme being a “unit of imitation” leaves a remarkably open-ended approach to what can and cannot be called a meme, especially when one of Dawkins’ given examples is as nebulous as “ideas”.

Instead, in her book *Memes in Digital Culture*, Limor Shifman suggests a new approach specific to what she defines as “Internet memes” (p. 40), attuned to the spread and propagation of content across the Internet. Shifman sets out a clear definition for what should be understood as an Internet meme (over other applications of the term) as:

(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance¹, which (b) were created with an awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users.

(2014, p. 41)

Crucially, she makes the claim that memes are not “single entities that propagate well, but [...] *groups of content units* with common characteristics” (p. 39 - emphasis in original), differentiating Internet memes from viral content in that while the latter usually consists of “*a single cultural unit* (such as a video, photo, or joke) that propagates in many copies, an Internet meme *is always a collection of texts*” (p. 56 - emphasis in original). This collection of texts is made up of derivatives that remix, appropriate or otherwise change a “founding text” (p. 58), thus all becoming part of the meme.

¹ Shifman characterises stance as “the ways in which addressers position themselves to the text, its linguistic codes, the addressees, and other potential speakers” (40).

A variation on this model that Shifman describes is the “egalitarian meme” (p. 58) in which many versions come into existence and evolve without a clear founding text, that are “based on a certain formula or genre” (p. 58). By this, Shifman emphasises that while both viral media and memes spread through online channels, viral media is only ever replicated, while memes are modified, remixed, and altered to become a *collection* based on a theme. Such conceptualisations of the Internet meme recall both Chess and Newsom, and Peck, in their approach to *The Slender Man* and digital legends. They observe the “variability inherent in digital media” (Chess and Newsom, p. 18) as well as users’ choice to create “legend variants” (Peck, p. 336) despite the “near-perfect copy fidelity made possible by digital communication” (p. 336). With this in mind, Shifman’s observation that egalitarian memes are a collection of texts “based on a certain formula or genre” might suggest that creepypasta is a genre composed of memes.

As I will show throughout my thesis, Shifman’s definition of a meme is useful in its description of how creepypasta circulates at the level of an individual narrative, but not necessarily as a way to describe creepypasta entirely. Shifman’s definition is applicable in a broad sense, as creepypasta is a term to describe “a group of digital items sharing common characteristics” (Shifman, 2014, p. 41) that were “created with an awareness of each other” (p. 41) (or at least of creepypasta existing on the Internet), and they are all of course “circulated via the Internet” (p. 41). However, describing creepypasta overall as a meme produces a complex and unwieldy framework; a meme (creepypasta as a concept) being made of memes (creepypasta narratives) which, in turn, downplays the additional genre specific traits and formal characteristics of creepypasta as digital fiction. Instead, considering the spread of individual narratives through the lens of their memetic traits is more useful.

Another significant term to be taken into consideration when examining the spread of digital content is ‘viral’ media. Described by Shifman as “the closest neighbour of the meme concept in popular and academic discourse” (p. 55), virality and viral media differ in a number of key ways from that which can be considered a meme – namely that rather than a meme’s “collection of texts” (p. 58), a piece of viral content is a “single cultural unit (formulated in words, images, or video) that is spread by multiple agents” (p. 59). Shifman suggests that “we think of the viral and the memetic as two ends of a dynamic spectrum” (p. 58), and that a viral media text may become memetic over time simply through people imitating and remixing the viral media text that then becomes the founding unit of a meme (p. 58).

Like Internet meme, viral appears to be a useful term for potentially describing the movement of single instances of creepypasta narratives through social media, such as the copy-and-paste text stories of 4chan’s /x/ messageboard, or the copying and pasting of the URL hosting a specific narrative. However, the term viral has been broadly criticised by Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green for being “at once too encompassing and too limiting” (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 20), in that it “overestimates the power of media companies and underestimates the agency of audiences” (p. 21) in the spread of media texts online. Conversely, they suggest the easily understood designator of “spreadable media” and the concept of “spreadability” (p. 4) to define “the continuous process of repurposing and recirculation” (p. 27) of media online. This term flattens meme and viral into a single concept of spread, encompassing the former through “repurposing” and the latter in “recirculation”. This is an effort, they argue, to move away from “a theory of media that makes media text sound [...] like a smallpox infected blanket” (p. 16). and instead, they highlight the

technical resources that make it easier to circulate some kinds of content than others, the economic structures that support or restrict circulation, the attributes of a media text that might appeal to a community's motivation for sharing media, and the social networks that link people through the exchange of meaningful bytes.

(Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 16).

Jenkins et al.'s work seeks to move away from the Internet-centric terms of 'viral' and 'meme' towards Jenkins' own theories of "Convergence Culture" (2006), which situates 'old' and 'new' media as part of a media ecology in which the two converge and mutually shape applications and developments (for example, the device we use to make 'old media' phone calls can now connect to the Internet and social media platforms). The analyses in *Spreadable Media* gesture towards this ecology, finding parallels between the online creation of fan content for others in fan communities with older community values of "reciprocity, collectivity, and fairness" (2013, p. 71) – and the tensions that can then emerge through corporate exploitation of content created by fans of media franchises and the *value* of content spread online.

However, although "spreadable media" and the applications put forward by Jenkins et al. work to highlight social media's role in a move towards more readily 'spreadable' content across the media ecology, their model is not suitable in conceptualising the nature of online spread in relation to creepypasta. Though Jenkins et al.'s analysis includes online content, it is situated within a wider media ecology whereby film, music, and TV are spread through "niche and subcultural communities" (p. 230) that communicate mostly online – thus their emphasis in spreadable media is on content in relation to "convergence culture" and a mutual shaping between old and new media.

As established earlier in this chapter, I argue that creepypasta should be considered as a born digital form of fiction, and thus there is not the reciprocity of influence between the way it spreads and older forms of media. Moreover, although creepypasta as a genre

does have technological ties to old media – as I will show in the next chapter – this link manifests as the reinterpretation of Gothic elements and horror affect as stories are told through the latest communication medium from print to wireless broadcasting to cinema.

Thus, while Jenkins et al. model functions well for the analysis of media spread in the wider context of a media ecology tied to fandom, capital and franchises, I argue that Shifman's original concepts of Internet memetics and virality is more suitable to analyse the way in which copy-and-paste spread functions for creepypasta. Shifman, in contrast to Jenkins et al., believes that both memetic and viral content involve a level of active engagement by the audience: "in the case of the viral, the communication may involve personalised meta-comments (for example, 'Don't try this at home'), whereas memetic content *invites modifications to the text itself*" (p. 60 - emphasis mine). As I will show in my analyses of *Candle Cove* and *The Slender Man*, such a differentiation between the two concepts, and the suggested spectrum of variability between them illustrates that Shifman's Viral/Memetic spectrum is a valuable way of analysing how individual creepypasta narratives are spread and engaged with across social networks.

1.4 – Creepypasta and Genre

In referring to electronic literature in a general sense, N. Katherine Hayles refers to it as a "hopeful monster [...] composed of parts taken from diverse traditions that may not always fit neatly together" (2008, p. 4). Creepypasta certainly fits in this emerging tradition of monstrous digital literature. As a genre, it is a monstrous hybrid, especially when one considers the diverse assemblage of literary and technological traits that form individual narratives, and then how that is multiplied across all texts that can be

regarded as creepypasta. And yet, as I will show in this thesis, creepypasta can be considered a genre – a distinct territory that can be referred to by name – but it is a genre with monstrosity at its heart, composed of a variety of traditions, media and practices, unified in its form as fourth-generation digital fiction, the spread that form facilitates, and its requirement “unnerve the reader and/or viewer, and typically engaging with the horror genre or the paranormal” (Henriksen, 2016, p. 23). As I have shown in this chapter, approaches to creepypasta itself are taken from diverse traditions and fields making the existing school of scholarship similarly monstrous. The methodology I devise for analysis throughout this thesis is even more of a monstrous hybrid. In this chapter, I have shown how the fields of folk studies, digital fiction, and memetics are key to understanding creepypasta’s form. In chapter 2, I show the centrality of horror and Gothic studies for understanding the unnerving content of creepypasta and set out the lineage and history of unnerving genres that, throughout this thesis, I will demonstrate creepypasta is a part of.

1.5 – Outline of the Thesis

In this chapter, I have sought to plot the first part of my argument that creepypasta should be considered an emergent genre that manifests through the form of digital fiction and derives its horror and gothic affect through that form. In section 1.1, I examined current scholarship on creepypasta and how it is considered, defined, and regarded by academics across folklore, noting that all cast an eye to an etymological root in copy-and-paste. In section 1.2, I built on observations from existing scholarship on creepypasta to make the case that creepypasta should be regarded as a form of digital fiction, considering a generalist approach of electronic literature and the specific

form of digital fiction. More specifically, I arrived at network writing, a consideration of works written on the Internet that leverage its potential for collaboration and performance – and fourth-generation digital fiction, a specific type of digital fiction that takes the structure and shape of existing platforms online. I argued that creepypasta's movement across platforms in relation to these definitions illustrates the need for a new approach towards creepypasta as a type of fiction. Finally, in section 1.3, I examined various definitions and approaches to copy-and-paste textual spread as well as other forms of information spread that fall under the spectrum of viral to memetic defined by Shifman.

Chapter 2 considers the Gothic and horror literary traditions that inform creepypasta narratives and form part of its hybrid nature. As I will show, this is a key omission in existing literature on creepypasta as the 'creepiness' or unnerving nature of the narratives is taken as a given and not situated within a wider context of Gothic or horror literature. This chapter will set out my methodology for analysis by examining the history of unnerving texts to discover the unifying facets drawn upon across tradition. I will then demonstrate how this history is built upon by creepypasta, unnerving readers *through* its form as fourth-generation digital fiction in a development of literary tradition.

In chapter 3, I analyse Kris Straub's 2009 creepypasta *Candle Cove*. As a subject of analysis, *Candle Cove* is particularly compelling because a complete journey of its spread can be charted from Straub's initial story. Therefore, it is perfectly suited to an examination of how the digital medium's specific forms of viral and memetic spread can assist in the renewal and form-specific manifestation of Gothic and horror traits. I will demonstrate how the act of spreading *Candle Cove* moves it into the genre of creepypasta, and how, throughout its continued movement across the Internet, it

engages with uncanniness, threatens subjectivity and borders. Here, I introduce the concept of “ontological flattening” as the state when real users and their responses, and the fictional story they are reading and responding to exist in the same textual space without borders, implied hierarchy, or explicit indicators of fictionality in the story text. Finally, I show how *Candle Cove* moves towards exhibiting traits of the weird.

In chapter 4, I turn my attention to what is arguably the most widely known creepypasta, *The Slender Man*. Like *Candle Cove*, *The Slender Man* can be traced back to a single origin point – a 2009 thread on the web forum SomethingAwful.com. I show how in this thread, a sense of ontological ambiguity is created through specific types of interaction – ultimately highlighting the “ontologically flattened” space of networked online communications platforms. Here, I develop Isabell Klaiber’s “double plot model” of collaborative digital fiction (2014, p. 124) to account for those forms of collaboration that occur in ontologically flattened spaces, which allows for feedback and development to take on a stance in line with the ontologically ambiguous nature of the story. I then demonstrate how this factors into other iterations of *The Slender Man* narrative, and how the narrative’s form as fourth-generation digital fiction allows it to leverage the digital medium’s affordances of interactivity and multimodality to emphasise the character’s uncanniness in ways unique to this form.

In chapter 5, I focus on a later example of creepypasta – 2016’s anonymously published *The Interface Series*. I will show how *The Interface Series* is illustrative of developments in the genre, differing from the subjects of the previous case studies in how it is spread and interacted with. Ultimately, I demonstrate how, through its form and specific narrative qualities, *The Interface Series* creates a sense of sustained ontological ambiguity and portrays a cosmic and existential threat to both character and reader as if it may truly be looming. In doing so, I develop Isabella van Elferen’s

taxonomy of “techno-Gothics” (2014, p. 138) to demonstrate how *The Interface Series* represents a new type of contemporary Gothic fiction that is both attuned to technological advancements and leverages its ontologically flattened status for thematic and narrative affect, becoming emblematic of what I term the techno-Weird.

In chapter 6, I offer a conclusion which presents my findings, evaluates the effectiveness of my approach, and suggests areas for future research. Specifically, I provide a model of ontologically flattened digital spaces as traced through chapters 3-5 as an integral part of how creepypasta functions. I then consider other areas that the concept of ontological flattening can be applied to and how it can be developed to analyse more than creepypasta and digital fiction.

2. The Gothic, Horror, and Genres of Unnerving

Affect.

In this chapter, I will examine horror and the Gothic as genres of unnerving affect, drawing on a wide and detailed history of scholarship in the field to demonstrate their differences and genealogical links. I will discern what elements cause a text to be regarded as horror, what elements may be considered Gothic, and ultimately find a unifying unnerving quality to both genres that will serve as a point of reference in demonstrating how creepypasta reinvents and reinvigorates the affects and traits of these unnerving genres through its form as fourth wave digital fiction. It is from these unifying traits that I will demonstrate through my analysis chapters that the interplay between content from these genres and the formal characteristics as fourth-generation digital fiction explored in chapter 1 work together in creepypasta to create a wholly unique type of unnerving text.

As I explained in the previous chapter, to be considered as *creepypasta*, a narrative must incorporate content and styles to “unnerve the reader, and typically engage with the horror genre or paranormal” (Henriksen, 2016, p. 23). The unnerving quality – or the ‘creepy’ – of creepypasta observed by Henriksen can manifest in a near-infinite number of ways through the variability and combination of forms, modes, and methods of engagement available across social media and the Internet. Moreover, beyond simply causing reader affect through its form alone, creepypasta engages with a wide breadth of modes and genres (and sub-genres) that have traits and narrative content that work to unnerve the reader. The most prominent of these – as noted by Henriksen – are horror and the paranormal.

However, while Henriksen, Chess and Newsom, and Peck note that creepiness is central to creepypasta, they do not explain what is meant by creepypasta's engagement with horror or explore what, beyond a gesturing towards the general unnerving qualities of creepypasta narratives, the 'creepy' nature of creepypasta actually is. Instead, the unnerving nature of these narratives is presented as a given, with the content of creepypasta stories being presented as enough to regard the 'creepy' aspect of creepypasta with little consideration. What horror, the paranormal, or other unnerving fiction is, how it functions, and how that relates to creepypasta is not explored or explained.

In addition to this, there is no scholarship on creepypasta that seeks to situate it in a wider tradition of unnerving fiction or as part of the Gothic tradition that, as I demonstrate below, horror and paranormal fiction are part of. In this chapter and throughout my analysis chapters, I aim to fill this gap in knowledge by examining the history of the Gothic, and key features that are represented in creepypasta narratives.

This chapter is an in-depth exploration of the Gothic that is divided into distinct sections. I begin with a general overview of the Gothic and its roots in section 2.1 and 2.1.1, before exploring the Gothic in detail from a chronological perspective, starting with the term's use in literature in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century in the Gothic revival (2.2). I then chart the evolution of the Gothic up until the present day. As horror as a literary genre emerged around the end of the nineteenth-century, I dedicate a subsection (2.3.1) to this generic formation and another (2.3.1.1) to general approaches to horror in the wake of its emergence and establishment as fiction distinct from the Gothic. In Section 2.6, I conclude the chapter by setting forward the unifying traits of horror and the Gothic that makes both unnerving as genres and that creepypasta renews through its medium.

2.1 – The Gothic.

Despite aesthetic similarities often associated with causing similar affect in readers, horror and the Gothic (and the paranormal that occurs in both) are not interchangeable categories and as such, a deeper understanding is required to show how creepypasta participates across all of them, integrating their tropes, themes, and features to become a new type of unnerving digital text.

In ‘Horror Fiction: In Search of a Definition’, Clive Bloom points out a difficulty that greets many scholars when approaching literature that ‘unnerves’ the reader:

What is horror fiction? The answer is as complex and problematic theoretically as it seems simple and uncomplicated practically. Moreover, the question is not helped by the multiplicity of apparently substitutable terms to cover the same thing: Gothic tale, ghost tale, terror romance, Gothic horror. All these titles seem to cover virtually identical literary productions with the definition of one acting almost as a catch-all for the others. This is all given an irritating twist when it becomes clear that while “horror” and “Gothic” are often (if not usually) interchangeable, there are, of course, Gothic tales that are not horror fiction [...] and horror tales that contain no real Gothic elements.

(Bloom, 2012, p. 211)

The entanglement between horror and the Gothic is made clear here. There is a glut of terms to describe what are, apparently, the same thing, with various applications of Gothic and horror scattered among them. Yet, upon examination, there are distinct differences between horror and the Gothic. Of crucial importance is the distinction Bloom makes between how horror and the Gothic manifest – in that there are “Gothic tales that are not horror fiction [...] and horror tales that contain no real Gothic *elements*” (emphasis mine). Horror here appears as an inherent quality to a text while

that which defines it as Gothic can be identified as specific elements that are employed in the construction of a text.

Trying to navigate what the “Gothic elements” (Bloom, 2012, p. 211) that Bloom loosely refers to in the quotation above is not an easy task. In the introduction to *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1980), Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick remarks that “no other literary form as influential as the Gothic novel has also been so pervasively conventional. Once you know that a novel is of the Gothic kind [...] you can predict its contents with unnerving certainty” (p. 9). She then goes on to list a raft of stock characters – the “heroine” and the “tyrannical older man” (p. 9), settings – “an oppressive ruin, a wild landscape” (p. 9), framing devices – “found manuscripts or interpolated histories” (p. 9), and a host of grizzly fates, acts, and preoccupations – “sleeplike and deathlike states; subterranean spaces and live burial; doubles; the discovery of obscured family ties; affinities between narrative and pictorial art; possibilities of incest; unnatural echoes or silences” (p. 9). Although this list goes on with a remarkable familiarity, and that we as individuals may have a collection of stock tropes, settings and figures that are conjured up in one’s mind when the word ‘Gothic’ is mentioned, these Gothic elements of a text – and more crucially, what *makes* these elements Gothic – are notoriously difficult to neatly categorise. Indeed, as Kosofsky-Sedgwick notes earlier in her introduction, “[t]o isolate and name characteristic Gothic themes is to plunge at once into the conflicting claims of the general and the specific” (1980, p. 3).

Although many scholars of the Gothic acknowledge the wide reach of contemporary uses of the term and the sheer flexibility of ‘the Gothic’ (Townshend, 2014, p. 4; Punter, 2014, p. 1; Hogle, 2002, p. 1; Bloom, 2007, p. 2; Spooner, 2006, p. 26; etc.), it is precisely this proliferation and application in innumerable contemporary contexts

that makes the concept difficult to isolate. Townshend has noted as much, remarking that “[f]ew academic studies in the field, in fact, fail to advance a definition of the Gothic in their opening pages” (2014, p. xli). In order to “recuperate for the term a critical function and utility in the face of [...] over-application” (p. xli), Townshend points first towards Chris Baldick’s 1993 characterisation of the Gothic as “a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space, these two dimensions reinforcing one another to produce an impression of sickening descent into disintegration” (Baldick, 1993, p. xix). Townshend points out that references to “effect” and “an impression of sickening descent” suggests that Baldick’s definition “ultimately relies on the theory of spectator or readerly reaction” (2014, p. xli) – an idea that I will demonstrate is more closely aligned with horror as a generic marker of affect over the Gothic (see 2.3.1.1 below). As Townshend remarks, this assessment is not particularly useful “when attempting to describe and define the Gothic beyond the vagaries of subjective emotional response” (p. xli). However, Baldick’s definition does gesture towards quantifiable “Gothic elements” (Bloom, 2012, p. 211); namely “inheritance in time” and “enclosure in space” (1993, p. xix) – elements that I will explore in greater detail shortly.

Space and time feature in other attempts to forward a definition of the Gothic, such as Eric Savoy’s description of “claustrophobic, gloomy settings imbued with a sense of forthcoming violence, spaces such as haunted houses, tombs and prisons, the contaminating influence of family curses and revenge driven ghosts” (Savoy, 2004, p. 168). Here, rather than a “sickening descent into disintegration” (Baldick, 1993, p. xix) that gestures towards a horror affect, gloom, a sense of violence (and therefore tension), and contamination from the past are brought to the fore, along with more specific explorations of the conditions that cause these feelings beyond simply space and time.

For Savoy, space is more specifically qualified as gloomy settings – a sense of violence inherent to them – such as houses (obviously haunted over inconsequentially occupied), “tombs and prisons” (p. 168). Time too is present in a more nuanced way than in Baldick’s definition, and in two trajectories. The sense of violence imbued in the settings is “*forthcoming*” (p. 168 - emphasis mine). It is a threat or a promise; that which is yet to come affecting character and reader from a potential future. Alongside this, Savoy notes a host of ways in which the past can return or remain, extending an affecting influence; family curses contaminate through generations, recalling Baldick’s “inheritance through time” (p. xix); ghosts are revenge driven, meaning they are *revenants*, returning from the past and creating a circular sense of threat as, presumably, their revenge will arrive at some point in the future. Savoy’s characterisation of the Gothic expands on Baldick’s affective definition. Claustrophobia in space and inheritance in time are given specific associative elements; haunted houses; tombs; prisons; family curses; ghosts; revenge.

Punter and Byron, in what they term “a broad approach” (2004, p. xx) to the Gothic, expand further still on this list of Gothic elements. They put forward what they consider key themes and topics to “facilitate the identification of connections and developments” (p. x) between and across texts that are viewed as Gothic. Although not entirely comprehensive, this list builds upon Baldick and Savoy, going beyond space and time towards mental states, key figures, and ontologies. They list the following as key themes, topics, and tropes: the Haunted Castle; the Monster; the Vampire; Persecution and Paranoia; Female Gothic; the Uncanny; the History of Abuse; Hallucination and Narcotic (pp. 259 – 293). Here we see the traces of Baldick and Savoy’s space and time through ‘The Haunted Castle’, which sees oppressive space through the castle itself, and time through the hauntings that take place within its walls. Similarly, ‘The History

of Abuse' recalls the 'family curses' of Savoy – which are often grounded in the all too terribly real rather than as a result of a supernatural or paranormal encounter, “rendering them all the more powerful when they emerge within the more dreamlike parameters of the Gothic” (p. 291). Punter and Byron's 'shopping-list' approach to Gothic elements that, as I explore below, become distributed and disseminated across media and culture may be one explanation for Townshend's remark that a definition of the Gothic is advanced with every study (2014, p. xli). A consideration of the Gothic as distributed elements, tropes, themes, and topics that crop up in Gothic fiction thus requires an approach beyond the mapping of tropes across time as they are (re)invented. Such a reconceptualisation of the Gothic is suggested by Anne Williams, who begins by stating that a “‘definition’ of ‘Gothic’ [...] outlines a large, irregularly shaped figure, an irregularity that implies the limitations of language – appropriate for the category containing this unspeakable ‘other’” (1995, p. 23). Such a limitation of language to adequately describe what the Gothic is may similarly account for the wealth of competing definitions that already exist. Williams continues:

Although I began with the term 'genre,' so many refinements and ramifications must be added to the usual sense of that term that it becomes unsatisfactory, for 'Gothic' is a 'something' that goes beyond the merely literary. Similarly, it is more than a 'mode' or a tradition, or a set of conventions. Perhaps like the Freudian concept of 'unconscious,' *Gothic implies a phenomenon long present but until recently not described.*

(Williams, 1995, p. 23 - emphasis mine)

Williams identifies something important here, in that the tropes, topics, themes, and Gothic elements often held up as signifiers of the presence of a Gothic text have, in some combination, existed long before Walpole added “... A Gothic Story” to the second edition of *The Castle of Otranto* (1765). The ghosts and witches of Shakespeare's plays are remarkably Gothic, and the presence of a monstrous other can

be seen in the epic poetry of *Beowulf* and even further back to Homer's *Odyssey*. The existence of the Gothic 'before the Gothic' may account for the integration of the creatures of myth and folklore into Gothic literary works; vampires (Punter and Byron, 2004, p. 268) and werewolves (Soanes, 2016, n.p) were the subject of word of mouth spread before they existed in print.

Williams instead suggests that since "none of the usual nouns seem adequate for naming Gothic, it may be possible to adapt a new one" (p. 23), forwarding that Gothic should be regarded as a "complex" – gesturing towards the similarities between the two words:

This word (like 'Gothic') may be both an adjective and a noun. As an adjective it means 'consisting of interconnected or interwoven parts'; 'involved or intricate, complicated'; and in grammar, 'pertaining to or designating a sentence consisting of an independent clause and one or more depended clauses.' As a noun, it means 'a whole composed of interconnected parts,' or (from psychiatry) 'a connected group of repressed ideas that compel characteristic or habitual patterns of thought, feeling, or action.' [...] Also like Gothic, 'complex' denotes an intersection of grammar, architecture, and psychoanalysis.

(Williams, 1995, pp. 23 – 24)

Williams' Gothic complex, then, is an "ordering principle" (p. 24) that connects "plots, settings, imagery, affects, effects, and literary forms" (p. 24) under what can be perceived as Gothic. Although the parallels between Gothic and complex described above by Williams seem to imply that such a joining was 'meant to be', the Gothic complex as an ordering principle of interwoven parts appears to gesture towards a conceptualisation of a Gothic assemblage. Williams' complex or ordering principle of the Gothic could similarly be framed as a description of the Gothic as a genre. As I explore in the introduction, genre is regarded as "formal and stylistic qualities that a group of cultural artefacts and practices share in common" (Rettberg, p. 10), then Williams' model fits this description. It is a framework that can become de and

reterritorialised across different instances of a Gothic text or between horror and the Gothic, or any other genre in which cross-pollination or ‘Gothic tendencies’ may lurk (such as noir, science fiction, weird fiction, or the detective novel), creating monstrous hybrids and new forms. As this thesis will demonstrate, the merging of Gothic “plots, settings, imagery, affects, effects” (Williams, p. 24) with the form of fourth-generation digital fiction is an example of a monstrous hybrid in the form of creepypasta.

In addition to Williams’ Gothic ‘complex’, moving a conceptualisation of the genre to an intersection of grammar, architecture, and psychoanalysis, Kosofsky-Sedgwick offers a spatialised perspective on the Gothic. She observes that a “remarkable thing about the Gothic formula, mitigating its narrowness, is the range of tone and focus possible within it” (p. 10). Kosofsky-Sedgwick considers the qualities of what are regarded as foundational Gothic texts as they “differ in tone and intent” (p. 11). She observes “[t]he light, fast-paced entertainment of *The Castle of Otranto*, the campy exhibitionism of *The Monk*, the minute harrowings of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and the psychological urgency of *Melmoth the Wanderer*” (p. 11). She argues that “while they all point somehow toward an aesthetic based on pleasurable fear, [they] all leave very different tastes in the reader’s mouth and exercise very different faculties in their authors” (p. 11). This observation leads to her posing the following questions:

How can talents as distinctive and varied as these authors all find scope within a narrow set of conventions narrowly defined? Or to put the question in another way, why are these conventions found *together* in the Gothic novel? Why did it take so long for one and another of the conventions to become disentangled from the formula and available to other novelistic traditions?

(Kosofsky-Sedgwick, 1980, p. 11)

In order to answer these, she turns to a particular spatial model that she argues underscores and unites the varied conventions used by different Gothic authors beyond

the “aesthetic based on pleasurable fear” (p. 11). Kosofsky-Sedgwick sets out the model as thus:

[I]t can be said that when an individual fictional “self” is the subject of one of these conventions, that self is spatialized in the following way. It is the position of the self to be massively blocked off from something to which it ought normally to have access. This something can be its own past, the details of its family history; it can be the free air, when the self has been literally buried alive; it can be a lover; it can be just all the circumambient life, when the self is pinned in a death-like sleep.

(Kosofsky-Sedgwick, 1980, p. 12)

Kosofsky-Sedgwick argues that this spatialised schism and its “three main elements (what’s inside, what’s outside, and what separates them) take on the most varied guises, [but] the terms of the relationship are immutable” (pp. 12 – 13). Upon the self and its outside ‘something’ becoming cut off and no longer capable of having a “proper, natural, necessary connection” (p. 13), their relationship becomes “one of parallels and correspondences rather than communication [...] creating a doubleness where singleness should be” (p. 13). From here, Kosofsky-Sedgwick argues that it is the effort to restore this natural state where “the most characteristic energies of the Gothic novel” (p. 13) lie. “The worst violence, the most potent magic, and the most paralyzing instances of the uncanny in these novels do not occur in, for example, the catacombs of the Inquisition. Instead, they are evoked in the very breach of the imprisoning wall” (p. 13). Kosofsky-Sedgwick’s spatial model of the Gothic is one that manifests on multiple levels. Immediately, there are the actual events of the narrative that cleave a natural unification in two – burying family secrets (or family members), imprisoning lovers etc. – and as she quite rightly observes, it is often the unearthing of the secrets or the attempt to reunify the lovers that are the most traumatic moments of a narrative. She argues that this model also works on a structural level – the “sudden, mysterious, seemingly arbitrary, but massive inaccessibility of those things that should normally be

most accessible” (p. 13) manifesting most obviously in a structural sense in “the difficulty the story has in getting itself told” (p. 13). To this end, she argues that, for Gothic novels:

A fully legible manuscript or an uninterrupted narrative is rare; rarer still is the novel whose story is comprised by a single narrator, without extensive irruption into the middle of the book by a new history with a new historian; rarest of all is the book presented by the author in her or his own person, without a pseudonym and an elaborate account of the provenance and antiquity of the supposed original manuscript.

(Kosofsky-Sedgwick, 1980, p. 14)

This structural level of Kosofsky-Sedgwick’s model – and specifically this example of a reader’s inability to access a full narrative or narrative truth – is of particular importance to this thesis as, when using networked social media platforms as a storytelling venue, interruptions are common. Moreover, as I will show throughout this thesis and have discussed briefly in the previous chapter, creepypasta invites irruptions by new voices – to the point where they become infinitely branching narratives with no “middle of the book” from which to find one’s way. Finally, the use of social media and Web2.0 platforms for storytelling all but necessitates the use of pseudonyms, as shown through the exploration of the hauntological Internet in the previous chapter, as authors often create one or more profiles on the platform they wish to tell their story that must be the profile *of* the character telling that story.

As I have shown from the above assessment of existing characterisations of the Gothic, a unifying consensus is its mercurial and multifaceted nature; existing as “Gothic elements” (Bloom, p. 211), with an interest in time and space (Baldick, p. xix; Savoy, p. 168), and an established set of “themes and topics” (Punter and Byron, p. 257) that can be included and excluded under its “ordering principle” (Williams, p. 24) that can be read through Kosofsky-Sedgwick’s spatial model of “what’s inside, what’s outside,

and what separates them” – extending from the literal separation of the self within the narrative and the conflict that then ensues to the form and structural shape of the text itself. The intention for the rest of this chapter is to critically engage with existing scholarship on the Gothic, beginning with the roots of the word, and consider how the term has developed and been advanced, as well as formulating new genres and terms such as horror. From there, I will propose a set of Gothic features or elements that consistently appear as defining markers that can be used to analyse and demonstrate how creepypasta achieves its ‘creepy’ designation and how it creates an unnerving or even horrific affect in readers.

2.1.1 – The Roots of the Gothic.

David Punter, in *The Literature of Terror: Volume 1* (2014), traces the roots of the Gothic as a term, arguing that in order to truly understand the reasons for its flexibility, it is imperative to “look back beyond Gothic *fiction* and into the history of the word ‘Gothic’ itself, which is not of course exclusively or even primarily a literary term” (p. 4 - emphasis in original). As a starting point for this historical exploration, Punter states that the original meaning of Gothic was, simply, “to do with the Goths” (p. 4), as in the barbarian tribes associated with the sacking of Rome and the fall of the Roman Empire. However, Punter notes that “because the seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century writers who used the term in this sense had very little idea of who the Goths were or what they were like” beyond their northern European geographical origin, the apparently straightforward origin of the term became somewhat murky, leading to ‘Gothic’ becoming “a synonym for ‘Teutonic’ or ‘Germanic’, while retaining its connotations of barbarity” (pp. 4 – 5).

By the mid to late eighteenth-century, however, such a localised connotation was lost, with Gothic being “descriptive of things medieval – in fact, of all things preceding about the middle of the seventeenth century” (p. 5); the historical component of Gothic – an emphasis on “post-Roman barbarism and to do with the medieval world” – overtaking its geographical significance. Such associations, however, also loaded Gothic of this moment with certain social connotations. As Fred Botting states:

The dominance of classical values produced a national past that was distinct from the cultivation, rationality, and maturity of an enlightened age. This past was called ‘Gothic’, a general and derogatory term for the Middle Ages which conjured up ideas of barbarous customs and practices, of superstition, ignorance, extravagant fancies and natural wildness.

(Botting, 1996, p. 15)

The Gothic of the mid to late eighteenth century, then, was set in opposition to the neo-classical values of its day – “where the classical was well-ordered, the Gothic was chaotic; where simple and pure, Gothic was ornate and convoluted; where the classics offered a set of cultural models to be followed, Gothic represented excess and exaggeration, the product of the wild and the uncivilised” (Punter, 1996, p. 5). Such values represented by the term were similarly represented in the emergent Gothic fiction of the age which, as shown by Punter, earned scorn and ridicule from the likes of William Wordsworth (p. 8) and Jane Austen (pp. 8 – 9). Indeed, as Botting notes, “Gothic productions never completely lost their earlier, negative connotations to become fully assimilated within the bounds of proper literature” (p. 15).

2.2 – The Gothic Revival.

The emergent Gothic fiction of the mid-eighteenth century coincided with a reappraisal of “[t]he idea that the classical style of architecture was superior to the medieval or

Gothic [...] when a revival of interest in Gothic architecture accompanied a more general reassessment of the arts and culture of the medieval world” (Punter and Byron, 2004, p. 34). An understanding of this Gothic revival allows us to understand the concepts that informed, and continue to evolve in, Gothic fiction. The Gothic Revival’s primary emergence in architecture has a direct link to the emergence of Gothic fiction. As Punter and Byron note, Strawberry Hill, “usually considered the first domestic Gothic Revival building” (p. 34), belonged to Horace Walpole, author of *The Castle of Otranto* – widely regarded as foundational work of Gothic fiction – with Botting noting that “[m]any of the main ingredients of the genre that was to be known as the Gothic novel can be found [therein]” (1996, p. 31).

However, this link between Gothic architecture and Gothic fiction is more than merely a connection via Walpole. Attitudes towards the Gothic found in architecture can also be found in fiction of the time, highlighting the Gothic as an expressive mode not bound by form or discipline. For example, Walpole’s Strawberry Hill estate, in its Gothic Revivalist redesign, “copies from an eclectic variety of different Gothic styles. There is a reliance on dramatic effect rather than real Gothic structures [...] Artefacts are divorced from their foundations and turned into signs disconnected from their original substance” (Punter and Byron, p. 34). As such, it is a “theatrical pastiche” (p. 34) of what were considered Gothic architectural styles and a counterfeit of the authentic. This pastiche and counterfeit extended further with the advent of the Gothic folly – *fabriqué* in French, literally ‘made’, further belying Gothic expression’s affinity for artifice. The landscape gardens of the period, such as the grounds of Wentworth Castle, featured Gothic follies designed to look like the ruins of medieval castles and abbeys with the appearance that they had stood as part of the landscape for hundreds of years – Wentworth’s being ‘Stainborough Castle’, which was a “celebration of Anglo-

Saxon civilization” (Charlesworth, 2005, p. 637) added to the grounds in the early eighteenth century.

Already, thematic links with creepypasta can be found in the attitudes towards Gothic revival through the wanton copying, decontextualisation, and spread of Gothic styles throughout the period when building of new structures shows how ‘spreadable’ the Gothic is. Moreover, the artifice at the heart of the Gothic revival is inherent in creepypasta and its form as fourth-generation digital fiction as posts that serve as a pastiche of the the day to day posting style of social media users are the method by which artificial Gothic stories are spread onto platforms “defined for other purposes” (Rustad, 2015, n.p).

2.2.1 – The Castle of Otranto.

The artifice, the counterfeit, and the fascination with the past at the heart of the Gothic Revival is similarly at the heart of Gothic fiction – one of the “ingredients” of the genre (Botting, 1996, p. 31) established by Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*. Initially published anonymously on Christmas day in 1764, the first edition of *Otranto* featured “a preface that became a crucial device in Gothic narratives” (p. 32). Botting continues:

[I]t was itself a fiction, a fiction, moreover, with *pretensions to historical authenticity and veracity*. The antiquarian tones of the preface declare The Castle of Otranto to be a translation of a medieval Italian story printed in 1529 and written at the time of the Crusades. Everything, from the Gothic script which it is printed to the feudal customs and miraculous incidents it presents, *conspires to give it an air of truth as a production of the barbarous and superstitious dark ages*.

(Botting, 1996, p. 32 - emphasis mine)

We see here that what is generally agreed upon as the first piece of Gothic literature was initially published as an authentic document from the “barbarous and superstitious”

Gothic age – one that has passed through a number of hands (author, printer, translator) before being viewed by the reader. Walpole’s anonymous publication and preface in the first edition of *Otranto* functions as a framing device to create a sense of authenticity and ontological ambiguity around the Gothic story presented therein. This is furthered by Walpole’s title for the first edition of *Otranto*, which continued with: *A Story. Translated by William Marshal, Gent. From the Original Italian of Onuphrio Muralto*. The preface, supposedly penned by William Marshall, works to frame the subsequent narrative as an important, historical document that was “found in the library of an ancient Catholic family” (Walpole, 1765, n.p) – none of which was true, but served to bolster the preface that framed the story as a piece of historiography. Such a framing sets the stage for future Gothic works to be “a patchwork of textual modes – romance, folk tale, realism, historiography, travelogue, psychobiography, confessional narrative, epistolary exchange, newspaper cutting – in which novels like *Frankenstein* [...] are remediated into a single ‘narrative’” (Mandal, 2015, p. 91). Of course, Walpole’s ‘patchwork’ in *Otranto* is nowhere near as extensive as that of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* – where the narrative is uncovered through stories told within stories, nested through various sets of letters and other correspondence – but such a framing through the hybridisation of textual modes can be seen as a ‘blueprint’ for future Gothic texts that only served to intensify and elaborate on the conceit to create a text that exists on the “liminal boundary between authenticity and counterfeit” (Mandal, 2015, p. 91). Both a patchwork of textual modes in its own right, and the framing for the text as something that *may* be a true story, or have some element of truth, have thus become part of the Gothic tradition in a way established by Walpole, and is, as I will demonstrate in my analyses, a core element of creepypasta, situating the genre as part of the Gothic tradition.

In its second edition, published in 1765, *Otranto* received a revised preface in which Walpole announced himself as the author, thus demystifying the text and dispelling any ambiguity around its ontological status. It also received a revised title, from “... *A Story*” to “... *A Gothic Story*”, definitively establishing terminology for the emergent genre. According to E. J. Clery, the addition was “a flippant paradox chiefly intended, one infers, to annoy stuffy critics who objected to the experiment. After all, how could a Gothic story have a modern author?” (2002, p. 21). Both Clery and Botting recognise that Gothic fiction of this era is more often regarded as being in the tradition of medieval romances, described as “wildly extravagant and fanciful tales of knights, giants, fabulous entities and marvellous incidents” and set apart from the emerging novels of the period that were “privileged as instructive observations on the living world” (Botting, 1996, p. 18). Indeed, this opposition is highlighted by Clery in his consideration of *Otranto*, arguing that it was “presented to the public, especially in the preface to the second edition, as an outright challenge to this orthodoxy. Romances had been called improbable; now Walpole accused modern fiction of being too probable” (p. 23). His preface to the second edition to *Otranto* reveals an intent to rehabilitate the Gothic and cultural attitudes towards it. As Clery explains, “Walpole wanted to combine the unnatural occurrences associated with romance and the naturalistic characterization and dialogue of the novel [...] [T]he credible emotions of the characters connect us to incredible phenomena and events and allow terror to circulate via processes of identification and projection” (p. 24). Such generic hybridity, even in its inception, remains to this day with Bloom remarking that it is “a genre half in the real world and half in the landscape of dreams” (2007, xxii), evoking this initial marriage of medieval romance and novel. Such hybridity at the heart of the genre may

perhaps go some way to explaining why, according to Townshend, scholars of the Gothic struggle *not* to forward a definition of the term when approaching it.

2.3 – Late Eighteenth Century to Victorian Gothic.

As the Gothic Revival continued into the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, so too did the publication of Gothic fiction in the wake of Walpole's *Otranto*, predominantly by way of the Gothic novel, which was, according to Punter, the "dominant genre" (1996, p. 55) of the 1790s. The glut of Gothic publications around this period – including Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and *The Italian* (1797), as well as Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) – Punter argues, is partially due to the growth in reading as a pastime for the lower middle classes, and because "[t]he 1790s were chaotic years in which domestic unrest and fears of invasion from abroad shaped political and cultural life" (p. 54). It is the combination of these factors, Punter argues, that led to the popularity of fiction that

rejected direct engagement with the activities of contemporary life in favour of geographically and historically remote actions and settings [...] Within the Gothic we can find a very intense, if displaced, engagement with political and social problems, the difficulty of negotiating those problems being precisely reflected in the Gothic's central stylistic conventions.

(Punter, 1996, p. 54)

Here, Punter gets to the heart of the maligned popularity of Gothic fiction that continues to endure though never being "fully assimilated within the bounds of proper literature" (p. 15). This may be because of Gothic fiction's ability to explore socially 'raw' wounds and contemporary anxieties. Such exploration is done, Punter argues, through the Gothic's "central stylistic conventions" of the time: primarily its fascination with the geographically and temporally distant as a way to keep contemporary cultural

and political anxieties at a safe distance and, as Punter writes of Radcliffe and Lewis, the production of “a literary mode which is ‘bracketed’ from reality from the very outset, and which, although it bears an important relation, as it must, to wider societal concerns, mediates these concerns through a symbolic structure which was already coming to have its own conventions and acceptances” (p. 74). These emergent Gothic conventions and acceptances from turn of the century fiction, from the setting to the “self-conscious references to the very processes of fictionalisation [and] the refusal to distinguish decisively between character trait and environmental pressure” (p. 54), set the stage for further development as well as departures as the nineteenth century and Victorian era progressed.

As I have explored through Gothic follies and the publication of *Otranto*, ontological ambiguity (and anonymous publication) along with heterogeneous modes of storytelling have been at the heart of Gothic fiction from the beginning. However, the nineteenth century saw a continuation in the popularity of the Gothic novel, which in turn, began to solidify through repetition, the moments, tropes and motifs that have since come to be known as ‘Gothic’. Notable texts, such as Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde*² (1886) and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), continue in the tradition of heterogeneous and fragmented modes of storytelling and a level of ontological ambiguity through the use of letters, multiple narrative perspectives and statements, and – in the case of *Dracula* – “a compilation of [...] letters, journals, and newspaper clippings” (Punter and Byron, 2004, p. 230). However, across the three texts, and a Victorian Gothic more generally, a shift can be seen in how

² Will henceforth be referred to as *Jekyll and Hyde* for brevity.

the Gothic engages with social and political anxieties, and in turn, its tropes, motifs, and monsters.

As Alison Milbank explains, the Victorian era “began like the ending of an Ann Radcliffe novel: the bad uncles and despotic guardian give way to the true heir, who is now able to preserve and defend her national inheritance” (2002, p. 145). Through a survey of writers across the Victorian era, Milbank illuminates the role of the woman in Victorian Gothic texts, suggesting from the quotation above that the entire era was perhaps a Gothic era and Victoria herself a Gothic monarch whose accession to the throne had a palpable “influence [...] upon the modes of political and literary sensibility during [the] time” (p. 146). The early Victorian Gothic output, Milbank argues, was characterised by “a bifurcation of the Radcliffe tradition: the trope of the liberated heroine became separated from the trope of release from the prison of the past” (p. 146) as writers from differing political and ideological stances navigated the new political landscape through their work.

Milbank argues that in the early Victorian Gothic “the heroine who acts as a focus for social critique is lost in the world of her tale, and the liberation from the hold of her past is replaced [...] by a repositioning of the woman to fix her in an architectural and political space” (p. 146). She turns to the historical novel – an “already Gothic” (p. 146) form – to illustrate this, showing how the Gothicising of history can illustrate opinion at the time. In particular, she highlights the work of G. P. R. James, historiographer to William IV, whose tales of France and England of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are dominated by “the subject of debated succession to the throne” (p. 146), with one particular instance concerning the “tragic lives of two female claimants to the British throne” (p. 146). Milbank suggests that this “tragic romance mode serves to legitimize the line that leads to Victoria [...] however the trope of liberation from the

past is separated from the heroine, who is left imprisoned by her fate (like Victoria?)” (p. 146). According to Milbank, this reaching into past eras to Gothicise present tensions (as *The Gothic* up until this point is wont to do) is also exhibited in the work of William Harrison Ainsworth – who “was drawn to the same period as James, but with directly Gothic interests in both ancient structures and instruments of oppression” (p. 146). Milbank argues that Ainsworth’s three ‘Tudor novels’ – *The Tower of London* (1840), *Guy Fawkes* (1841), and *Windsor Castle* (1843) – are shot through with Gothic tropes and imagery, from supernatural visions, trapdoors, dungeons, and caves, to an appearance from Herne the Hunter – a spectral horseman of Windsor folklore.

Moreover, for Milbank, Ainsworth “plays upon the dual role of the Tower and of Windsor as royal palaces and as prisons” (pp. 146 – 147), remarking how Lady Jane Grey and Anne Boleyn enter each respective place in celebrated status early in each work, yet re-enter later to meet imprisonment or execution. This emphasis on duality and contrasts, Milbank argues, was intended for the reader to “draw conclusions about the state of the nation” (p. 147) in the early part of Victoria’s reign. The Gothicising of present anxieties into the past is made explicit in Ainsworth signing off his survey of *Windsor Castle* with a remark on the contemporary restoration of the castle being associated with Victoria (p. 147), an act read by Milbank to mean that “in order for Victoria to gain legitimacy [...] she must become one with Britain, culturally and naturally. However, with her being thus assimilated as a principle of continuity, there ends up being no space for the heroine apart from the structure” (p. 147). As such, we see through Milbank’s assessment of early Victorian Gothic that the era was characterised by the exorcising of present political tensions into the past – to “[replay] the trauma of the Reformation from the perspective of a later parallel cultural revolution” (p. 147). However, in doing so, the authors of these texts must skew

established Gothic tropes (or at least those established by Radcliffe) in order to illuminate their own political views.

Milbank then casts her eye towards Gothic fiction of the later Victorian era which, rather than Gothicising the present in the past, exhibits a “contemporary and localised setting in the Britain of its own century” (p. 147), the imprisoned Gothic heroine moving from past Royals to the women of the contemporary middle-class. She notes that:

Gothic and sensation fiction of the mid-century sought in various ways to register the psychic disturbance of the Victorian middle-class wife, who was confined to the domestic realm at the very time in which that locale ceased to be productive or economically active. It became instead a space to exhibit one’s freedom from market forces. Thus, the very circumstances that encouraged female psychological introspection were also those that opened up a critical perspective on social and gender roles in the construction of the trapped woman as one focus of a new generation of fictions.

(Milbank, 2002, p. 155)

This updating of the Gothic to the contemporary domestic realm is a view shared by Punter and Byron, who characterise the Victorian Gothic as “marked primarily by the domestication of Gothic figures, spaces and themes: horrors become explicitly located within the world of the contemporary reader” (2005, p. 26). That which causes a horror affect in Gothic texts is no longer kept at arm’s length spatially or temporally as “the exotic and historical settings that serve to distance the horrors from the world of the reader in earlier Gothic are replaced with something more disturbingly familiar: the bourgeois domestic world or the new urban landscape” (p. 26). This domestication of the Gothic, they argue, is as a result of its “appropriation by the sensation novel” (p. 26) – that is “fiction [that] focuses on the bourgeois world and is characteristically preoccupied with domestic crime and disorder” (p. 26).

Punter and Byron suggest two categories of Gothic sensation novel – those that “work within the female Gothic tradition of the heroine imprisoned within the home or some substitute institution” (p. 26) and those that explore “the sensational spectacle of the mad or criminal female protagonist” (p. 27) – that both exhibit a fascination with “identity and the transgression of borderlines” (p. 26), exploring confinement, sanity, and criminality through various novels. Thus, for them, like Milbank, the psychic impact of social upheaval upon women was a predominant focus for the Victorian Gothic. The most sensational character of these sensation novels, they argue, is Lucy Graham in Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) who elicits the fear that “bigamous and murderous” proclivities lie “behind the façade of the modest and respectable Victorian woman” (p. 27). Thus, fears around shifts in the roles of women in Victorian society are easily mapped onto the traditional Gothic heroine, who in this process sheds her heroine status, becoming monstrous through criminality, madness, or both. These contemporary fears can similarly be found in Gothic novels such as Stoker’s *Dracula*, in which the ‘three sisters’ – the female vampires who reside in Count Dracula’s castle – are creatures of “disruption and transgression of accepted limits and boundaries” (p. 231), a supernaturalisation of social anxieties suggested by the sensation novels around “the New Woman [...] who was characterized by her demands for both social and sexual autonomy” (p. 231), and a more literal monstrousness than the mad or the criminal.

Victorian fears of social and sexual upheaval made monstrous, Punter and Byron argue, also feature heavily in Stevenson’s *Jekyll and Hyde* and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). Rather than fears of a gendered upheaval, Stevenson and Wilde explore emergent social concerns around degeneration characteristic of the Victorian *fin de siècle* as corruption, animalism, and deformity manifest as an influence on a

body, transforming it into something monstrous to the point where it is a distinct monstrous other (Punter and Byron, 2004, pp. 41; 227 – 228). They show that the meek Henry Jekyll is transformed into the beastly, impulsive, and atavistic Mr. Hyde, and as Dorian Grey pursues decadence and hedonism to murderous ends, his portrait bears the monstrous transformation invited by such a life. In all these cases, an interest in the transgressive other emerging *from* the human is foregrounded – and particularly, an emergence of repressed atavistic impulses from beneath respectable Victorian societal values; the modest Victorian woman becoming criminal in Gothic sensation novels; the corrupting influence of the vampire turning Lucy into “a ‘nightmare’ of ‘voluptuous wantonness’” (p. 40); Mr. Hyde emerging after Henry Jekyll drinks his potion; Dorian Grey’s image distorting in place of his physical self.

Punter and Byron argue of the latter two texts that “although we are encouraged to think in terms of duality [...] the texts also imply it is not simply a *split* that is at issue but a more complex fragmentation of the subject. As Dorian suggests, man may well be not a stable unified subject, but a ‘complex, multiform creature’” (p. 41). They suggest that multiplicity of the subject is “an even more disturbing concept than duality” (p. 41) and those Victorian Gothic texts exploring anxieties surrounding decadence and social decline employ the figure of the ‘abhuman’ to do so. The abhuman, they argue:

may be a body that retains traces of human identity but has become, or is in the process of becoming, something quite different. Alternatively, it may be some indefinable ‘thing’ that is mimicking the human, appropriating the human form. Either way, it is the integrity of human identity that is threatened; these are liminal bodies, occupying the space between the terms of such oppositions as human and beast, male and female, civilized and primitive [...] the majority of these abhuman bodies are the product not of supernatural forces but of scientifically explainable processes, and it is the scientist who becomes the pre-eminent figure in the Gothic fiction of the period.

(Punter and Byron, 2004, p. 41)

Here, Gothic representations of anxieties begin to encroach on the horrific. The Victorian abhuman figure is a threat to identity and boundaries – causing a horror affect (see section A. d. I below). The boundaries and identity under threat are that of Victorian society and the reader. Unchecked scientific enquiry represented by the scientist (mad or otherwise over-ambitious) brings about the abhuman: creatures such as Victor Frankenstein’s creation and Mr. Hyde whose liminal status triggers horrific reactions and abjection in readers. Alternatively, it is science, and the anxieties over evolutionary theory that “dissolved the previously accepted boundaries between human and animal” (p. 42), or the Victorian scientific enquiry into societal decline exemplified by Max Nordau’s *Degeneration* (1895) that seek to explain or rationalise the monstrous abhuman of Victorian Gothic.

The comingling of Gothic elements and horrific affects in the late Victorian era, as found in the abhuman and *Jekyll and Hyde*, indicates the trajectory of horror and Gothic fictions’ complicated relationship up until the present – something that I will explore more in the section on twentieth century Gothic below. In the Victorian Gothic, such a blurring, according to Roger Luckhurst, is due to the increased secularism in the late Victorian period which was “marked by the rise of the scientific savant and the engineer/inventor as cultural heroes” (2016. p. 115). Luckhurst characterises fear in the first wave of Gothic romance as “associated with blasphemy, mortal sin and moral transgression. Vice has its moment in the sun, but writers such as Ann Radcliffe ensure that the Protestant Virtues are always ultimately victorious” (p. 115). By contrast, while “there is some authentic Christian dread left in *Dracula*” (p. 116), late Victorian works of unnerving fiction – that Luckhurst unites under the emergent banner of horror as an explicit genre – “initially [seem] to derive from a more secular framework, picking up on the radical materialism and atheism that underpins some of the ideas [...] in

Frankenstein” (p. 116). To illustrate this shift towards secular scares, Luckhurst references the protagonists of H. G. Wells:

[T]he Time Traveller, Doctor Moreau or Griffin in his violent and disordered novella *The Invisible Man* – have no religious frame of reference, and barely any notion of social morality supported by a protestant state. The priest is openly mocked in *The War of the Worlds* (1898) and Christian values rapidly collapse.

(Luckhurst, 2016, p. 116)

Here Luckhurst points out that secularist and material fears begin to overshadow Christian dread to the point where later Victorian Gothic texts do not have a religious frame, or even mock religious figures. For Luckhurst, this change characterises an emerging secular materialism and a waning of Christian values as the dominant worldview: “[b]y the end of the century, vengeful mummies are cross about the politics of colonial occupation rather than the presumptions of Christendom” (p. 116). Such a change, he argues, is emblematic of the diversification of the Gothic as a literary form into horror as scientific discovery “specifically the continual revolution in biological understanding in this era” (p. 107) marked a shift towards more bodily fears that “pinpoint[...] the body as the locus of modern horror” (p. 107).

2.3.1 – Gothic Horror.

Alongside the strides in re-shaping the Gothic throughout the nineteenth century, such as moving an “aesthetic based on pleasurable fear” (Kosofsky-Sedgwick, p. 11) from far-flung antiquity into the heart of the contemporary British Empire, and developing monsters that reflect that empire’s innermost anxieties, practitioners of Gothic fiction began theorising the sensations and affects of the Gothic; most notably terror and horror.

In ‘On the Supernatural in Poetry’, published in *New Monthly Magazine* in 1826 – three years after her death, Ann Radcliffe is perhaps the first Gothic writer to explicitly and formally differentiate between the affects stirred by her writing. Framed as a discussion between two travelling companions on the supernatural in Shakespeare and Milton, Radcliffe asserts that “[t]error and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them” (p. 66). This difference, she argues, is found in the depiction of the object that causes such feelings. Referring to a Milton quotation, she argues that it “imparts more of terror than of horror; for it is not distinctly pictured forth, but is seen in glimpses through obscuring shades, the great outlines only appearing, which excite the imagination to complete the rest” (p. 67). Terror, then, functions through obscurity, leaving “something for the imagination to exaggerate” (p. 67); the faculties awakened to a high degree of life through dread and anticipation of something indistinct – the mind piecing together the scenario or threat based “upon the few hints that truth reveals to it” (p. 67). Radcliffe’s terror is stood in contrast with horror and its contracting, freezing affect – the difference between the two succinctly illustrated by Devendra Varma who states that “[t]he difference between Terror and Horror is the difference between awful apprehension and sickening realization: between the smell of death and stumbling against a corpse” (1966, p. 130).

Representation and methods of triggering terror and horror also differ according to Varma, who asserts that:

Terror thus creates an intangible atmosphere of spiritual psychic dread, a certain superstitious shudder at the other world. *Horror resorts to a cruder presentation of the macabre: by an exact portrayal of the physically horrible and revolting*, against a far more terrible background of spiritual gloom and despair. Horror appeals to sheer dread and repulsion, by brooding upon the gloomy and sinister, and lacerates the nerves by establishing actual cutaneous contact with the supernatural.

(Varma, D. 1966, p. 130 - emphasis mine)

The awareness of the crucial difference between terror and horror as feelings elicited by Gothic writing – first examined by Radcliffe – recalls Kosofsky-Sedgwick’s remarks on early Gothic writing discussed in Section 2.1. Her observation that the Gothic novels written at the turn of the nineteenth century, while united under an “aesthetic based on pleasurable fear” (p. 11), divert in “tone and intent” (p. 11) – and, as shown above, what exactly this pleasurable fear may be (terror or horror) – illustrates the pull and tension within the Gothic between terror writing, Gothic romance, and what has since become horror. Varma argues that it is Lewis’ *The Monk* that heralds the beginning of what she refers to as “the horror-romantic phase of Gothic fiction” (p. 132), his writing standing on contrast to contemporaries such as Radcliffe by “his brutal emphasis on gross detail” (p. 145).

This brutality and emphasis on repulsion is a thread carried through the turn of the century and into the Victorian Gothic discussed above. The movement from antiquity to contemporary London increased Varma’s “actual cutaneous contact with the supernatural” (p. 130) as its monsters were no longer locked in tales dredged up from the mist of time through ‘found’ manuscripts. Moreover, the more bodily creatures of the Victorian Gothic similarly revealed the enduring strength of the horror thread of the Gothic. Shelley’s monster not only reflected contemporary anxieties around scientific advancement but suggested that the supernatural can take on a more corporeal form of what once was human – beyond spirits or ghosts. Similarly, corruption of the human form, found in *Dracula*, *Jekyll and Hyde*, and offset, but nonetheless present in *The Picture of Dorian Grey* – what is referred to above by Punter and Byron as the abhuman – draws upon horror, expanding the concept of cutaneous contact with the

supernatural with the idea that such contact could come from within; a subcutaneous contact – unavoidable and transformative.

2.3.1.1 – Approaches to Horror Fiction.

The formative concepts for horror literature laid out in the previous section endure beyond the Victorian era into the present day. In this following section, I will consider approaches to horror fiction as it emerged as a distinct genre in the twentieth century, and how it departed from Victorian Gothic writing along the chronology of the development of horror and Gothic literature. Following this, I will explore the ghost story specifically as a genre that bridged horror and Gothic fiction into the twentieth century, and the Uncanny as a key emergent theory during the early twentieth century.

In his search for a definition of purely horror fiction, Bloom turns to a selection of horror writers and their sensitivity to “technical and stylistic gradations that separate one tale from another in a type of hierarchy of horrific effects” (p. 211). To further bolster this framework of using writers of unnerving literature as a way of ‘finding’ horror fiction, Bloom draws on Stephen King, who “notes three levels, the most significant being that which calls up ‘terror’ of things unseen but suggested [...] the second level is that of ‘fear’ and the ‘horrific’ [...] lastly comes the tale of mere ‘revulsion’ designed to create repulsion” (p. 211). Already, through King’s regard for a three-tiered hierarchy of horror, Bloom sets up a consideration of horror as a quality in a text that provokes an affect in readers – from terror to repulsion. This consideration, and subsequently the distinction between horror and the Gothic, is furthered through Bloom’s argument that horror remains ahistorical when compared to Gothic elements in that while “elements that scared our ancestors may or may not scare us; conversely,

horror fiction seems to retain archaic elements one would imagine should have been long since abandoned” (p. 211).

Bloom then traces the works of late nineteenth and twentieth-century writers, such as H.P Lovecraft and other practitioners of horror to find a definition of this timeless, affective horror genre. Although Bloom’s focus is on a particular era of horror literature – namely the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries – the aforementioned ahistoricity of horror makes his exploration a useful roadmap by which to examine the elements that make up horror in general. Bloom argues that, for Lovecraft, the pursuit and evocation of what he defines as ‘the weird’ is “an experiential process *out of which* human experience is born. Weird literature evokes that ‘lost’ evolutionary stage whose archaic remains act upon the reader from psychological depths parallel to, but quite different from, the Freudian unconscious” (p. 214), seeking not to ask the reader to consider what is scaring them, but instead tapping into a “primeval nature of fear, deeply embedded in our ‘subconscious mind’ [...] and always capable of being invoked (through either dreams or art)” (p. 214). For Bloom, Lovecraft’s weird tale “must contain the threat or actuality of destructive annihilation leading to oblivion” (p. 216) as the source of terror, creating an atmosphere that results in “a correlative state in which the reader becomes aware in *themselves* of a profound uneasiness” (p. 215 - emphasis in original) as well as a “sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers” (Lovecraft, 2014, n.p). These unknown spheres and powers, then, recall what Bloom, drawing from King, refers to as “terror of things unknown [...] but suggested” (p. 211), with the unknowability and suggestion being what taps into and triggers this profound uneasiness and primal level of fear.

Moving from the unknowable aspect of horror towards dread, contact, and “the threat of [...] destructive annihilation” (p. 216), Bloom, via Lafcadio Hearn, then argues that

this visceral and subconscious sense of dread may occur via “demonic *contact* itself” (Bloom, p. 216 - emphasis in original), what Hearn refers to as “the experience of the dead” (2010 [1919], p. 235). This fear, Hearn suggests, is “of prenatal experience stored up in the individual by inheritance [...] and the intuitive terror of supernatural touch can thus be evolutionally explained” (p. 237 – qtd. in Bloom, pp. 216 – 217). Hearn’s remarks of the deeply inherited, evolutionary nature of dread recall Lovecraft’s “subconscious mind,” and the concept of horror as an instinctive *reaction*. Bloom elucidates on this inherited dread of demonic contact – or contact with the dead – stating that “such contact annuls identity boundaries, thereby providing the equivalent of annihilation. Thus, contact confuses the animate and inanimate, the human and the nonhuman, the living and *the dead*. It brings about that which must not be” (Bloom, p. 216 - emphasis in original).

For Bloom, then, this threat of contact with the dead or demonic comes in the form of the revenant that “disturbs the cultural realm of identity [but] is also curiously a type of *reassurance*, not only because of the innate conservation of *the return* (implying a cyclical cosmos) but because the return is what the reader *wanted!*” (p. 218 - emphasis in original). Bloom thus highlights a tension at the heart of horror: its triggering of an innate kind of fear, and its reassurance of both metaphysical unknowns (the nature of the cosmos) and the stability of genres (a return of the dead, and the dread that comes with it was expected, even wanted, by the reader). This is a fear anticipated and not necessarily unknown, yet one that still provokes a physical reaction in the reader, thus, to return to Bloom’s reading of King’s hierarchy, it can be seen as the “second level [...] of ‘fear’ and the ‘horrific’” (p. 211).

Finally, in tracing the innate fear triggered by horror, Bloom examines the act of revulsion – that affect assigned the adjective ‘mere’ by King, implying it to be of a

lower status of horror than that of terror or fear. However, Bloom argues that “for many contemporary critics, especially academics and feminists, [revulsion] has become the *central motif* of the horror genre: the body, its fluids, passages, and surfaces, is the registration for horror’s symbolic significance” (p. 220 - emphasis in original).

Returning to the threat of contact, Bloom invokes Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection as the way in which the bodily central motif of horror can be analysed. Bloom describes abjection as “a theory of identity crisis” (p. 221) that primarily focuses on “polluting objects” of the body – forms of “defilement” that provoke revulsion and a recoiling in the reader (Kristeva, 1982, p. 71), a sensation Kristeva refers to as “the twisted braid of affects and thoughts” (p. 1). The polluting objects of defilement – bodily products – appear in two categories “excremental and menstrual” (p. 71); the former “and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without” (p. 71) that can, ultimately, be taken as the threat of oblivion, of nonbeing, and of death. The latter “stands for the danger issuing from within identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and [...] the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference” (p. 71).

For Bloom, the excremental is represented best by the corpse that “becomes [...] the death that infects life as both waste and excess” (p. 221) and “menstrual and other fluids are constantly symbolically reproduced in horror fiction as ‘hieroglyphs’ for all our condensed fears. These fears are archaically embedded in the functions of the body and the way those functions both create and at the same time destabilize the ego” (p. 221). Therefore, corpses, their causes, and their effluence provoke revulsion in a reader through their liminality as both waste and person, as well as the threat of contamination and in turn annihilation of the self, whereas bodily products defined as menstrual are encountered through symbolic representation and threaten us with the breakdown of

social and sexual constructs and order. Abjection, both excremental and menstrual, threatens borders of identity. It serves as a reminder of their instability and permeability, as well as the fragile distinction between that which is ‘outside’ and that which is ‘inside’ these borders, as bodily products, now jettisoned, move from “I to not-I, inside to outside, from a safe known to a contaminating alien Other” (p. 221). As such, there is a return to the threat of annihilation, as Bloom explores through Lovecraft and Hearn. Abjection is a bodily reaction to the horrors of an embodied identity under threat from its borders and definition dissolving, a visceral reaction to the potential annihilation of identity and form. Here, I argue that Kristeva’s distinction between inside and outside also recalls Kosofsky-Sedgwick’s spatialised model of the Gothic and its components of “what’s inside, what’s outside, and what separates them” (pp. 12 – 13). Yet rather than imprisoned lovers, or the structure of a text impeding it from being told, a more visceral starkness – a horror as described by Radcliffe – is apparent. What is inside is the self, what is outside is all that is not the self, and that which separates them is a formed identity that abjection demonstrates is all too fragile. Indeed, the repulsion experienced when confronted with the abject lends truth to Kosofsky-Sedgwick’s remark that “the worst violence, the most potent magic, and the most paralyzing instances of the uncanny [...] are evoked in the very breach of the imprisoning wall” (p. 13). Horror comes when the borders of identity and selfhood are breached and we are reminded of the materiality of our selves – the flesh, blood, matter down to the atoms that make up “I” is no different than the atoms that make up the “not-I” (Kristeva, p. 221). Rather than a transformed self at the hands of a Gothic encounter, the horrific and abject encounter threatens to eradicate it altogether. Bloom concludes with a set of “principles upon which the horror tale is based” (Bloom, p. 221). These principles are:

[T]here is always the presence of the supernatural, demonic, violent, and unpredictable, usually present without explanation or logic and glimpsed at the moment it breaks into our world. The demonic threatens the annihilation of human consciousness but, at the same time, assures us of continuity in the eternal, now stripped, nevertheless, of all but a residual religiosity.

(Bloom, 2012, p. 221)

Crucially, he argues that “the horror tale proper refuses rational explanation, appealing to a level of *visceral response beyond conscious interpretation*. Thus, even scientifically created monsters are demonized and science is turned into fantasy. Horror is the literature of disjunction” (p. 221 - emphasis mine). As such, Bloom presents a model of horror in which the unfathomable – Lovecraft’s fear of the unknown, Hearn’s contact with the dead – is a core defining trait, one that brings with it a visceral, potentially abject, reaction in the reader; a “nightmare condition [that] is more ancient than humanity, residing in our remote anthropoid ancestors. It is, therefore, *genetic*, not psychological – capable of *evocation* but *not* explanation” (p. 217 - emphasis in original).

This characterisation of horror is shared by Noël Carroll, who states that “novels are denominated horrific in respect of their intended capacity to raise a certain *affect*” (1990, p. 14 - emphasis in original). Carroll explores this in the context of what he terms “art-horror” (p. 27); an emotional response by a reader to an object (usually a monster) with a feeling of threat or danger, and impurity. Carroll’s full definition of art-horror is as follows:

I am occurrently art-horrified by some monster X, say Dracula, if and only if 1) I am in some state of abnormal, physically felt agitation (shuddering, tingling, screaming etc.) which 2) has been *caused* by a) the thought: that Dracula is a possible being and by the evaluative thoughts: that b) said Dracula has the property of being physically (and perhaps morally and socially) threatening in the ways portrayed in the fiction and that c) said Dracula has the property of being impure, where 3) such thoughts are usually accompanied by the desire to avoid the touch of things like Dracula.

(Carroll, 1990, p. 27 - emphasis in original)

Carroll's art-horror and Bloom's principles of horror fiction intersect; Bloom considers the properties and affect raised by the *text* while Carroll focuses specifically on the monster of the text, or what Bloom refers to as "the presence of the supernatural, demonic, violent, and unpredictable" (p. 221); the threat, or that which delivers the threat, of annihilation. Like Bloom, Carroll recognises horror's capacity to invoke an involuntary, perhaps even physical, reaction in readers. The affect raised by horror, Carroll argues, is often shared by the characters of the text and the reader: "in works of horror the responses of characters often seem to cue the emotional responses of audiences" (p. 17). It is this shared response that separates horror stories that, for example, feature monsters, from other *non*-horror stories that feature monsters, but do not raise the same affect. Carroll argues that when, in *Dracula*, Jonathan Harker describes the looming Count's protruding teeth, "we regard them as something shudder-inducing, nauseating, rank – something one would not want either to touch or be touched by" (p.17). We are art-horrified – both under threat and repulsed – recalling Bloom's remarks on the horror tale's appeal to a visceral response over conscious interpretation, even as a reaction to a character's description of experience – or an emotional cue. This emotional cueing often comes through "in the language of immediacy and gross physicality" (Townshend, 2014, p. xxv) that, according to Dale Townshend, are "two of the definitive qualities" of horror since "at least, the publication of Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* in 1796" (p. xxv). Townshend's observations here foreground the language of horror as a point of definition and, indeed, the way in which it cues a reaction in readers, while also foregrounding that such an interpretation of horror as a genre is at least over two centuries old.

In arguing that horror is a source of reader affect, Xavier Aldana-Reyes describes horror fiction as “the literature that actively, and predominantly, seeks to create a pervasive feeling of unease and which, consistently, although not necessarily always successfully, attempts to arouse the emotions and sensations we would normally ascribe to being under threat” (2016, p. 11). Here, Aldana-Reyes highlights the subjectivity involved in horror’s affective unease – namely that what is horrifying for some may not be for others – yet emphasises that the intended reaction or sensation in readers is universal: threat.

Aldana-Reyes’ approach via reader affect circumvents using genre tropes as a way of defining horror, an area he sees as particularly tricky when trying to delineate whether a text is ‘horror’. He argues that while we may “readily associate the genre with specific characters or creatures [...] and settings [...] these alone are not sufficient to guarantee generic allegiance” (p. 8). He cites Terry Pratchett’s *Discworld* series as an example that problematises using such tropes as sites of classification because although the series is “full of every conceivable supernatural creature” (p. 8), the tone and irreverence of Pratchett’s writing all but divorces it from horror. As a counterpoint, Aldana-Reyes remarks on the works of J. G. Ballard, Tess Gerritsen, and Chuck Palahniuk as texts that “teeter on the brink of the horrific [as] fear is itself a rather vague emotion which may be caused by anything that poses a sense of threat” (pp. 8 – 9). To address this, Aldana-Reyes argues that, in the case of the relationship between the Gothic and horror, “it is crucial that a distinction be drawn between the Gothic, an artistic mode, and horror, an affective marker” (p. 15), as, while both serve to generate fear in the reader, horror “unlike the Gothic, [is not] circumscribed by particular settings, characters or situations” (p. 15), nor an intrinsic connection to aesthetics (p. 15).

From Bloom, Carroll, Townshend, and Aldana-Reyes then, horror can best be understood as a genre or generic marker of *affect* – one that provokes in its reader an unconscious, perhaps even evolutionary, reaction ranging from “profound uneasiness” (Bloom, p. 215) to shudders, tingles, and even screams (Carroll, p. 27) and/or revulsion along the way. Such reactions are shared by both character and reader through language of immediacy and gross physicality (Townshend, p. xxv), that trigger varying levels of a sense of ‘being under threat’ – from physical or psychological harm to the outright annihilation of body and identity.

2.3.2 – The Ghost Story.

Alongside the criminal, the mad, and the abhuman discussed earlier in this chapter, ghosts made up another wildly popular figure in Victorian Gothic fiction that moved out of echoey castles and crumbling towers into contemporary domestic settings. However, due to its relation to the diversification of the Gothic and horror at the end of the Victorian era, and its significant cultural role at the time, the ghost and the ghost story warrants its own subsection.

While ghosts and spirits have been around in fiction for about as long as there has been fiction in whatever form it may have taken, the ghosts of the Victorian era were remarkably prolific – perhaps being the spirits that earn the Gothic of the nineteenth century the term “ghost mode” (p. 211) by Bloom. Punter and Byron argue that the popularity of the ghost story during the time was predominantly down to two factors: the “emergence of many new periodicals and literary magazines in the wake of the mid-century expansion of the publishing industry” (p. 27), and “the rise of positivistic

science and the decline of religion in the increasingly materialist and secular nineteenth century” (p. 27).

From the former, they suggest, we can see the dissemination of ghosts, spirits, and the supernatural – as well as more generally Gothic motifs – into wider popular works such as Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* (1838), *Bleak House* (1852 – 3), and *Little Dorrit* (1855 – 7) that, much like the early Victorian Gothic scrutinised by Milbank, “appropriates the Gothic in the service of both realism and polemic” (p. 28). Thus, the entanglement of the Gothic, realism, and the political can be seen to run rife through the Victorian Gothic, continuing the genre’s characteristic of being “a genre half in the real world and half in the landscape of dreams” (Bloom, 2007, xxii).

From the latter, we see the Victorian ghost continuing in the Gothic externalisation of social anxieties. Rather than the upheaval of gender roles and the fears of social decline signified by the mad, the criminal, and abhuman, the Victorian ghost is a response to increased secularism and a rise in “positivistic science” (Punter and Byron, p. 27). With that in mind, we can again return to Bloom, but this time, his remarks on horror and how it “assures us of continuity in the eternal, now stripped, nevertheless, of all but a residual religiosity” (Bloom, 2012, p. 221). The figure of the ghost as it appears in Victorian Gothic and beyond, then, may serve to highlight the tricky interconnection between horror and the Gothic. It is worth reiterating Bloom’s qualifier that horror, unlike the Gothic, refuses rational explanation for its events. Considering this alongside Julia Briggs assessment of ghost stories in that they are “a special category of the Gothic [...] partly characterized by the fact that their supernatural events remain unexplained” (2012, p. 177), we can see that the ghost story – or “ghost mode” of the Gothic (Bloom, p. 211) – from Victorian times and beyond, may, like the ghosts

themselves, inhabit a spectral state; neither present nor absent from horror or the Gothic.

The Victorian ghost's position as hovering between horror and the Gothic is emphasised by Punter and Byron who argue that "Victorian ghost stories typically centre on the irruption of the supernatural into the familiar, comfortable, and [...] the mundane everyday world" (p. 28) serving to "challenge or at least question the authority of science and reason" (p. 28). This, again, recalls Bloom's "principles upon which the horror tale is based" (p. 222), where there is "the presence of the supernatural [...] usually present without explanation or logic and glimpsed at the moment it breaks into our world [...] assur[ing] us of continuity in the eternal, now stripped, nevertheless, of all but a residual religiosity" (p. 222). Here then, we see that the Victorian ghost's interruption into the everyday world is as much a horror event as one of a supernatural Gothic – one that reflects that scares and unnerving affect are increasingly drawn from secular perspectives in this period. Reading the conditions for a ghost through Bloom's definition for horror reveals that regardless of a spirit's reason for returning – often a Gothic secret buried in the past – their appearance in the mundane present is itself an act of horror; a reassuring rupture in the secular fabric of day-to-day life that we may, in some form, continue after death while also causing chills by representing the inevitable end of mortality.

This seeking of reassurance is similarly done, Punter and Byron argue, through the very tools and language of Victorian science with "a proliferation of societies for psychical research" (p. 28) that, they state, results in "the publication of numerous stories of supposedly 'true' hauntings" (p. 28). Luckhurst similarly views the emergence of Spiritualist groups in the late Victorian era as a response to social upheaval. He argues that they represent "weird compromise formations" (p. 117) created in response to

“crisis around the competing authority of science and religion” (p. 117), and that at its core “Spiritualism often claimed to use the empirical experimental method of science to ‘prove’ the existence of the spirit’s survival of bodily death. In the face of chronic doubt over biblical truths, here was proof one could touch” (p. 117). Just as the late Victorian ghost story mediated between the Gothic and horror (religious and secular), so too did the “eminent group of philosophers, physicists, psychologists and gentlemen researchers [who] formed the Society for Psychical Research with the express aim of putting disorderly and chaotic spiritualist investigations onto a proper, systematic scientific footing” (p. 117). Their mediation between the religious and secular, Luckhurst shows, is exemplified by “the scientised language of psychical research [where] weird extra-sensory communications in trance and dream became ‘telepathy’, ghosts became psychical projections called ‘phantasms of the living’ and haunted houses were ‘phantasmogenetic centres’” (p. 117). From the legitimising terminology used and the conviction in science around experienced spiritual phenomena, the compromise between the cultural authorities of science and religion realised by psychical research imbued ghosts with a heightened sense of possibility, and granted reports and tales of experiences with them with a renewed ontological ambiguity from this cultural legitimacy. The new legitimacy afforded to tales of spirits through the entwining of spiritualism and science similarly occurred in the opposite trajectory; with those seeking to ‘disprove’ the existence of ghosts through phantasmagoria and magic lantern shows. Terry Castle charts the spread of phantasmagoria and magic lantern shows from mainland Europe “across the Channel, where it met with – if possible – and even more enthusiastic reception. Given the indigenous mania for all things Gothic, England indeed seemed the natural home for phantasmagoria” (1988, p. 37). There was, according to Castle, a tension at the heart of phantasmagoria. The shows used

technology to create the visual illusion of spirits and ghosts in front of an audience, and the practitioners were more than happy to declare this fictional and illusory nature up front:

Producers of phantasmagoria often claimed, somewhat disingenuously, that the new entertainment would serve the cause of public enlightenment by exposing the frauds of charlatans and supposed ghost-seers. Ancient superstition would be eradicated when everyone realized that so-called apparitions were in fact only optical illusions.

(Castle, 1988, p. 30)

As Castle clearly notes here, the garb of public enlightenment that phantasmagoria were dressed in was not the whole story. Although early magic lantern shows “developed as mock exercises in scientific demystification, complete with preliminary lectures on the fallacy of ghost-belief [...] clever illusionists were careful never to reveal exactly how their own bizarre, sometimes frightening, apparitions were produced” (p. 30).

Therefore, even in ‘demystification,’ the ghosts of the nineteenth century were designed to thrill and entertain in an ontologically ambiguous sense:

Everything was done, quite shamelessly, to intensify the supernatural effect. Plunged into darkness and assailed by unearthly sounds, spectators were subjected to an eerie, estranging, and ultimately baffling spectral parade. [...] Even as it supposedly explained apparitions away, the spectral technology of the phantasmagoria mysteriously re-created the emotional aura of the supernatural. *One knew ghosts did not exist, yet one saw them anyway, without knowing precisely how.*

(Castle, 1988, p. 30 - emphasis mine)

The magic lantern shows operated as a paradox – a state of utter ontological disorientation – showing audiences the existence of something they were previously told did not exist.

It is here that the function of phantasmagoria begins to become apparent – as much a *relocation* of the ghostly as an entertaining demonstration of it. According to Castle, the

term evolved “from an initial connection with something external and public [...] to refer to something wholly internal or subjective; the phantasmic imagery of the mind” (p. 29). The term “phantastmic” and the idea of the magic lantern is then adopted into models of the mind and imagination. As Castle writes:

The magic lantern was the obvious mechanical analogue of the human brain, in that it "made" illusionary forms and projected them outward. But in another highly paradoxical sense, ghosts now seemed more real than ever before-in that they now occupied (indeed preoccupied) the intimate space of the mind itself. The paradox was exactly like that achieved at the real phantasmagoria: ghosts did not exist, but one saw them anyway. Indeed, one could hardly escape them, for they were one's own thoughts bizarrely externalized.

(Castle, 1988, p. 58)

Through Briggs' work on ghost stories, we can see how such a concept and mode of thinking made its way into the fiction of the Gothic 'ghost mode'. Recalling her earlier observation on the ghost story's 'special status' within Gothic fiction, she writes: “the ghost story's 'explanations' do not operate to rationalize or demystify the supernatural events, but rather set them inside a kind of imaginative logic [...] in which *thought itself is a mode of power*” (2012, p. 178 - emphasis mine). Briggs draws on the work of Edgar Allan Poe as an example of this in action. Though not ghost stories in “the narrowest sense of the term” (p. 178), “The Tell-Tale Heart” and other stories of Poe's dramatize “the inexplicable human urge to hurt oneself or others, the desire to throw oneself off a precipice [...] His stories revealed that the ultimate horrors lie not without but within” (p. 178). For Briggs, the ghost story:

reverts to a world in which imagination can produce physical effects, a world that is potentially within our power to change by the energy of our thoughts, yet practically alarming. And of course the ghost story itself lends some degree of credence to the powers of the imagination, since the mere words on the page can, in their limited way, reproduce the effects they describe; once we are in the grip of the narrative, the heartbeat speeds up, the skin sweats, or prickles, and any unexpected noise will cause the reader to jump.

(Briggs, 2012, p. 178)

Briggs here gestures towards the affective nature of horror. Her characterisation of “words on the page” reproduces the very effects they describe mirroring Carroll’s designation of “art-horror” (p. 27) and the capacity for a combination of language and imagination to produce physical effects. However, she cautions that to simply “read the ghost story merely as a reaching through the familiar to the terror and pleasure of the supernatural” (p. 182) – to see the ghost story through atavistic thrill of the ghosts of the narrative being conjured in the mind – “is to underplay the darker aspects of the form” (p. 182). She emphasises the importance of revenge as a primary motivator in the ghost story, and that the form plays host to “the most primitive, punitive, and sadistic of impulses” (p. 182). The sadism on the page highlights the relationship between the Gothic and horror, as Briggs draws attention to “the degree of physical disgust or horror evoked” (p. 182) through such depictions of cruelty. Here, we see the ‘ghost mode’ of the Gothic – the ghost, its reason for being, and the cruelty it represents – functioning as a “Gothic element” (Bloom, 2012, p. 211) by which horror can be invoked.

2.3.3 – The Uncanny.

The spectral, the creation of the ‘magic lantern of the mind’, and indeed the figure of the ghost itself brings about a spectre that in many ways haunts both horror as an affect and the Gothic: Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939), and with him, the approach of psychoanalysis which he was foundational in developing. In particular, it is the theory put forward in his 1919 essay “*Das ‘unheimliche’*” – in which he sets out the concept of the ‘uncanny’ – that runs as an undercurrent beneath horror and the Gothic. Bloom, Kristeva, Carroll, Punter, Hogle, Briggs and nearly every scholar of horror or the Gothic draw upon Freud’s uncanny, building on his work to analyse unsettling texts across time and culture.

Freud's uncanny is itself a response to and an extension of ideas put forward by fellow psychoanalyst, Dr. Ernst Jentsch, in his essay "*On the Psychology of the Uncanny*" (1906). Jentsch characterises the uncanny as a "psychical uncertainty" (p. 9) produced by a lack of orientation in one's perception of the world. Crucially, he explains that:

Among all the psychical uncertainties that can become an original cause of the uncanny feeling, there is one in particular that is able to develop a fairly regular, powerful and very general effect: namely, doubt as to whether an apparently living being is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate.

(Jentsch, 1997 [1906], p. 11)

Jentsch's uncanny – particularly the uncertainty over the living and animate status of objects – is triggered by wax figures (something that many surely experience standing next to too-glossy celebrities at Madame Tussaud's), dolls, and automata (p. 12). He references the writer E.T.A Hoffman as an example of a writer who produces uncanny affects in his writing by leaving the reader "in uncertainty as to whether he has a human person or rather an automaton before him in the case of a particular character" (p. 13) – achieved via uncertainty not being the "focal point of his attention, so that he is not given the occasion to investigate and clarify the matter straight away" (p. 13), drawing out suspense and keeping uncertainty suspended. Jentsch also remarks on the use of hallucination, delirium, and intoxication in characters as a means of creating uncertainty around whether the objects they interact with are animate or not – though he refers to this method as a "quite banal trick" (p. 13). Jentsch finally draws out the unsettling nature of the uncanny as the awareness of the embodied nature of one's own existence, that the psyche is part of an organic system. He references epileptic fits and "the deranged system of a sick person" (p. 15) as examples of non-fictional triggers of the uncanny that make the human appear mechanical and stand "in contradiction to the usual view of psychical freedom" (p. 15). In the other direction, he argues that "[t]he

horror which a dead body (especially a human one) [...] and similar things cause can also be explained [...] by the fact that thoughts of latent animatedness always lie so close to these things” (p. 15). Uncertainty over what is living and dead through associations of movement that disrupt “[t]he human desire for the intellectual mastery of one’s environment” (p. 15) is for Jentsch, at the heart of the uncanny.

Freud uses Jentsch’s essay as a point of departure and begins his exploration of the uncanny with an analysis of the word ‘*unheimlich*’ across different languages and dictionaries. He focuses particularly on the point that “everything is *unheimlich* that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (p. 420). Freud then explores Grimm’s dictionary for entries of ‘*heimlich*’, in which we find “*Heimlich*, as used of knowledge – mystic, allegorical: a *heimlich* meaning [...] *Heimlich* in a different sense, as withdrawn from knowledge, unconscious” (Grimm, 1877 qtd. Freud p. 421). This conflation of *heimlich* and *unheimlich* leads to Freud’s conclusion that “*heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* is in some way or another a sub-species of *heimlich*” (p. 421). This transformation from the former to the latter – and the commonly accepted understanding of the uncanny – is worked through psychoanalytical reading, and in particular, Freud’s interest in repression.

Like Jentsch, Freud then draws upon the work of Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffman, but rather than a broad gesture to his style as an author, Freud analyses “*The Sandman*” (1817) through the lens of uncanny-as-repression. The story entails the character Nathaniel being tormented by memories around the death of his father, and ideas of the Sand-Man – a figure who would rob children of their eyes if they did not go to bed. A childhood Nathaniel “determined to find out what the Sand-Man looked like” (p. 422) sneaks into his father’s office and sees a visitor, Coppelius – “a repulsive person whom

the children were frightened of” (p. 422). Coppelius catches Nathaniel and threatens to burn his eyes for eavesdropping. Later in life, Nathaniel believes “he has recognized this phantom of horror from his childhood in an itinerant optician, an Italian called Giuseppe Coppola” (p. 422). Nathaniel buys a spy-glass from Coppola but is thrown into fits of madness when he looks through it – first mistaking a professor’s clockwork automaton for a woman and falling in love, and finally being tormented by the reappearance of Coppelius in a crowd and falling to his death.

For Freud, it is not the dolls and automata mistaken for living people in Hoffman’s story that are the source of its uncanny affect. There is no intellectual uncertainty around the living or inanimate nature of the doll, nor the orientation of Nathaniel’s world and the revelation that “Coppola the optician really *is* the lawyer Coppelius and also, therefore, the Sand-Man” (p. 423). Instead, it is the preoccupation with eyes, or more specifically “the idea of being robbed of one’s eyes” (p. 423) that give the story its uncanny quality. Freud relates this fear to the repression of the “anxiety belonging to the castration complex of childhood” (p. 424) that then reappears in a distorted, yet still somewhat familiar form. Freud argues that:

Every emotional affect, whatever its quality, is transformed by repression into morbid anxiety, then among such cases of anxiety there must be a class in which the anxiety can be shown to come from something which *recurs*. This class of morbid anxiety would then be no other than what is uncanny, irrespective of whether it originally aroused dread or some other affect. In the second place, if this is indeed the secret nature of the uncanny, we can understand why the usage of speech has extended *das Heimliche* into its opposite *das Unheimliche*, for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old – established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression [...] something which ought to have been kept concealed by which has nevertheless come to light.

(Freud, 1919, p. 429)

We find here how the uncanny comes about, and its close connection to horror and the Gothic beyond simply the affect it triggers. Recurrence, a return of the repressed and it

being made strange (or indeed monstrous) through that very act of repression calls directly to the Gothic and Catherine Spooner's characterisation that "[i]n Gothic texts [...] the past is a site of terror, of an injustice that must be resolved, an evil that must be exorcised" (2007, p. 18). This characterisation speaks to the monstrous forms that threaten the protagonists of Gothic texts; representations of repressed traumas and injustices made monstrous in their irruption in the present, and the spectres of the Gothic ghost mode discussed above – as well as the antiquated medieval settings of early Gothic novels. Indeed, as the feeling itself is associated with unpleasantness, the Gothic *and* the horror-affect that the Gothic can invoke, "provide the best-known examples of those strange and ghostly figures that Freud saw as examples of 'the Uncanny'" (Hogle, 2002, p. 6).

Hogle's take on the uncanny, however, suggests a move *beyond* Freud – past the "strictly psychological or visceral drives from our earliest existence [...] and] the devices he isolates for rendering the symbolic disguises of such drives in fiction" (p. 6). Hogle's interpretation relocates anxieties from developmental psychology to cultural anxieties, showing how those devices can be "employed [...] for configuring quite familiar and basic social contradictions engulfing middle-class individuals who must nevertheless define themselves in relation to these anomalies, often using creatures or similarly *othered* beings to incarnate such mixed and irresolvable foundations of being" (p. 6). Freudian repression, then, takes on a new form through the Gothic – a way to shift and externalise pressures, contradictions, and threats to middle-class England using fiction. The significance of the source of 'the threat' in Gothic and horror as an externalisation or making strange of contemporary social issues – or 'anomalies' – repressed in day to day life is an incredibly significant concept for the analysis of Gothic, horror, and other forms of genre fiction. This integral nature is succinctly put

by Catherine Spooner who remarks that the Gothic characterises “the past [as] a site of terror that needs to be exorcised” (Spooner, 2006, p. 18) – a return of the repressed in all its forms.

We can also return to the ghost, whose mere presence is inherently uncanny – having been repressed and coming to light, especially if one considers the foregrounding of revenge in their return. Indeed, as Briggs remarks “Ghost stories represent the return of the repressed in its most literal and paradigmatic form” (p. 178). Of key interest to Briggs is the relationship between the uncanny and repetition; a relationship that can manifest as coincidence or through the figure of the double. She states, drawing upon Derrida’s consideration of production, repetition, and performance in literature that:

It soon becomes apparent that many of the most characteristic motifs of the ghost story, even the very ghosts themselves, are reproductions or simulacra of human beings, and many of the other figures that appear in ghost stories – doubles (or *doppelganger*), automata, manufactured monsters like Frankenstein’s, reanimated corpses (or zombies), the golem made from the clay of the dead – are all different forms of reproduction, and that the concept of uncanniness itself is closely connected to disturbing interpretations and the discovery of resisted meanings. Literature, with its fundamental process of mirroring lived life, is by its nature, uncanny.

(Briggs, 2012, p. 179)

Through Briggs’ remarkably comprehensive list, we can see many ‘threats’ – othered, repressed, estranged – that are reproduced or doubled, including literature itself.

Through Briggs, there is a return of Jentsch’s assessment of the uncanny, something that is developed by Bennett and Royle, who argue for the uncanny in terms of “making things *uncertain*: it has to do with the sense that *things are not as they have come to appear through habit and familiarity*” (1999, p. 37 - emphasis mine). The intellectual uncertainty of Jentsch is changed via the concept of repression by Freud. From this, we arrive at what can be read as the use of estrangement to create a sense of uncertainty –

of a potential ontological ambiguity – in a characters' experiences, or possibly in the mind of the reader.

This assessment of the uncanny purely as uncertainty can be linked to Punter and Byron's suggestion that the uncanny is an inherently Gothic theme in section 1.2 and across their list of key themes and topics of the Gothic. Uncertainty can similarly be found in their take on 'persecution and paranoia', suggesting that "the literary Gothic has been concerned with uncertainties of character positioning and instabilities of knowledge" (p. 273) from its inception, the culmination of which is a "catastrophic decline as [the protagonist's] subjectivity disintegrates under the pressure of paranoid fantasies" (p. 276). Uncertainty can also be seen in their inclusion of 'hallucination and narcotic' as a Gothic topic, as they argue that:

the Gothic is grounded on the terrain of hallucination: this would be another way of saying that it is a mode within which we are frequently unsure of the reliability of the narrator's perceptions, and thus of the extent to which we as readers are enjoined to participate in them or to retain a critical distance.

(Punter and Byron, 2004, p. 293)

The link between uncertainty at the hands of paranoia and uncertainty at the hands of hallucination and a dreamlike quality "of impending sleep, to a world where all sense of differentiation and vivid colour is in continual danger of slipping away" (p. 293) is incredibly close. Both have the effect of 'making strange' the world to both character and reader, creating an uncanny uncertainty around perception and reality that could give way to horror at any point.

The uncanny, therefore, can be seen as the bedrock – or perhaps the spawning point – of both horror and the Gothic. It is, as pointed out by Jentsch and Freud, a psychological *affect*. It triggers horror that can give way to revulsion and other physical

sensations. At the same time, the way in which the uncanny works, and the methods by which it can be invoked, are regarded by many to be Gothic traits and elements.

2.4 – Twentieth-Century Gothic.

As I have shown above, as the Victorian era ended at the beginning of the twentieth century, Gothic fiction continued its movement away from its roots as Gothic romance safely set in the Middle Ages to a bricolage of elements and artefacts that erupted in the contemporary present to cause the sensation of horror. The ghost story, discussed in 2.3.2 in its Victorian context, further evolved in its liminal generic space as the “darker aspects of the form” (Briggs, p. 182) were given more to draw on as “the darkness at the heart of Western so-called civilization exploded outwards into history in the most unparalleled and horrifying way in the twentieth century, making it the most irrationally destructive ever known” (p. 184).

Briggs points out that the First World War, the first mechanised global conflict, left a cultural scar far beyond Victorian anxieties around the ‘new woman’ or the *fin de siècle* (p. 183). As such, the ghost became less a traumatic figure eliciting horror and instead a “form of light relief” (p. 183) in comparison to the horrors around it. Yet, as Briggs also argues, ghosts emerged from that conflict, and have continued to emerge through the great traumas of the twentieth century: battlefield mythologies and “strange rumours” (p. 184) of the Western Front of the ghosts of saints helping troops during the retreat from Mons, immortalised in Arthur Machen’s *The Bowmen* (1915); the collected ghost stories of Elizabeth Bowen written during the Second World War’s Blitz where the spirits therein are “somehow necessary to their victims, almost invented by them to fill the spiritual voids opened by the shock of war” (p. 185). What we find through Briggs’

charting of the ghost story is a relocation and evolution as it transitions from one century to the next – accelerated through increasingly technologically facilitated cultural traumas.

The irreversible impact war has on culture – specifically the Great War – is documented by W. Scott Poole. He argues that the emergence of the distinctly horrific from the Gothic – beginning in the previous century – is rooted in the Great War. Poole’s assessment of horror agrees somewhat with my exploration of the term in section 2.3.1.1, that it is a marker of affect, and one that has a specifically physical component. Looking at usage of the word in pre-World War I literature Poole concludes that “‘horror’ meant physical revulsion, not a good scare. Even into the 1800s, the meaning of the word has always suggested the body in a state of intense distress” (2018, p. 10). Of course, bodies in a state of intense distress is an all too fitting description of the reality of trench warfare, and Poole notes the increased usage of the term in descriptions of the World War I, arguing that “[t]he years following the Great War became the first time in human history the word ‘horror’ and its cognates appeared on such a massive scale. Images of catastrophe abounded” (p. 10). The scar left by such a conflict, Poole argues, cannot be understated.

The haunting, and importantly, bodily and material reality of the First World War shifted our cultural relationship to unsettling genres as “[t]he horror of the Great War consumed the lives of soldiers and civilians alike; it sought them out in their sleep, their imagination, and, bizarrely, in their entertainments” (p. 10). Rather than the pastiche and fancy of the Gothic, unsettling fiction “took a ghastly turn, dealing more openly with the fate of the dead, even the bodies of the dead [...] [N]ew feelings about death and the macabre began to seek expression” (pp. 10 – 11). Poole turns his attention to early twentieth century stage productions and films, noting how Gothic subjects such as

Frankenstein, *The Werewolf*, and *Jekyll and Hyde* were adapted into quite different narratives that worked at odds with the middle-class audiences and concerns the tales were originally for:

The Great War had definitively shaped a desire for the creators of horror to do more than entertain, to thrill and chill. There was something confrontational about the way artists, writers, and filmmakers produced horror. They seldom had any kind of obvious political conclusions they wanted drawn from their work, but they almost always wanted their audiences to come face-to-face with death in new and disturbing forms that mocked the bourgeois cheers of much of prewar Europe. People who felt directly addressed by this new horror culture seemed to want the same.

(Poole, 2018, p. 31)

Poole's assessment here sets up a class division between the Gothic and horror alongside their stylistic differences – with horror being 'bodily' and more intense. However, this division is complicated in Poole's declaration that "horror in film and fiction reflects the anxieties of the present moment" (p. 27), while earlier Gothic output was designed to "entertain, thrill and chill" (p. 31). As I have demonstrated in the previous section, social anxieties of the time of production are at the heart of much Gothic fiction.

The intense global trauma that marked the first half of the twentieth century, starting with the First World War, can be viewed as a crucial for the development of both horror and the Gothic – perhaps *the* moment in which the Gothic begins to atomise from a coherent genre towards something closer to the "Gothic elements" distributed across texts as described by Bloom (2012, p. 211). The real-life visceral horror of war meant that traditional Gothic thrills were ill-equipped to entertain or thrill as they had once done, instead being intensified through a seeking of less supernatural and instead more bodily, material, more horrifying content.

The accelerated technological development that facilitated previously unthinkable scales of horror in war similarly impacted the forms a Gothic narrative could take – moving from novels and print to a multitude of media and modes. As Poole and Requelme note, the birth of cinema at the turn of the century ushered in a new way for Gothic fiction to be presented – which it summarily was through the adaptations of nineteenth century novels into film, albeit with an eye towards a horrific affect (Poole, p. 30). Elisabeth Bronfen goes further still, arguing that through cinema’s “proximity to the spectacle of the supernatural [it is] the natural successor of a literary tradition concerned with ghosts, revenants, and demonic forces” (2014, p. 107). Cinema’s visual dynamic, for Bronfen, lends itself to the supernatural excess of the Gothic – portraying on screen that which previously could only be portrayed via fantastical description on the page.

Bronfen claims that cinema has potentially been a Gothic medium from the very beginning, arguing that “[a]s in Gothic fictions, the affective power of the cinematic image feeds on our willingness to believe in, and be moved by, apparitions of light and shadow cast on a white screen in a darkened room” (p. 107). She equates this belief in the forms of light and shadow to the “black words on a white page of a Gothic novel” (p. 107) – recalling Carroll’s ideas of art-horror and how the language used and words on the page can produce physical effects in the reader.

Bronfen also draws on cinema’s similarity in form to magic lantern shows and phantasmagoria of the previous century (p. 107). The “projected specters” (p. 107) and trickery of phantasmagoria can be seen as predecessors to the films and techniques of Georges Méliès (1861 – 1938) – a stage-magician and illusionist who was able to “adapt the theater of magic to the new medium of film” (p. 107) – going as far as to proclaim him as responsible for the coupling of Gothic and cinema. She writes:

With his penchant for fairies, demons, and other marvels, for both journeys into unknown lands and chilling adventures into haunted houses, Méliès instigated the relation that film was to have with the Gothic, given the emphasis of both on an experience of the world beyond rational comprehension.

(Bronfen, 2014, p. 107)

As Bronfen shows, the works of Méliès and their dreamlike qualities – *A Nightmare* (1896); *The Devil in a Convent* (1900); *The Kingdom of the Fairies* (1903); *The Impossible Voyage* (1904) and many others – all gesture towards the notion of the Gothic as “a genre half in the real world and half in the landscape of dreams” (2007, xxii). Importantly, therefore, the inherent ‘trickery’ in the medium gestured to by Bronfen also suggests a continuum of the Gothic ontological ambiguity.

Bronfen makes the case that the “special relation film art has to the Gothic is [...] both thematic and formal” (p. 108). She argues that the ‘act’ of cinematic screenings – the lights dimming, the projector creating a new, believable world on the screen, only for the illusion to dissipate once the film ends and the house lights return – works in a similar way to the Gothic of the eighteenth century as:

Gothic cinema [...] confronts us with uncomfortable realities yet also makes them ghostly, both calls up and keeps safely distant anxieties and forbidden desires deep in our culture and psyches. It thus uses the screen as a conceptual space where, by virtue of an embodied, yet also spectralized, performance, concerns that profoundly trouble a specific cultural moment can be addressed and worked through under the guise of seeming fictional.

(Bronfen, 2014, p. 108)

For Bronfen, the mechanisms by which Gothic cinema functions as a form has a similar effect to the medieval settings of the Gothic fiction a hundred years or so prior: safely keeping representations of contemporary anxieties in a world that can be accessed, immersed in, and then retreated from at will “under the guise of seeming fictional”. She argues that Gothic cinema also “self-consciously speaks to its own technical apparatus” (p. 108) as cinema produces “a double of the world it represents, the art form of film is

involved in a hallucinatory enterprise, rendering tangible not actual but possible experiences” (p. 108). Gothic cinema, for Bronfen, goes one further, by “viscerally staging [...] creatures that exist only in fantasy” (p. 108), and therefore bringing to the foreground the “spectrality of the film medium by undercutting all semblance of ‘realistic’ verisimilitude, seeming to open a passage between the spiritual beyond and the material here [...] these films speak to the uncanniness of their own mode of communication as it gives imaginary tangibility to what is physically absent” (p. 108).

The inherently Gothic nature of early cinema is similarly recognised by Fred Botting who acknowledges the importance of the Gothic in interwar German expressionist cinema, as well as the many adaptations of novels from decades prior. He argues that these films “made a gothic literary aesthetic visible as a shadowplay [...] [I]t was a medium in which unreal things could happen and unreal beings could exist” (2014, p. 150). Moreover, through technological trickery such as “[d]ouble-exposures and over-exposure [...] stop-frame editing in which objects could appear and disappear, or split screens in which one figure could appear twice” (p. 150), the new medium of film allowed the Gothic and horror to come together through an embodied, visible version of that which thrilled them on the page: “[s]hocking or terrifying audiences in realising the unreal, cinema was also seen to present the workings of the desires, demons and suppressed energies of the human psyche on screen” (p. 150). Embodied affect in readers and an exorcising of cultural anxieties all transfer from the page onto the silver screen, as well as gesturing towards a technologically facilitated ontological ambiguity by “realising the unreal” through camera trickery, with “new camera tricks [...] devised to maintain this element of wonder” (Kaye, 2012, p. 239).

The technological progress that allowed the Gothic to find a new home along with horror affect on celluloid also forged further genre atomising as the Gothic fell out of

trend for print fiction of the time. For Botting, a distinct Modernist Gothic did not exist as:

the aesthetic experiments and aspirations of modernism aimed higher and appealed to a cultural elite that had little time for popular and formulaic fiction [...] Also, modernist identifications of a very different sense of life, one in which reality, time and consciousness were perceived to be fragmented, transient and in flux, used metaphors of phantom, ghost or spectre as appropriate registers for the everyday instabilities of subjectivity and materiality.

(Botting, 2014, p. 149)

Here, then, we see why the entrenched tropes of the Gothic (the monsters, castles, dungeons etc.) migrated to celluloid. Modernist trends in literature intended to leave entrenched notions of sensation and genre fiction behind, and thus Gothic tales – or their settings, characters, and other tropes – found a new home. For Botting, Gothic literature in this era – in a move to more pulp forms exemplified, in his opinion by M. R. James – showed “a reluctance to engage with anything suggestive of modernity. The horrors that appear [...] are linked to the distant past, to ancient lore and rites” (p. 165). Moreover, the Modernist moment – characterised by Futurist manifestos that appeal to “a world of speed, engines and energy, of cars and crashes, accelerating beyond safe and stolid institutions of culture and tradition” (p. 148) – suffused the cultural moment itself with a Gothic energy. As Botting writes: “[c]ivilisation does not exclude barbaric and savage energies, it reinvents them” (p. 148) – a quote here that brings up-to-date the characteristics that made Gothic a derogatory marker for the middle ages during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

The changing configurations of cities, crowds, commodities and consciousness compose a new ‘phantasmagoria’ [...] the uncertain extent to which the modern world involves a blurring of perception and hallucination, a flux of impressions, realities, machines and media forms, in which both a sense of the solidity of things and security of selves is supplanted by multiple and sometimes monstrous movements that engender apprehension but cannot easily be apprehended. *It is as if the uncanny disturbances, spectres and ghosts that once*

were limited as effects of gothic fictions, extended, via other media, into the fabric and shadowy formation of modern life, a kind of 'phantomodernity'.

(Botting, 2014, pp. 148 – 149 - emphasis mine.)

Botting's characterisation of the movement of the Gothic in the first half of the twentieth century here is important. Through a combination of rapid technological and industrial progress, unprecedented horror in war, and the development of new forms of media, the Gothic dissipates out from simply being a subject, aesthetic style, or a collection of elements found in fictions, and instead becomes characteristic of the nature of life itself. Such a reading is echoed by Hogle who argues that the Gothic of modernity suggests "a backward-leaning counter-modernity lurking in both the emerging and recent stages of modern life. This retrogression appears to undermine, and in that way 'haunt,' the assumption that the 'modern' has left behind any regressive tendencies that might impede its progress and fulfilment" (2014, p. 4). These assessments of the first half of the twentieth century suggest that Armitt's proclamation that "Gothic, then, has become a means of reading culture, not just a cultural phenomenon to be read" (2011, p. 10) is an appropriate reappraisal of the term.

Indeed, the atomisation of the Gothic into the fabric of culture, Armitt argues, was anticipated from the very beginning as the term itself is a "floating signifier transferred from one referent (fifth-century tribes) to another (high medieval architecture) and then another (Walpole's hybrid)" (p. 4). She suggests that *The Castle of Otranto* – its patchwork of elements, hybridity, and fragments – is reflected in twentieth century culture and beyond, as well as how the Gothic and its "mixture of quite different elements [that are] inherently unstable" (p. 5) can be used as a way to map cultural trajectories and anxieties. For Hogle, the Gothic's inherent instability and patchwork nature anticipates postmodern aesthetics that make references to earlier styles "that

assume a near-complete divorce of those signifiers from fixed meanings or older contexts” (pp. 9 – 10). Hogle thus suggests that the bricolage, quotation, and remix from across art and culture found in many postmodern texts can be mapped onto the creation of Gothic texts from its generic beginnings in the eighteenth century. As this characteristic has been part of the Gothic aesthetic since at least the design and construction of eighteenth century follies, Hogle asserts that the Gothic is “first, a precursor of this counter-aesthetic and thus, more recently a fellow traveller with postmodernity” (p. 10).

2.5 – Late-Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Gothic.

The latter half of the twentieth century up until the present day sees the Gothic continue to mutate and permeate through, describe, and react to contemporary culture (Spooner, 2006 & 2012; Botting, 2014; Hogle, 2014). What constitutes a Gothic narrative in the era of a postmodern and ‘phantommodernist’ society is somewhat tricky. Botting describes the situation thus:

Genres such as horror, science fiction, fantastic and romance now overlap in their registration of mutations; television, comics, cartoons, music and computer games absorb and develop techniques for the production and screening of terrors and anxieties. As social hierarchies are challenged, so are the aesthetic categories that supported them; judgement is liberated into a range of partial, political and personal interpretations often linked to freedoms of the market or the choice it demands. High art and popular culture collide in an aesthetic context in which personal taste and consumption come to the fore [...] Boundaries become increasingly porous.

(Botting, 2014, p. 172)

The Gothic, then, becomes the distribution of “Gothic elements” described by Bloom (2012, p. 211), that move across genres and through popular and newly emergent media, mutating through formal requirements and reflecting what Botting sees as a

Gothic culture in its ever-shifting forms. For Botting, these atomised Gothic elements, where they crop up, enact the postmodern “incredulity towards metanarratives” (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiv). More specifically, the presence of these Gothic elements – their monstrous otherness, their liminality, their revenant nature, unmoored from past signification and context – mount a “challenge to those rational, moral and ideological frameworks which, in modernity, had shaped the world: freedoms, anxieties, monstrosities associated with otherness, power, bodies, sexuality” (Botting, 2014, p. 172). The Gothic thus resembles its creatures who resemble and enact a postmodern challenge to binary frameworks in Gothic narratives.

The Gothic’s ability to demonstrate the permeability of generic and cultural boundaries, shifting with ease between narrative forms and styles and across media with its already “ungrounded signifiers” (Hogle, 2014, p. 11), reflects the dramatic shifts in wider society as:

identity, reality, truth and meaning are not only effects of narratives but also subject to a dispersion and multiplication of meanings, realities and identities that obliterates the possibility of imagining any final human order and unity. Progress, rationality and civilisation, increasingly suspect, cede to new forms of sublimity and excess, new terrors, irrationalities and inhumanities.

(Botting, 2014, p. 173)

The “sublimity and excess [...] irrationalities and inhumanities” of the increasingly fragmented postmodern society of the late-twentieth and early twenty-first century recall Gothic thematic touchstones existing since its roots in fiction in the mid eighteenth century. Gothic elements, then, through their ungrounded liminality *par excellence*, usher in and serve to describe Botting’s “phantomodernity” (p. 149) – whose emphasis on the “solidity of things and security of selves [...] supplanted by multiple and sometimes monstrous movements that engender apprehension but cannot easily be apprehended” (p. 148) recalls his comments above on the postmodern

condition. In times where culture itself appears Gothic, the elements of the Gothic begin to settle in every aspect of culture with little regard for medium, form, or genre.

Hogle argues that because of the inherently ungrounded nature of Gothic elements, they are “astonishingly adept at symbolizing many underlying conflicts within [...] cultures at different points in time” (p. 11) in a way that can react and respond to cultural forces. Botting notes that “familiar monsters [...] continue through popular fiction, culture and media, repetitively recycled [...] with occasional minor alterations of their status, capacities and abilities, all of which constitute small but unique selling points in a competitive market” (p. 199). This flexibility of Gothic signifiers is also noted by Linnie Blake and Agnieszka Soltysik in *Neoliberal Gothic* (2017) who take a global view, stating that the “pattern of gothic writing interrogating the contemporary *Zeitgeist* would spread across the world [...] as successive nations adopted the mode’s lexicon to explore their own most troubling times” (2017, p. 3). The ungrounding of Gothic elements, their modularity and ‘adjustability’, and their transport around the world via more rapidly spread and proliferating media mean that their ability to interrogate past trauma is universally recognised. This leads to reinventions and reinterpretations of Gothic elements specific to certain cultures that, through a global availability of media via the Internet, can be viewed by the rest of the world and fed back into wider cultural knowledge of the Gothic.

The reinvention of ungrounded or floating signifiers as a response to globalised markets and postmodern cultural output mirror Catherine Spooner’s assessment in her introduction to *Contemporary Gothic* (2006). She notes that “returns from the dead [...] seldom take exactly the same shape they possessed before. The notion of revival can be seen to imply a reappropriation and reinvention of previous forms rather than a straightforward repetition” (2006, p. 11). As such, the Gothic in the contemporary age

is one in which the term has become “a more flexible means of description that does not present a definitive statement about its object, but can be applied to a variety of different texts” (2006, p. 26). As a result, “a text may be Gothic and simultaneously many other things” (p. 26). Gothic elements are redeployed in a litany of new ways but as Spooner writes:

Nevertheless, these themes and motifs deliberately recall the Gothic and implicitly engage in dialogue with the form as it emerged in the eighteenth century. They may subtly alter the Gothic as it is traditionally understood, appropriate for ends perhaps entirely different from, or even contrary to, those of its earliest practitioners, even ‘de-Gothicize’ conventional images [...] draining them of their power to induce horror.

(Spooner, 2006, pp. 26 – 27)

For Spooner, while themes, motifs, and elements that signify the Gothic may be always already unmoored from a set meaning, there is an ingrained cultural association with them learned from nearly three centuries of cultural output shaping how we ‘traditionally’ understand the Gothic. Gothic elements distributed across media, form, and genre will speak to this understanding, as any new meaning for these elements is shaped by our understanding of the Gothic and the reconditioning of elements in relation to that original understanding.

The ‘de-Gothicization’ and subversion of Gothic images gestures towards a contemporary postmodern culture where meaning and identity is in flux (explored above by Botting and Hogle). With experiences and identity no longer fixed, so too is the meaning and associated *affect* of our monsters. This emptying of even horrific, unnerving, or otherwise negative affect from Gothic elements is something that, according to Spooner, the Gothic was always primed for and anticipating long before postmodernism elevated pastiche, metacommentary, and self-awareness to common cultural textual practices. She argues that the “Gothic has from the very beginning been

a very knowing and self-aware genre – it was artificially constructed by a camp antiquarian, Horace Walpole, and parodies appeared almost as soon as the first novel” (p. 23). Techniques associated with postmodernism here appear baked-in to the Gothic at birth. Its ontological ambiguity, artificiality, and ahistoricity, drawn from the artificiality of the architecture and follies that inspired its literary form, sheds light on the fact the Gothic has always been self-aware if it was constructed and arranged from Walpole’s chosen signifiers. As Spooner shows here, the floating, modular, and remixable nature of Gothic elements means they have been transgressing genre boundaries for as long as they have existed.

Taking stock of today’s contemporary Gothic and echoing Botting, Spooner remarks that the “Gothic no longer crops up only in film and fiction, but also fashion, furniture, computer games, youth culture, advertising” (p. 23). The unmoored nature of the contemporary Gothic allows its elements – characters, archetypes, plots, settings etc. – to be recycled, reinvented, and even subverted as postmodern cultural output, un beholden to form, genre, or even fiction and traditional notions of ‘text’. Botting warns that this reinvention and – with an emphasis on young adult franchises such as *Teen Wolf* and *Twilight* – creation of “increasingly attractive images of once negative ones” (p. 199) comes at the cost of over-familiarity; a situation where “scary figures, when invested with positive associations, lose the very features and effects that once, negatively in fear or horror, charged them with significance” (p. 199). However, as Spooner notes above, this subversion of Gothic images is also an already practised aspect of the Gothic. Gothic output in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first century, then, is not necessarily always deliberately postmodern in its execution, but Gothic elements have, since inception, been primed for subversion, self-aware incorporation, and widespread distribution. As Spooner argues, the “[c]ontemporary Gothic possesses

a new self-consciousness about its own nature; it has reached new levels of mass production, distribution and audience awareness [...]; and it has crossed disciplinary boundaries to be absorbed into all forms of media” (2006, p. 23). Gothic elements in the twenty-first century are cultural commodities, familiar enough to cross media and genre boundaries, symbolising what they are required to symbolise when they are required to do so, all with a little bit of tweaking and reinvention to play off existing “audience awareness” (p. 23).

2.5.1 – Found Footage.

As examined above, elements of the Gothic – its stock characters, monsters and villains, settings, plots – have become distributed across culture in various states of subversion, de-gothicising, or reinforcement of cultural understandings, predominantly through media and technological developments. Technological and media advancement has similarly reinvigorated the Gothic trait of ontological ambiguity. The pretence of a ‘factual’ narrative – a document found in an archive, published letters, a lecture on how spirits and the supernatural do not exist – allows Gothic elements to slip across and between forms, genres, and straddle the border between existing in reality or fiction. Continuing the lineage established in the ‘found documents’ of the first edition of *Otranto* and *Frankenstein*, and through the Victorian “mock exercises in scientific demystification” (Castle, 1988, p. 30) of phantasmagoria, the proliferation of more portable and cheaper forms of video recording resulted in the ‘found footage’ horror film cycle at the turn of the millennium. Henriksen describes this cycle as:

A sub-genre of horror films, so-called ‘found footage’, ‘point of view’ (POV in short) or ‘mockumentary’ horror, explores how monsters and technology – whether the technologies of machinery or the technologies of the mind – are intertwined. ‘Mockumentaries’ are films that use the aesthetics of documentaries to tell fictive stories, thus blurring the boundary between fact and fiction [...] but it has roots stretching back to Orson Welles’s legendary 1938

radio drama *The War of the Worlds*, which famously used news bulletins to tell the story of an alien invasion of Earth. Later the BBC television film *Ghostwatch* (1992) became one of the first shows to bring together mockumentary and the more traditional creatures of the paranormal, such as ghosts and poltergeists, in a narrative of a ‘true’ haunting.

(Henriksen, 2013, pp. 407 – 408)

As Henriksen observes here, a stepping stone between *Frankenstein* and phantasmagoria to found footage is Orson Welles’s interwar broadcast of *The War of the Worlds*. Of importance is the new bulletin format in which the narrative was told. The subsequent reaction from the public is now, as Henriksen says, the stuff of legend. The radio drama’s presentation as a series of news bulletins – supplemented by the opinions of ‘academics’ and ‘scientists’ – functioned similarly to the authoritative and objective stance taken by the hosts of the phantasmagorias before it and Welles’s performance provoked panic and confusion in its listeners, resulting in numerous phone calls to CBS Radio and a headline in *The New York Times*. Both used technologies to transmit and conjure up fantastical happenings while retaining an ‘objective’ stance, thus blurring the lines between reality and fiction. In a shift away from H. G. Wells’ iconic aliens, Henriksen credits the BBC’s *Ghostwatch* with using a similar format but focusing on poltergeists and hauntings. Again, the format is reminiscent of both Welles’s radio drama and the phantasmagorias before it, albeit with an updated technology being used to usher in the sense of paranormality, using well-known and trusted faces from BBC News to deliver the narrative. The development of the video camera, used to great effect in *Ghostwatch* is where the use of technology to blur the distinction between fact and fiction in horror narratives gains a name and subgenre – the “‘found footage’, ‘point of view’ (POV in short) or ‘mockumentary’ horror” (p. 407), using new technologies to further the Gothic tradition of artificially created documentation of Gothic elements, then presented as authentic.

While Henriksen presents ‘found footage’ and ‘mockumentary’ and ‘POV’ horror as synonyms, I believe a distinction must be made between these types of horror film. Despite being aesthetically similar, the latter two subgenres do not insist on the ontological status of their narratives as fact or as having happened in the real world. Moreover, marketing and other paratexts treat these texts as traditional films. ‘Found footage’ on the other hand, owes its namesake to *The Blair Witch Project* (1999 – shortened to *Blair Witch* from here on in), which had an entirely different approach to marketing as well as engaging its viewers. Rather than wear any marks of studio or distributor in its marketing, *Blair Witch* set out to deceive viewers with an online campaign and listing the actors as ‘missing’ from the end of production until after the release of the film on IMDB.com.³ Thus the emphasis is in *found* footage – as in, this footage was found in the real world, edited and then distributed.

Blair Witch signifies a crucial development point in the recurrent Gothic trait of ontological ambiguity. Not only was it a remarkable financial success and pop-culture phenomenon, but as well as using handheld video cameras and presenting as a student documentary film gone awry, it exploited the liminal online spaces of the fledgling Internet to further stake its claim on reality. Martin Harris explores the methods used in the promotion of the film, and the use of the Internet not just as a tool of said promotion, but as a way of providing supplementary information to further foreground the film’s basis in reality and feed into its presentation as a factual account of events in a way “possibly unlike any other film previously promoted on the Internet” (Harris, 2001, p. 78). After the film’s debut at Cannes in 1998, distribution rights were bought by Artisan, who recognised that “the Internet as proven a highly susceptible vehicle for rapid, widespread dissemination of fraudulent information” (2001, p. 78), leading to the

³ The Internet Movie Database: an extensive website that lists all cast, crew, and other film production credits.

creation and distribution of online content that was complimentary to the ‘found footage’ conceit of the film. Such material included fictional “police reports, interviews with the ‘missing’ filmmakers’ parents, a time line extending back to the eighteenth century, and other data bearing some relation to the story told by the film though not depicted on screen” (2001, p. 78). The combination of the verisimilitude of the film itself, its editing style and form, and the online ‘resources’ and supplementary information put out by the studio means that filmgoers searching for answers to the ontological status of the film are only further misled when finding Artisan’s online materials – feeding into the Gothic tradition further, as the narrative reveals itself to be a “patchwork of textual modes [...] remediated into a single narrative” (Mandal, 2015, p. 91) that neither confirms nor denies its status as real.

The title of Margrit Schreier’s analysis on how the reality status of *Blair Witch* is viewed by recipients sums up the effect: “Please Help Me; All I Want to Know Is: Is It Real or Not?” (2004). In tracing the marketing of the film, like Harris, she then explores how a system of interrelated perspectives used for evaluating the reality of media lead the viewer to such a question – “a pragmatic perspective concerning the product type (‘fact,’ ‘fiction,’ and ‘hybrids’), a semantic perspective concerning product content (degrees of plausibility), and a perspective of mode referring to the (perceived) realism of the product (formal features and their effects on degree of involvement)” (2004, p. 305). Schreier finds that *Blair Witch* problematises our perspectives and navigation of fact and fiction through its presentation as a “hybrid” between the two poles “that combines elements of fiction and nonfiction to varying degrees” (2004, p. 314). As such, viewers struggle to navigate between the “paratextual signals [that] point to the supposedly factual status of the media product... the mode of production [that] is highly realistic... [and] the content... [that] involves elements

which are clearly implausible and thus point to the fictional status of the film” (2004, p. 328). Therefore, the believability of ‘found-footage’ as a sub-genre of horror appears to be due to its use of contemporary technology as a mediator for the fantastical events and Gothic elements of the film, positioning the factual representation of the narrative alongside the traditional genre elements of the Gothic within that point towards a fictional story. This approach enhances the horror affect of the story by bringing the ontological ambiguity experienced by Gothic protagonists to the audience of the film itself, making them uncertain of their own experiences.

While Schreier notes that most viewers of the film are able to distinguish it as a product of fiction, “almost 40 percent of the discussants... are at least temporarily uncertain whether the film constitutes as fact or fiction” (2004, p. 328). Here, she demonstrates that the traditional Gothic elements of witches and the paranormal override the verisimilitude of the narrative’s form and supplementary information, allowing viewers to assign the film with the designation of fiction. However, as Schreier quite rightly states, “ordinarily, when people go to the cinema to watch a film, fictionality status is simply taken for granted and does not become a topic of discussion in the first place” (2004, p. 328). The affect of uncertainty and ambiguity around the narrative’s status, at least momentarily, in the mind of the viewer then recalls Botting’s remarks that, in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first century, “reality, truth and meaning are not only effects of narratives but also subject to a dispersion and multiplication of meanings, realities and identities” (2014, p. 173).

2.6 – Unifying features of Horror and The Gothic: Threats and Ontological Ambiguity.

As I have explored above, and as shown by many scholars before me, there are a wealth of Gothic elements that have been distributed across numerous texts and through culture. In order to analyse creepypasta's renewal and reinvention of Gothic elements through its form, I argue that the affective nature of horror and the litany of Gothic elements, tropes, and conceptualisations can be grouped into two broad categories of: threats and ontological ambiguity. Both have a lineage through both the affective quality of horror and the Gothic tradition established by Walpole and *The Castle of Otranto* and can be seen in various degrees, combinations, and manifestations in the centuries of Gothic and horror output explored above.

The broad category of threats exists as that which will irreversibly and negatively change something for either the characters in a story or the reader. As explored in section 2.3.1.1, this change may be the breakdown of borders and boundaries to identity; a threat to one's physical body; a threat to one's perception of reality; or a threat to one's very existence. In all cases, a threat signals a potential, irreversible, most likely unpleasant change. In this sense, it is a marker and source of horror affect as Aldana-Reyes notes "fear [...] may be caused by anything that poses a sense of threat" (pp. 8 – 9).

As my critical engagement with horror and the Gothic shows, threats may be realised as Gothic elements in a narrative or as a 'sense' that imbues the text. Threats may be monsters – as cultural anxieties repressed and returning in estranged forms; as hauntings and ghosts – representations of past injustices; they may be demonic – representing a more metaphysical threat of annihilation; threats may even be subverted

and – as explored in section 2.5 – emptied of their threatening nature. Threats also draw heavily on the uncanny and the presence of the uncanny in a text may also create a sense of threat. For Freud and Jentsch, the uncanny is a psychological affect, but as Punter and Byron, Briggs, Hogle and others show, it is one that is realised through the presence of monstrous distortions of repression or a disorientation over what is real. The uncanny may be the precursor to the emergence of a more direct threat within a text, it may be representative of a threat long repressed, or it may be present as a Jentschian “physical uncertainty” (p. 9), a threat to the sense of self in relation to one’s surroundings. As I will demonstrate over the course of this thesis, a sense of peril is a necessary component of an unsettling narrative and a threat is an affective trait often realised through Gothic elements such as a monster, ghost, or setting.

Ontological ambiguity is a trait closely linked to the threat but is a separate aspect. As I have shown above, ontological ambiguity has been consistent in the Gothic form from the architectural roots of the Gothic revival to the present day. It is an affect achieved through techniques that vary and adapt through time. As I have shown throughout this chapter, techniques for creating ambiguity over the ontological status of Gothic elements and narratives can be found in the *fabriqué* follies of the eighteenth century; the preface to the first edition of *The Castle of Otranto* that foregrounded it as a ‘found’ and translated historical document; the anonymous publication and epistolary format of *Frankenstein*’s first edition; phantasmagoria’s illusion of legitimate scientific enquiry; and the Internet-supplemented videocamera documentation of *The Blair Witch*. While the Gothic has an affinity for artifice, its signifiers ungrounded for “dramatic effect” (Punter and Byron, p. 34) from the very beginning of the Gothic revival, it is the tradition of presenting the counterfeit and artificial as an artefact of the real world that has resonated throughout the history of the Gothic. From the list above, it is apparent

that the characteristic of ontological ambiguity is one that has continually been updated in step with technological developments. As I will show in the analyses that follow, this tradition has a continued and significant resonance with creepypasta. In particular, creepypasta narratives engage with the medium-specific ontological ambiguity that can be afforded by social media platforms in order to further this Gothic trait in the twenty-first century.

Like the use of threats, it is my intention with this category to incorporate all aspects of how ontological ambiguity may manifest in Creepypasta, whether it be experienced by a character in a narrative who doubts the existence of a threat or experienced by a reader who is uncertain whether what they have read or experienced is a true story. Again, like threats, the uncanny underscores ontological ambiguity through a prevailing sense of uncertainty for characters, the reader, or both.

In the following analyses, I will demonstrate that creepypasta is an emergent genre that manifests through the form of fourth-generation digital fiction and incorporates horror and Gothic traits. Moreover, it derives its unnerving and creepy affect through the form in which it manifests. Creepypasta uses the traits and markers of the Gothic and horror through the invocation of threats in various forms and through ontological ambiguity, but it does so in a new and unexamined way that is exclusively derived through its form – that is, using digital textuality and the digital medium. Going forward from this chapter, this thesis will take the shape of an in-depth exploration of creepypasta's use of its form to forward and reinvent Gothic traits of ontological ambiguity and the threats to borders, identity, or one's very existence. Each of the three case studies will elucidate the interaction between the intrinsic properties of digital textuality, Gothic elements, and horror affect.

3. *Candle Cove*: Becoming Creepypasta through Spread.

Skyshale033

Subject: Candle Cove local kid's show?

Does anyone remember this kid's show? It was called Candle Cove and I must have been 6 or 7. I never found reference to it anywhere so I think it was on a local station around 1971 or 1972. I lived in Ironton at the time. I don't remember which station, but I do remember it was on at a weird time, like 4:00 PM.

(Kris Straub, *Candle Cove*, 2009, n.p)

Much like for Skyshale033, the initial poster in the mock message board that forms the original version of Kris Straub's story, the name 'Candle Cove'⁴ may sound familiar to some. It is a narrative that has, through the affordances of copy-and-paste, spread widely across the Internet in a variety of ways, leaving traces of its presence on forums, message boards, and social media. Since its publication online in 2009, *Candle Cove* has spread via URL, as text, as video, and as image, circulating as genuine conversation, historical footage, and playful online in-joke as it has moved across the Internet. As a subject of analysis, *Candle Cove* is particularly compelling due to its visible lifespan as a creepypasta narrative – beginning as a static and clearly fictional story, before being shared 'into' becoming creepypasta. As I will show in this chapter, during this lifecycle, *Candle Cove* displays a litany of "Gothic elements" (Bloom, 2012, p. 211) that are realised, renewed, and reinvented through its digital textuality as it is spread across various platforms. I will explore the lifespan of *Candle Cove*, showing how the narrative activates Gothic threats, conjures different forms of horrific affect, and amplifies an ontologically ambiguous state as it moves across online

⁴ I will be using 'Candle Cove' to refer to the television show within the narrative, and *Candle Cove* to refer to the narrative itself.

communication platforms. Specifically, I will show how *Candle Cove* begins as a story that unnerves its readers by exhibiting uncanny traits as part of its narrative and how textual spread and the affordances of digital media renews and alters engagement with uncanny Gothic traditions, meaning that in becoming creepypasta, *Candle Cove* moves to exhibit traits of another Gothic affect: the weird.

To do so, I will begin by engaging with *Candle Cove* as a piece of fiction prior to its spread across social media and the wider Internet. I will demonstrate some of the horror and Gothic traits inherent in the text before its spread that are then intensified or reinvented once the narrative is coupled with the copy-and-paste mechanism of digital textuality and spread beyond its initial webpage – thus being spread ‘into’ the realm of creepypasta. I will then consider variables in copy-and-paste spread, such as text-based copy-and-paste and URL-based copy-and-paste, and how *Candle Cove*’s spread across the Internet utilises both forms of movement – deriving horrific affect and renewing Gothic traditions for the digital age in the process. Finally, I will show how narrative spread can take shape in other digital forms that can further Gothic and horror characteristics of the uncanny and the weird to destabilise a reader’s relationship with a text. This is done through what I define as ontological flattening – a state whereby real users and their responses, and the fictional story they are reading and responding to exist in the same textual space without borders, implied hierarchy, or explicit indicators of fictionality in the story text.

3.1 – Welcome to Candle Cove.

Candle Cove is a short story written by Kris Straub and published on his website Ichor Falls (ichorfalls.chainsawsuit.com) in 2009. The narrative takes the form of a

conversation between the denizens of the fictional “NetNostalgia Forum,” and is presented on a plain HTML webpage formatted to look like a message board (see Fig. 3.1). The epigraph at the start of this chapter is the initial post from this fake thread, started by a user with the name Skyshale033. 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 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?”), the conversation takes a darker turn as Skyshale033 shares a 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.p)

Clearly, the experience that Skyshale033 recalls is worlds away from watching what one would consider a conventionally broadcast episode of even the creepiest children’s show. Skyshale033 even distances the disturbing video from potentially being real by referring to the memory as a “bad dream”. However, her description triggers similar recollections from others in replies and the forumgoers come to the realisation that they all shared the same memory around experiencing the episode. They then debate whether or not what they remembered was an aired episode, a dream, or a

manufactured memory brought on by Skyshale033's anecdote before a final revelation from mike_painter65:

i visited my mom today at the nursing home. i asked her about when i was littel in the early 70s, when i was 8 or 9 and if she remebered a kid's show, candle cove. she said she was supriised i could remember that and i asked why, and she said "because i used to think it was so strange that you said 'i'm gona go watch candle cove now mom' and then you would tune the tv to static and juts watch dead air for 30 minutes. you had a big imagination with your little pirate show [*sic* all].

(Straub, 2009, n.p)

The thread then ends, with no replies to mike_painter65's chilling revelation, leaving the reader to ponder over what those in the chat really experienced all those years ago.

NetNostalgia Forum - Television (local)

Skyshale033

Subject: Re: Candle Cove local kid's show?

Does anyone remember this kid's show? It was called Candle Cove and I must have been 6 or 7. I never found reference to it anywhere so I think it was on a local station around 1971 or 1972. I lived in Ironton at the time. I don't remember which station, but I do remember it was on at a weird time, like 4:00 PM.

mikePainter65

Subject: Re: Candle Cove local kid's show?

it seems really familiar to me.....i grew up outside of ashland and was 9 yrs old in '72. candle cove...was it about pirates? i remember a pirate marionete at the mouth of a cave talking to a little girl

Skyshale033

Subject: Re: Candle Cove local kid's show?

YES! Okay I'm not crazy! I remember Pirate Percy. I was always kind of scared of him. He looked like he was built from parts of other dolls, real low-budget. His head was an old porcelain baby doll, looked like an antique that didn't belong on the body. I don't remember what station this was! I don't think it was WTSF though.

Jaren_2005

Subject: Re: Candle Cove local kid's show?

Sorry to resurrect this old thread but I know exactly what show you mean, Skyshale. I think Candle Cove ran for only a couple months in '71, not '72. I was 12 and I watched it a few times with my brother. It was channel 58, whatever station that was. My mom would let me switch to it after the news. Let me see what I remember.

It took place in Candle cove, and it was about a little girl who imagined herself to be friends with pirates. The pirate ship was called the Laughingstock, and Pirate Percy wasn't a very good pirate because he got scared too easily. And there was callopie music constantly playing. Don't remember the girl's name. Janice or Jade or something. Think it was Janice.

Skyshale033

Subject: Re: Candle Cove local kid's show?

Thank you Jaren!!! Memories flooded back when you mentioned the Laughingstock and channel 58. I remember the bow of the ship was a wooden smiling face, with the lower jaw submerged. It looked like it was swallowing the sea and it had that awful Ed Wynn voice and laugh. I especially remember how jarring it was when they switched from the wooden/plastic model, to the foam puppet version of the head that talked.

mikePainter65

Subject: Re: Candle Cove local kid's show?

ha ha i remember now too. :) do you remember this part skyshale: "you have...to go...INSIDE."

Skyshale033

Subject: Re: Candle Cove local kid's show?

Ugh mike, I got a chill reading that. Yes I remember. That's what the ship always told Percy when there was a spooky place he had to go in, like a cave or a dark room where the treasure was. And the camera would push in on Laughingstock's face with each pause. YOU HAVE...TO GO...INSIDE. With his two eyes askew and that flopping foam jaw and the fishing line that opened and closed it. Ugh. It just looked so cheap and awful.

You guys remember the villain? He had a face that was just a handlebar mustache above really tall, narrow teeth.

kevin_hart

Subject: Re: Candle Cove local kid's show?

i honestly, honestly thought the villain was pirate percy. i was about 5 when this show was on. nightmare fuel.

Jaren_2005

Subject: Re: Candle Cove local kid's show?

That wasn't the villain, the puppet with the mustache. That was the villain's sidekick, Horace Horrible. He had a monocle too, but it was on top of the mustache. I used to think that meant he had only one eye.

But yeah, the villain was another marionette. The Skin-Taker. I can't believe what they let us watch back then.

kevin_hart

Subject: Re: Candle Cove local kid's show?

jesus h. christ, the skin taker. what kind of a kids show were we watching? i seriously could not look at the screen when the skin taker showed up. he just descended out of nowhere on his strings, just a dirty skeleton wearing that brown top hat and cape. and his glass eyes that were too big for his skull. christ almighty.

Skyshale033

Subject: Re: Candle Cove local kid's show?

Wasn't his top hat and cloak all sewn up crazily? Was that supposed to be children's skin??

mikePainter65

Subject: Re: Candle Cove local kid's show?

yeah i think so. rememer his mouth didn't open and close, his jaw just slid back and forth. i remember the little girl said "why does your mouth move like that" and the skin-taker didn't look at the girl but at the camera and said "TO GRIND YOUR SKIN"

Skyshale033

Subject: Re: Candle Cove local kid's show?

I'm so relieved that other people remember this terrible show!

I used to have this awful memory, a bad dream I had 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. I woke up many times from that nightmare. I used to wet the bed when I had it.

kevin_hart

Subject: Re: Candle Cove local kid's show?

i don't think that was a dream. i remember that. i remember that was an episode.

Skyshale033

Subject: Re: Candle Cove local kid's show?

No no no, not possible. There was no plot or anything, I mean literally just standing in place crying and screaming for the whole show.

kevin_hart

Subject: Re: Candle Cove local kid's show?

maybe i'm manufacturing the memory because you said that, but i swear to god i remember seeing what you described. they just screamed.

Jaren_2005

Subject: Re: Candle Cove local kid's show?

Oh God. Yes. The little girl, Janice, I remember seeing her shake. And the Skin-Taker screaming through his gnashing teeth, his jaw careening so wildly I thought it would come off its wire hinges. I turned it off and it was the last time I watched. I ran to tell my brother and we didn't have the courage to turn it back on.

mikePainter65

Subject: Re: Candle Cove local kid's show?

i visited my mom today at the nursing home. i asked her about when i was littel in the early 70s, when i was 8 or 9 and if she remebered a kid's show, candle cove. she said she was suprised i could remember that and i asked why, and she said "because i used to think it was so strange that you said 'i'm gona go watch candle cove now mom' and then you would tune the tv to static and juts watch dead air for 30 minutes. you had a big imagination with your little pirate show."

Candle Cove and Other Stories
now available at Amazon.com

New horror at LOCUS28

Candle Cove is © 2009-2015 Kira Straub. All rights reserved.

Fig 3.1: The full original Candle Cove text as it appeared on *ichorfalls.chainsawsuit.com*.

At this point, I would like to point out that when introducing this plot summary of Straub's story, I did not call it a *creepypasta* narrative. This is because the original form of the narrative was not a piece of fourth-generation digital fiction. It was published instead as a static HTML web page. Aesthetically, the text on the page is arranged to emulate the look of an early message board, and the dialogue that makes up the story is clearly designed to evoke the conversational feel of online communities. However, this initial form of *Candle Cove* was nothing more than text formatted to look like posts. Whether or not this meant that the page was an archive of a real, long since deleted conversation, or instead to just give the narrative a particular form as a piece of fiction is never made clear, but at a glance, it is obvious that the page itself is not intended as a particularly convincing facsimile of a forum or message board. There is no bordering to delineate each post as commonly found in forum layouts and no user pictures or avatars commonly associated with message boards. Key however, is that there are no hyperlinks to other threads or boards, nor is there a button or text box giving the impression that there is an option to reply to the thread. Convincing reproduction of a forum exchange, then, is lost due to the inability to truly replicate the entirety of a message board or forum page replete with the inherent interactivity that comes with networked digital media.

As well as being a static web page, *Candle Cove* belongs to a complex worldbuilding exercise by Straub. As Thomas M. Stuart notes, the story "originated in Kris Straub's collected histories of the fictional ghost town, Ichor Falls" (2018, p. 155). These collected histories were realised as posts on Straub's eponymous website (where I have sourced Fig. 1). Though he focuses on 'The Hirsch Camera (1870)' (2009), an account of a supernatural camera from 1870 in the form of "exhibition notes from the Rand Historical Society" (p. 155), Stuart notes that both it and *Candle Cove* are both

available in Straub's book *Ichor Falls: A Visitor's Guide: Short stories from a quiet community* (2009) – a printed collection of these blog posts. Although Stuart references 'The Hirsch Camera (1870)' from this print text, the story can be found first on Straub's Ichor Falls website, published late 2008 (Fig. 3.2).



Fig. 3.2: 'The Hirsch Camera (1870)' as it appears on Ichor Falls prior to its print publication.

Therefore, as Stuart recognises, 'The Hirsch Camera (1870)' "was originally a node in a network of *openly fictional texts* – originally digital, now also bound and published – meant to construct the sense of an existing town" (p. 155 - emphasis mine). The original publication of *Candle Cove* hosted on Straub's Ichor Falls website can thus be regarded in the same way; similarly existing to construct part of the unusual goings on in Ichor Falls, though by way of a fictional online conversation rather than fictional archive text.

When its journey from screen to page is considered, *Candle Cove* did not initially "take the structure and shape of a platform already defined, *and defined for different purposes*" (Rustad, 2015, n.p - emphasis mine) to be an example of fourth-generation digital fiction. As demonstrated by its collation, printing and binding, the formatting shown in Fig. 1 that replicated the feel of a forum or message board could be – and was

– replicated in print. This means that in its original online form, *Candle Cove* is not digital fiction in that it “would lose something of its aesthetic and semiotic function if it were removed from that medium” (Bell et al. 2010). The narrative did not lose anything of its aesthetic and semiotic function in being replicated in print, as its appearance *in* print was a replication of its text formatting on a web page, which itself was a replication of the *style* of a forum or message board. It is a digital text insofar as it is text accessed via a networked computer and read on a monitor – but if it were printed from that webpage, the form and aesthetic of the story would remain.

3.2 – The Gothic Horror of the ‘Static’ Cove.

Despite the first instance of *Candle Cove*, hosted on Straub’s websites not yet belonging to the genre of creepypasta, it is important to consider *Candle Cove* in its original pre-copy-and-paste state as it is already infused with Gothic elements given that it was written as a piece of intentionally unnerving fiction. It is necessary to tease these out prior to its wider spread across the Internet, as these Gothic elements spill out, take a new form, and create different horror and Gothic affect when then spread across social media. Quite apparent in the conversation between the fictional forumgoers is the Gothic characterisation of the past. Specifically, that “in Gothic texts, the past returns with sickening force” (Spooner, 2006, p. 18). According to Spooner, this force is through the past as “a site of terror, of an injustice that must be resolved, an evil that must be exorcised” (p. 19). In Spooner’s list, one can see a shift from experience to agency that maps on to the Gothic representation of the past. Terror is experienced, caused by an injustice that is carried out by an evil agent that must be exorcised once the past returns in the present due to these actions being unresolved and repressed. In

the case of *Candle Cove*, an evolution from the affective marker “terror” to the implication of agency in “evil” can be traced as the narrative progresses.

Though terror may be a strong word to associate with the early stages of the conversation in the thread shown in Fig. 1.1, there is something undeniably unnerving about children’s television puppet shows of the 1970s and 80s that Straub draws influence from, tapping into the uncanny through the unnatural animation of physical marionettes and other toys imbued with what appears to be life. In their analysis of *Candle Cove*, Cooley and Milligan examine the narrative in the context of the common topic of ‘haunted object’ creepypasta narratives. They specifically cast an eye to the theme of “haunted software” (p. 197) and its exploration of “technological nostalgia” (p. 197) – a subgenre of creepypasta that revolves around the narrator having a dread-filled experience after encountering a piece of older software or technology such as haunted videogame cartridges. They note how Straub was inspired by a surreal comedy article from the satirical news outlet *The Onion*, titled ‘Area 36-Year-Old Still Has Occasional *Lidsville* Nightmare’ (2000). For those unfamiliar with *Lidsville*, Cooley and Milligan explain it as follows: “[an] unsettlingly surreal 1972 children’s television show [...] in which a child is whisked away to a surreal land of anthropomorphized household objects (mostly hats) and costumed performers” (p. 200). It is easy to see how Straub could find inspiration for horror from this description, as the idea of children being whisked away to a land best described as “surreal” and populated by anthropomorphised objects taps into fears of unsupervised or kidnapped children as well as the uncanny. Cooley and Milligan state that “*The Onion* story succeeds in its humour because it draws forth what might resonate with grown up *Lidsville* viewers 28 years later and positions its unsettling, tongue-in-cheek assessment of the show in a public and networked forum” (p. 201). What resonates, they argue, and the site

whereby *Candle Cove* primarily derives its unnerving affect, is found in description of the fictional show's "slipshod craftsmanship" (p. 199) of its primary cast – all "flopping foam jaw[s] and fishing line" (Straub, 2009, n.p) and dirty skeleton marionettes.

Nostalgia here, though, is a point of departure between *Lidsville* and *Candle Cove* for Cooley and Milligan. They claim that "[c]reepypasta explores the inner nightmares of technological nostalgia for seemingly static objects by rendering them sinisterly active subjects" (p. 197). The shoddy construction and production values of *Lidsville* and the technological era it represents can be fondly remembered through the safety and irony of nostalgia – its inherent creepiness simply an aesthetic quirk of the time. On the other hand, the nostalgia present in *Candle Cove* is "nostalgia for something, but that label of 'thing' does not create the usual safe distance expected, as nonhuman objects vie for subjective response" (p. 197).

Here, an understanding of how *Candle Cove* intensifies and turns uncanny real-life feelings of nostalgia towards childhood television shows can be seen. According to Janelle Wilson "there cannot be a so-called negative nostalgia. And yet, one may recall negative events from the past and experience nostalgia" (2014, p. 27). Wilson draws on experiences of people who had childhoods in East Germany as an example of this – those who look back fondly on the goods, groceries, advertisements, and television of their youth as, post-unification, "East Germans occupied a subordinate status; unemployment was high, wages were low, and social anomie prevailed [...] Visions of reunification bringing about a hopeful and harmonious future did not materialize. The past, then, gets romanticized" (p. 29). In this instance, a past that was, at the time, undesirable is recontextualised through a present that, in other respects may be worse or not live up to its promise. However, nostalgia here works as it would for those remembering *Lidsville*. The rough construction and scrappy production is, decidedly, a

negative attribute, but one that is likely to only be considered past a certain age.

Experiencing such a show as a young child then growing old to view *Lidsville* again recontextualises scrapiness as charming due to a romanticisation of one's childhood.

Those remembering Candle Cove in the original story, on the other hand, revisit the memories of their childhood along a similar trajectory – fondly laughing at the fishing line manipulating the poorly made marionettes – before this romanticised nostalgia of a childhood show begins to sour through the shared memory of something more sinister acting *on* them as children.

Cooley and Milligan assess the narrative at this junction between fictional forumgoer and sinister show, with the former acting as the subjects of the story, and the latter as the nonhuman object imbued with more agency than one would anticipate. Focussing on the nostalgic lens through which the thread contributors recall the existence of the show, Cooley and Milligan note how “the television show *Candle Cove* first aired in 1971 or 1972” (p. 198), a time where “[t]he malleability of childhood has not yet drifted away [...] the social priming that teaches us subjects *act* and objects are *acted upon* has not finished giving form to their consciousness” (p. 198 - emphasis in original). This emphasis on the childhood forumgoers' formative minds allows a reading of the *Candle Cove*'s terror as thus:

The dark nostalgic realization of the forum posters that they once could see behind and beyond the static – into the life of things – before they had been properly instructed on how to deceive themselves illuminates the great lie of the social world: the tale of the pre-eminence of the subject over a world of static objects.

(Cooley and Milligan, 2018, p. 198)

Here, they argue that the forumgoers in the present realise that their childhood past was a time where the certainty of their status of subject was not yet fully learned or considered an absolute truth. In revisiting their past through collective nostalgia, the

forumgoers challenge their security in this belief as their collective memory reveals that they, as children, were networked into a mysterious situation where they were “acted upon” (p. 198) into hallucinating ‘Candle Cove’ by something left unknown by the thread’s end.

As Cooley and Milligan put it, “[n]ostalgia here is laid bare as a shared delusion of something that never was, something that was always creepy to begin with” (p. 198) as the now adult viewers have to confront “their own uncanny actancy” (p. 199). Actancy here is a term developed by Bruno Latour to refer to a shared “responsibility for action” (Latour, 1999, p. 180) between subjects and objects, and adapted by Cooley and Milligan to refer to the relationship between the imagined show, the forum posters, and the agency of both:

The adult human posters share a mutual unease with the material performance of these makeshift automatons of wire, foam and wood that managed to bring beings of skin, blood and organs into a network together.

(Cooley and Milligan, 2018, p. 199)

For Cooley and Milligan, the source of terror and of uncanny affect in *Candle Cove* is in the agency presented by the show and its ability to act upon the forum posters, compelled into an online network to piece the show together from nostalgic memory that the show itself exerts on them; “the downfall of [the] façade of the subject/object dichotomy” (p. 199). The puppets of the show, they suggest, “wield the earth-shattering ability to topple the standard arrangement of subject and object, and they proudly redistribute agency” (p. 208) across nonhuman entities. The loss of control, of agency, and of a sacrosanct status as subject is threatening by leaving those in the Net Nostalgia forum potentially trapped “in an omnidirectional web of static, unsure [of] who or what can network with their minds” (p. 209). The threat at the heart of *Candle Cove*, they argue, is invited in through the vulnerability of being another thing in a network of

things; agency shared as actancy. This is a threat of being irreversibly altered, of one's sense of identity and boundaries being reshaped or eradicated as the "standard arrangement" (p. 208) of subject and object disintegrates.

While I agree with Cooley and Milligan's assessment of the horrors present in *Candle Cove* – its breach of boundaries between subject and object, and the collapse of hierarchies that entails – they stop short of connecting what they see as the core component of this unsettling and unnerving affect to a lineage of horror and Gothic fiction. I argue that it is essential to connect the unsettling affect of the static story to Gothic and horror traits such as "uncertainties of character positioning and instabilities of knowledge" (Punter and Byron, 2004, p. 273), along with the threat to subjectivity and borders, and the undercurrent of uncanniness throughout. As I will show in this chapter these traits found in the static version of the story are developed and reinvented as the story is spread across the Internet as creepypasta.

More specifically, I argue that Cooley and Milligan's analysis gestures directly at the Gothic preoccupation with the transgression of borders as set out in Chapter 2. In particular, the collapse of subject and object distinctions can be mapped onto Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick's spatialised Gothic model of "what's inside, what's outside, and what separates them" (1980, p. 13). In the case of *Candle Cove*, "what's inside" is our forumgoers. They are safe in their selfhood and consideration of themselves as subjects that can share individual opinions and recollections of 'Candle Cove' in the fictional thread. "What's outside" is 'Candle Cove' and its puppets, considered objects without agency by the forumgoers, albeit inherently unnerving ones. "What separates them" is time and nostalgia as 'Candle Cove' exists only as memories in the thread we read.

These borders begin to waver halfway through the fictional thread of *Candle Cove* as Skyshale033's dream is revealed to be a real episode. When user kevin_hart replies saying "i remember that was an episode [*sic*]", Skyshale033 responds with an alarmed "No no no, not possible" – the idea that something so disturbing could not be confined to one subject's dreams, but in fact be a *real object* is something too alarming to countenance. However, the transgression is fully realised in the chilling twist that mike_painter65's mother remembers him announcing he would watch 'Candle Cove' and "tune the tv to static" (Straub, n.p) as a child. Indeed, the increasing tension and final revelation illustrates Kosofsky-Sedgwick's spatialised Gothic model and her assertion that "[t]he most paralyzing instances of the uncanny in these novels [...] are evoked in the very breach" of the border that separates inside and outside (p. 13). In this instance, nostalgia, memory, and time, and the certainty of experience that comes with them is breached by mike_painter65's mother, who reveals the reality of their childhood memories, and the sinister implications that *something* with agency created those memories all those years ago.

The breach of borders between subject and object can be viewed as a Gothic threat. It is one that gets to the heart of abjection as explored in Chapter 2, crossing the biological and psychic boundaries of the human body and plugging into Clive Bloom's characterisation of abjection as "a theory of identity crisis" (2012, p. 221). What is threatened here is the sovereignty of human agency and subjectivity, upended by the uncanny activity of nostalgia and networks – all becoming uncanny actants where uncertainty reigns. In the case of *Candle Cove*, Punter and Byron's assessment that "the literary Gothic has been concerned with uncertainties of character positioning and instabilities of knowledge" (2004, p. 273) is writ large beyond a singular character's perceptions and instead extended to the assumptions on which society is built – or, in

Cooley and Milligan's words, "the great lie of the social world" (p. 198) that is the distinction between subject and object.

This threat in *Candle Cove*, then, is undoubtedly Gothic. It illustrates Kosofsky-Sedgwick's definition through reunification between two divided parties (forumgoers and show) via a breach of that which divides them (time, via nostalgia) – bringing with it disturbing connotations and uncertainties around subjectivity and reality. In addition, it demonstrates Spooner's assessment of the "past as a site of terror" (2007, p. 18) in Gothic texts – albeit this terror being realised in the present (again, breaching the border of time). Through the story's suggestion that human agency and subjectivity is rendered obsolete by the malevolent show itself and its apparently active ability to alter the perceptions of reality for those watching or remembering it, *Candle Cove*'s threat also stretches into the realms of Horror affect. The mercurial nature of this agency in both human and show returns us to Spooner's vision of the Gothic past as mentioned earlier in this chapter: the site of an "evil that must be exorcised" (p. 19), weighted with more agency and deliberate execution than the past's affective terror.

Crucially, the traits I draw from Cooley and Milligan's analysis and connect to Gothic and horror traditions also demonstrate how the static and pre-spread version of *Candle Cove* all gesture towards a prevailing sense of the uncanny. As explored in Chapter 2, the uncanny in its Gothic mode is characterised as the "return of the repressed" (Briggs, 2012, p. 178) as terrible and unresolved events consigned to the past make their presence felt in the present. This is clearly the crux and driving force of *Candle Cove*'s narrative, as Skyshale033's initial post invites others to revisit old and buried memories that are repressed through the fog of nostalgia. This repression resonates with Spooner's assessment that the past in Gothic fiction is "a site of terror" (2006, p. 18) as Skyshale033 eventually confronts the disturbing screaming episode that they repressed

by categorising it as a dream. Moreover, the uncanny can be viewed in its effect of “making things uncertain” (Bennett and Royle, 1999, p. 37). In *Candle Cove*’s final six posts, uncertainty reigns, as memories are rapidly reappraised to be dreams, disturbing experiences, and finally something altogether more sinister and potentially paranormal in the concept of a shared childhood hallucination. Itself a Gothic hallmark, as Punter and Byron assert that “the Gothic is grounded on the terrain of hallucination” (p. 293), as uncanny uncertainties in perceptions and subjectivity reign supreme.

3.3 – The Static Cove and the Aesthetics of Gothic ‘Found’ Texts.

In their analysis of *Candle Cove*, Cooley and Milligan gesture to another Gothic trait that creates uncertainties in perception and furthers the Gothic hallmark of ontological ambiguity, although they do so without connecting the text to the genre that provides its essential affective characteristics. This aspect, rather than being drawn from the narrative content of the story, is instead found in its form and participation in the storied Gothic trope of the “found manuscript” (Kosofsky-Sedgwick, p. 9) as a framing device for the story therein. Cooley and Milligan state that Straub had eventually “come forth” (p. 202) about the fictional status of *Candle Cove*. They argue that the form of the story obfuscated its fictionality because, as it is presented as a forum, “it may well be a forum” (p. 201). Implicit here is the idea that the content published as *Candle Cove* by Straub may have been found elsewhere on the Internet, or at least made to look that way through Straub’s presentation of the story.

As demonstrated in Chapter 1, a copy-and-paste function – or general textual spread across and between websites – is a critical part of the creepypasta genre and indicative of its form as fourth-generation digital fiction. A recognition that the copy-and-paste

aspect of creepypasta is an essential component of how a text can be considered part of the genre is absent in Cooley and Milligan's analysis of *Candle Cove*, and as such, they do not link the narrative or creepypasta more widely to the field of digital fiction. They do, however briefly, invite readers to speculate on *Candle Cove*'s fictionality status through the potential that it has been "lifted" (p. 201) from the Internet at large and preserved on "the very real-sounding site 'NetNostalgia Forum – Television (local)'" (p. 202). This reading suggests that the version of *Candle Cove* published by Straub is, in fact, the first spread instance of the narrative.

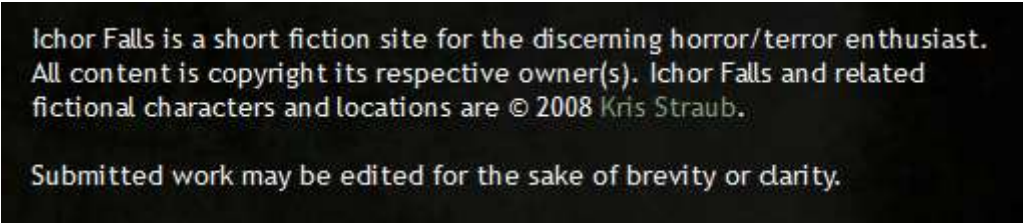
It is my contention, however, that although *Candle Cove* is presented as a forum conversation, this is done without aiming to deceive the reader. By being archived as part of the wider Ichor Falls project that taps into the Gothic "patchwork of textual modes [...] historiography, travelogue, [...] epistolary exchange, newspaper cutting [...] remediated into a single 'narrative'" (Mandal, 2015, p. 91), it is part of a dialogue with Gothic traditions of facsimile and found documents at an aesthetic level to construct the impression that they are all relics and documentation of a convincingly lived-in town, but while remaining clearly fictional. Below, I will show that this is a clear choice by Straub, and also that the nature of publishing on a networked website as an author results in paratextual indicators of fictionality as part of the digital medium.

The opening text of *Candle Cove* seen in Fig. 3.1 suggests that Straub is to *Candle Cove* as William Marshall is to *The Castle of Otranto*. Marshall is the discoverer and translator of the story within *The Castle of Otranto*, ensuring it reaches the eyes of an audience in England after being "found in the library of an ancient Catholic family" (Walpole, 1765, n.p), allegedly writing the preface before the story proper. Straub, through the Ichor Falls website, has pieced together the impression of a town through various documents, positioned as the curator rather than the author. The immediate

difference is that Marshall and the ancient library are a creation of Horace Walpole: a character and setting to create the framing device that gives a sense of provenance to the story that follows. Straub, on the other hand, is very much a real author, though his ancient library – the implied source for his texts on Ichor Falls – is similarly fictional. Read in this way, the line of “NetNostalgia Forum – Television (local)” (Straub, 2009, n.p) that introduces *Candle Cove* reads less like an attempt to replicate the navigation bar of a forum and more like a statement or preface from Straub of where he allegedly found this scrap of conversation.

However, while Walpole initially published *Otranto* anonymously, thus giving the fictional William Marshall’s preface a sense of authenticity and authority, the second edition of the novel dispelled any attempt at deception. Later Gothic novels followed *Otranto*’s blueprint in form (see Chapter 2.3), while rarely committing to a sense of ontological ambiguity. As Straub has always been forthcoming about the fictional status of the stories that construct Ichor Falls, it is this Gothic lineage that the static *Candle Cove* falls into. One can map easily the collected histories that form Ichor Falls and the print book *Ichor Falls: A Visitor’s Guide: Short stories from a quiet community* against the “compilation of [...] letters, journals, and newspaper clippings” (Punter and Byron, 2004, p. 230) that make up Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*.

As the initial post of *Candle Cove* is situated as part of Straub’s compilation that forms a picture of Ichor Falls, hosted on the Ichor Falls website, paratextual indicators of this fictional status are visible across the page. The original Ichor Falls blog post for *Candle Cove* features the accompanying text window (Fig. 3.3).



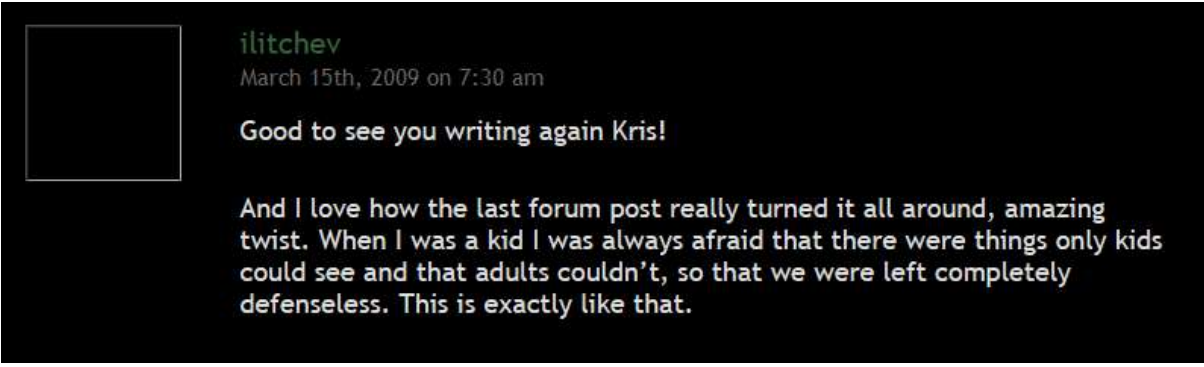
Ichor Falls is a short fiction site for the discerning horror/terror enthusiast. All content is copyright its respective owner(s). Ichor Falls and related fictional characters and locations are © 2008 Kris Straub.


Submitted work may be edited for the sake of brevity or clarity.

Fig. 3.3: A text descriptor of Straub's Ichor Falls website.

Here, Straub clearly describes the website as a venue for hosting fiction about Ichor Falls, which is similarly stressed as a fictional location with fictional characters.

Moreover, the blog format of the website invites comments from readers. The first of which implicitly acknowledges Straub's role as a writer of fiction (Fig. 3.4).



 **ilitchev**
March 15th, 2009 on 7:30 am

Good to see you writing again Kris!

And I love how the last forum post really turned it all around, amazing twist. When I was a kid I was always afraid that there were things only kids could see and that adults couldn't, so that we were left completely defenseless. This is exactly like that.

Fig. 3.4: The first reader comment underneath *Candle Cove* from the day it was initially published.

In Fig 3.4, it is clear that Straub's Ichor Falls attracts a readership aware that the site sets out to create a patchwork of short texts to construct the impression of the eponymous town. User ilitchev appears to have been following Straub's writing for a while and opens his comment with a full attribution of *Candle Cove* to Straub ("Good to see you writing again Kris!"). He then goes into detail as to why the story was creepy for him, offering his experience as feedback.

As well as publishing *Candle Cove* on ichorfalls.com, Straub also published the story at ichorfalls.chainsawsuit.com, a subdomain of his webcomic Chainsawsuit. It is this version of the story that I have presented in Fig. 3.1 as it has a plain background and is

on a less cluttered page. Here, the indicators of fictionality are more subtle, but are still present. In Fig. 3.5, I have enlarged the bottom of the webpage to highlight these.



Fig. 3.5: The bottom of the webpage hosting *Candle Cove* on *chainsawsuit*.

The three links that appear at the bottom of the page further indicate that *Candle Cove* is a work of fiction. Reading Fig. 3.5 from left to right, the first is a link to purchase *Candle Cove and Other Stories* on Amazon.com; the second a link to Straub’s YouTube channel, Local58, hosting further unsettling content he produces as ‘found footage’ videos; and the third is a link to Straub’s webpage as an author and a place to find his other work as a writer of fiction.

I argue that the form of the static *Candle Cove* exists as part of the Gothic lineage of found document narratives but does so without attempting to present an “air of truth” (Botting, 1996, p. 32) and ensuing ontological ambiguity as with the first edition of *Otranto*. Instead, Straub appears to be more interested in the form purely as a way of telling stories – the Gothic “patchwork of textual modes [...] remediated into a single narrative” (Mandal, p. 91).

Understanding how the initial, static version of *Candle Cove* engages with horror and the Gothic to unnerve readers is essential to unlocking how its subsequent textual spread changes and renews these Gothic traits through the affordances inherent in the transformation of the story into true fourth-generation digital fiction. As I have explored in these two sections, Cooley and Milligan’s reading of the narrative illuminates prescient and relevant anxieties around nonhuman agency in the wake of

technological proliferation. However, I demonstrate that they do not situate this anxiety, or its “earth-shattering” (p. 208) affective quality in a lineage of Gothic and horror fiction, or, in fact, discuss how creepypasta’s creepy modifier necessitates an engagement in Gothic and horror tropes. Above, I have highlighted the Gothic nature inherent in their reading of *Candle Cove* to provide a foundation to continue my analysis of *Candle Cove* beyond the static webpage they use for their analysis. As I will demonstrate below, as well as the unnerving content present in the story of *Candle Cove*, the tale derives further horror affect and Gothic elements through the affordances of digital media. While Straub’s own publication of *Candle Cove* telegraphs its fictional status, either explicitly or implicitly, those who spread beyond the borders of his websites were not so forthcoming, using the transference of the found document or manuscript aesthetic from a venue where it is clearly marked as fiction, to other platforms as a way to play with ontological borders and authenticity.

3.4 – Beyond Ichor Falls: *Candle Cove*, spread, and becoming Creepypasta.

As I have demonstrated above, *Candle Cove* was not originally published as a piece of fourth-generation digital fiction as it did not lose any of its “aesthetic and semiotic function” (Bell et al. 2010) when printed and bound. I also demonstrate how the story is inherently Gothic, in part thanks to its aesthetics. In this section, I will show how, through spread across social media, *Candle Cove* becomes creepypasta, and in turn, becomes fourth-generation digital fiction. I will also demonstrate how through this spread, the horror and Gothic traits found in the original static text and analysed above, take on new forms that utilise the wider affordances of digital and social media to affect

the reader in different ways. I will explore how unaltered narrative spread – a process that can be person-to-person or masspersonal (disseminated from an individual to many) – is a process that can also tease at ontological boundaries, creating ambiguity and reinventing Gothic traits. Moreover, I will show how the move from a static publication of a ‘found’ text to a performance of the text is one way in which creepypasta reinvents the Walpolean Gothic tradition for ‘found’ narratives.

Candle Cove, initially spread virally. As explored in Chapter 1, this is when “a single cultural unit [...] is spread by multiple agents” (Shifman, 2014, p. 59). In the case of *Candle Cove*, viral spread occurs at its simplest when a person copies and pastes the URL to Straub’s webpage into a text box for posting on social media or instant messenger, resulting in many copies of a link to a stable version of the narrative. Alternatively, they may wholesale copy-and-paste the text from the webpage into another setting without altering it. The latter is alluded to in a statement by Straub about his story a year after publication, where he acknowledges how “people would orchestrate recreations of the story by pretending to be the characters in actual forums” (Straub, 2010, n.p). *Candle Cove*’s form as a conversation on a forum lends itself perfectly to copy-and-paste spread as performance *on* actual forums.

Reflecting on the spread of *Candle Cove* beyond its initial online publication in 2009, Straub recalls how “it ended up shared without my knowledge at much more popular horror fiction sites, where it reached a much bigger audience. I know 4chan helped to spread it around” (unkle lancifer, 2011, n.p). It is difficult to find archived instances of this spread except onto wildly popular sites such as creepypasta.com, set up in 2008 to preserve creepypasta narratives as those shared on messageboards such as 4chan are often quickly deleted due to the ephemeral nature of the website.

As Straub mentions above, the initial spread of *Candle Cove* was through horror *fiction* sites, therefore there was no doubt or ambiguity around its fictional status when spread to these sites from the original posts. Illustrative of this is the ‘about’ page of creepypasta.com, which reads “Creepypasta.com is a collection of various paranormal/scary short stories. I didn’t write any of these; many of them were anonymously published on the 4chan imageboards” (creepypasta.com, 2013, n.p). Readers of the narrative on Straub’s website then spread it virally and, crucially, unaltered via copy-and-paste to horror fiction websites. Here, *Candle Cove* remains explicitly fictional as the clarity of the purpose of these websites – as horror fiction websites – frame *Candle Cove* (and other stories they host) as fictions. In addition, users who further spread the narrative hosted on these horror fiction sites by posting links to the story similarly do not challenge or upset ontological boundaries between the world of *Candle Cove* and the wider Internet as they would be sharing links to a stable version of the narrative hosted on a site that announces the fictionality of the stories therein.

However, the interactive nature of Web2.0 and social media platforms allows for an abundance of metatextual commentary from those sharing a link to the stable story and the responses from readers who can comment to the page where the link or text was shared. As Russell Frank argues in his analysis of digitally forwarded and re-told text, metatextual commentary and remarks are of great importance to understanding the reception of stories and texts online when spread in an unaltered state as they signify the moment where the reader, or audience, becomes the performer. He states that the comments that accompany an unaltered or replicated version of a text “offer insight into an aspect [...] of transmission that rarely occurs in face-to-face contexts: the pivot from hearing [...] to telling” (Frank, 2013, p. 101). That is, those who share *Candle Cove* in

an unaltered way may, in their telling of the narrative (via sharing), supplement the unaltered narrative or link with additional content in the form of remarks. In what follows, I will demonstrate that these remarks show a destabilisation of *Candle Cove*'s ontological status and fictionality, one that is dependent on the narrative being spread onto social media and Web2.0 platforms "already defined, and defined for different purposes" (Rustad, 2015, n.p). In performing the spread of *Candle Cove* – and additional users replying to the performance, or the one telling – a common theme emerges in acting as if the fictional show discussed by the characters within Straub's story actually existed; lost in the vague nostalgia of childhood television half-remembered from when they were growing up.

An example of this destabilisation through metatextual remarks and 'telling' can be found in the following. On Halloween 2011, Straub's webcomic page *Chainsawsuit* featured a new version of *Candle Cove* where a three-panel comic of 'static' accompanies the story text (see Fig. 3.6).

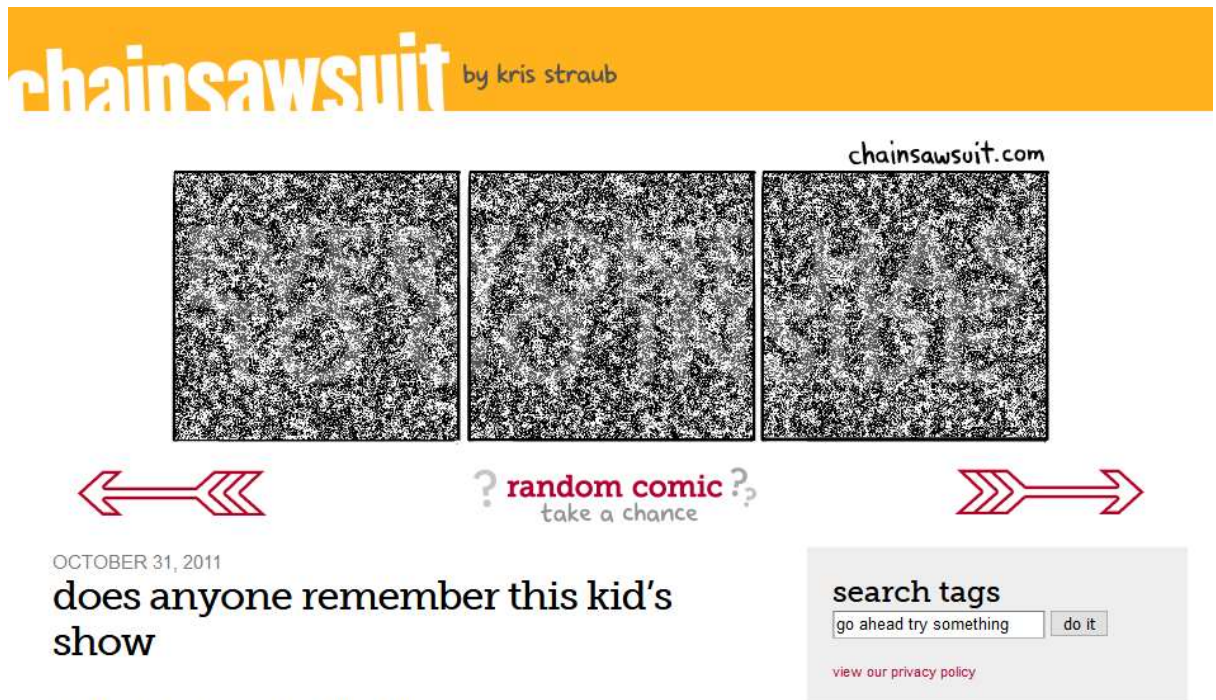


Fig. 3.6 – Straub’s webcomic iteration of *Candle Cove*, published on Halloween 2011.

A post by user ‘kipmanley’ on the website MetaFilter.com from the same day links to this republished version of the original story. MetaFilter is a site described as “a weblog that anyone can contribute a link or comment to [...] [that] exists to break down the barriers between people, to extend a weblog beyond just one person, and to foster discussion among its members” (2019, n.p). The format for MetaFilter appears to be similar to a forum or discussion board like Reddit rather than a blog.

Kipmanley’s post on MetaFilter consists of a title taken directly from *Candle Cove*, titling the post and subsequent thread with “NetNostalgia Forum – Television (Local)” (2011, n.p). The post proper consists of a short remark formatted as a hyperlink to Straub’s webcomic iteration of his story; “does anyone remember this kids show” (2011, n.p), and a short quote from Skyshale033’s initial post from the narrative (see Fig. 3.7).

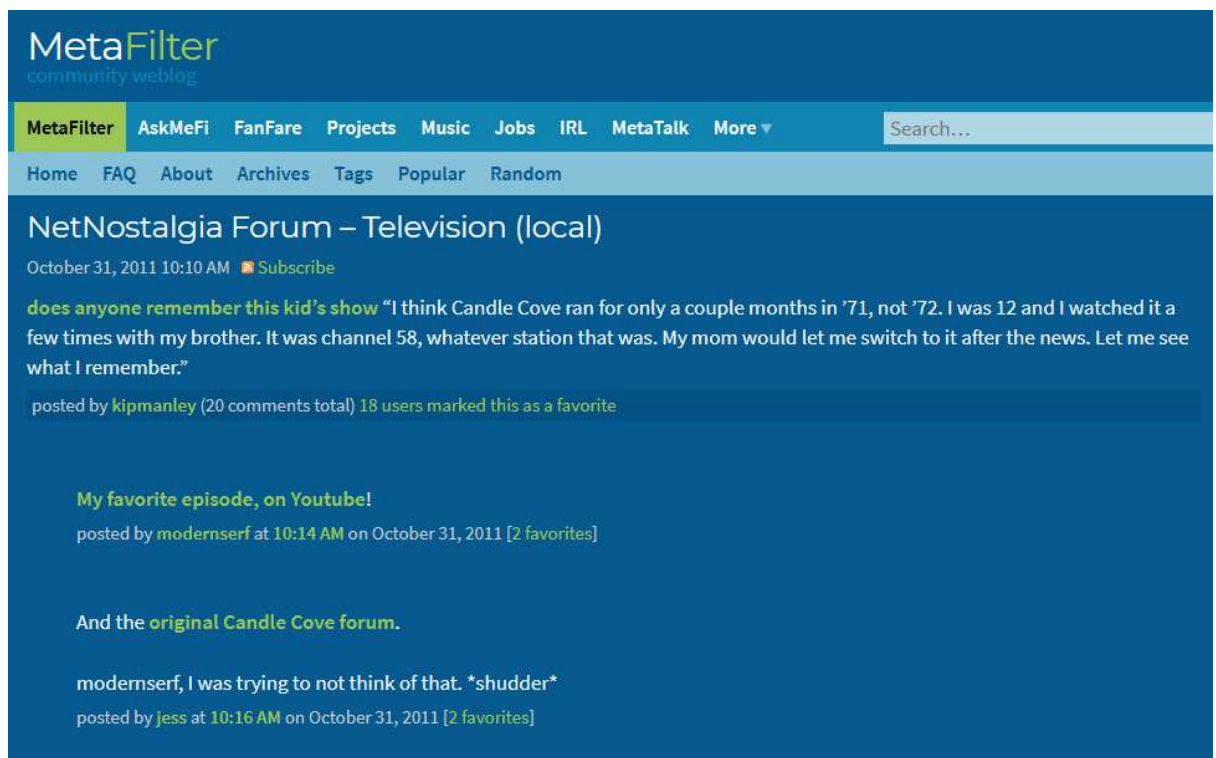


Fig. 3.7 – Kipmanley’s post on MetaFilter sharing a link (indicated by the green text) to Kris Straub’s webcomic iteration of *Candle Cove* shown in Fig. 3.6 and initiating a discussion thread.

Kipmanley takes a peculiar stance with his pivot from hearing to telling *Candle Cove* and choice of metatextual comments around the hyperlink he shares. The title they use to start the thread – “NetNostalgia Forum – Television (local)” – is lifted directly from *Candle Cove*. In its original context it serves to signify the name of the forum and sub-board that Skyshale033’s thread takes place on or, as explored in section 2.2.1, functions to show where Straub initially ‘found’ the text. In the case of Kipmanley, as

the thread is already taking place on MetaFilter, this quote from *Candle Cove* is used as the title of the thread. Similarly, the text used to link to Straub's Chainsawsuit comic – “does anyone remember this kids show” – is Skyshale033's opening question to their fellow forumgoers. The thread title being lifted directly from the beginning of Straub's original version of *Candle Cove* and the choice to use Skyshale033's opening line to act as a hyperlink thus implies that kipmanley is seeking to perform *Candle Cove* in a new setting – pivoting from hearing to telling by recreating the first lines of *Candle Cove* in MetaFilter.

However, their post continues with Jaren_2005's post from the original version in quote marks. This initial post, then, straddles the line between performance and viral link-sharing. kipmanley lifts quotes directly from *Candle Cove* and tells them in his post, partially as if they were his own words (the thread title and “does anyone remember this kid's show”) and partially indicated as a quotation (the non-hyperlinked text in quote marks being one of Jaren_2005's posts out of sequence when compared to the static version of the narrative). By hyperlinking to Straub's *Chainsawsuit* iteration of *Candle Cove*, kipmanley is also virally sharing an unaltered “cultural unit” (Shifman, p. 59). Key here is that the quotations from *Candle Cove* picked by kipmanley are remixed out of sequence to form a question with further contextualising information that can be posed to the rest of the members of MetaFilter and at no point do they indicate that these quotes are quotes rather than their own post, as they have become part of the pivot from hearing to telling the narrative, or that they refer to a possibly non-existent television show from a *fictional* story.

Importantly, by directly asking a question to the MetaFilter community and providing a quotation that appears to be giving contextual information about a television show, readers of kipmanley's post may be primed to expect the link to elaborate further on

this seemingly real television show called ‘Candle Cove’. Then, if the link is followed, readers are directed to Straub’s *Chainsawsuit* webpage where the *Candle Cove* story is presented in full (Fig. 6) formatted as an online conversation, though underneath a webcomic that plays on the “television static” twist of the story, thus undercutting the framing of kipmanley’s initial post. Although the distinction between the fictional world in which ‘Candle Cove’ exerts its nightmarish hold on Skyshale033 and co, and the online but ultimately factual world in which kipmanley shares the tale with MetaFilter is not totally blurred, the performance through which kipmanley chooses to spread the story begins to tease at the border between the two – facilitated by the choice to spread on a Web2.0 platform designed for sincere interaction between users. In doing this, kipmanley spreads *Candle Cove* ‘into’ the form of fourth-generation digital fiction. Any ontological ambiguity seems to be restored to certainty of fictionality by clicking and moving through the hyperlink in kipmanley’s performance and quoting of *Candle Cove* to Straub’s webcomic as the *Chainsawsuit* webpage clearly frames the tale as an unnerving fiction. However, reader interactions with kipmanley’s performance and with Straub’s webcomic version of *Candle Cove* soon put an end to any reassurance. Instead, as I will show below, they illustrate that textual online interaction has some level of ontological ambiguity.

On both kipmanley’s post, and Straub’s webcomic iteration of *Candle Cove* that kipmanley linked to, the first comment by another user is a link to a YouTube video claiming to depict ‘footage’ of *Candle Cove* the television show. The users who post links to this supposed footage are ‘modernserf’, who can be seen replying to kipmanley and shown in Fig. 3.7, and ‘XxXx’ who is shown in Fig. 3.8 which depicts the comments section under Straub’s comic.

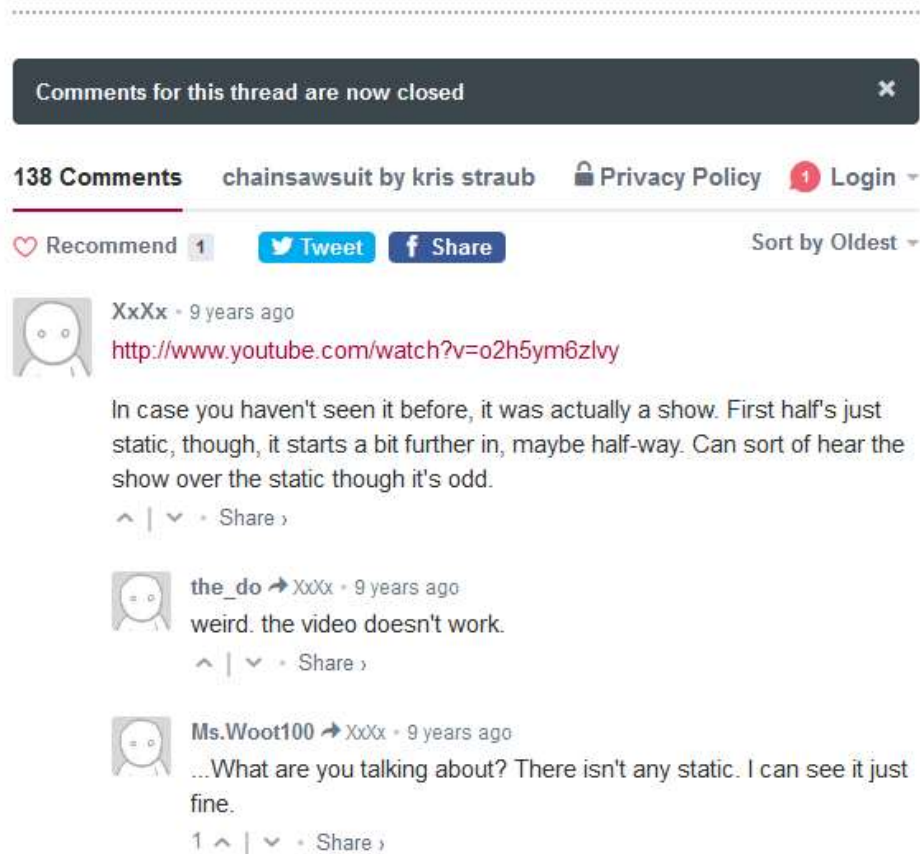


Fig. 3.8 – The comments section under Straub’s webcomic version of *Candle Cove* depicted in Fig. 3.6.

Here, we can see that *Candle Cove*’s movement across the Internet has taken on a memetic turn. This manifests in two ways. First, *Candle Cove* has become a “collection of texts” (Shifman, 2014, p. 58) comprised of Straub’s original story, his webcomic version, and at least one video of ‘Candle Cove’ that has been created and shared on YouTube. In addition, rather than simply reproducing or spreading the text of *Candle Cove* either through a link or by copying and pasting the story text, users are beginning to spread the sense of unease and confusion felt by the fictional users of the original story by spreading links to the video and feigning the ability to see the content or static, mimicking the twist in Straub’s original version of the tale and these interactions becoming part of the memetic collection of texts.

In their comments linking to the YouTube video in question, both modernserf and XxXx provide comments that read as engagement with *Candle Cove* as fact.

Modernserf remarks “[m]y favorite episode, on Youtube!” (2011, n.p) – with his comment formatted as a hyperlink to the episode, while XxXx comments with the direct URL link to a YouTube video and the following unnerving message: “In case you haven't seen it before, it was actually a show. First half's just static, though, it starts a bit further in, maybe half-way. Can sort of hear the show over the static though it's odd” (2011, n.p). Here we can see that both users engage directly with the world presented by *Candle Cove* as if it were real – taking on the stance of real people who have actually seen the television show (which doesn't actually exist) – mimicking the tone of Skyshale033 and the other fictional forumgoers early into Straub's original text.

In mimicking the conversational tones of their respective forums and talking in a matter-of-fact way about ‘Candle Cove’ the show as if it were a real piece of media that they had viewed and sincerely wish to discuss, XxXx and Modernserf destabilise the perceived boundary between the site of conversation between ‘real’ people found on MetaFilter and Chainsawsuit, and the fictional world of *Candle Cove* discussed by those real people. This continuation of the stance presented by the original *Candle Cove* text (that is, a discussion of ‘Candle Cove’ as a real television show) in MetaFilter and *Chainsawsuit*'s comments sections by the two users forces other readers and members of those online communities to consider with sincerity, if only for a brief moment, the possibility that ‘Candle Cove’ the show did in fact exist and is remembered by real people. Moreover, this style of spread and performance recalls the pastiche and counterfeit at the heart of the Gothic as an expressive mode discussed in Section 2.2.

This ambiguity about the ontology of ‘Candle Cove’ the television show is furthered by even more counterfeit and pastiche through the implication that it had at one point been

re-recorded and uploaded to YouTube – remediated by other people for those who also remember the show to enjoy. Unfortunately, both videos have long-since been removed from YouTube, either by their respective uploaders or by YouTube itself. YouTube’s policy when a video is removed is to keep the link active, but link to an imposing black screen with ‘Video unavailable’ as the only text.

Both videos can be accessed by the Internet Archive Wayback Machine, revealing that the video linked to by modernserf is titled *Candle Cove S1 e04 p1*, and was uploaded to YouTube by Lazy0Waffle (Fig. 3.9). The video file has similarly been archived meaning it can still be viewed. It consists of ten minutes of looped television static for both the video and audio, then three seconds of a black screen. The video linked to by XxXx was uploaded by jojacob666 (Fig. 10), though unfortunately the video data has not been archived. However, its content can be discerned by looking at the conversation leading on from XxXx’s comment on Straub’s comic. As seen in Fig. 3.8, the first reply to XxXx, by user ‘the_do’, is “weird. the video doesn’t work” (2011, n.p), which, at first, may indicate that the_do has encountered a similar issue to myself and been greeted with a dead link. However, the date of their comment indicates that it was posted in the same year as XxXx (2009). According to the Internet Archive Wayback Machine, the video remained active until at least 2014 (Fig. 3.10) meaning that the link was still active at the time of the comment.

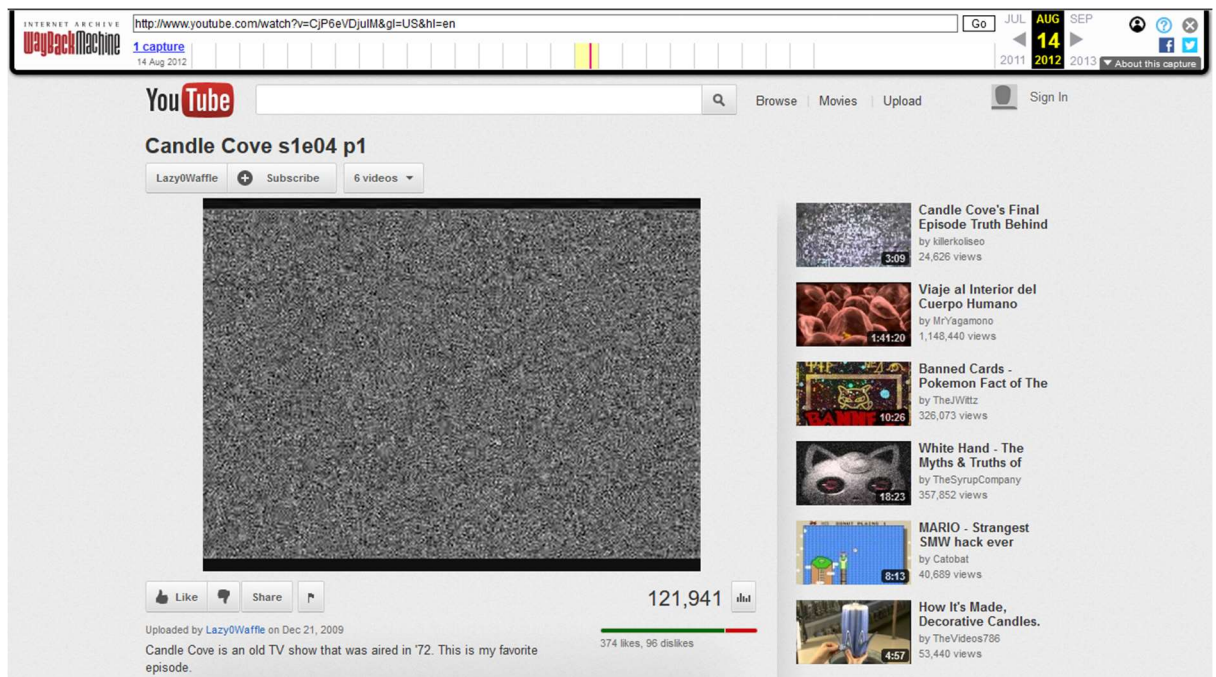


Fig. 3.9: The archived version of the now broken link posted by modernserf, leading to a video of Candle Cove uploaded to YouTube by Lazy0Waffle. Note the date in the navigation bar at the top indicating that it was active when the conversations took place.

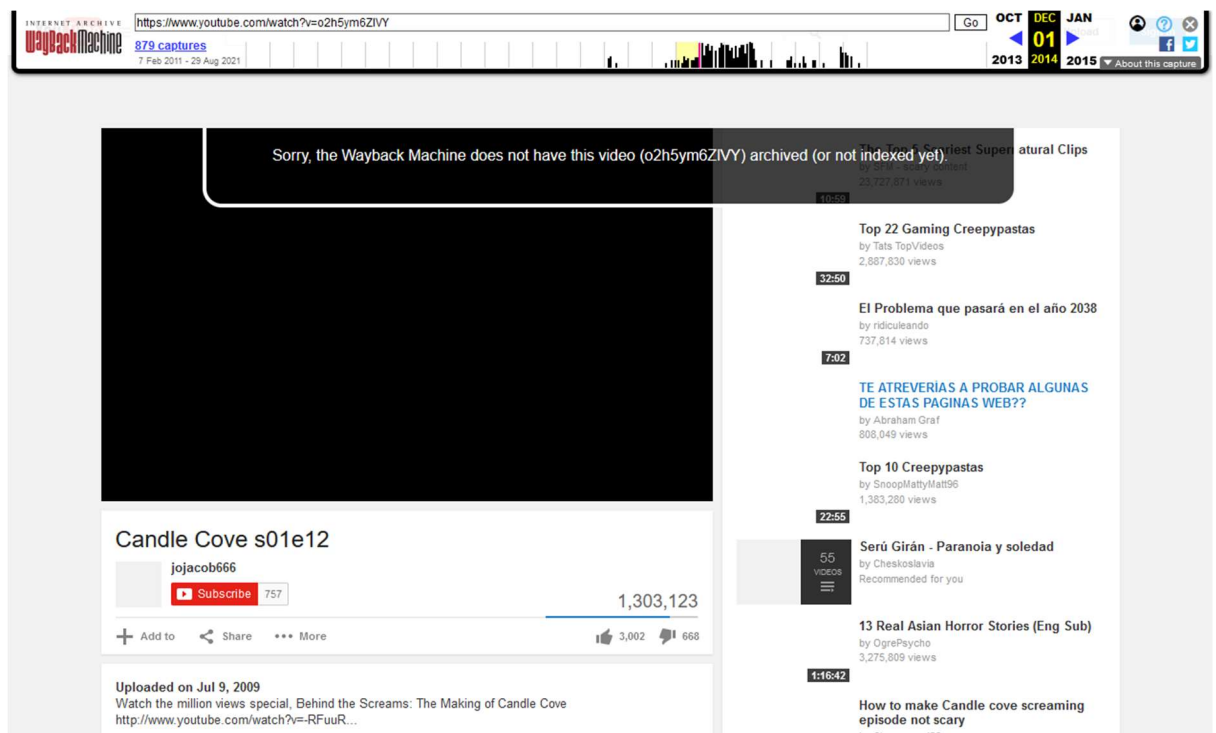


Fig. 3.10: The archived version of the now broken link posted by XxXx, leading to a video of Candle Cove uploaded to YouTube by jojacob666. Note the date in the navigation bar at the top indicating that it was active when the conversations took place.

The functioning link proves that the _do's inability to work the video is not the result of the transience of digital media. The second reply by 'Ms.Woot100' in response to the _do instead indicates a roleplay to further play with the assumption that those in the text conversation are sincere and real users, further destabilising the ontological status of 'Candle Cove' outside of its eponymous narrative. Ms.Woot100 replies "...What are you talking about? There isn't any static. I can see it just fine" (2012, n.p). Here, Frank's pivot from hearing to telling moves beyond a copy-and-paste of the textual content of Straub's initial narrative as new text is added around the existence of 'Candle Cove' as a real television show. Thus, we move beyond *Candle Cove* as a viral "single cultural unit [...] spread by multiple agents" (Shifman, p. 59) and enter the realm of a memetic "group of digital items [...] created with an awareness of each other" (Shifman, p. 41), as the static *Candle Cove* narrative is supplemented by fan videos created with an awareness of the original story. Moreover, this shows that *Candle Cove* has spread firmly into the form of fourth-generation digital fiction as it exists across multiple social media and Web2.0 platforms and that these platforms, through interactivity and user participation, are a "significant part of the aesthetic expression and the meaning potential" of the story (Bell et al. 2014, p. 10), affecting how users engage with and interact with the story.

In the example above, readers of the unfolding exchanges are confronted with two possibilities: either 'the_do' or 'Ms.Woot100' are lying about their experience of the 'Candle Cove' video and it does not exist, or *Candle Cove* is in fact a 'found' narrative. In the latter scenario, the television show 'Candle Cove' exists in the real world and it exudes the same sinister and supernatural control over people through a YouTube recording as it did to the children when it initially aired with some viewers able to see the footage, and others left confused about what is meant to be there.

Such ambiguity is also shown in other spread versions of the narrative. In an ‘askreddit’ thread (a genre of thread on the message board Reddit in which users can ask any question to the wider reddit community), user ‘/u/ThePolymath’ asks: “Reddit, what is your creepiest, most unnerving story? Real or not, please creep us out” (2010, n.p).

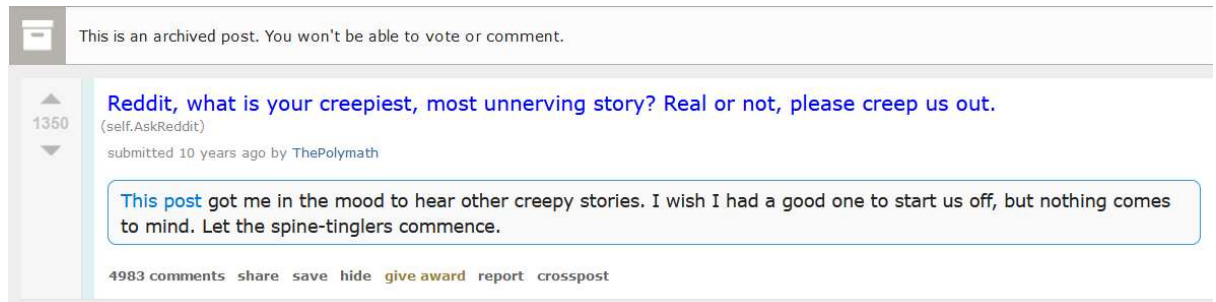


Fig. 3.11 – /u/ThePolymath’s ‘askreddit’ thread encourages users to share their creepiest stories.

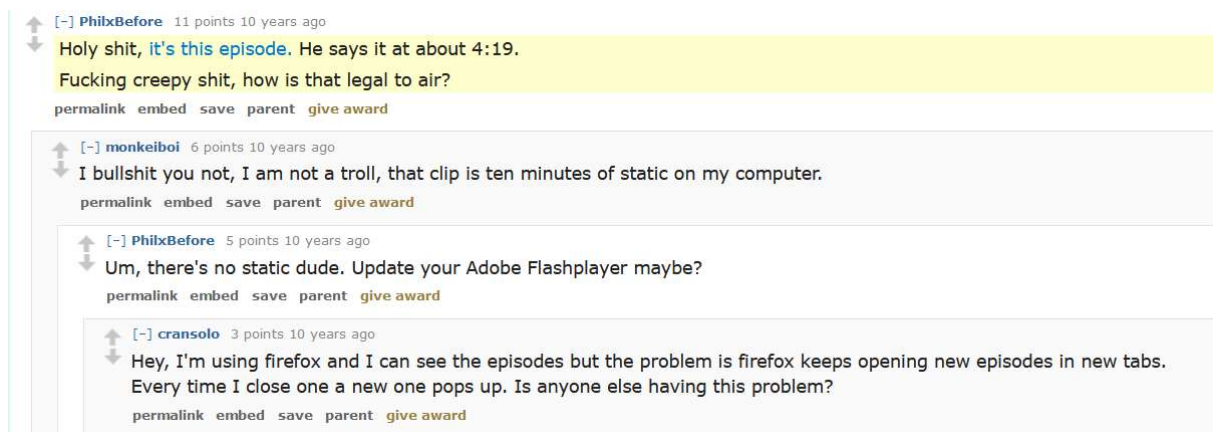


Fig. 3.12 – A link to alleged footage of ‘Candle Cove’ underneath /u/havespacesuit’s textual spread of the story.

In response to /u/ThePolymath’s invitation, user ‘/u/havespacesuit’ posts the unaltered full *Candle Cove* text to the thread – thus beginning a similar cycle of dialogue addressing *Candle Cove* as if it were real. Underneath /u/havespacesuit’s post of the narrative and as seen in Fig. 12, user ‘/u/PhilxBefore’ posts a link to Lazy0Waffle’s YouTube video discussed in Fig. 9 above, hyperlinked to the text “it’s this episode” (visible in blue). They accompany this link with a remark about how The Skin-Taker’s threat of “TO GRIND YOUR SKIN” (Straub, 2009, n.p) can be heard at around four

minutes in, adding “[f]ucking creepy shit, how is that legal to air?”. As I have shown above that this video is, in fact, ten minutes of static, we know that /u/PhilxBefore is intending to mislead readers of the thread.

As shown in Fig. 3.12, a reply from ‘/u/monkeiboi’ begins another iteration of the game witnessed in Fig 3.8 between the _do and Ms.Woot100. /u/monkeiboi writes: “I bullshit you not, I am not a troll, that clip is ten minutes of static on my computer”.

/u/PhilxBefore replies with apparent deadpan sincerity: “Um, there’s no static dude.

Update your Adobe Flashplayer maybe?”. A similar exchange occurs further down the thread when ‘/u/maldovix’ comments that they “jumped 6 inches out of my seat when I hit it to open in a new tab and the static started”, to which /u/PhilxBefore replies: “The link works fine for me, it might be loud but there’s no static? What browser are you using?”. Here, /u/monkeiboi and /u/maldovix link the mysterious alleged malfunction of the video back to the original *Candle Cove* and its twist that to adults, the show was just “dead air for 30 minutes” (Straub, 2009, n.p). As the video linked by

/u/PhilxBefore has long-since been removed from YouTube, readers late to the conversation must speculate on whether /u/PhilxBefore’s confusion and troubleshooting suggestions are sincere and the other users are feigning the video being purely static or whether the video link is indeed static and it is /u/PhilxBefore attempting to confuse other users. Alternatively, those aware of the Wayback Machine can attempt to recover the video to discover the truth.

Similar confusion, troubleshooting, and crucially, linking back to motifs in the original story can be seen in the interactions on the Spanish blog, The Diary of The Black Sheep (Fig. 3.13). The narrative text is virally reproduced and prefaced as Creepypasta, but the same YouTube video discussed above is embedded at the bottom of the post with

the caption “[t]his is the infamous Candle Cove final episode. I see only static ...” (2010, n.p).



Fig. 3.13 – The embedded video at the bottom of the reproduction of Candle Cove on ‘The Diary of The Black Sheep’

179 Responses to “*CREEPY PASTA: CANDLE COVE*”

hunk874531

June 9, 2010 at 11:50 pm



wtf!!!!.

[Answer](#)

black dipper

June 10, 2010 at 4:40 pm



I don't know your k, but I only see static!

[Answer](#)

one good

October 11, 2012 at 4:38 pm



I am 10 years old and I saw at the beginning some puppets come out then a skull with its body comes out (Captain Percy) from there a girl crying and a man with a pig's face and sometimes you can find a smiling face

fatima

May 3, 2014 at 11:16 am



I could see all the video, there are many screams and a girl does not stop crying as if she was already high from that

Misaki woods

December 24, 2013 at 1:03 pm



It is that the series can only be seen by young children ...

[Answer](#)

Demon-terra

January 31, 2014 at 12:45 pm



I hear screams but I only see static, at some point I heard a man say something that I did not understand, after seeing the static for a while my eyes hurt and it still resonates in my ears

Fig. 3.14 – Responses to The Diary of The Black Sheep's blog post.

As Fig. 3.14 shows, the story along with the embedded video elicits replies varying from “wtf !!!!!” and “I see it, it does not look like static” to “I do not know about you, but I only see static!” and “do you not see static or are you making us more scared with doubt?”. The variety of contradictory responses again show that the contributors to the thread are reacting to – or perhaps performing reactions to – the video in different ways based on *Candle Cove*’s twist. Some, such as ‘black dipper’, insist repeatedly in the comment section that the video consists only of static – going as far as to reply to various other comments to reassert their claim. On the other hand, users such as ‘fatima’ and ‘Demon-terra’ claim that the content of the video is visible and is remarkably disturbing. These opposing accounts work together in the comments section to reproduce the ontological ambiguity around the existence of ‘Candle Cove’, also felt by the forumgoers in Straub’s original story.

The users ‘one good’ and ‘Misaki woods’ seek to add an additional dimension to the lore of ‘Candle Cove’ through their inputs in the comments section, attempting to explain the discrepancy in who sees static and who sees footage from the show. In their engagement with the video, they seek to also explain the unsettling mystery at the heart of *Candle Cove*; what were the children watching in the static? User ‘one good’ asserts that they are “10 years old” before detailing the disturbing content of the alleged ‘Candle Cove’ footage such as “a skull with its body comes out” in a juvenile style befitting their claimed age. ‘Misaki woods’ clarifies in a later post that this is “the series [that] can only be seen by young children”. *Candle Cove*’s uncanny twist that the eponymous show was simply static is all the more effective by lack of an explanation as to how the forumgoers were able to have such distinct collective memories, with countless interpretations available to the reader. However, as shown above, the users ‘one good’ and ‘Misaki woods’ have taken an implicit idea within the story– the idea

that only children can view ‘Candle Cove’ through the static – and expanded it into the foundation for their interaction with the narrative.

Overall, these exchanges shown in MetaFilter, Chainsawsuit, Reddit, and The Diary of The Black Sheep exhibit similar qualities in terms of spread type, and all demonstrate the importance of interactivity, remix, and the role each platform plays in how readers engage with *Candle Cove*, and thus the importance of creepypasta’s form as fourth-generation digital fiction to its renewal of Gothic traits. All begin with a form of viral textual spread, a “single cultural unit [...] that propagates in many copies” (Shifman, p. 56). This takes the shape of either as a link to Straub’s website (either Ichor Falls or Chainsawsuit) or as a full copying and pasting of the narrative text of *Candle Cove* (Chainsawsuit itself being a form of this from Ichor Falls). This viral spread then becomes a memetic as a collection of “digital items sharing common characteristics [...] created with an awareness of each other” (p. 41) forms around *Candle Cove*. This is often seen through the linking of a supposed video of ‘Candle Cove’ – a URL spread textually across platforms and threads – and the following conversation by users in those threads as to whether the video is simply static, or a depiction of the horrors of the puppet show remembered by Skyshale033 in the narrative text. The move from a static iteration of the narrative text virally spread to a memetic collection of texts including additional content pushes an ever-increasing ambiguity around the boundaries between fact and fiction. It is thus the variation in this narrative’s spread that drives an increasing intensity in ontological ambiguity. Users are confronted with footage from a fictional television show that did not exist in its original fictional narrative but exhibited a disturbing control over the characters who remembered it. Then, via users claiming to see either footage or static, the alleged footage of the show begins exhibiting its unnerving autonomous traits *outside* text marked as part of its fictional world as new

readers are confronted with a choice to accept that one portion of commenters are lying, or that the paranormal qualities of ‘Candle Cove’ really do exist.

In this section, I have shown how *Candle Cove* was spread *into* creepypasta – moving from a static webpage to being a horror narrative copied and pasted onto social media platforms. Moreover, it is spread into being fourth-generation digital fiction where “the platform is a significant part of the aesthetic expression and the meaning potential” (Bell et al. 2014, p. 10). As I have shown above, the horror and Gothic traits discussed in section 3.2 are altered through the move from a static webpage to dynamic sites of Web2.0 interaction where readers pivot from hearing to telling the story, spreading it further, or adding new comments altogether. Key here is the shift in a sense of ontological ambiguity from whether ‘Candle Cove’ was a real television show or just static for the characters in the fictional narrative to whether alleged YouTube footage of ‘Candle Cove’ is viewable or static for real users on the platforms where the narrative has spread. Through narrative spread across the Internet, *Candle Cove* ensnares readers in a bewildering and disorienting scenario where fiction and reality bleed together in online textual spaces as performative roleplay and sincere responses exist on the same page, responding to the same piece of video.

3.5 – “I don’t think that was a dream. I remember that.”: The videos of ‘Candle Cove’.

As I have shown in the preceding analysis, *Candle Cove*’s original format and content is well suited to online spread that results in an ontological play between users that obfuscates its fictional status. Often, this ontological play is not signalled to all users, leading to the contradictory exchanges analysed above. An additional, more literal level

of ontological ambiguity can be found when shifting the focus of analysis to the video iterations of ‘Candle Cove’ (see Fig. 3.15).

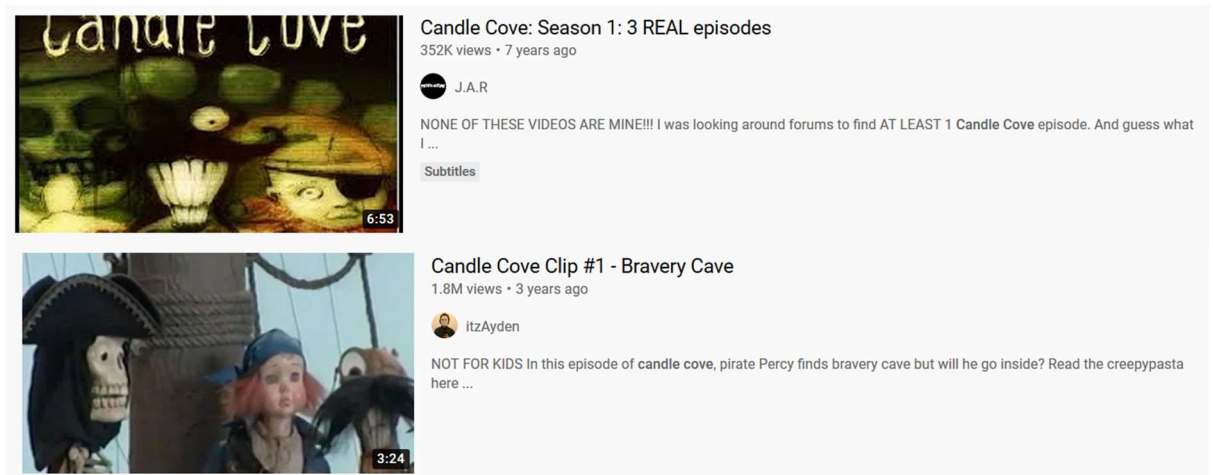


Fig. 3.15 – Alleged episodes of ‘Candle Cove’ uploaded to YouTube.

Fig. 3.15 shows two out of thousands of videos of ‘Candle Cove’ that have been published on YouTube since Straub’s initial publication of the narrative; fan edits that depict what readers of *Candle Cove* believe the show to have looked like if it were real. These videos are a way of performing the narrative by reproducing the show supposedly watched by Skyshale033 and the rest of the forumgoers of Straub’s original fiction. This kind of memetic spread – by creating a new addition to the collection of texts that form *Candle Cove* – is unique to its form as fourth-generation digital fiction, as the narrative can spread across different social media platforms that are suited for different types of media and take new shapes while doing so.

In this instance, rather than positioning readers as being caught in the middle of a conversation where reality appears to be different for each participant, the YouTube videos of alleged ‘Candle Cove’ episodes seem to do away with ontological boundaries entirely by bringing into alleged existence – as a recorded artefact – a television show that never actually existed as a television show. This complex breach of the boundary

between real and fictional worlds recalls Kosofsky-Sedgwick's spatialised model of the Gothic – “what's inside, what's outside, and what separates them” (1986, pp. 12 – 13), and specifically her observation that “the most potent magic, and the most potent instances of the uncanny [...] are evoked in the very breach of the imprisoning wall” (p. 13). Here, the imprisoning wall of an ontological distinction between the fictional world where ‘Candle Cove’ exists as a television show and the real world where it is a fictional show as part of the *Candle Cove* creepypasta narrative has all but disappeared. The potent magic of the multimodal spread of the narrative and aspects from it – such as ‘footage’ from the show itself – into video is that it brings real-life users and recordings of a fictional show into the same ontological space on social media.

The videos are uploaded, linked to, and presented as truly found documents, with the interface and formatting of YouTube giving the videos “an air of truth” (Botting, 2014, p. 32), thus recalling a Gothic fascination with artifice and facsimile, and reinventing the Gothic tradition of presenting a narrative as “a patchwork of textual modes” (Mandal, 2015, p. 91) to a patchwork of digital media. Moreover, by bringing footage of ‘Candle Cove’ into the real world through edits, the videos “realise the unreal” (Kaye, 2012, p. 239) much like early Gothic cinema's experiments with film. These come together to forward the Gothic preoccupation with “uncertainties of [...] positioning and instabilities of knowledge” (Punter and Byron, 2004, p. 273).

By examining the dates of the posts in Fig. 3.8, 3.12, and 3.13, we can see that the video linked in each of the discussions was produced in 2010, a year prior to Straub's own re-publication of *Candle Cove* on his Chainsawsuit webcomic. Though information about the particular linked video can no longer be found, the video must have been produced in a brief window between Straub's initial *Candle Cove* post on 15 March 2009, and the earliest comment linking to the video – /u/PhilxBefore's Reddit

comment – on March 23rd of the same year. This illustrates just how quickly videos of ‘Candle Cove’ were produced as alternative memetic ways to spread the narrative.

In a short blog post highlighting *Candle Cove* as a piece of digital storytelling, digital media scholar Bryan Alexander embeds another “user-generated video sample” (2011, n.p) as an example of the narrative’s development. Alexander quotes and preserves the original video description text:

A rather bizarre episode of Candle Cove, a children's show which aired on a small uhf television station in Ashland, KY about 71 or 72. I contacted the old owners of the station and they loaned me the tape and asked me to digitize the episodes for them and said I could do whatever I wanted with them. This is the last episode and is very strange.

(jojacob666, in Alexander, 2009, n.p)

The description by jojacob666 positions the video as actual footage of ‘Candle Cove’ obtained from the station who screened it, – albeit with the location changed from Ironton in Straub’s narrative to Ashland here. It is thus positioned as a real artefact that, having supposedly existed as tape before being uploaded, existed as a television show in the real world. The paratextual comment preserved and quoted by Alexander further serves to frame the video as an authentic copy of a television show broadcast in the real world. The detailed description of the videos alleged provenance recalls the preface to *Otranto*, in which the fictional William Marshall claims to have found the initial document in the “library of an ancient Catholic family” (Walpole, 1765, n.p) and since translated it. In this instance, jojacob666 claims to have been given the original episode tapes of ‘Candle Cove’ and since digitised it for upload on YouTube.

Importantly, this video – and others like it – exist both as a part of *Candle Cove*’s memetic spread – that is, as a single entry into the *Candle Cove* meme as a collection of texts – and as a free-floating, highly unsettling video on YouTube, with its

accompanying paratext supporting the idea that it was once screened to children. Lost in the glut of ever-increasing online content, these videos of ‘Candle Cove’ can function as Gothic found documents in the truest sense. I argue that on social media and Web2.0 platforms, the fictional framing used by Walpole to set up *The Castle of Otranto* has the potential to occur as a real experience, as these videos may legitimately be happened upon by those idly browsing the world’s largest video library. To a viewer unaware of the *Candle Cove* narrative, Kris Straub, Ichor Falls, or any surrounding indicators of the video (and others like it) being a fan-made work tying into a fictional world, stumbling across one of these videos would be, at best a bewildering experience, and at worst an experience as terrifying as Skyshale033’s, depending on the actual content of the video discovered. For those unaware of *Candle Cove* when they happen upon the threads analysed in section 3.4 or unfamiliar with the title when viewing any fan-made videos, the experience of interacting with the material on Web2.0 can be recast as an unsettling Gothic experience. For the uninitiated, these instances of *Candle Cove*’s spread raise questions such as “is ‘Candle Cove’ real?”, “if it isn’t, how is there a video of it?”, “is this video really static or can others see something else?”, and crucially, “can I trust the people I am reading?”. Readers may be unsure as to whether they are unwitting characters in a roleplay or talking to equally disoriented users, and any stability of knowledge surrounding the boundaries between fact and fiction is quickly eroded.

3.6 –The Uncanny, The Weird, and the Becoming Real of *Candle Cove*.

A Gothic sense of disorientation; an “instability[y] of knowledge” (Punter and Byron, 2004, p. 293) and an uncanny uncertainty – a sense that “things are not as they have

come to appear through habit and familiarity” (Bennett and Royle, 1999, p. 37) prevails among conflicting responses in the comments discussed in sections 3.4 and 3.5. This imbues the experience of encountering the videos of ‘Candle Cove’ with a threatening quality – able to change or challenge a reader’s perception of reality simply with its presence. In this sense, *Candle Cove* itself moves into the realm of another Gothic characteristic: the weird.

When defining the weird, Mark Fisher states that:

It involves a sensation of *wrongness*: a weird entity or object is so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist, or at least it should not exist here. Yet if the entity or object *is* here, then the categories which we have up until now used to make sense of the world cannot be valid. The weird thing is not wrong, after all: it is our conceptions that must be inadequate.

(Fisher, 2016, p. 15 - emphasis in original)

For Fisher, a weird entity is one that challenges all preconceived notions about its context. It is a thing that should not be able to be where it is, and yet, it is. With its presence alone, it suggests that our understanding of the way the world is may be outmoded or no longer useful. It is precisely this sense of wrongness – this sensation that what we are encountering should not exist, or at least not in the scenario in which we are encountering it – that *Candle Cove* ultimately evokes as it is spread across the Internet. As demonstrated above in sections 3.4 and 3.5, with *Candle Cove*’s spread comes a litany of ways in which the story renews and reinvents its inherent ontological ambiguity, leaving doubts about what might exist and might not.

To understand how *Candle Cove* embodies traits of the weird, it is important to grasp the weird in relation to the uncanny. Fisher describes the weird as that which “brings to the familiar something which ordinarily lies beyond it, and which cannot be reconciled with the ‘homely’ (even as its negation)” (p. 11). Something that is weird, thus, cannot

be aligned with something homely or familiar, nor can it be aligned with its negation in the unfamiliar or uncanny. In this conceptualisation, the weird is not something repressed that has returned to disturb the present as in a Freudian uncanny, but something entirely unfamiliar breaking through into a familiar space. This is true of the video instances of ‘Candle Cove’, as they suggest the supposed return of a television show that never existed (thus, it cannot be a return). ‘Candle Cove’ lies *beyond* the familiar while taking on the aesthetic of a 1970s or 1980s television show – and as such presenting itself as something once familiar obfuscated through time. A sense of Freudian uncanny – “the anxiety [...] from something which *recurs*” (Freud, 1919, p. 429) in relation to viewing an instance of *Candle Cove*’s video spread or when wondering if the show’s title is familiar from one’s youth is a false one. When it is realised that *Candle Cove* is not uncanny (and therefore was never familiar to begin with), the wrongness of encountering a thing that should not be here and the weird of *Candle Cove* is also experienced. *Candle Cove* is an entire fiction masquerading as a memory of a television show that was never broadcast, yet still seems to unsettle and disturb posters of message board threads and viewers of YouTube videos.

The weird is not a new concept. As Fisher observes, its foundations appear in the works of H.P. Lovecraft, a figure instrumental in creating the weird tale as a form of horror in the early twentieth-century. Fisher argues that, in Lovecraft’s work, the “interpolation into the stories of simulated scholarship alongside authentic history produces ontological anomalies [...] [B]y treating really existing phenomenon as if they had the same ontological status as his own inventions, Lovecraft de-realises the factual and real-ises the fictional” (p. 24). By this, Fisher observes that within the context of Lovecraft’s stories, fictional scholarship and factual history ontologically exist at the same level and are treated with the same sense of authenticity. What Fisher defines as

the “reality-effect” (p. 24) has led to cases where “more than a few readers have contacted the British Library asking for a copy of the *Necronomicon*” (p. 24) – the fictional text referred to across many of Lovecraft’s stories. The similarities between Fisher’s observations about Lovecraft’s works and the ontologically ambiguous devices at work within *Candle Cove* are striking. For both, fiction and fact exist on the same ontological level when reading the text.

However, rather than an author treating real-world phenomena and inventions of fiction as having the same ontological status in his text, the affordances of Web2.0 spaces and social media platforms allow for the fiction of *Candle Cove* to exist at the same ontological level as users online, with videos of alleged footage existing alongside genuine digitisations of children’s television shows. This “reality-effect” is only furthered when users begin to disagree over their experience watching alleged footage of ‘Candle Cove’. The factual presence of sincere online users is “de-realised”, and the fictional ‘Candle Cove’ is “real-ised” as other users who understand the twist of the original story insist their experiences are also true, resulting in discussions where forum regulars are “left wondering if Candle Cove was a real children’s program” (Straub, 2010, n.p). I define this “reality-effect” when enhanced and accentuated by creepypasta’s form as fourth-generation digital fiction as “ontological flattening”.

3.6.1 – Ontological Flattening.

I define ‘ontological flattening’ as a state when real users and their responses, and the fictional story they are reading and responding to exist in the same textual space without borders, implied hierarchy, or explicit indicators of fictionality in the story text. The form of fourth-generation digital fiction lends itself to ontological flattening due to it being “created and read in a social media environment” (Bell et al., 2014, p. 11) –

here expanded to Web2.0 environments and forums – where “the platform is a significant part of the aesthetic expression and the meaning potential” (p. 11). I argue that my new concept of ontological flattening is key to developing an understanding of how creepypasta’s form enables a new way for the affective traits of horror and Gothic fiction to be experienced by intensifying the Gothic trait of ontological instability to an end point where reader and text exist at the same ontological level.

A precedent for my concept of ontological flattening exists in the form of Alison Gibbons’ concept of the “ontological hoax” (2012, p. 432). Texts that engage in ontological hoax, Gibbons argues, are those which “use multimodality to present their narratives in a way which appears to endow them with a greater sense of authenticity [...] As such, these books masquerade as something they are not, disguising their fictional status” (p. 432). Gibbons gives examples of print texts that leverage multimodality, from the inclusion of images and supplementary video, to taking the form of non-fiction artefacts such as auction catalogues and art biographies replete with examples of paintings (p. 432).

As demonstrated in this chapter through the development of *Candle Cove* videos as I will show in chapter four regarding photographs of The Slender Man, multimodality is frequently incorporated into creepypasta narratives as they are developed and spread. However, while in both cases, the multimodal examples obfuscate ontological stability and endow them with a greater sense of authenticity, they are able to “masquerade as something they are not” (Gibbons, 2012 p. 432) through their form in a way that print fiction cannot. Distinctly supposed lost episodes of *Candle Cove* are still episodes of *Candle Cove* that exist on websites that host user-generated videos, and that are spread and distributed online. This distribution acts as a new entry point into, and example of the *Candle Cove* narrative, obfuscating and further distancing the text from indicators

of fictionality by distributing it across a network: impossible for a print text. This is demonstrated in section 3.3, where I show how various instances of *Candle Cove*, from comments sections under Kris Straub's webcomic reproduction to textual enactments, exist in an ontological uncertain space as users make use of multimodal additions to *Candle Cove* to play textual games with each other – if they are aware of the narrative and its fictional status – and unsuspecting commenters – who may be misled by multimodal aspects of the narrative instance and be left uncertain about the 'true' status of the *Candle Cove* video. Indeed, in addition to multimodality through the addition of supplementary media, another aspect of Gibbons' model of ontological hoax stresses the physical form of the text itself is part of the hoax, as the printed text appears as something else to obfuscate fictionality. As the affordances of networked digital text are essential for a narrative to be creepypasta, using a physical form to disguise their fictional status is not possible. Instead, by being written for and read on social media platforms, forums, and other venues for interpersonal communication with other people through networked digital text, creepypasta always appears as something it is not – a 'real' account, experience, or other form of documentation – by virtue of the platform it is written on. The "ontologically challenging" (Gibbons, 2012, p. 433) nature of the multimodal print texts that are the subject of Gibbons' analysis are the result of careful design, planning, typesetting, and printing. For creepypasta, such hurdles in production to convincingly present a fictional text as real are avoided as the platform the stories are written on delivers the fiction in a digital form where its fictional status is always disguised as the presence, experience, or content of a real user.

These examples also foreground another aspect by which creepypasta departs from the ontological hoax model: the capacity for interactivity with the narrative in ways that impact the narrative for other readers. While print fiction that can be considered

ontological hoax fiction may require the reader to interact with the text in some way – for example, turning the pages – that interaction is not permanent, nor does it impact the experience of the narrative for other readers. For creepypasta, the comments by readers inscribe their presence as readers on the narrative itself and what they say can shape how other readers engage with the text at hand. This may be through an effort to deliberately keep new readers confused or to re-enact the original story text as seen in chapter three, section 3.3. As I will show in subsequent chapters, it can also be to make sense of narrative fragments in conversation with other readers (chapter four, fig 4), or even through a direct question and answer with the author or a character from the narrative (chapter five, section 5.3.2). As these interactions take place on social media platforms or other venues for networked textual conversation, they remain as part of that instance of the narrative unless a platform shuts down, a thread is deleted, or some other form of moderation/unarchiving occurs.

A final way in which creepypasta moves away from ontological hoax is through the way in which markers of fictionality are displayed, interacted with, and impact the reception of the text. Alice Bell and Marie-Laure Ryan observe two key markers of fictionality: Dorrit Cohn’s consideration that “narrative devices that suggest the fictionality of texts [as fictional] stories are hardly ever told in the same way as factual ones” (Bell and Ryan, 2019, p. 19), and “formulae” that openly flag a text’s fictional status, such as “‘once upon a time’, ‘there was and there was not,’ or the paratextual genre indicator ‘a novel’ that appear at the beginning, or outside the text proper”.

Creepypasta and print ontological hoax fictions complicate Cohn’s claims, being told specifically as factual stories and using multimodal means to bolster their (false) claim to reality. For both, there are no markers of fictionality in the *content* of their stories or the form in which they are told. However, paratextual indicators of fictionality are an

inescapable fact of print fiction and the publishing industry. Though Gibbons' examples do not display "a novel" or similar on their covers, searching their ISBN numbers uncovers blurbs that reference a "philosophical exploration of the boundaries between fiction and reality" (Boyd, 2004, n.p) or copies for sale in the poetry section of Amazon. Therefore, unless one happens across the physical artefact in a bookstore and purchases it without prior knowledge of what it is, a reader will inevitably encounter paratextual markers of fictionality in the process of seeking the text out to read. On the other hand, as I have shown throughout this chapter and will demonstrate further throughout this thesis, creepypasta makes its way to the reader via textual spread on platforms that are not traditional venues for fiction – that is, they are sites of textually mediated interpersonal communication between users. There are still paratextual indicators of fictionality to be found for creepypasta narratives, such as Kris Straub's initial static web page publications of *Candle Cove* that were subsequently spread across the Internet (section 3.2). These webpages openly state that the stories therein are fictional. However, in order to find these markers, a reader must either already be familiar with the narrative in question or be dedicated to online research and seeking out the origin of these stories. Thus, most encounters with creepypasta narratives are likely to be from a spread instance of the story where these indicators of fictionality have long since been stripped away. In this way, the ontological hoaxing effect of creepypasta is more effective in its concealment of fictionality than that of print examples.

These differences and intensifications from print ontological hoaxing can be attributed to creepypasta's form as fourth-generation digital fiction where the social media platform "is a significant part of the aesthetic expression and the meaning potential" (Bell et al., 2014, p. 10). In Hans Rustad's elaboration of the term, he states that fourth-

generation digital fictions “take the structure and shape of a platform that is already defined, and defined for different purposes” (Rustad, 2015, n.p). The platform’s part in the aesthetic expression and meaning potential of creepypasta narratives is that, as the venue for the fiction to be told and spread, it ensures that creepypasta is always an ontological hoax, “masquerading as something they are not, disguising their fictional status” (Gibbons, 2012, p. 432). Throughout the analysis chapters of this thesis, I show that creepypasta inherently must take the structure and shape of a platform that is already defined for different purposes. Whether it is the spread of *Candle Cove* to Metafilter.com and the comments sections of blogs with users debating whether the eponymous television show exists, ‘recorded’ versions of the show appearing on YouTube and other video hosting websites, or the various ways in which I will show the spread of *The Slender Man* and *The Interface Series*, creepypasta narratives are “created and read in a social media environment” (Bell et al., 2014, p. 10) and must therefore abide by the posting structure and rules alongside the ‘real’ users on those platforms.

It is here that a true distinction can be made between the print ontological hoaxes of Gibbons’ analysis and the ontological ambiguity inherent to of creepypasta. For the former, multimodal techniques are used to create the illusion that the fictional narrative and the media by which it is told is part of the real, physical world of the reader – the text is elevated to their level. For the latter, as I show throughout this thesis, both fiction and reader are ontologically flattened, existing in the same textual space. Real users and their responses to a narrative are posts or comments, just as the narrative itself is delivered as posts and comments.

My concept of ontological flattening can be implicitly seen in Lyle Skains’ research on contemporary online fiction that is written for and read on “platforms defined for other

purposes” (Rustad, 2015, n.p), and particularly her concept of “dissonant fabulation” (2018, p. 41). Skains describes dissonant fabulation as a “generic mode of written communication in which fictional narratives are posted in non-fictional spaces, subverting the generic conventions of those spaces and creating socio-cognitive dissonance in the reader” (p. 50). Here, Skains refers to social media and sites of networked interaction as “non-fictional spaces” where fictional writing is unexpected but not impossible. She then ties dissonant fabulation to a history of “social activist pranks or culture jamming” (p. 46) where activists use the genre of commerce and capitalism to subvert its hegemonic cultural messaging. Dissonant fabulation does this by appearing in “commercial spaces”. Skains defines these as online venues where “commercial entities come into contact in official capacities with their clients or consumers [...] whether on the company’s own pages or elsewhere such as *social media*” (p. 46 - emphasis mine). The appearance of dissonant fabulation in these spaces then subverts its use and promote social discourse. An example Skains gives is the Amazon reviews page for BIC Cristal For Her pens. By writing heightened fictional reviews that adhere to the format, tone, and stance of the online review genre, “The BIC reviewers, men and women alike, signal awareness of the norms of the Western culture in terms of gender stereotyping” (p. 52) and the absurdity of gendered marketing around something as universal as a pen. Dissonant fabulation, then, can be regarded as a form of fourth-generation digital fiction as it “takes the structure and shape of a platform that is already defined, and defined for different purposes” (Rustad, n.p). Importantly, however, it leverages the ontologically flattened nature of these platforms to achieve its disruptive goals. Skains explains that “By entering into their respective commercial and/or social communities online and subverting the generic expectations of these sites, these authors are contributing critical digital commentaries

that then ignite further discourse, intertextual and otherwise” (p. 52). Thus, the expected use of an ontologically flattened space and the socially understood rules of engagement therein shape both reader interaction and how it can be leveraged for writing fictional stories.

Unlike dissonant fabulation, which “create[s] dissonance that inspires humour and ignites discourse” (p. 51), creepypasta leverages ontologically flattened social media spaces for distinctly unnerving effects. As I have shown above and will show in subsequent chapters, the texts generated by the spread of creepypasta narratives on social media spaces are not, like dissonant fabulation, principally concerned with activism and social discourse based on satire. Creepypastas act as an illustration of Skains’ observation that “the fantasy genre raises questions about the nature of reality” (p. 51). However, while Skains’ use of “fantasy” delineates it from fiction in non-fictional spaces, creepypasta is a genre that challenges this boundary. As Hoorn (2012) reflects, “unbelievable fantasy [...] a cluster consisting of what is traditionally called ‘fantasy,’ for example horror, sci-fi, and cartoons [...] focus on extraordinary events but not in daily life” (p. 66). By appearing, like works of dissonant fabulation, on platforms where non-fiction is expected and where we read about and respond to experiences from textually mediated people we expect to be real, creepypasta brings extraordinary events squarely into online spaces of daily life. Rather than a pleasurable dissonance for humour and social commentary, as I have shown above in my analysis of comments and conversations underneath videos of *Candle Cove*, creepypasta instead creates a dissonance that becomes a tension in what can be read and trusted in ontologically flattened venues.

Ultimately, it is through the nature of ontologically flattened spaces, the tension they create through the dissonance of fact and fiction existing on the same textual level, and

a multi-faceted memetic spread – as discussion, as performance, and as video – that *Candle Cove* has become real. That is, the conditions that create the original fictional narrative published by Straub have been recreated *outside* of that fiction. As shown in section 3.3, the result of *Candle Cove*'s spread on message boards was a series of conversations that occurred online that culminate in disagreements over the reality of what happens when watching the video alleging to be 'Candle Cove' footage shown in Fig. 3.9 – especially prominent in the example from Reddit. Though the video in question is not a repressed memory from the past interrupting the present, as is the case in Straub's original story, it similarly has an uncanny then weird affect on readers as reminiscing about the show did on Straub's fictional forumgoers, especially when they begin to piece together their shared memory of the episode of the characters "just screaming" (Straub, 2009, n.p). On social media platforms, this is facilitated by the users spreading the narrative or a video of 'Candle Cove' or roleplaying their contrary experience to the reality of the video (claiming to see static if the video contains footage or vice versa). Thus, the spread of *Candle Cove* across ontologically flattened online spaces reproduces the conditions of narrative of *Candle Cove*; members of an online community debate whether or not the eponymous television show exists, creating a sense of Gothic "instability of knowledge" (Punter and Byron, 2004, p. 273) in the process.

However, through continual spread, *Candle Cove* is, in Henriksen's interpretation, still becoming real rather than having *become* real. As she states:

Becoming real is [...] not about the monsters 'finally' breaking through the boundaries separating fact and fiction, thus entering 'reality'. This would stop the movement, the processes and the emergence of *becoming* and turn back to an ontology of *being*.

(Henriksen, 2014, p. 415 - emphasis in original)

Henriksen uses “becoming” in a Deleuzian sense, in that it refers to an “ontology of transformation and change rather than static *being*” (p. 415 - emphasis in original). By this, the continual spread of *Candle Cove* allows it to remain ontologically ambiguous. The affordances of digital media, including interactivity, reader comments, videos, and remixing, ensure that the narrative remains a process which cannot be anchored to being either fact or fiction. Henriksen notes that “[p]rocesses of change and emergence play important parts [in creepypasta narratives] [...] which are usually based on movement and transformation brought about by being copied, pasted and circulated” (p. 415). For Henriksen, memetic variation and continual spread allows creepypasta narratives and the threats they carry to “move in between fact and fiction, reality and imagination, always restless, emerging through digital interactions” (pp. 415 – 416). As I have shown above, the numerous digital interactions around *Candle Cove* in its various instances of spread point to an ontology of transformation and change. That is to say, the examples point to a suitably Gothic ambiguous ontology that, facilitated through performance, creation, and viral spread inherent in creepypasta as a genre, results in a text that hovers in a permanent state between fact and fiction. Crucially, I have expanded on Henriksen’s observation by demonstrating that it is essential to consider the site of these digital interactions and the spaces through which creepypasta narratives are copied, pasted, and remain in a state of restlessness. It is only through creepypasta’s form as fourth-generation digital fiction, and thus the affordances of social media platforms as it moves and spreads across these sites, that allows it to remain in a state of becoming – suspended between fact and fiction on platforms where any ontological distinction between the two is flattened to the same textual level if not readily telegraphed.

3.7 – Conclusion.

In this chapter, I have explored the spread of *Candle Cove*, from its beginning as a distinct piece of fiction, both online as a static webpage and a print text, before its spread across Web2.0 platforms and social media, becoming an example of creepypasta in the process. I have shown how the static narrative itself draws on Kosofsky-Sedgwick's spatialised model of the Gothic to call into question human agency and ontological ambiguity through its unnerving content, bringing about a sense of Gothic threat through its breach of borders between subject and object. Following this, I have shown how *Candle Cove* is spread into the genre of creepypasta and becomes fourth-generation digital fiction by moving beyond websites and pages that telegraph its fictional status or exist to host fictions and horror writing onto platforms defined by other purposes – that is Web2.0 platforms designed for interpersonal communication, conversation, and content generated by real users. I show that as it moves from a viral spread to memetic, *Candle Cove* destabilises certainties around fictionality, illustrated by metatextual commentary and examples of conversation that follow *Candle Cove* once spread. I have analysed the performance of *Candle Cove* as an example of spread through Frank's model of hearing and telling to forward messages, as well as how it is spread through Web2.0 user-generated content such as videos. I have demonstrated how this spread positions the reader in a state of Gothic uncertainty as the hearing and telling and subsequent conversation between users takes place around them.

Finally, I have shown how the spread of *Candle Cove* as footage of 'Candle Cove' reinvents the ontological uncertainty inherent in its spread, moving away from uncanniness towards the weird drawing on and reinventing early Twentieth Century Gothic Horror techniques used by H.P. Lovecraft to further unnerve the reader. This is done through the new concept of "ontological flattening" that I have introduced.

Ontological flattening is a state when real users and their responses, and the fictional story they are reading and responding to exist in the same textual space without borders, implied hierarchy, or explicit indicators of fictionality in the story text, thus intensifying the ontological uncertainty in the story. As I show in the analyses that follow, ontological flattening is a defining feature of creepypasta that can be observed across digital spaces and platforms.

4. *The Slender Man*: The Renewal of Gothic and Horror Traits through Interactivity.



We didn't want to go, we didn't want to kill them, but its persistent silence and outstretched arms horrified and comforted us at the same time...

— 1983, photographer unknown, presumed dead.

(Knudsen, 2009, n.p)

The post above was made by Eric Knudsen under the username Victor Surge, on the SomethingAwful message board in a thread titled “create paranormal images”. It was posted on 10 June 2009, the point at which the world first encountered The Slender Man⁵. The Slender Man is the figure at the centre of what is described by Andrew Peck as a digital “legend cycle” (2015, p. 334) and without a doubt the breakout ‘star’ of the Creepypasta genre. His image or variations of his iconic traits have appeared in numerous media outside the genre, including video games (*Slender: The Eight Pages*,

⁵ Much like in Chapter 3 with *Candle Cove* referring to the narrative and Candle Cove referring to the television show, *The Slender Man* will refer to the narrative – or in this case, narrative collection – and The Slender Man will refer to the eponymous character.

2012; *Slender: The Arrival*, 2013), songs (Haunted Garage, *Carnival Invocation/Slenderman*, 2016), and even episodes of popular television shows such as *Supernatural* ('#THINMAN', Season 9 Episode 15, 2014) and *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* ('Glasgowman's Wrath', Season 16 Episode 6, 2014), albeit as pastiche.

Beyond cultural references and representations in other forms of fiction, The Slender Man is perhaps best known offline as a key factor in an attempted murder in Waukesha, Wisconsin on 31 May 2014, when two twelve-year-old girls stabbed their best friend nineteen times at, what they believed was, the behest of The Slender Man. The event quickly became known as "the Slender Man stabbing" in the ensuing moral panic (Trammell and Gilbert, 2014; Chess and Newsom, 2015; Tolbert, 2015; Maddox, 2018). The tragic event in Waukesha serves as an extreme example of the focus of this chapter – how *The Slender Man* uses interactivity, an affordance of its form as fourth-generation digital fiction, to reinvent and renew horror and Gothic traits, predominantly threats and ontological ambiguity.

As this chapter will show, The Slender Man is not beholden to a singular piece of content. From the outset, he was created as a character in search of a story. However, through appearances in numerous pieces of content that have spread online, across Web2.0 and social media – some story-driven, some implying a wider untold story – a *Slender Man* mythos and narrative has formed. It is in this way that *The Slender Man* differs from *Candle Cove*. *Candle Cove* was, to begin with, a discrete narrative contained within a single piece of content. As Chapter 3 shows, *Candle Cove* was published by Kris Straub and was spread virally before being spread memetically as multiple pieces of content, such as performance through metatextual comments and fan-made videos. *The Slender Man*, on the other hand, was always intended to be

memetic – distributed through multiple different pieces of content and shared across the Internet.

In this chapter, I will begin with an analysis of the creation, spread, and notable iterations of *The Slender Man*, before turning my attention to existing scholarship on the narrative. Most scholarly attention on *The Slender Man* is situated in the field of folklore studies, and this section will highlight how these existing analyses of *The Slender Man* overlook Creepypasta and digital fiction as a form. I will then analyse different instances of *The Slender Man* narrative to demonstrate how the digital affordances of interactivity and multimodality factor into Gothic and horror traits and their renewal through digital textuality. First, I turn my attention to the initial thread in which The Slender Man was created, adapting and developing Isabell Klaiber’s “double plot model” of collaborative digital fiction (2014, p. 124) to account for those forms of collaboration that occur in ontologically flattened spaces, which allows for feedback and development to take on a stance in line with the ontologically ambiguous nature of the story. Then, I analyse *Marble Hornets* as an ARG instance of *The Slender Man* that manifests in ontologically flattened space. Finally, I analyse the concept of the tulpa as a development of *The Slender Man* that allows for a rekindling of a sense of ontological ambiguity in the wake of mainstream attention and growing external markers of fictionality.

4.1 – What is *The Slender Man*?

Rather than being copied and pasted from a long-gone source like *Candle Cove*, *The Slender Man* can be traced back to a single thread from the SomethingAwful.com forums in 2009. This thread, entitled *Create Paranormal Images* and started by user

Gerogerigege on June 8th, invited users to take innocuous pictures and use Photoshop and other image manipulation software to turn them into images of paranormal phenomena by placing ghosts and other anomalies subtly in frame. Jeffrey A. Tolbert, states that *The Slender Man* began as a “deliberate fiction” (p. 41) and the fact of *The Slender Man*’s birthplace, and crucially its initial deliberate fictionality, is now considered “common knowledge” (2015, p. 41). By this, he means that, through Gerogerigege’s invitation to create and manufacture paranormal images, there is an explicit acknowledgement that the pictures posted therein will be fictional representations created for the thread.

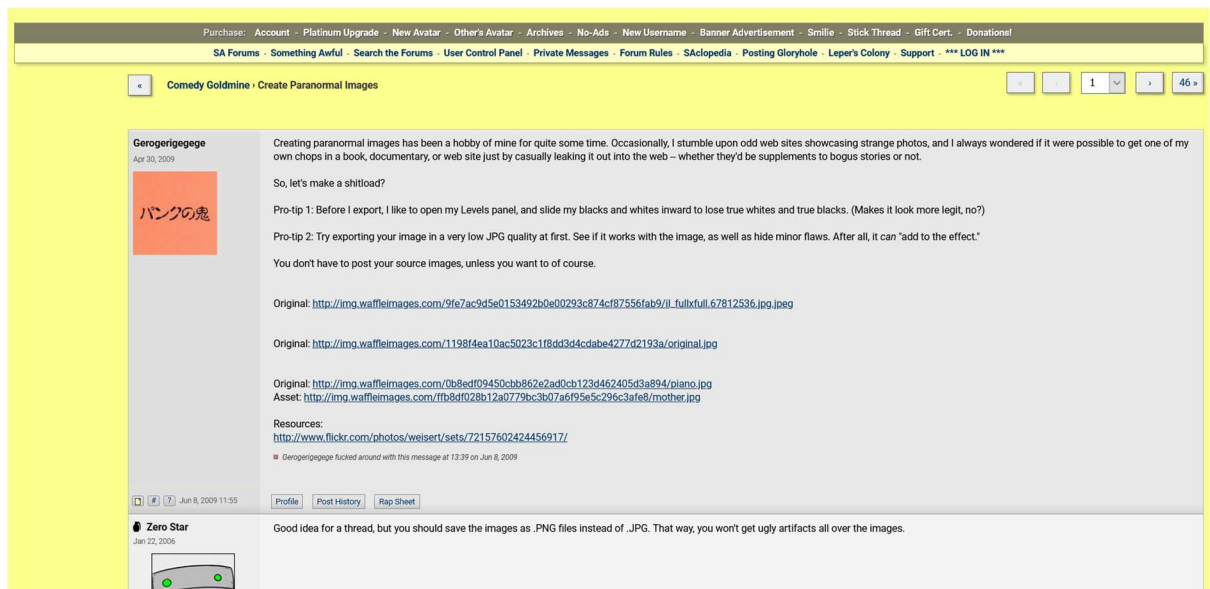


Fig 4.1: Gerogerigege’s original post starting the Create Paranormal Images thread on SomethingAwful.com.

Fig 4.1 depicts a screenshot of the initial post in the thread on SomethingAwful.

Gerogerigege’s initial rallying cry, as shown at the top of the image, is repeated here for clarity:

Creating paranormal images has been a hobby of mine for quite some time. Occasionally, I stumble upon odd web sites [sic.] showcasing strange photos, and I always wondered if it were possible to get one of my own chops in a book, documentary, or web site just by casually leaking it out into the web -- whether they'd be supplements to bogus stories or not.

So, let's make a shitload?

(Gerogerigege, 2009, n.p)

Here, Gerogerigege invites the SomethingAwful forums to engage in their hobby of using Photoshop to make “strange photos”. Gerogerigege acknowledges that this practice has the potential to fool others into thinking these images are real, suggesting that, when stripped of context and indicators of fictionality by being “leaked out into the web”, they may end up in a documentary”. In addition, they also recognise the potential for other users to reappropriate and remix these images as “supplements to bogus stories”. Crucially here, Gerogerigege implicitly acknowledges two key characteristics of creepypasta. First, their use of “bogus” over fictional when referring to the stories that their images may supplement implies an intent to mislead, thus implicitly acknowledging the artifice and hoax at the heart of the Gothic – indeed, something continued through the creation of the images to begin with. Secondly, by considering the circulation of these images as “casually leaking [them] out into the web”, Gerogerigege understands the ease by which the Internet facilitates the circulation and spreading of content.

The thread soon gained popularity, and after a day had grown to three pages of paranormal hallmarks, such as “ghost faces [...] ghoulish hands [...] and mysterious glowing orbs” with users sometimes posting “fiction to supplement their images” (Chess and Newsom, 2014, p. 22). A trend within the thread was to subtly embed the paranormal element within the photoshopped pictures, forcing those viewing them to make a concerted effort to seek out what may be unsettling about them, as seen in Fig. 4.2.

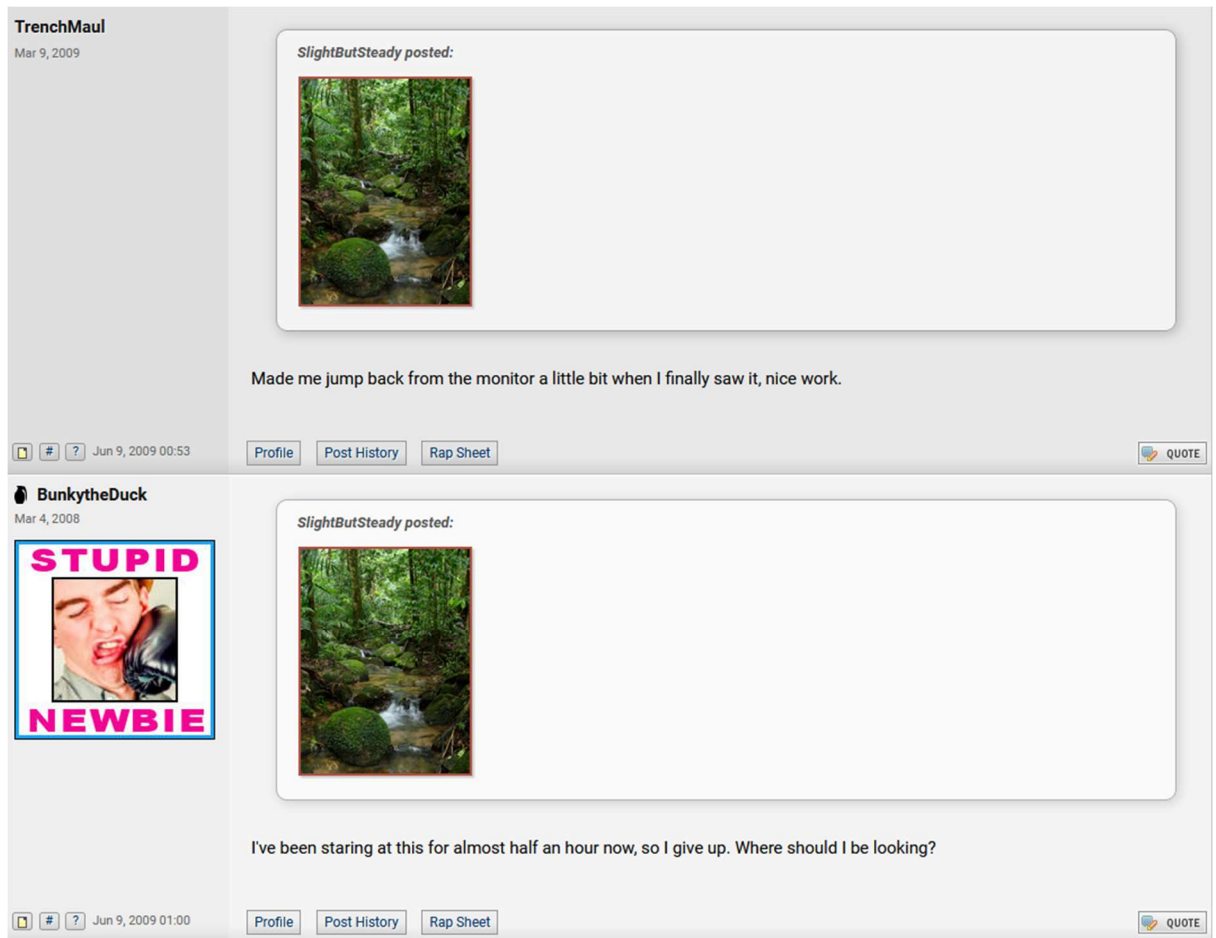


Fig. 4.2: Two users struggle to find the subtly embedded paranormal element in a submission to the thread.

It is with this stylistic choice of subtlety and horror lurking in the background in mind that Eric Knudsen, under the username Victor Surge, posted the first images⁶ of The Slender Man on June 10th. The first image, which is shown in the epigraph of this chapter, depicted a group of worried or anxious looking adolescents walking in a huddled group with the fuzzy shape of a figure to the centre of the frame standing totemic behind the children, inhumanly tall and clearly without a defined face.

Underneath, also shown in the epigraph, a caption reads “We didn't want to go, we

⁶ Image links to the *Create Paranormal Images* thread on SomethingAwful.com are now broken, however, many fans of *The Slender Man* have preserved them along with contextual information. I am retrieving posts and images from [http://anomalyinfo.com/Stories/slender-man-images-chronological-order], cross-referencing text against the *Create Paranormal Images* thread for accuracy.

didn't want to kill them, but its persistent silence and outstretched arms horrified and comforted us at the same time... — 1983, photographer unknown, presumed dead” (Knudsen, 2009, n.p).



Fig 4.3. Eric Knudsen’s second picture of ‘The Slender Man’.

In the same post, a second image, shown in Fig. 4.3, was posted along with a caption that gave a name to this bizarre and new monster. Appearing to just be a black and white photo of children playing on a slide, watermarked as “City of Stirling Libraries

Local Studies Collection,” closer inspection reveals a tall, dark figure standing in the shadow of a tree in the background of the image, encircled by children, with apparent tentacles extending from its back. Accompanying the image was a caption stating:

One of two recovered photographs from the Stirling City Library blaze. Notable for being taken the day when fourteen children vanished and for what is referred to as ‘The Slender Man.’ Deformities cited as film defects by officials. Fire at library occurred one week later. Actual photograph confiscated as evidence.

– 1986, photographer: Mary Thomas, missing since June 13th, 1986

(Eric Knudsen, 2009, n.p).

The way Knudsen’s images and captions implied a larger story left untold, the ominous tone of what was shared, and the unique appearance of The Slender Man resonated with the members of the forum. Soon after Knudsen’s first posts on the third page of the thread, the users who had been following the thread were “excitedly discussing the works created so far and laying the groundwork for future efforts” (Chess and Newsom, 2014, p. 28).

Over the following week, Knudsen continued to post images of The Slender Man with increasingly elaborate and in-depth backstory⁷. In this time other users started contributing to the development of *The Slender Man*. These contributions ranged from suggestions in character design and additional backstory to other photoshopped images and even fully formed snippets of additional textual content to form the narrative to the thread’s new-born monster. As Chess and Newsom note, “by mid-June of 2009, most of the discussion on this forum centered on the Slender Man” (p. 29). After a period of enthusiastic discussion and content creation the thread collectively began to offer up their take on the creature. Over the course of this collective effort, consistent traits and

⁷ Accessible here: <http://anomalyinfo.com/Images/slender-man-third-image-june-11-2009>;
<http://anomalyinfo.com/Images/slender-man-fourth-images-june-11-2009>;
<http://anomalyinfo.com/Images/slender-man-seventh-image-set-june-12-2009>;
<http://anomalyinfo.com/Images/slender-man-eighth-image-set-june-13-2009>

occasional deviations began to emerge. Recounting this period of experimentation with The Slender Man, Chess and Newsome state:

Several factors [...] varied and changed from iteration to iteration. In terms of visual representation, the Slender man is always male, tall, and slender. He is almost always depicted in a black suit with a tie. His face tends to be blank, blurred out, or non-descript. [...] The Slender Man's arms vary visually – sometimes he has simply longer-than-usual human arms, while other times he is specifically depicted with tentacles [...] The Slender Man's body type often has him hidden in trees and in the woods [...] forcing the audience to look harder to find the location of the lurking character.

(2014, pp. 29 – 30.)

It is from these commonly understood characteristics developed in the *Create Paranormal Images* thread that further content was created; a male, tall, and slender figure in a suit and tie being an easy marker that the image or video presented tied into the collective creation of *The Slender Man*.

4.1.1 – ARGs and Video Series.

The interest in *The Slender Man* content being produced by the SomethingAwful community in the *Create Paranormal Images* thread, along with Gerogerigegege's instruction to leak the content developed there onto the wider Internet, all but assured the character's spread beyond the forum. The most popular content that spread *The Slender Man*, beyond Knudsen's own images and captions, was the YouTube video series and subsequent ARG (Alternate Reality Game), *Marble Hornets* (DeLage, Wagner, and Sutton, 2009) – “the first major web series about the Slender Man” (Chess and Newsom, 2014, p. 30) and part of a salvo of web series that Chess and Newsom argue are “significantly responsible for expanding the popularity of the Slender Man on the Internet [...] by moving off the marginally popular web site to YouTube and Twitter” (p. 31). The first *Marble Hornets* video was uploaded to YouTube and posted

on the SomethingAwful thread by user Ce Gars on June 20th 2009, only ten days after Knudsen's first post introducing The Slender Man.

A summary of *Marble Hornets* is as follows: The series is presented as found footage at all times and centres on two film students, Jay and Alex. Jay's narration and inserted text captions in the videos set out the premise for the series. In them, he explains that the videos are the remnants of a film project by Alex called *Marble Hornets*. Alex gave Jay the footage, but Jay explains that the two are no longer in contact. Over the course of filming, Alex's behaviour became erratic, eventually leading to him abandoning the project. As Jay examines the tapes, it becomes clear that a creature, never identified as The Slender Man but clearly resembling him, is stalking Alex. In addition to using YouTube, Jay also maintained a Twitter page for *Marble Hornets* in-character (see Fig. 4.5), interacting with fans, linking to the latest uploads on YouTube, and giving additional information that supplements the narrative told through the videos.

As the narrative depicted across the film series progresses, a second YouTube member and series, *totheark*, begins sending Jay cryptic messages on YouTube and Twitter, as well as uploading their own videos. This second character interacting with Jay across multiple platforms, and in the same way fans are, gives the impression that the paranormal experiences of Jay are not safely contained within the player interface of YouTube and have spilled out across social media.

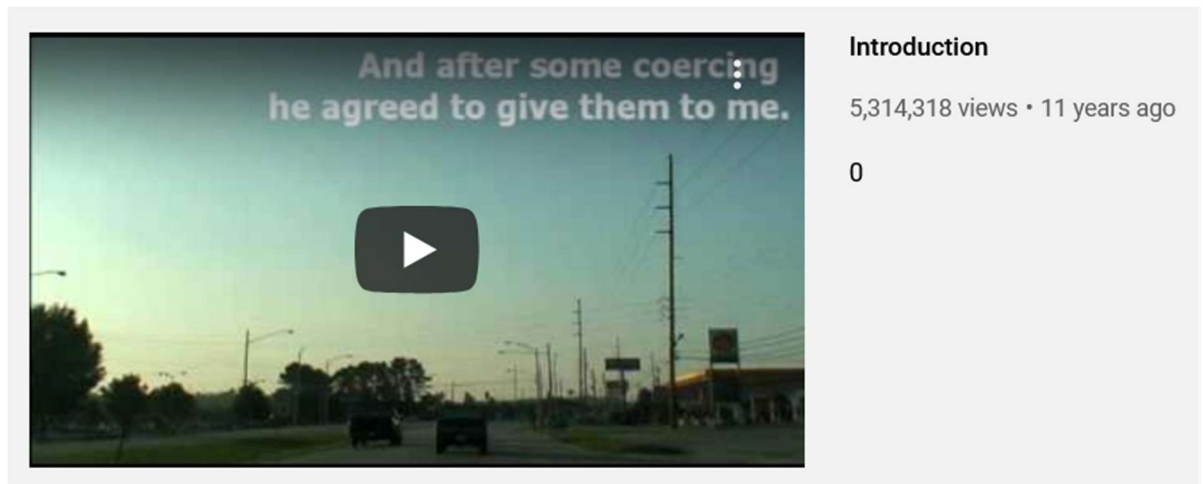


Fig 4.4: The first instalment in the Marble Hornets series.
[\[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wmhfn3mgWUI\]](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wmhfn3mgWUI)



Fig 4.5: An excerpt from the Marble Hornets Twitter page.

The creator of the series did not at any point disclose that the series was fictional while interacting with viewers, either under the guise of both Jay on YouTube and Ce Gar in the *Create Paranormal Images* thread. This allowed viewers to make suggestions and

shape the progression of the story by interacting with Jay via comments under the YouTube videos or via his Twitter account as if he was real and genuinely being stalked by The Slender Man. In addition, the adversarial YouTube and Twitter user ToTheArk also interacted with both Jay and the audience via comments and their own channel, encouraging participation through the inclusion of coded messages and direct address in comments sections. This dynamic has led to the prevalent classification of *Marble Hornets* as an Alternate Reality Game (Alexander, 2011; Tolbert, 2013; Henriksen, 2014; Chess and Newsom, 2015) because of the high level of interactivity between readers and the story, including spotting and solving coded messages in videos and tweets, as well as direct interaction with characters via their accounts.

The success of *Marble Hornets*, evident in Fig. 4.4 which shows the first video's view count of over five million, set the style for future video series/ARGs featuring The Slender Man – the most notable of which are *EverymanHYBRID* (Caffarello, Koval, and Jennings, 2010), and *TribeTwelve* (Rosner, 2010), which along with *Marble Hornets* are collectively referred to as “the Big Three” by fans (TribeTwelve, The Slender Man Wiki, n.p). Each of these helped shape *The Slender Man* collective narrative in various ways, contributing different aspects and elements to what become commonly understood attributes of *The Slender Man*, such as: “proxies” (Chess and Newsom, 2014, p. 31) – humans under the influence of The Slender Man or driven insane by their obsession with him; “slender sickness” (p. 33) – a nausea, cough, and progressively worsening illness from contact with The Slender Man; integrating other creatures of Creepypasta into *The Slender Man* narrative (p. 35) such as *The Rake* – a pale humanoid cryptid that first appeared on 4chan in 2005, in a similar thread to *The Slender Man*, aiming to create a new monster; and highlighting that recording

equipment suffers audio and visual distortion in the presence of The Slender Man (p. 33).

In addition to the above, all of The Big Three video series develop *The Slender Man* mythos further in that he stalks and targets young adults. This is possibly because creating a found footage web series depicting children at risk would potentially be widely flagged and reported. However, this shift upwards in age for The Slender Man's targets invites wider participation and interactivity with the narrative, opening up further performances and tellings from users of a wider age group while still being in keeping with the framework of *The Slender Man*.

4.1.2 – Wider Content.

Although the ARG/video series mentioned above are by far the most popular and widely spread contributions to *The Slender Man*, the character appears in innumerable works across the Internet. As of 11 September 2022, The Slender Man is tagged in over ninety-nine thousand images on DeviantArt (one of the Internet's largest art communities) 2497 entries tagged on Archive of Our Own (an immensely influential community and repository for fanfiction and other fan works). *The Slender Man* narrative is thus formed between and across a network of content that is contributed to by any creative netizen who wishes to participate, using any form afforded to them.

Beyond text-based stories and images in the tradition of Knudsen's introductory posts, video games have also become a notable entry in the wider spread of *The Slender Man*. In particular, indie game *Slender: The Eight Pages* (Hadley, 2012) – originally titled *Slender* and renamed after the release of its sequel *Slender: The Arrival* a year later – “played a role in expanding the audience, and therefore the potential creator base, of the series” (Chess and Newsom, 2014, p. 35). This was achieved, firstly by being released

for free, and secondly through its “relatively simple” (p. 35) mechanics that ensured a low skill barrier to experience its immediate and unnerving atmosphere which put the player in a first-person perspective as they explored a darkened forest while being stalked by The Slender Man. The player is tasked with finding eight pieces of paper hidden around the map – an endeavour that is hampered by a limited ability to sprint and a torch with a short battery life meaning both must be used sparingly. As the player collects more pages, appearances by The Slender Man become more frequent, accompanied by the audio and visual distortions first set out in *Marble Hornets*, thus illustrating what Jeffrey A Tolbert refers to as a “refining of the meme” (2018, p. 39) by bringing elements introduced from previous, collective, iterations of *The Slender Man* into a “mass-produced commodity” (p. 39) where “‘historical’ knowledge established by the meme tradition [is] available [...] for direct engagement” (p. 39).

The game is clearly a work of fiction. The player has to first start the game through a conventional menu. The player then explores the map, which does not correlate to any real location, from the perspective of a nameless avatar. They can also pause or exit the game at any point. Despite this, its tense tone meant that it gained widespread attention from the gaming press (Goodman, 2013; Hargreaves, 2013; *The New York Times*, 2012) and its free-to-play status meant that it was easily accessible. These two factors, combined with popular YouTube streamers filming playthroughs including their reactions to playing the game (such as ‘Markiplier’ whose video has 4.5 million views, and ‘PewDiePie’ whose video has 9 million views), meant that it became remarkably popular and drove knowledge of *The Slender Man* to a much wider audience.

As this overview suggests, interactivity is integral to *The Slender Man*. The narrative exists across and between various texts that comment upon and reference each other to build a fuller understanding of The Slender Man. In the following, I will demonstrate

how the interactive and participatory nature of *The Slender Man* helps foreground a renewal and reinvention of Gothic and horror traits – specifically “found manuscripts and interpolated histories” (Kosovsky-Sedgwick, p. 9); “affinities between narrative and pictorial art” (p. 9); the chorus of pseudonymous voices to tell a single story (section 2.1); and a preoccupation with the uncanny as “making things uncertain [...] that things are not as they have come to appear through habit and familiarity” (Bennett and Royle, 1999, p. 37) – through the affordances of its form as fourth-generation digital fiction. *The Slender Man* differs subtly from *Candle Cove* examined in the previous chapter. While both spread outwards on social media and Web2.0 platforms (an integral trait of creepypasta), *Candle Cove*’s spread foregrounds the ability to copy and paste, remix, and replicate content across the Internet. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how the spread of *The Slender Man* emphasises spread through interactivity, and in doing so, highlights how creepypasta narratives and engagement create ontologically flattened spaces to emphasise an uncanny ontological uncertainty to online interaction.

4.2 – Existing scholarship.

As shown in the introduction to this chapter and in Chapter 1, *The Slender Man* is without a doubt the most studied creepypasta narrative. However, as I discuss below, much of the scholarly attention has come from folklore studies or privileges a folklorist methodology in analysing the narrative. As explained in Chapter 1.1, Andrew Peck’s influential 2015 article ‘Tall, Dark, and Loathsome: The Emergence of a Legend Cycle in the Digital Age’, situates *The Slender Man* as a remediated folklore, with an emphasis on the folk communities and parallels with offline folk storytelling at the

expense of acknowledging creepypasta as a genre with specific characteristics tied to its digital form, as well as its continuation of horror and Gothic traditions. Thus, while I argue in Chapter 1.1 that Peck's approach is useful, it fails to acknowledge both the unique formal characteristics of *The Slender Man* and its digital setting, as well as the rich history of unnerving literature (explored in Chapter 2) of which creepypasta is at the forefront.

In an article considering the textual and formal implications of Peck's legend cycle, Jeffrey Tolbert considers *The Slender Man* in terms of ostension. In folklore studies, ostension is the process of "showing the reality itself instead of using any kind of signification" (Dégh and Vázsonyi, 1983, p. 6), achieved through "ostensive action" (p. 6). Tolbert defines ostensive action as "the direct performance of a given action, or its representation through related action (with the assumption that the ostensive act itself is somehow 'real')" (2018, p. 27). Tolbert argues that in contrast to ostension in the context of existing folkloric narratives, *The Slender Man* engages in a process of "reverse ostension", explaining that:

If ostension involves the privileging of experience over representation (e.g., acting out the content of a legend, rather than simply listening to the recitation of it), Slender Man's creators are effectively reversing this process by weaving together diverse strands of "experience" (in the form of personal encounters with the creature, documentary and photographic evidence, etc.) into a more or less coherent body of narratives. Simultaneously, these narratives are consciously modelled on existing, established, "real" ones (specifically, again, the legend genre).

(Tolbert, 2018, pp. 27 – 28)

Here, Tolbert argues that through the creation of texts that form *The Slender Man* collective narrative, such as Knudsen's original images and captions or the *Marble Hornets* videos, participants create texts that purport to be the documentation of lived experience (i.e. the ostensive action in an already existing legend). However, key to this

process is that no experience has in fact taken place, as these texts are fictional while appearing to be real through their form, and that, specifically, the texts falsify a historical legend of The Slender Man where there is none. These discrete examples of fake ostensive action then collectively form *The Slender Man* narrative as a wider narrative, thus acting as ostension in reverse, building a history from false ostensive action. Tolbert expands thus:

If ostension effectively bypasses the sign (in this case, the narrative) by privileging the direct experience of the object of the sign, then what I am calling reverse ostension implies a sign is constructed, where none previously existed, by weaving together disparate strands of experience (as well as indexing and mimicking other signs). Reverse ostension is, then, an act of reverse engineering: *an effort to arrive back at the sign*, that is, to create a narrative tradition by correlating and connecting fragmentary narratives (themselves representations of experience, albeit fictional ones).

(Tolbert, 2018, pp. 31 – 32 - emphasis in original)

Here, Tolbert further explains the difference between ostension and reverse ostension. Critically, ostension requires the existence of a sign and the object it references, in this case, an existing legend such as the Loch Ness Monster. An ostensive act would be to visit Loch Ness rather than read about someone else's experience or sighting of the monster – all hanging on the fact that there is a pre-existing narrative about a monster hiding in the loch for experiences, documentation, and narratives to form around. Reverse ostension, on the other hand, mimics the documentation of experiences in order to create the impression of a pre-existing narrative where there is none.

Tolbert states that, in this model of reverse ostension, the production and consumption of disparate instances of documented "experience" (in the form of documentary, photographs, text etc.) is done on "the shared understanding that the thing being constructed, the semiotic system being developed, has no experiential grounding: there is no connection to reality beyond the *resemblance* of the system to those already

existing” (p. 44, emphasis in original). Though found footage cinema similarly relies on the understanding that the texts – specifically videos and images – forming a narrative are false but collectively resemble a legend, Tolbert argues that classifying “creative acts which construct sign systems based on existing models as reverse ostension [...] would overlook the critical participatory nature of phenomena like Slender Man” (p. 44). Here, Tolbert is gesturing to, but not fully reaching, an acknowledgement of the affordances of Web2.0 as a venue to tell interactive, participatory, and multimodal stories.

Tolbert’s analysis is useful for understanding how *The Slender Man* is a narrative formed from a collection of texts, and, critically, how it is formed from collective and participatory action to create a legend as if it were real. However, Tolbert stops short of connecting the role of platforms and technology in facilitating reverse ostension, or how the process of a “deliberate attempt to mimic or replicate [a semiotic] system” (p. 44) relates to communication on Web2.0 platforms as well as the Gothic traditions of fragmented narratives and artifice, fake histories, and ‘found’ documents.

The technological – and predominantly networked – aspect of the creation of *The Slender Man* is addressed by other scholars. Jessica Maddox, while focusing on the moral panic following the tragic event in Waukesha, WI, characterises *The Slender Man* as a “fictional, horror-themed Internet meme” (Maddox, 2018, p. 235). Maddox references Shifman’s definition of the term (see Chapter 1 section 1.4) as a new axis in the discourse characterising The Slender Man during the moral panic. She argues that in “previous moral panics, individuals were merely sharing or consuming the object of concern. But with Slender Man, there is now *creation*, sharing, and consumption” (p. 236). Crucially, she states that “[m]emes, such as Slender Man, require rapid production and constant reproduction – qualities that are predominantly made possible

by digital cultures”. Maddox’s analysis of the moral panic around *The Slender Man* leads her to consider how mainstream media blame “Slender Man and the Internet as additional culprits in [the crime], and this is done in such a way that the Internet emerges as a gendered female” (p. 236). This is typically where, in discussing The Slender Man, he is often characterised as “born on the Internet” (p. 244), and that, as a second villain in the story, the Internet is the mother of the monster that drove two girls to stab their friend. Put simply, Maddox states that alarmist discourse after the Waukesha stabbing typically characterised the “Internet as feminine, with Slender Man being the meme-child that came from the Internet” (p. 244). Maddox thus reveals that participation and interaction, through the consideration of *The Slender Man* as a meme, was at the forefront of the media discussion around Waukesha. However, while *The Slender Man* can very easily be considered in terms of an Internet meme, since the lore is a “a collection of texts” (Shifman, 2014, p. 56) that remix and reference a “founding text” (p. 58), doing so sidesteps questions of genre and *The Slender Man*’s own participation in horror and Gothic traditions. This is illustrated in Maddox’s own consideration of creepypasta in her analysis; it is examined simply as the website creepypasta.com and referenced only in passing as a venue for *The Slender Man*’s further development and spread (p. 42), rather than as the emergent form of horror and Gothic fiction of which *The Slender Man* is a part.

Focussing on the networked digital spaces that *The Slender Man* was written on and spread across – specifically the wireless network of “the cloud” – Thomas Stuart considers the narrative as a “distinctly digital expression, an ill-defined monster working to create a network of small children from the ‘elsewhere’ of his semi-virtual domain” (2018, p. 157). Stuart pays close attention to the contemporary networked nature of the Internet – “the cloud as a network of networks” – that, through

characterisation as an all-consuming network of content and experience, is personified by *The Slender Man*. For Stuart, The Slender Man's presence "as a nightmare of networks in historical documents, then, represents at once the breach and the fulfilled promise of the cloud. This is the temporal and spatial collapse of cloud integration, our past experiences reorganized and represented by a future-oriented network". Here, Stuart recognises the affordances of the digital medium through which *The Slender Man* travels, and the ways in which the documents of experience – as referred to by Tolbert above – are, through digitisation and presentation on Web2.0 platforms, presented in a way that overcomes any temporal or spatial limitations of their perceived existence as non-digital documents. These are then reformed and rearranged through the cloud as a network of networks, reorganising past experiences to coalesce as *The Slender Man*.

However, I contend that Stuart mischaracterises the nature of creepypasta narratives as they spread across the Internet. As I argue in Chapter 3, creepypasta changes its type of spread along Shifman's "dynamic spectrum" (2014, p. 58) of viral to memetic as it moves across the Internet. Stuart assigns limits to the spread of creepypasta. Though recognising it as a genre, he argues that it spreads "without the transformations and detail-shift of typical urban legends" (p. 154), thus tying the development of creepypasta to the viral end of Shifman's spectrum by stating that creepypasta narratives must spread unmodified. Moreover, Stuart consigns Creepypasta to online textual horror that ignores the "multi-mediated nature of the cloud and the horror podcasts, Gothic Twitter feeds, Weird YouTube miniseries, inscrutable alternate reality games, indie video games and untold other expressions of networked anxiety that move through its electronic elsewheres" (p. 155). This overlooks that creepypasta can embody the "detail-shift" (p. 154) of urban legends through spread, but, as

demonstrated through *Candle Cove*'s spread in the previous chapter and creepypasta as a form of fourth-generation digital fiction, multimodality and interactivity in spread constitute a crucial part of the genre.

In a departure from most discourse on *The Slender Man* and interactivity, Aaron Trammell and Anne Gilbert turn their attention to the narrative as a site of play. They argue that, in the wake of the stabbing in Waukesha, a “new vocabulary and approach to play is required to counter traditional understandings of play which reduce it to something we do, and neglect the ways in which play can take on a life of its own, and forget how it is always also acting upon us” (2014, p. 395). Without this development, they assert, there is a risk to “mistake travesties like Slender Man as something akin to a juvenile caper” (p. 395). This sentiment gets to the heart of the potential seriousness of how interactivity factors into Creepypasta narratives. As shown Chapter 3, play with ontological narratives often occurs alongside spread and metatextual comments when a narrative is spread. This play with the border of fact and fiction is, partially, a driving factor behind the stabbing in Waukesha (Brodsky, 2017, n.p). Trammell and Gilbert argue that play in this sense “acts as a disposition of interaction with forms of media beyond the game” (p. 399).

The ‘game’ of *The Slender Man*, what Trammell and Gilbert refer to as its “scheme” (p. 396), is the insistence that the figure should “circulate promiscuously. In other words, it has a life of its own” (p. 402). Interactivity – and play as a form of interactivity – and spread are, according to Trammell and Gilbert, intrinsically linked. *The Slender Man*'s life of its own is the result of players taking part “in a participatory and collective ritual. In the context of the Slender Man, all involved have been indicted in the evocation and animation of the Slender Man” (p. 397). It is through participation, interactivity, spread, and play, they argue, that *The Slender Man* narrative perpetuates, persists, and appears

to have an autonomy or “animation” outside the control of any one creator or creative community. The reason for the persistence and popularity of *The Slender Man*, they argue, is that “Slender Man has, from the start, operated as a nearly open-source horror meme that evolved via the collective imaginations of innumerable participants across Internet sites” (p. 401). It is here that Trammell and Gilbert get closest to creating a definition of what *The Slender Man* is, in particular aligning with Maddox that *The Slender Man* is a meme. Significantly, they further that classification to specify that *The Slender Man* operates as a “horror meme”. Thus, they acknowledge, albeit briefly, *The Slender Man* as part of a wider form of participatory fiction, and specifically, fiction of unnerving affective traits by belonging to the horror genre. The participatory nature of a meme as a collection of texts, then, is the ‘game’ by which people playfully interact with *The Slender Man*. This participation, in turn, grants an apparent life to the eponymous monster, apparently produced “out of the collective will of many” (p. 402).

This collective will through participation and play produces a “disposition towards media outside the game” (p. 399) that carries dangers. Trammell and Gilbert argue that play “is a process that makes the fiction take on an affective actuality and that blurs the supposed distinctions between illusion and reality” (p. 392). This affective actuality of fiction and instability of reality recalls a Gothic ontological ambiguity despite Trammell and Gilbert not connecting to this generic trait. They argue that contributors must treat entries into the “participatory and collective ritual” (p. 397) as if it were real, and their contribution a documentation of that ‘real’ experience, as those playing the ‘game’ of *The Slender Man* are doing so by the scheme or rules set out by Knudsen’s original post. Here, then, the creation of artificial documentation and relics to regard them aesthetically as ‘real’ resonates with the Gothic fascination with artifice and facsimile as with follies. In this way, Trammell and Gilbert argue, “play produces

affective worlds which themselves mold us” (p. 393) – with the site of play for *The Slender Man* being social media and not a conventional or expected game space. Because of this, they suggest, *The Slender Man* can be stumbled across and engaged with by those not knowing the rules with which to navigate the affective world produced by the collective will and content of those playing. In the wake of the Waukesha tragedy, it is this collective play action, they argue, that has “produced depositories filled with beings that possess powers and ramifications far greater than those possessed by most individuals, yet [...] allows us to neglect responsibility for these creations, while simultaneously allowing them to take on lives of their own” (p. 402). Gothic traits of ontological ambiguity run throughout the characteristics emphasised by Trammell and Gilbert. Much like a long-abandoned Gothic folly that may be happened upon by a walker who mistakes it for a real ancient relic, abandoned creepypasta stories lie dormant online to be stumbled across by users and mistaken for documentation of a real paranormal experience. The point of departure lies in the affective quality of the horror in creepypasta itself (rather than the act of discovering it in a depository), recalling – instead of unmoored historical signifiers of an older time – the ontological ambiguity of the first edition of *Otranto* or *The Blair Witch Project* (see Chapter 2, section 5.1). Creepypasta itself departs from this in what Trammell and Gilbert refer to as “lives of their own” (p. 402) – the spread and iteration of a narrative on Web2.0 platforms by various users, outside the control of any original author.

In an article that brings together elements of the analyses by Tolbert and Trammell and Gilbert above, Lyle Enright (2017) argues that *The Slender Man* is emblematic of a “post-postmodern” turn (Nealon, 2010). The “post-postmodern” is defined by Jeffrey Nealon as “intensifying certain strains within postmodernism in order to render it a kind of hyper-postmodernism of positive usage” (2010, p. 168). Specifically, Enright argues

that *The Slender Man* represents a validation of “many of Nealon’s pronouncements on contemporary art and culture” and serves as an example to help “identify and further clarify the sorts of shifts that he characterizes as ‘post-postmodern’” (p. 2). Enright uses Nealon’s argument that overcoming a postmodern “obsession with *meaning* (or lack thereof)” (p. 4, emphasis in original) requires a refocusing on “what literature and other cultural products *do* within a given context and how they accomplish their work” (p. 4, emphasis in original). For Enright, this means recognising the assessments of other scholars of *The Slender Man* but re-examining them through the lens of Nealon’s theory.

Key for Enright is the idea that Tolbert’s concept of reverse ostension, while being a re-deployment of existing narrative traits (in this case folklore), does not seek to achieve a postmodern aim of identifying “holes in the text” or subvert common assumptions of meaning in folklore (p. 7), but instead emphasises *The Slender Man*’s “clear attention to usage over meaning which [...] characterizes the post-postmodern” (p. 8). Enright argues that the creation of *The Slender Man* through reverse ostension is representative of Nealon’s deployment of the Deleuzian figure of the forger who “creates a new regime of truth which calls the previous one into question” (p. 8) – particularly apparent in the community decision to create a narrative that “people would believe that people believed” (Tolbert, 2013, p. 9). Enright also recognises the potential for slippage in the manufactured ‘truth’ of *The Slender Man* due to the narrative’s complex relationship with reality and representation and casts an eye to the Waukesha stabbing. He argues that “while the Slender Man is created by Deleuzian forgers who are aware of the constructed nature of their ‘truth,’ their creation has been received by many who, still operating in a realist paradigm of truth, begin to confuse play and reality” (p. 10) – an

assessment that echoes Trammell and Gilbert's understanding of *The Slender Man*'s relationship with play.

Ultimately, Enright argues that *The Slender Man* “emerged as an epistemological challenge working its power by proliferating at such breakneck speed that it even began to collapse the logics of its own production and consumption” (p. 11). This is exemplified by members of the original *Create Paranormal Images* thread professing their sleepless nights after participating in the thread. Here *The Slender Man*, written knowingly as a fiction, triggers a horror affect partially due to a lack of control in its rapid proliferation through wider contribution. This epistemological challenge, then, functions as a representation of Nealon's characterisation of “intensification” (2012) as a hallmark of the post-postmodern by moving beyond the postmodern forger of truth – instead “challenging existing regimes of truth to the point at which even its own producers become terrified consumers of their own product” (pp. 11 – 12). Enright's exploration of *The Slender Man* demonstrates that thinking beyond postmodernism towards post-postmodernism is a useful heuristic. *The Slender Man* avoids solid cultural critiques and interpretations based on meaning and subversion, and instead intensifies characteristics of the platforms on which it is spread to achieve certain affects.

As the preceding overview shows, much scholarship on *The Slender Man* focuses on the concepts of participation and interactivity, and the importance of the networked digital environment in the development of both monster and narrative. Focussing on the affordances of digital media, these approaches show that the environment in which the narrative is accessed is distinctly important to what *The Slender Man* does and means. Despite this, much scholarship on *The Slender Man* also seeks to situate the narrative within the realm of contemporary folklore, rather than using a frame of born-digital

fiction despite the media-specific nature of the narrative, thus previous studies of the narrative miss connecting *The Slender Man*'s characteristics to the form-specific affordances of fourth-generation digital fiction. Moreover, scholarship also recognises that *The Slender Man* trades distinctly in *horror* – be that as a meme, a phenomenon all its own, or an entry into creepypasta. However, this scholarship stops short of considering *The Slender Man* part of a horror or Gothic literary tradition – or indeed defining horror, despite acknowledging the narrative's clear engagement in horror and, in the case of Enright, recognising that it may represent an entry to a new literary paradigm.

As outlined in Chapter 1, this thesis argues that creepypasta is a form of digital fiction, in that it is “written for and read on a computer screen [...] 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). Furthermore, this thesis argues that it is through this form that creepypasta reinvents and renews horror and Gothic traits. In this chapter, I will augment and build on the approaches above through the lens of the Gothic tradition to show how *The Slender Man*, as an example of Creepypasta, leverages the affordances of networked digital media, and social media platforms in particular, through its form as fourth-generation digital fiction to reinvent and reinterpret horror and Gothic traits of the threat and ontological ambiguity. I will begin by turning my attention to the original *Create Paranormal Images* thread and the collaboration, interaction, and development therein, analysing the way that the denizens of SomethingAwful, in seeking to re-create a folk creature, redeploy Gothic textual conventions, specifically those of found documents and a wilful destabilisation of ontology. In doing so, I develop Isabell Klaiber's “double plot model” of collaborative digital fiction (2014, p. 124) – showing

how collaborative and iterative developments on writing a fiction begin to tease at fact and fiction boundaries when written in an ontologically flattened space. I then examine the ARGs of *The Slender Man* and how their multi-faceted form, reframing of the ontological status of The Slender Man through multiple ontologically flattened platforms, and different style of interaction further intensifies the Gothic and horror conventions previously developed in the original thread. Finally, I turn my attention to the concept of the tulpa, a thematic device within certain entries to *The Slender Man* that yet again recontextualises what it means to interact with the narrative, re-establishing ontological instability and re-emphasising the creature as a threat in the process.

4.3 – *The Slender Man* and Interactivity.

4.3.1 – Ontologically Flattened Collaboration and The Slender Man's Origins.

As stated in his introductory post, Gerogerigegege's aim from the very beginning was to create images that were not just unnerving, but could make their way into books, websites, or documentaries by being spread out of the original thread (Fig. 4.1).

Therefore, the thread is already imbued with a Gothic fascination with artifice that hearkens back to its earliest roots. The instructions on decontextualising and modifying digital images in the thread recall how the formative style of the Gothic revival was driven by "artefacts [...] divorced from their foundations and turned into signs disconnected from their original substance" (Punter and Byron, 2004, p. 34).

The decontextualisation and modification of photographs to create paranormal images, whilst having been democratised and made far easier by software such as Photoshop,

GIMP, and other image manipulation tools, is not a solely digital characteristic as doctored photographs have existed for as long as there has been photography. However, an emphasis on the affordances of digital text, and specifically the form of fourth-generation digital fiction, emerges through Gerogerigegege's intention to have this content leaked across the Internet as neither collaboration on the production of the images nor the networked leaking of this content could happen through another medium. As shown in his initial post (see Fig. 4.1), in which Gerogerigegege first sets up the brief and their intentions, they foster a call for collaborative aesthetic expression – “let's make a shitload” – and for the resultant images to be spread outwards across social media platforms by users. Collaboration and interactivity as part of SomethingAwful are thus brought to the fore. In addition, Gerogerigegege's goal of having the content from the thread “casually leak [...] out into the web” and appear as real in other media furthers the connection to Gothic artifice beyond simply facsimile and towards how such artifice consists of unmoored and decontextualised signifiers. Specifically, artificial paranormal images are divorced from their foundations as fiction in Gerogerigegege's thread and turned into believable signs of the paranormal when decontextualised and spread onto other platforms.

This aim to produce believable fictions sets the tone for the thread from the very beginning, three pages of forum posts and two days before Knudsen would first post The Slender Man. Immediately after Gerogerigegege's original post, there is a brief exchange where user 'Zero Star' advises that “you should save the images as .PNG files instead of .JPG. That way, you won't get ugly artifacts all over the images”, to which user Flavahbeast replies “the ugly artifacts are ghosts too”. Gerogerigegege replies that “artifacts are essential. Makes the images look older. Edit: Artifacts also hide minor flaws you pick up on high quality renders”. Here, we can see how the attitude within

the thread embodies Enright's characterisation of the original creators of *The Slender Man* as Deleuzian forgers even before his first appearance in the thread. The members of the thread are discussing how best to leverage the affordances and perceived flaws of various aspects of digital media to create the most convincing forgeries with which to conceal "the constructed nature of their 'truth'" (Enright, 2017, p. 10) and to intentionally mislead those outside the playful venue of interaction of the thread who are "still operating in a realist paradigm of truth".

This level of iterative community feedback and collaborative interaction continues after Knudsen's first post depicting The Slender Man – though indicative of the creature's future popularity, early comments are predominantly praise. User ZombieScholar remarks "you are an amazing and terrible bastard, sir. Well played". This sentiment is echoed by 21stCentury who quotes the previous post and adds "this could be glorious in book form". After Knudsen begins to create more posts with follow-up images, other users suggest ways in which the character could be more menacing or believable. User Thoreau-Up suggests of one submission: "I think the Slender Man's tentacles need to be a little less obvious. It seems a lot less freakier if you can see them so clearly". This evaluation is backed up by another user in the next post in the thread, stating "I agree, its better when you don't notice them at first, and only later you realize just how alien the Slender Man is". These early interactions show a desire by the community to collaboratively hone Knudsen's – now their – creation into something that generates a more visceral sense of fear and credibility through the images and media produced. In addition, the community demonstrates a keen awareness of how to enhance The Slender Man's inherent uncanniness – a "simulacra of [a] human being" in the vein of "doubles (or *doppelganger*), automata, manufactured monsters like Frankenstein's" (Briggs, 2012, p. 179) – by obfuscating how alien he is and therefore creating a sense that

“things are not as they have come to appear through habit and familiarity” (Bennett and Royle, 1999, p. 37). Thus, by recognising the affective quality of concealing how unfamiliar The Slender Man is until a reader truly notices them in an image and feeding back to contributors, the community elevates uncanniness, a fundamental trait of horror and Gothic texts, to the forefront of how *The Slender Man* is experienced. This post-response feedback-and-refinement dynamic in the thread results in what Chess and Newsom observe as “slippage between those who are creating [...] the conventions of the Slender Man, and the audiences who are consuming it” (p. 63). That is, the feedback offered in comments from other forumgoers who are enjoying the development of *The Slender Man* directly impacts that development. Therefore, forumgoers who provide feedback have a hand in creating the conventions of the monster, the narrative lore surrounding him, or both.

While Chess and Newsom show that collaboration and collective creation are an integral part of *The Slender Man*, the interplay between contributor and reader facilitated by a specific Web2.0 platform can also be read as *The Slender Man*’s form as collaborative digital fiction. In her analysis of collaborative digital fiction writing platforms, Isabell Klaiber develops what she defines as a “double plot model” which is designed to analyse narratives on platforms such as “*Protagonize*, *OMM* [One Million Monkeys], and *Ficly* [that] branch out into multilinear versions at the end of any contribution; thus alternative versions of a story may be introduced to any instance of the narrative” (2014, pp. 124 – 125). Klaiber points out that these specific platforms have their own properties aside from message boards and other Web2.0 platforms that make them specifically attuned to writing collaborative fiction, such as a separate display for the literary text and a “paratextual blog-like commentary” (p. 126). Her double plot model thus shows how “the interaction between the users [in collaborative

writing platforms] may be considered the ‘story behind the story’, which runs parallel and is immediately connected to the literary narrative” (Klaiber, 2014, p. 126).

Klaiber’s model was initially developed for platforms that are specifically designed for collaborative storytelling with the story being written and the venue for user comments and interaction being separate and distinct spaces. I argue that it can also be adapted to show how *The Slender Man* is not only a form of fourth-generation digital fiction in the way it leverages collaboration and interactivity, but also how such collaboration furthers horror and Gothic traits within the text. As shown in Fig 4.6, the community using the SomethingAwful message boards find a tool analogous to the parallel text-and-commentary systems in specific collaborative writing platforms in the forum’s “quote function”. Here, through the interface and display of the forum, the text quoted – in this case, Knudsen’s original image of The Slender Man – is boxed out from the post by Dissapointed Owl remarking on it. Thus, the interplay between story and world building, and community feedback around *The Slender Man* in the original “Create Paranormal Images” thread mirrors the “double plot” that Klaiber identifies in collaborative digital writing as one plot level is graphically distinct from the other.

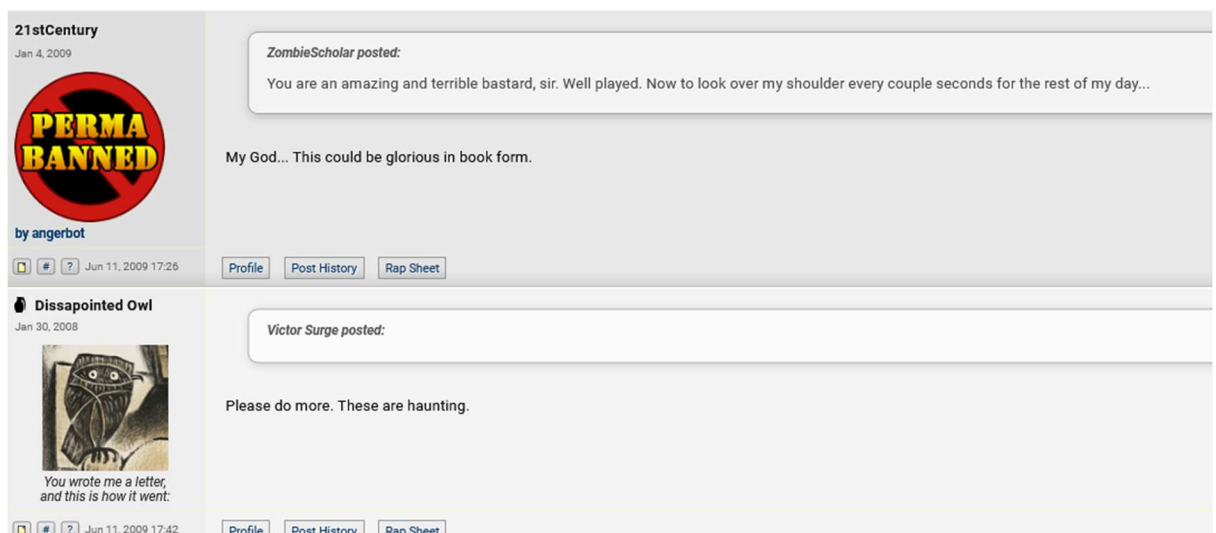


Fig 4.6: The users of SomethingAwful using the ‘quote’ function to represent submitted content in their own replies as a separate window (images lost to link-decay).

However, while the “Create Paranormal Images” thread mirrors Klaiber’s model in the use of graphical distinction to separate feedback from fiction, the thread departs from Klaiber’s model in ontological status. In Klaiber’s double plot, she states that “regardless of their interdependency, the two plot levels are fundamentally different from each other in [...] ontological status” (2014, p. 127), though still a fundamental part of the storytelling process. That is, the discrete displays for the literary text and the paratextual commentary ensure that the two plots of literary text and commentary remain on ontologically distinct levels no matter how much they inform one another. In the case of *The Slender Man* though, the narrative plot (or formative fragments of lore), exists on the *same* ontological level as the second plot of the forum goes commenting and giving feedback on their creations as the SomethingAwful forum exists as what I defined in chapter 3 as an ontologically flattened space. More specifically, on SomethingAwful, using the quote function to differentiate between content and paratextual commentary is a voluntary action, and while it functionally works to differentiate between textual types in a reply, both the original post and the reply – be it paratextual feedback, additional content, or interaction with another’s content – all appear on the same thread and in the same textual space. Thus, boundaries between what is an interaction with the story and what is an interaction with the author become unclear as reader, story, and author all exist at the same ontological level without interface distinction within the borders of the thread – that is, it is an ontologically flattened textual surface.

I argue that the first instances of ontological flattening in *The Slender Man* are perhaps best illustrated early on in Knudsen’s own response to readers who respond positively to the first images of The Slender Man. He writes “Maybe I’ll do some more research. I’ve heard there may be a couple more legit ‘Slender Man’ photographs out there. *I’ll*

post them if I find them. Also seconding the 1920s time traveller picture as awesome” (n.p, emphasis mine). Here, Knudsen “blurs the supposed distinctions between illusion and reality” (Trammell and Gilbert, 2014, p. 392) by both furthering his own story as if it were real, while also responding with feedback to another user’s content in a tone that indicates he is aware of its fictional status. Knudsen’s role-playing stands in contrast to other users who were quick to drop the pretence of real experience to respond to feedback, such as those seen in Fig. 4.6. Instead, Knudsen commits to a Walpolean Gothic framing device as also seen in the analysis of *Candle Cove* in Chapter 2 – that he is not a writer, but the custodian of a true story much older than him. In doing so, he highlights where Klaiber’s double plot, with its ontologically distinct literary text and commentary, and the ontologically flattened venue of the SomethingAwful thread differ. The latter, with no borders between the story being developed and the comments of the readers and authors, offers a space to play with the indistinct boundary between the fiction being developed and reality. This results in a pattern of offering iterative feedback and narrative development by users memetically interacting with *The Slender Man* text and further forging their own documents of encounters with the monster.

This use of the thread’s ontologically flattened space invites others to contribute and interact with *The Slender Man*’s ever-growing patchwork of forged experience. While Knudsen’s images and captions seek to situate artefacts in the recent past, other users attempt to further the aim of forging a patchworked past for the monster. These contributions and their aim to “create a narrative tradition” (Tolbert, 2018, p. 31) that appears to stretch far into history is what Tolbert considers the heart of the reverse ostension process. Following Knudsen’s stance in his follow up posts, other readers turned authors submit their contributions to *The Slender Man* by posing as researchers in the thread. In particular, they interact with the narrative to ‘find’ (forge) earlier and

earlier records of encounters with The Slender Man to give a sense of history beyond the thread. The development in interacting with *The Slender Man* in such a way results in the following exchange:

Machismo: Oh kay... That is creepy. Where did the slender man come from? Did his idea spontaneously come to us on SAF [SomethingAwful Forums]?

Thoreau-Up: I've been following the signs for quite some time.

There are woodcuts dated back to the 16th century in Germany featuring a tall, disfigured man with only white spheres where his eyes should be. They called him 'Der Großmann'[Sic], the tall man. He was a fairy who lived in the Black Forest. Bad children who crept into the woods at night would be chased by the slender man, and he wouldn't leave them alone until he caught them, or the child told the parents what he or she had done. Even then, there is this chilling account from an old journal, dating around 1702:

(Translated from German, some words may be innaccurate) [sic]

'My child, my Lars...He is gone. Taken, from his bed. The only thing that we found was a scrap of black clothing. It feels like cotton, but it is softer...thicker. Lars came into my bedroom yesterday, screaming at the top of his lungs that "The angel is outside!", I asked him what he was talking about, and he told me some nonsense fairy story about Der Großmann. He said he went into the groves by our village and found one of my cows dead, hanging from a tree. I thought nothing of it at first...But now, he is gone. We must find Lars, and my family must leave before we are killed. I am sorry my son...I should have listened. May God forgive me.'

[...] There is more evidence of the slender man, but this is one of the oldest translatable accounts. Anyone else in the thread found anything like this?

(2009, n.p)

The preceding exchange shows the shift towards playing with the ontological ambiguity between literary text and paratextual commentary in relation to the development of *The Slender Man*. On the surface, user Machismo explicitly acknowledges The Slender Man as a fiction by referring to the monster as an "idea". However, his questioning probes whether he had existed prior to the thread, though it is not possible to discern whether this question is sincere. Thoreau-Up, who had previously commented offering feedback on The Slender Man's tentacles while addressing the content as purely fictional, replies to Machismo's question in the style of sincere real-world research into *The Slender*

Man. He claims to have found 300-year-old sources and translated them from German, folding in tropes from traditional European folk tales, such as fairies, forests, and the punishment of naughty children, before asking the rest of the message board if they had come across similar stories. Such a question is a direct invitation for further interaction with the narrative ingredients of *The Slender Man* lore: a tall supernatural figure and missing children. User TombsGrave also answers Machismo's question and furthers the notion of folkloric beginnings of *The Slender Man* at the same ontological level as Thoreau-Up – that is, engaging with and contributing to *The Slender Man* entirely as if it were real – by suggesting “I know of an old Romanian fairy tale, highly unpopular even in its earliest iterations. It might be based on a particular event, or perhaps it is an extrapolation from existing Slender Man stories. The translation I'm most familiar with goes a bit like this [...]” (2009, n.p). In this case, TombsGrave gestures towards even earlier stories concerning The Slender Man that do not exist, suggesting that the fairy tale they post is built on even earlier foundations. Furthering the illusion of historic roots, TombsGrave also hints at multiple translations of the story – suggesting that the ‘definitive’ origin of The Slender Man could be obfuscated across languages and time. This development in the fictional history of *The Slender Man* creates a new method by which other readers can engage with and contribute to *The Slender Man*. By establishing the idea that it is impossible to ascertain true origin to the monster or a definitive historical account, TombsGrave opens up the possibility of near-infinite historical accounts, with users ‘finding’ and ‘translating’ their own tale, adding to a deliberately unclear history of the creature. This approach to the manufactured history of the creature, through the “correlating and connecting [of] fragmentary narratives (themselves representations of experience, albeit fictional ones)” (Tolbert, 2018, p. 32) repositions the narrative in relation to the Gothic roots of *Otranto* with an emphasis on

interactivity through its form as fourth-generation digital fiction. As each user who interacts with *The Slender Man* by contributing to the collection of historical fragments does so through the conceit of fictional research and discovery of previous historical accounts, they are, at each new entry, positioning themselves as the custodian of a Gothic found document purporting to be a true account and real experience.

Adding further to the manufactured history of *The Slender Man*, user GyverMac offers up the following manipulated image (Fig 4.7) and caption to the thread:



Fig 4.7: GyverMac's image submission to the Create Paranormal Images thread.

A German woodcut from the 1540s. It has puzzled historians since it was discovered at Halstberg castle in 1883. The woodcut bears the distinct style of a known woodcut artist from that area, Hans Freckenberg. Although known for his realistic depiction of human anatomy in his works, something that was unusual for the woodcuts in the 16th century, this picture differs radically from the rest of Freckenberg's works. The character to the right bears little semblance to a human being, with skeletal physique and long limbs at odd angles. Many theories have been discussed as to what Freckenberg wanted to symbolize with that character, some say it's a personification of the religious wars that raged in Europe at the time, others say it's a personification of the mysterious plague that has been believed to be the reason for the mysterious abandoning of the Halstberg castle and the nearby village in 1543. [sic all]

(GuyverMac, 2009, n.p)

The image, an edited version of a 1538 woodcut print by Hans Holbein that was part of his "Dance of Death" series (Fig. 4.8), depicts a knight in battle with a featureless multi-limbed creature that resembles The Slender Man but is different enough to imply historical inaccuracy or a change in the monster's presentation. This ambiguity is further reflected in GuyverMac's caption, presented as a description and academic analysis of the woodcut that does not mention The Slender Man, but crucially furthers the Germanic setting of Thoreau-Up's tale of Der Großmann. By contributing a patchwork of art, history, scholarly interpretation, and a mysterious fire in a German castle to the historical malicious fairytale offered to the thread by Thoreau-Up, GuyverMac draws on established Gothic elements while presenting them as the product of factual research into the monster the thread is collectively creating.



Fig. 4.8: Hans Holbein's original 1538 woodcut "Der Ritter" (The Knight)

GyverMac's caption furthers the artificial history that causes *The Slender Man* to be something "people would believe that people believed" (Tolbert, 2013, p. 9) by weaving a fictional history for the woodcut that implies that it may be more than an allegorical image, and instead a sixteenth-century depiction of The Slender Man.

Significantly, all examples of 'historic' experiences with The Slender Man offered by Thoreau-Up and GuyverMac have gone on to be shared out of the thread as individual

instances of the wider narrative of *The Slender Man*, with GyverMac's manipulated woodcut achieving Gerogerigege's original aim of the thread by being mistaken for an original image. This shifting of voice towards an ontological flattening in the *Create Paranormal Images* thread as *The Slender Man* gained popularity – stylistically attempting to bring him to life – thus further expands on and diversifies Klaiber's double plot of collaborative digital fiction. As shown above, rather than a fictional narrative and the narrative of its creation through comments and suggestions of others existing on separate ontological levels and in separate textual spaces, the original thread of *The Slender Man* brings fiction and comments into the same textual and ontological space. In addition, and because of this ontologically flattened textual space allowing readers to creatively interact with *The Slender Man* as if it were real, a third plot emerges in which readers interact with the developing elements of *The Slender Man*, creating further narrative content as if they personally had experienced contact with the materials. They thus insert themselves into the creation and curation of *The Slender Man* as Walpolean figures presenting what already existing horrors they had supposedly discovered. Here, the Gothic trait of ontological ambiguity first seen in *Otranto* is fully reinvented through digital media. *Otranto*, being a print text with the reader and story distinctly separated by the medium, relies on a preface to frame the text as true. The SomethingAwful forum, on the other hand, flattens all ontological levels to be possibly true, as readers offering real feedback, fictional posts, and riffing on those posts by presenting their own alleged experiences *as if they were true* all exist in the same textual space with no demarcation as to which fits where ontologically.

Moreover, while Tolbert's model of reverse ostension works to describe the epistemological complexities at play in the *Create Paranormal Images* thread, in particular, and how the denizens of SomethingAwful interact with *The Slender Man*

and other fictions they developed, it ignores the literary traditions that are also invoked by the community interacting with the text in this way. More specifically, the affordances of digital media and digital textuality at play in the original thread allows those interacting with it to collaboratively participate in established Gothic literary traditions and techniques in new ways. Knudsen's original tranche of Slender Man posts, from police reports to children's drawings, creates a Gothic "patchwork of textual modes [...] remediated into a single 'narrative'" (Mandal, 2015, p. 91) – drawing on the Gothic tradition popularised in Victorian Gothic novels of assembling a coherent narrative through various scraps that present different events and perspectives. Knudsen's insistence that he is merely a researcher relaying older 'real' artefacts – despite all those within the thread being under no such illusion – situates him as a Gothic custodian of 'found' narrative scraps. This characterisation is expanded to the members of the thread at large when they begin to interact with *The Slender Man*, similarly leveraging digital media's multimodal capabilities to create their own content to weave together a larger narrative of *The Slender Man*. Specifically, this narrative is told through "diverse strands of experience" (Tolbert, 2013, p. 2), thus creating a collaboratively told narrative that manufactures a history for The Slender Man out of disparate and different experiences. As I demonstrate above, what is recognised by both Tolbert and Enright as reverse ostension, then, can also be considered an interactive and collaborative continuation of Gothic textual conceits that allow a text to straddle the "liminal boundary between authenticity and counterfeit" (Mandal, 2015, p. 91), albeit for the thrill of those aware of the conceits at play. This is achieved through my adaptation of Klaiber's model of collaborative digital fiction that takes into account ontologically flattened spaces whereby the community contributions and feedback are collapsed from one, thus resulting in a form of collaborative development that situates

new contributions as real-world research with contributors as the discoverers and collators of already existing texts.

4.3.2 – Multi-Platform Ontologically Flattened Storytelling.

As more users interacted with The Slender Man in the *Create Paranormal Images* thread, creating a history for the creature with their own additions to the narrative, the more likely it became that the creature and parts of the narrative would be spread further afield due to the production of more content. This is the case with *Marble Hornets* and other ARGs that, due to their multimodal (predominantly video) method of storytelling, necessitated the infrastructure and affordances of other websites such as YouTube and Twitter to be told, thus further establishing *The Slender Man* as a piece of fourth-generation digital fiction. As I will show below with *Marble Hornets* continuing *The Slender Man* across multiple social media platforms, it leverages the affordances of these platforms, as well as the different format and framing for telling their iteration and experience of *The Slender Man* to intensify the capabilities for a variety beyond the SomethingAwful thread in which the character was created and established, incorporating elements of Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) and allowing fans to interact with characters directly. Here, ontologically flattened spaces allow for antagonists and other threats from *Marble Hornets* to exist in precisely the same textual space as fans, with much more agency than the researched history presented in the *Create Paranormal Images* thread of the previous section.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter *Marble Hornets* is a direct offshoot from the *Create Paranormal Images* thread, as the creator of *Marble Hornets* was a member of that thread, posting a link to his first video in the thread shortly after Knudsen's first post depicting The Slender Man. Klaiber notes that certain collaborative writing

platforms allow stories to “branch out into multilinear versions [...] thus alternative versions of a story may be introduced to any instance of the narrative” (2014, p. 124). However, the multilinear and branching stories of Klaiber’s analysis are made possible by the specific platforms used, thus containing the stories and all subsequent branches and variations to those websites. For *The Slender Man* and other creepypasta narratives, branching of the story takes place across various Web2.0 and social media platforms, embodying the qualities of fourth-generation digital fiction by taking “the structure and shape of [platforms] [...] already defined, and defined for different purposes” (Rustad, 2015, n.p) as they are spread and branched out into multilinear variations of the original narrative.

The trait of creepypasta to branch out into multilinear variations can be seen in *Marble Hornets* as an entry into *The Slender Man* narrative. The video series begins branching outwards from the existing SomethingAwful thread that first created *The Slender Man* while depicting the monster on new platforms and in a new trajectory. This quality of iterative development of existing content across platforms is what Bryan Alexander defines as “second order” social media storytelling. He argues that *Marble Hornets* “began with pre-existing social media content, worked it into a new story, then was followed by social media responses. In other words, this storytelling approach presupposes social media, draws from it, and depends on that world” (2011, pp. 88 – 89). Alexander’s characterisation of *Marble Hornets* draws attention to how the series intrinsically involves interaction and participation with *The Slender Man*. Specifically, user Ce Gars spreads the myth of The Slender Man memetically to a new social media platform, YouTube, and in doing so, he develops the overall *Slender Man* narrative further. In addition, however, *Marble Hornets* also represents a significant development in the spread of *The Slender Man* narrative in terms of reach and exposure to a new

potential audience. In particular, it boosts the monster's popularity through its accessible delivery on a more popular platform by moving away from SomethingAwful and onto YouTube and marks a shift in how readers interact with the narrative by beginning a trend of incorporating elements of ARGs to certain branches of the narrative delivery.

According to Alexander, Alternate Reality Games are “a combination of story and game. Its contents are distributed throughout the world, usually online” (2011, p. 152), by the designers of the games, commonly known as “puppet masters”. Story elements and contents are distributed across various sites, social media platforms, and even in the real world. This is where the gaming element comes in as users “play the game by discovering bits of content and discerning the story [...] while comparing notes with other players”, solving puzzles and collaboratively uncovering more of the story and narrative as more of the story elements are discovered and deciphered. It is this distribution of narrative across various platforms as well as offline while at no point declaring where story ends or real world begins that leads Alexander to argue that ARGs operate “right on the boundary between fiction and non”. Moreover, the fragmented and puzzle-like quality to ARG storytelling allows readers to “function as detectives” (Chess and Newsom, 2015, p. 37) in piecing the narrative together, facilitating high levels of interaction with the text, and collaboration with other readers.



Fig 4.9: Comments under *ToTheArk*'s video Program – part of the *Marble Hornets* ARG. Accessible at [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=46GwQd-X38g>]

This level of detective work can be seen in Fig 4.9 above where users cross-reference the cryptic video posted by *Marble Hornets* antagonist 'ToTheArk' in order to glean more context and understanding from an earlier video from the *Marble Hornets* YouTube channel. The screenshot is taken from the YouTube comments section under the video titled "Program" posted by a YouTube account belonging to 'ToTheArk' which is important to the wider *Marble Hornets* story, but in a way that isn't immediately clear. The seventeen second long video is a static shot of a house in a worn VHS aesthetic (flickering frame edges and discolouration) with a faint series of numbers in the lower left of the frame (shown in Fig. 4.10), ending with the text "BLEED MORE" for two seconds.

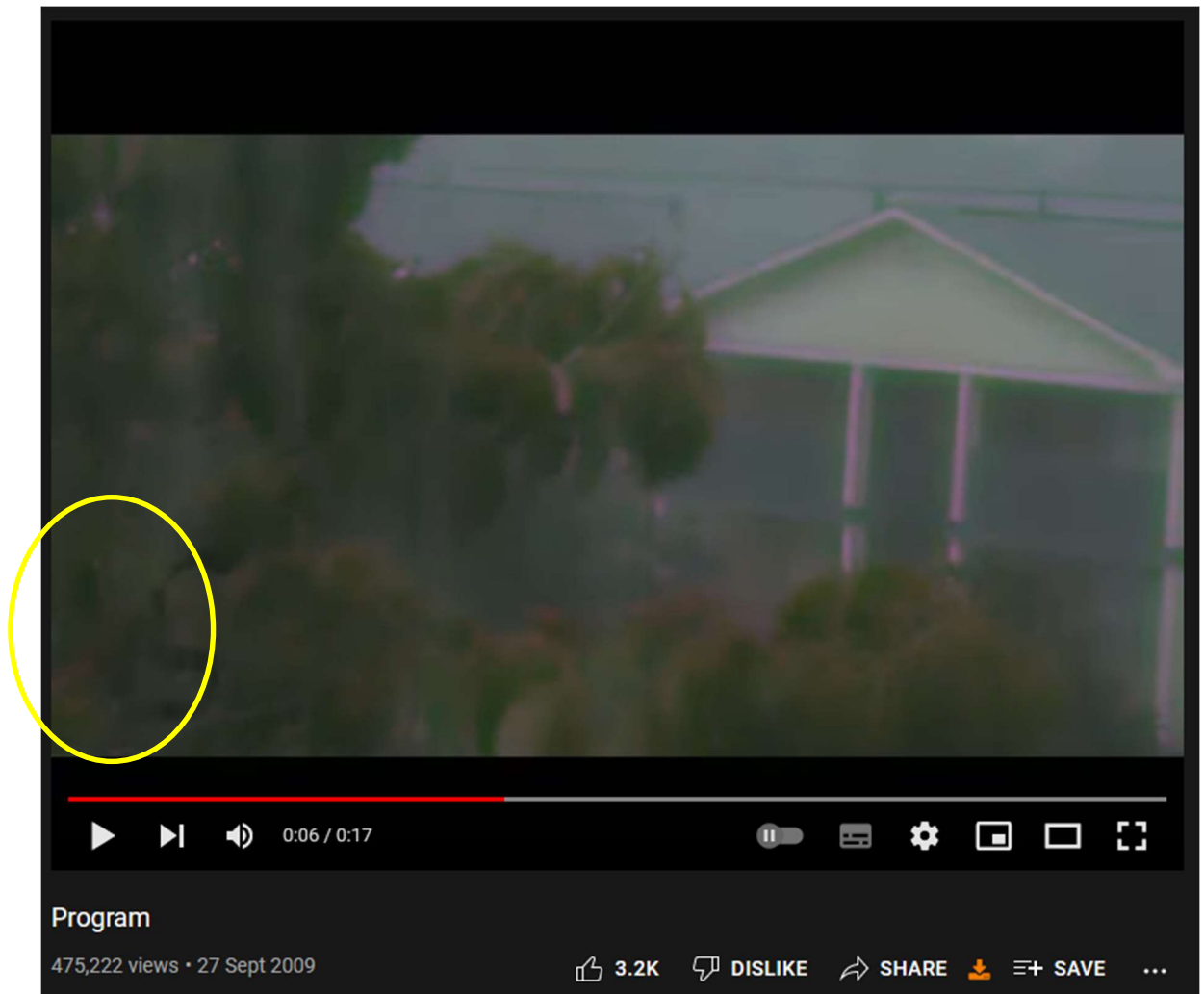


Fig 4.10: A screenshot from the video 'Program' by 'ToTheArk'. I have circled the numbers that appear in the video in yellow. Accessible at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=46GwQd-X38g]

K.T.B's comment in Fig. 4.9 (partially hidden under the "Read more" break for brevity) is an elaborate methodology for decoding a set of numbers that appear in the video (circled in Fig. 4.10) involving the conversion of binary and hexadecimal to ASCII control codes that work for old cassette tapes (the kind *Marble Hornets* was supposedly filmed on). Another user, Ulrik Ruud Rostrup, then uses K.T.Bs analysis to connect the code to a specific video from the *Marble Hornets* narrative, interacting with both the previous user and the wider *Marble Hornets* narrative to discover more aspects of the story. Both users appear to regard the mystery they are solving as real, or are at least taking the role of detective seriously in relation to how their discoveries may impact

understandings of the characters of *Marble Hornets*. The interaction is also an example of how *Marble Hornets* is a form of fourth-generation digital fiction in which the “structure and shape of a platform that is already defined, and defined for different purposes” (Rustad, 2015, n.p). Here, YouTube’s structure – user accounts, videos, metatext, and comments sections – all inform how *Marble Hornets* is told, how it is interacted with by users, and how users then interact with each other to impact their understanding of the narrative, thus making the platform “a significant part of the aesthetic expression and the meaning potential” (Bell et al., 2014, p. 10).

Moreover, *Marble Hornets*’ form as fourth-generation digital fiction means that those “playing” along get to experience the Internet as an “affective world” (Trammell and Gilbert, 2017, p. 393) created through their interaction with the text. YouTube becomes an ontologically flattened space where users can directly interact with videos uploaded by characters – both with YouTube profiles that exist at the same ontological level. Those reading and playing along with *Marble Hornets* are positioned as participants in a horror narrative as it happens – reacting to new uploads by characters on the platform to decipher the story in a way that embodies Trammell and Gilbert’s notion that play “acts as a disposition of interaction with forms of media” (p. 399).

The fragmentation of *Marble Hornets* across platforms, profiles, and videos makes the narrative “available to so-called ‘lurkers’ or ‘rubberneckers’ – that is, people who do not wish to interact with the puppetmasters directly,” (Henriksen, 2014, p. 411). Key here is Henriksen’s eye towards a *choice* in interaction (not wishing to do so), and subsequently, this implies that those who “rubberneck” are already aware of the play and interaction involved in experiencing the story, but opt out of participating, instead enjoying watching other users ‘play through’ the narrative.

I argue instead that those following or “rubbernecking” *Marble Hornets* may not be aware of the play involved and that by being told primarily on YouTube, *Marble Hornets* enhances the ontological ambiguity of *The Slender Man*. In being shared beyond the borders of SomethingAwful, the ontological dynamics between fact and fiction developed and settled on by the community of that particular forum are no longer known or signalled by users on the new platform – that is, while as I have demonstrated the ontologically flattened nature of the SomethingAwful thread, participants were still aware of the ontological status of *The Slender Man* due to it being contained within a thread calling explicitly for fictional images. Thus, interaction with *The Slender Man* takes on a new, context-specific dynamic. This is because open platforms are “defined for other purposes” (Rustad, 2015, n.p) and are inherently ontologically flattened spaces. Those who discover the *Marble Hornets* videos on YouTube (perhaps via algorithm or a search for a word that happens to be the title of an instalment) rather than following Ce Gar’s original link from SomethingAwful may not be aware of the forged nature of the monster, and thus “confuse play and reality” (Enright, 2017, p. 10).

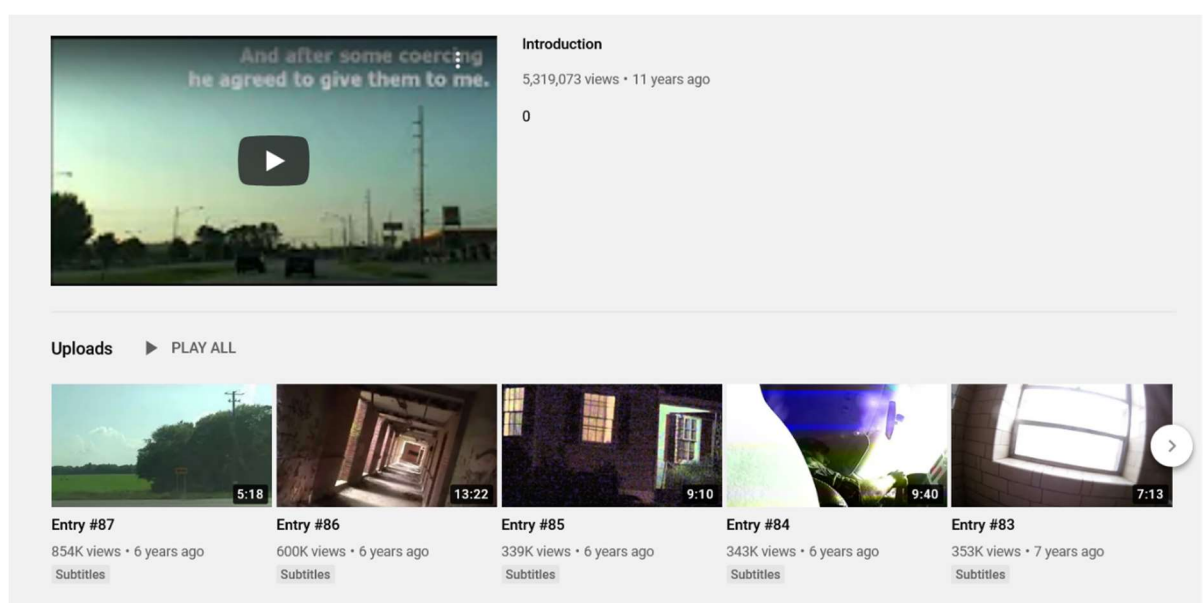


Fig 4.11: The Marble Hornets profile homepage on YouTube.

Fig 4.11 shows the video thumbnails for various *Marble Hornets* entries on YouTube. The unassuming and at times rough thumbnails coupled with the similarly generic video titles mean that these videos depicting fictional encounters and experiences with The Slender Man could easily slip into a playlist of average YouTube home movies by real people with no paratextual signification of their fictional status. This illustrates how the aesthetics of *Marble Hornets*, as well as its form and choice of platform could cause users to “confuse play for reality” (Enright, 2017, p. 10). Ontological ambiguity is easily achieved purely by virtue of *Marble Hornets* not explicitly signalling its status as fictional for those who are not suitably primed in the scheme or rules of engagement for encountering the fiction on an ontologically flattened platform.

Enright similarly argues that the YouTube platform goes a long way towards furthering *Marble Hornets*’ ambition towards ontological ambiguity. He notes that the “documentary nature of *Marble Hornets* rubbed shoulders with other ‘authentic’ uses of the same tools and platform, where the camera could still largely be perceived as a recording device presenting unmediated images” (p. 15). Here, Enright highlights how YouTube does not distinguish between videos of fictional content or those that capture real-life moments, and that videos of fictional content that use the same tools and aesthetics as real-life videos can similarly be perceived as real-life due to the contextual use of the personal camera as a tool for recording and presenting unmediated or ‘true’ images. Enright also argues that *Marble Hornets*’ delivery stands in contrast to earlier found footage cinema which “was still overcoded by the expectations of a cinematic industrial logic”. That is, no matter how convincingly ‘real’ the footage may be, its screening in a full cinema provides a distancing effect inhibiting engagement with the footage depicted as if it were real. This is because these surroundings and mechanisms

for viewing are intrinsically tied to the film industry and its economic concerns, thus bracketing the content presented out from reality as a fictional film presentation.

While I agree with Enright's assessment of *Marble Hornets* and its departure from previous forms of found footage cinema, he overlooks *Marble Hornets*' connection to horror and the Gothic's lineage of ontological ambiguity by instead placing an emphasis on how YouTube allows *Marble Hornets* to "resist the economic logic that has restricted the artistic potentialities of other films" (p. 16). While not incorrect in his assessment as YouTube allows *Marble Hornets* to exist outside studio and market concerns, this, I argue, is a flawed approach that reduces the significance of horror and the Gothic as merely an influence on creepypasta as opposed to the literary and generic tradition it actively draws upon and renews. As I demonstrated in Chapter 2, the use of emergent technology to achieve a sense of ontological uncertainty is a long-established tradition in horror and Gothic narratives. *Marble Hornets*' use of social media platforms is simply a continuation of this tradition using twenty-first-century technology. In addition to allowing *Marble Hornets* to exist outside a conventional studio system and its economic logic, I contest that it is essential to see how the platform itself affects the form of *Marble Hornets* beyond simply being a way to access the videos that make up the series. YouTube allows for commentary, sharing, interaction, and community building beyond, positioning *Marble Hornets* as part of the fourth-generation digital fiction of *The Slender Man* by, as I have demonstrated, being a "significant part of the aesthetic expression and the meaning potential" (Bell et al., 2014, p. 10) of the narrative.

4.3.3 – Tulpas.

A final way in which *The Slender Man* uses interactivity to further horror and Gothic traits is through the concept of the tulpa. Tulpas are not an original concept to *The Slender Man* but are instead an online development of a specific type of Tibetan Buddhist meditation centred around the practice of “meditating a mental being into existence” (Haynes, 2016, n.p). Contemporary online tulpas are, according to Samuel Veissière (2015), “presently understood [...] [as] a sentient being who becomes incarnate, or embodied through thought-form” (n.p). As Veissière explains, the term first found purchase in the west in 1929 when explorer Alexandra David-Néel published *Magic and Mystery in Tibet*, recounting her experience of witnessing tulpa creation, and in fact creating one of her own “in the image of Friar Tuck” (n.p). The online tulpa community is keen to archive its development from this original meditative practice. A timeline curated by a user known as Albatross (2013) charts how the term found purchase on 4chan’s /x/ (paranormal) message board at around the time when *The Slender Man* was being discussed by SomethingAwful. The /x/ board recognised the horror potential of tulpas and sought to spin tales of tulpas as strange and malevolent entities, writing creepypasta narratives featuring them.

This concept of meditating a being into existence is remarked upon in the initial *Create Paranormal Images* thread (Fig. 4.12).

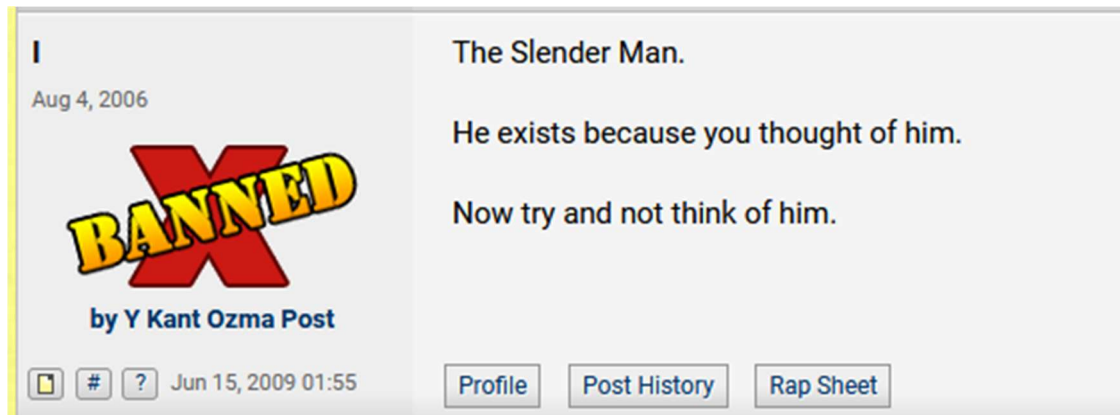


Fig. 4.12: A post by the user 'I' in the Create Paranormal Images thread on SomethingAwful.

The user 'I's observation about thinking The Slender Man into existence chimes with Veissière's definition of a tulpa as "a sentient being who becomes incarnate [...] through thought form" (2015, n.p). This framing of The Slender Man as irreversibly brought into existence by the community or fans that thought him up has become a somewhat foundational aspect of *The Slender Man*, featuring as the driving concept behind a YouTube video series *The Tulpa Effect* (2011) – a vlog where a woman updates viewers on how her partner's obsession with *Marble Hornets* brought an apparently real Slender Man into the world. As Chess and Newsom write:

Many people on Slender Nation and other forums related to the Slender Man have suggested that he has, indeed, become a tulpa. The basic idea of this theory is that, in constructing the character, fictionalizing him, and then putting the character out into the world as though he were real, the Internet has essentially created a "real" Slender Man, who stalks his victims just as the fictional one does.

(Chess and Newsom, 2015, p. 119)

Chess and Newsom suggest that this tulpa theory of *The Slender Man* creates a sense of ontological ambiguity in the narrative and around the fictional status of the character in that "while everyone is able to acknowledge that the character itself, was born fictionally, the tulpa theory allows a space where the Slender Man is able to both exist and not exist".

While Chess and Newsom argue that the tulpa theory creates a space of ontological ambiguity for The Slender Man, I suggest that *The Slender Man*'s form of fourth-generation digital fiction *already* allows for him to exist and not exist. As shown in section 4.3.1, *The Slender Man*'s existence is predicated on contributors understanding the rules of play in the ontologically flattened spaces where the narrative is spread. Because of this, The Slender Man exists simultaneously in textual spaces where he “rubs shoulders with other ‘authentic’ uses of the same [...] platform” (Enright, 2017, p. 15). *The Slender Man*'s ontological status is thus dictated by a reader's prior knowledge of the narrative, its traits and rules of interaction, or their general disposition towards seemingly real paranormal content.

Instead of the incorporation of tulpas into *The Slender Man* creating the first opportunity for ontological ambiguity as suggested by Chess and Newsom, I suggest that the hybridising of tulpas and the Slender Man allow later tellings – such as *The Tulpa Effect* – to rekindle a sense of ontological ambiguity. Through viral and memetic spread out of the form of fourth-generation digital fiction and off social media platforms – such as featuring in viral video games, pastiche in fictional narratives on traditional media such as *Supernatural* and *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, and even becoming a Hollywood star in 2018 horror film *Slender Man* – a critical-mass of fame marks The Slender Man as a distinctly fictional creature, thus robbing him of his ability to exist between fact and fiction and unsettle readers. Reframing The Slender Man as a tulpa – a being brought into existence in the real world precisely through being collectively thought about in fictions – enables writers to acknowledge the fictionality and popularity of previous Slender Man narratives while bringing the character back into a state of ontological ambiguity. That is, to return to ‘I’s post in the

Create Paranormal Images thread, to tell readers that The Slender Man truly exists “because you thought of him” (2009, n.p.).

Moreover, the tulpa framing affords *The Slender Man* a more psychological way of unnerving readers – tapping into a Gothic tradition of uncanny and a destabilisation of certainty and borders. The ontological flattening inherent in *The Slender Man* and the ability for readers to interact with characters and narratives as if they are real on social media platforms creates an uncanny sense that “things are not as they have come to appear through habit and familiarity” (Bennett and Royle, 1999, p. 37) – that is, social media platforms can contain encounters with fictions and monsters as if they were as real as other users. Recasting The Slender Man as a tulpa furthers this uncanniness, suggesting that even the most minute act of interacting with *The Slender Man*, thinking about the creature and the narrative – even while acknowledging that he is fictional – is enough to bring about the real Slender Man who can haunt readers across the Internet alongside his fictional representations. Such a framing casts The Slender Man as the Internet’s collective doppelganger and a creature that is uncanny in a way far beyond his elongated humanoid appearance. As Julia Briggs notes, the act of repetition and doubling – the “mirroring [of] lived life” (2012, p. 179) are inherently uncanny. The tulpa framing of *The Slender Man* recognises the repetition of the monster in a way that mirrors lived life – through Tolbert’s reverse ostension – to create something that appears real is inherently uncanny, and the real ‘tulpa’ Slender Man is the consequence of this action. To interact with the fiction as if it were real imbues it with powers that may cause it to become real and autonomous beyond the control of those who think about it as a fiction – a “sentient being who becomes incarnate [...] through thought-form” (Veissière, 2015, n.p.).

Ultimately, framing The Slender Man as a tulpa serves to shift the rules of play and interaction around treating *The Slender Man* as real. The tulpa as a device within *The Slender Man* narrative warns that doing so may bring about the very monster that the community knew was fictional but chose to make real through forged histories, experiences, and interactions. In this sense, the tulpa aspect of *The Slender Man* recalls Punter and Byron's remarks that "the literary Gothic has been concerned with uncertainties of character positioning and instabilities of knowledge" (2004, p. 273). Here, even if the community is certain in *The Slender Man*'s appearance as ontologically ambiguous, the real thing is always a potential threat.

4.4 – Conclusion

As I have shown in this chapter, ontological ambiguity and instability follows *The Slender Man* across the Internet. As a monster, he openly invites interaction, even play. However, when those interacting with the narrative appear to have a grasp of the complex epistemological game being played on Web2.0's ontologically flattened surface, *The Slender Man* threatens to knock them off-balance through the theory of the tulpa – remaining mercurial between fiction and reality even as researchers can point out his birthplace in the *Create Paranormal Images* thread.

I have also demonstrated how the concept of ontological flattening first set out in chapter three lends itself to enhancing an understanding of *The Slender Man* and how it was created. This is through my development of Klaiber's model of interactive digital fiction that takes into account how ontologically flattened Web2.0 spaces as sites of narrative development problematise a "double plot" (Klaiber, 2014, p. 124) by having

no distinct hierarchy between development comments and the narrative itself.

Ultimately, *The Slender Man* collapses all distinction between narrative and feedback as users in the original SomethingAwful thread present contributions as historical research – constructing a Gothic patchwork of found narrative strands and destabilising ontological certainty in the process.

This threat of destabilising the borders and boundaries of our most basic understandings of the world around us are at the heart of the Gothic uncanny. As observed by Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, the uncanny is to do with “making things *uncertain*: it has to do with the sense that *things are not as they have come to appear through habit and familiarity*” (1999, p. 37 - emphasis mine). This is the threat of *The Slender Man*, illustrated through ontological ambiguity and interaction. As a monster, he threatens certainty – whether that is certainty around the rules of play and interaction; certainty in how much trust the reality of content presented by platforms on the Internet; or certainty of how much control one has over the fictions they interact with.

5. *The Interface Series*: A Move Towards the New.

We are on the verge, all of us.

Times are dire.

We are about to be gathered again into the arms of the Mother, to become one flesh with her.

The Mother who gathers lost children.

The Mother I have seen in dark spaces since I was a little child.

Back when I called her "the mother with horse eyes."

We are about to meet her again.

We are about to be unborn.

(/u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9, 2016, 15⁸)

The post above is the sign-off of the first direct post from an anonymous author, known only by his Reddit username “/u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9”, addressing his fans in a subreddit dedicated to tracking and discussing the then small but intriguing narrative that he was writing in the comments of various posts across the platform. The quote in the epigraph is the first to link back to the username of the author, introducing the “mother with horse eyes” as something that would be a mysterious antagonist as the narrative continued. This narrative became known as *The Interface Series*,⁹ dubbed so by fans after the “flesh interfaces” (/u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9, *a unite a stage a coup*, 2016, n.p) referred to in the first author’s mysterious first post under the account name.

Compared to *Candle Cove* or *The Slender Man*, *The Interface Series* is something of an outlier in terms of its story and evolution online. Both *Candle Cove* and *The Slender*

⁸ Though there are no page numbers to the posts, each has been numbered by the community here: <https://www.reddit.com/r/9M9H9E9/wiki/narrative> - I will be using the post numbers for reference – e.g: a quote from post 15 will be referenced as (2016, 15).

⁹ It is also sometimes referred to as “Mother Horse Eyes” after the author’s username. *The Interface Series*, however, is the more common name and will be used throughout this thesis.

Man can be traced back to their source where a stable fictional ontological status can be found. Rather than originally being created as an explicit piece of fiction before being stripped of paratextual indicators, as is the case with *Candle Cove*, or having overt roots in an explicit attempt to create something *like* an existing piece of folklore such as *The Slender Man*, *The Interface Series* began on Reddit.com fully embracing the flattened ontological state of the platform and, as I will show, began in a state of genuine ontological ambiguity that remains to this day. The author /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 is truly anonymous, and as I will explore in the next section of this chapter, weaves a narrative that evades any attempt to pin it to a stable sense of fact or fiction. It is also a far newer example of Creepypasta, beginning in 2016 rather than 2009 for both *Candle Cove* and *The Slender Man*.

In this chapter, I will show how *The Interface Series* represents a more contemporary form of creepypasta, and analyse it as an example of evolution in the genre. This development, I argue, mirrors a more general evolution in the Gothic as a response to ever-changing technological advancements. *The Interface Series* distinctly reinvents traits from this shift in Gothic writing by leveraging its form as digital fiction in a way that earlier creepypasta narratives do not. I develop Isabella van Elferen's taxonomy of "techno-Gothics" (2014, p. 138) to demonstrate how *The Interface Series* represents a new type of contemporary Gothic fiction that is both attuned to technological advancements and leverages its ontologically flattened status for thematic and narrative affect. In doing so, I propose that *The Interface Series* is representative of what I term "techno-Weird" – a characteristic where ontologically flattened platforms are leveraged by a narrative to enhance and emphasise characteristics of Lovecraftian weird fiction and its fascination with ontological instability.

In addition, as I will show throughout this chapter, *The Interface Series* exhibits a hybrid of *Candle Cove*'s anarchic but playful memetic spread, and the more controlled ARG-like elements of *The Slender Man* while further reinventing and interpreting horror and Gothic traits in a way that sets it apart from earlier narratives.

5.1 – Entering the Flesh Interface.

To effectively analyse *The Interface Series*, a description of the story told by the narrative and the story of the narrative are both necessary as interactions with and reactions to the narrative are as important for analysis as the direct posts that make up the story. However, the sprawling, complex, and fragmented nature of *The Interface Series* and its moment in the online spotlight is not easy to summarise briefly. In this section I will summarise the main premise and themes of *The Interface Series* before exploring the narrative and reader reaction in greater detail and finally examining how *The Interface Series* forged a relationship with tech journalism before coming to an end.

5.1.1 – A Synopsis of *The Interface Series*.

The Interface Series is a collection of posts distributed across the popular social networking, news, content aggregation and discussion website, Reddit. The structure of Reddit is key to understanding *The Interface Series*, as it is this platform that the narrative takes the “structure and shape” of (Rustad, 2015, n.p). Reddit is a remarkably popular Web2.0 website, ranked nineteenth in terms of global traffic as of August 2022 according to SimilarWeb. Reddit is organised via topic or subject based communities referred to as subreddits. Users can submit links, photos, videos, or text based posts to

relevant subreddits and other users can comment on and discuss the post. Each post, including comments, can be upvoted or downvoted by the community, with the proportion of upvotes or downvotes determining the visibility of that content. The top content from across the website is displayed on Reddit's front page, allowing users without accounts to see the most popular and upvoted content from across Reddit's various communities and subreddits.

The Interface Series is a creepypasta narrative told via posts distributed across Reddit's various subreddits, beginning in the replies to other posts before the author,

/u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9, began submitting content directly. The story itself consists of several narratives that are loosely connected and sometimes converge.

While the narratives themselves are largely told in a linear pattern, the posting order hops between each narrative strand. Taken in totality, *The Interface Series* tells a story spanning from prehistory to far in the future, but is primarily concerned with multiple dimensions, LSD as a method by which to comprehend these dimensions, and interdimensional travel through "flesh interfaces". The story is delivered via multiple perspectives, from a boy in a prehistoric tribe, to a CIA officer, through to a maintenance worker for futuristic pods that connect users to the internet. Broadly, *The Interface Series* depicts how humans learned of multiple dimensions, sought to study and weaponise them during the wars of the twentieth century, and how those developments lead to the Internet of the 2030s. Simultaneously,

/u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 tells the story of how he is personally involved in this wider plot through his relationship with the "mother with horse eyes". Throughout the story, it is strongly implied that Mother also appears in various narrative strands in different guises and aliases, her most antagonistic being "Q" – a near omniscient intelligence brought into existence by humanity's experiments on flesh interfaces that

now seeks to subsume the human race into its plan which is never fully explained. The story is implied to be taking place across various dimensions, with the fragments delivered to us being preparation and a warning that Q is going to attempt to reach our reality next.

5.1.2 – The Story of the Narrative.

The Interface Series began on the 21 April 2016, nestled in the comments thread under a post in the /r/mildlyinteresting subreddit. It would then continue across the entirety of the website and in a variety of subreddits for 100 ‘canonical’ posts (those that present fragments of the narrative and collated by fans) as well as various other posts and interactions by /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 across Reddit and other websites. The original post in /r/mildlyinteresting was a picture of Penguin Books limited-edition print of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). It was likely posted because the cover had a mildly interesting feature where the title on the front cover came completely blocked out and redacted by ink that becomes ‘un-censored’ (Fig 5.1) as the black block ink covering the book title and Orwell’s name wears away over time and handling, thus reflecting themes within the novel.



Fig 5.1: The original post on the /r/mildlyinteresting subreddit under which /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 made his first post.

This post was undeniably popular, with approximately 33,400 upvotes and 1470 comments. The top comment, by user /u/Ayatollah_Bahloni, simply reads “Doubleplus interesting” (2016). This comment gained 4969 upvotes and generated a discussion

around Orwell's use of newspeak in the novel. Comparatively, /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9's first comment gained only 194 upvotes, meaning that it was relatively hidden from view. The post itself, however, set the template for how most of *The Interface Series* would be delivered. The text in each posted fragment would be loosely related to the Reddit post it was a reply to, either through some vague thematic gesture, tone, or a mention of the same topic – albeit in a wildly different context. For example the inaugural post by /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9, in reply to the picture of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* reads as follows:

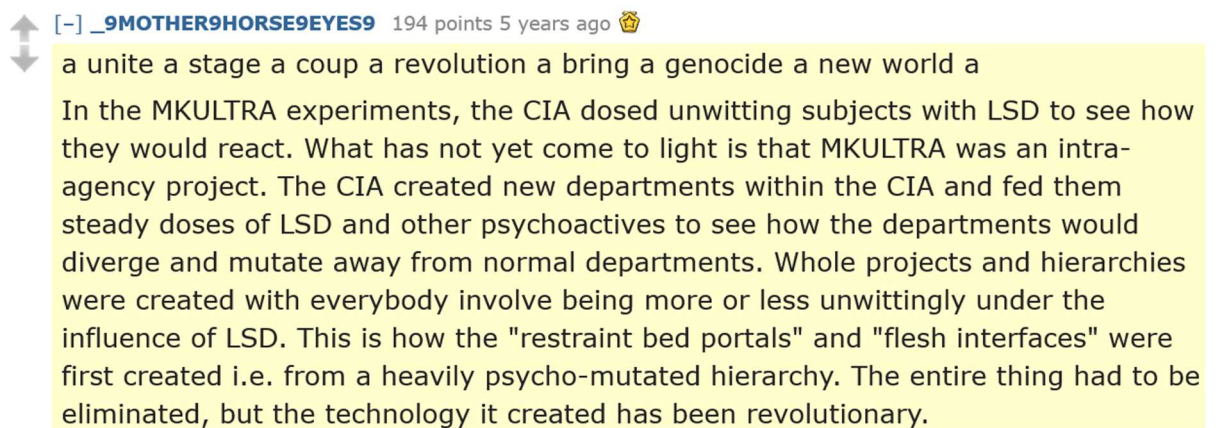


Fig 5.2: The first post/narrative fragment of *The Interface Series*. A reply to the post in Fig 5.1.

As seen in Fig 5.2, the post introducing *The Interface Series* to the world begins with no clear link to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or George Orwell. Reading the post and entering the world laid out in /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9's text only reveals a scant relation to the original post through a gesture towards government departments, in this case the CIA, and ways to control populations, with references to MKULTRA, “restraint bed portals” and “flesh interfaces”. These thematic links become more apparent in /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9's second post (Fig 5.3), which appeared on the same day in reply to a completely different Reddit post in a different subreddit called /r/tifu – short for “Today I Fucked Up”, a subreddit where people share mistakes

with the community to vent or share a funny anecdote. Original posts typically begin with “TIFU” (Today I fucked up) followed by the user’s mishap.

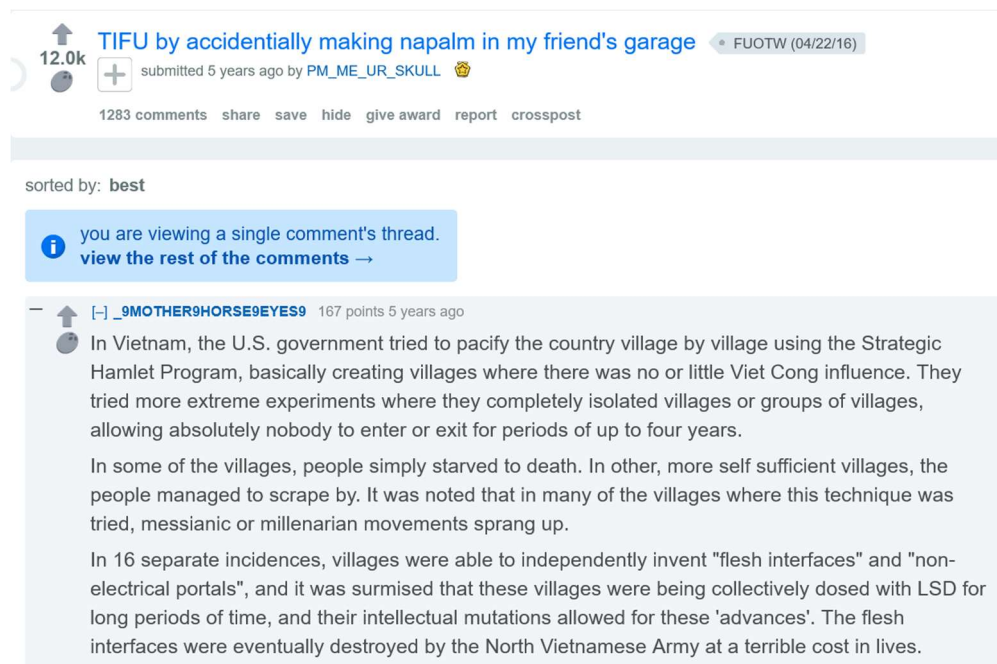


Fig 5.3: The second post in The Interface Series including the original thread post it is a reply to.

Here, “napalm” forms the link between the original post in the /r/tifu subreddit and /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9’s comment. The original post references accidentally making napalm while the topic of /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9’s post is the Vietnam War where napalm was widely used by U.S. forces. The post’s content also connects to the first Orwell post, recalling “flesh interfaces” and LSD, as well as appearing to reference a similar time period due to MKULTRA in the first post and the Vietnam War in the second. In total, /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 would post nine times on April 21st. These posts spanned five different subreddits (five posts in /r/funny, and one each in /r/dataisbeautiful, /r/todayilearned, /r/tifu, and /r/mildlyinteresting) in reply to other users’ original posts. Each of /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9’s reply posts is a self-contained anecdote following the format detailed above of being somewhat related to the original user’s post, while also building an account of an

alternative history riddled with strange and unexplained terminology where Soviet Russia and the CIA attempt to understand “flesh interfaces” and “chitinous cruciform organisms” (2016, 8).

The first two posts detailed above give an example of how *The Interface Series* emerged: without warning, interrupting expected conversation, but with a sense of pattern. This sense was not lost on some other users, who began to notice the strange posts with a factual and authoritative tone referencing the real-world, but talking about mysterious and disturbing portals, flesh interfaces, and mutations. In the following days, a subreddit was set up to document /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9’s posts and discuss what the strange fragments could mean. This first subreddit, named /r/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 after the author, was abruptly set to private and locked in an act of trolling. A second subreddit, an abbreviated /r/9M9H9E9, was subsequently created and remains active to this day, maintaining an archived wiki of verified posts pertaining to *The Interface Series* and attributing a name to each one. However, it was in the first subreddit, after three days of consistent posting across Reddit in a pattern and tone similar to the posts above, that the author addressed the growing community of users who had begun to pay attention to him. This post, which has since been entitled *Hello Friends* by the community, reframes the posts before and has become critical to understanding *The Interface Series*. In this post, the author explains the fragmented narrative forming through his comments.

[T]his information is not fiction. Nor is it true. It is a mix of things which happened and things which almost happened. Things which were and things which could have been. You must understand that the present moment in which we exist is simply a nexus from which trillions of possible pasts and possible futures branch out [...] I am writing about what has never been, and what must never be.

(/u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9, 2016, 15).

Continuing in this prophetic stance, he writes that:

Soon, technological advances in the field of information technology and bioengineering will fundamentally reshape human existence. There are a number of possible outcomes, and I believe that most of them will result in the human race entering unending era of absolute slavery.

(/u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9, 2016, 15)

In the same post, the author also reveals that he is a “30-something American male without the benefit of a college education or a stable job” and that he has “no proper formal qualifications for the task” ahead. However, he goes on to state – “I have personally experienced the intellectual mutations of which I write. Through repeated self-experimentation, I have fractured the time-state of my brain, and now it exists in an ever-shifting state between various pasts which didn't happen”. This claim hints at LSD use in a similar way to the posts leading up to this address, as both the CIA and the Soviet Union used LSD to induce flesh interfaces and conduct experiments – first referenced in posts 1 and 4 respectively. This becomes an important thread through the fragmented narrative, ultimately reframing the posts that have come before as the product of the author’s fractured “time-state” as he writes down the experiences of “things that have happened and things which almost happened”. From here, /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 continues to post across Reddit, weaving a narrative spanning subreddits from /r/aww (for pictures of cute animals) to /r/news (for breaking worldwide news stories), while also occasionally posting in the /r/9M9H9E9 subreddit. The story is fragmented across 29 different interlinked narratives told from different perspectives. It tells the story of clandestine and secretive projects to create and control interdimensional portals known as “flesh interfaces” due to them being lined with nondescript, but distinctly human, flesh. These interfaces are, allegedly, created through

the heavy usage of LSD, and became part of a Cold War research race between the USA and USSR.

Through numerous posts from the perspective of an investigator, a CIA researcher, and a special ops soldier in Vietnam, the narrative describes various bizarre and horrific effects of the flesh interfaces. These include “segmentation” where research teams close to interfaces and incidents “ended up with people missing limbs, cut in half, etc. What's interesting is that the people could live for quite some time despite segmentation” (2016, 4); mysterious “‘chitinous cruciform’ creatures” (2016, 3), that were allegedly found surrounding a portal near the Falkland Islands; and various nightmarish experiments conducted to better understand the interfaces and their nature, ultimately sending children through due to their likelihood of returning alive.

Gradually, more perspectives and characters are added to the patchwork of voices, including a Neo-Nazi who survives a trip through a flesh interface; a cat who must protect its owners from “the oily ones” (2016, 36); a young tribal boy who is warned of a crone who lives nearby (55); and more abstract vignettes that feature for a single post – such as a poem about a “great crystal tower” on a planet orbiting a dying star that appears to be the other side of a flesh interface (89). However, in addition to the perspectives that serve to introduce the flesh interfaces and the world allegedly experienced by the author, there are two further ‘main’ narrative strands.

In the “sense feed beds” (33) strand, the author tells of something from a “possible future”. They claim that in 2039, most of humanity spends a large portion of its time in “hygiene beds” (33) – fully immersive Internet connected beds that allow for direct connection to the user’s senses. Through this network, a malevolent and omniscient entity known as ‘Q’ has enslaved humanity into docile complacency. The author tells of

a group of humans mounting a futile resistance against Q, ultimately using the author as a way to write into existence a timeline where Q does not exist.

The other main narrative strand concerns a boy kidnapped by “Mother with the Horse Eyes” (2016, 17) – a horrifying creature who is composed of various animal parts and calls itself Mother. The boy reveals that the creature made his parents disappear, keeps him imprisoned in his home, and forces him to perform magic. In order to break free, the boy brings his future self to his rescue. It is revealed that the future version of this boy is the author, whose story intersects with the boy’s. In posts to the /r/9M9H9E9 subreddit, the author, going by the name ‘Nick’, reveals how he has struggled with alcoholism and doubts his sanity and experiences, especially early in life around Mother. However, after his roommate relays their own experience of finding a flesh interface, Nick feels vindicated in his perception of reality, visits the flesh interface, and frees his past self. Throughout the story, it is strongly implied that Mother, Q, and the crone of the tribal boy narrative are the same entity and a persistent malevolent presence across space and time.

5.1.3 – News Interest, Spread, and ‘End.’

Two days after /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9’s first post in reply to the picture of a copy of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that first introduced Reddit to flesh interfaces, the strange fragmented narrative began to find media attention. Jacob Kastrenakes of tech-culture news website *The Verge* penned an article titled ‘Someone is creating a horrifying sci-fi world in Reddit comments’ (2016). The article briefly outlines the first thirteen posts by the author and begins a minor media sensation among tech and digital culture journalism. Articles then appear in British newspaper *The Guardian* (Alexander, 2016), the British Broadcasting Corporation’s ‘BBC Trending’ section of

their website (Mohan, 2016), tech-culture news website *Gizmodo* (Menegus, 2016), and *Vice News*' 'Motherboard' (Emerson, 2016) section for covering emerging stories from the Internet.

Much like on Reddit, the author directly interacted with the press giving him attention. In a follow-up piece for *Vice*, /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 offered up a fragment of the narrative for publication on the website. This fragment was allegedly part of the CIA investigator's narrative, explaining what happened when something dead was sent through a portal:

Most of the animals were "rejected" in the manner of inanimate objects. But occasionally, if they were quite freshly dead, they would come back alive. Not only that, but none of the returned animals seemed altered at all. This was exciting.

Naturally, we progressed to people. [...] The first 16 subjects were rejected by the portal. We felt pretty low. In our attempts at resurrection, we were racking up quite a body count. Finally, the 17th subject came back to us. Not only that, but he was cognizant and seemed entirely unaltered. Now, finally, after decades, we were about to find out the secret of the other side.

(Mother Horse Eyes, 2016, n.p.¹⁰)

This fragment of *The Interface Series* underscores the cold disregard for human life the secret government groups had in the name of understanding the portals. Though the editor for the article claims to have briefly exchanged messages with the author, no further information about him, the ontological status of *The Interface Series*, or any wider context was given.

As I will discuss in more detail below, this media attention, and publication beyond Reddit helped further knowledge of the narrative, boosting its popularity and causing curious readers to seek out /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9's posts for themselves. Access to *The Interface Series* was spread either via hyperlinks or, in the case of the

¹⁰ The author was credited differently for Vice, eschewing the '9' for spaces between the words.

second Vice article, a direct copy and paste of narrative text. Traditional viral and memetic spread also occurred elsewhere as shown in Fig 5.4, where the text for the original post was shared to 4chan. This spread was decontextualised from Reddit and unattributed to /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9, meaning it was posted as if it were the user's own words. Similar spread occurred across various forums and message boards.

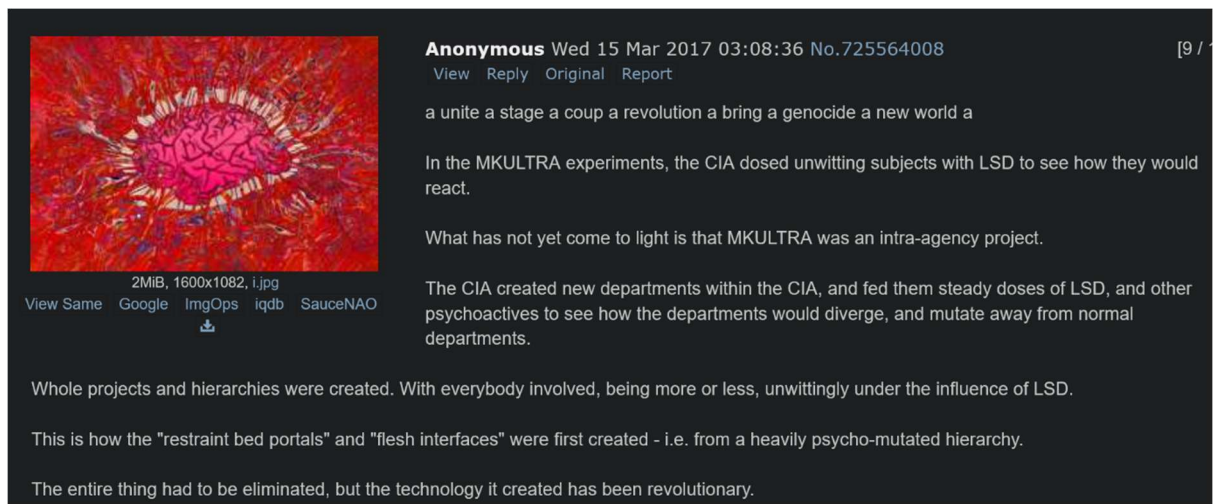


Fig 5.4: Copy and paste spread of The Interface Series.

Ultimately, in a post on 18 June 2016, entitled *So long, and thanks for all the chitinous cruciforms!* posted in the /r/9M9H9E9 subreddit, the author ‘ended’ *The Interface Series* detailing the meeting with his boyhood past self, being freed from Mother, and concluding with “THE END” (2016, 100). However, this would not be the end of posts by /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9. On 14 April 2018, the moderator of the subreddit, a user known as /u/Gabbikat, hosted an AMA (Ask Me Anything) thread where fans and members of the community could pose questions to the author. One interaction, shown in Fig 5.5, illustrates the ontologically ambiguous status that *The Interface Series* still holds:

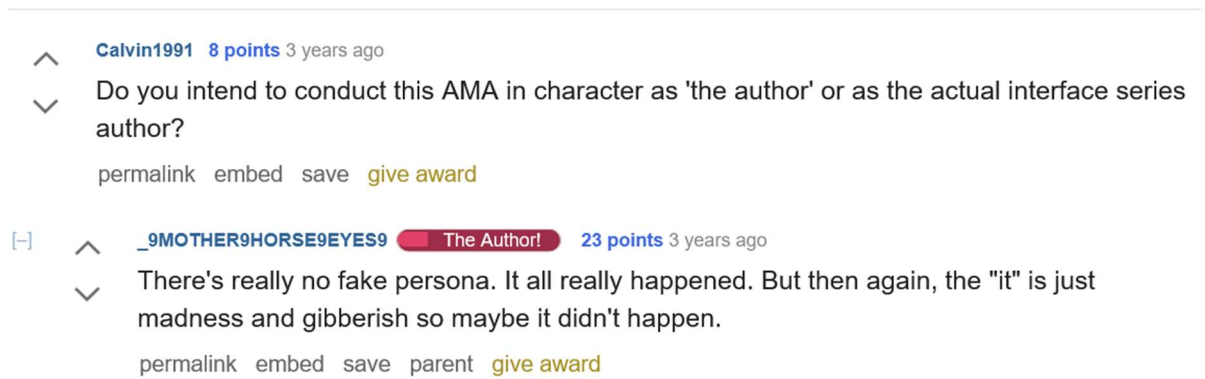


Fig 5.5: An interaction between a fan and the author in an Ask Me Anything thread.

Here, /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 insists that there are no personas or a difference between him as the author in the AMA thread and the author who apparently experienced and relayed *The Interface Series*. This ambiguity remains to this day and the author is still anonymous, though the community in /r/9M9H9E9 compiles resources to attempt to reveal his identity. The narrative also continues to be spread further online today via the dedicated fan community that assembles around the subreddit. From here and as shown in Fig 5.6, radio plays, audiobooks, fanart, and a pastebin with all posts archived for copy and paste spread are meticulously curated and shared across the Internet.

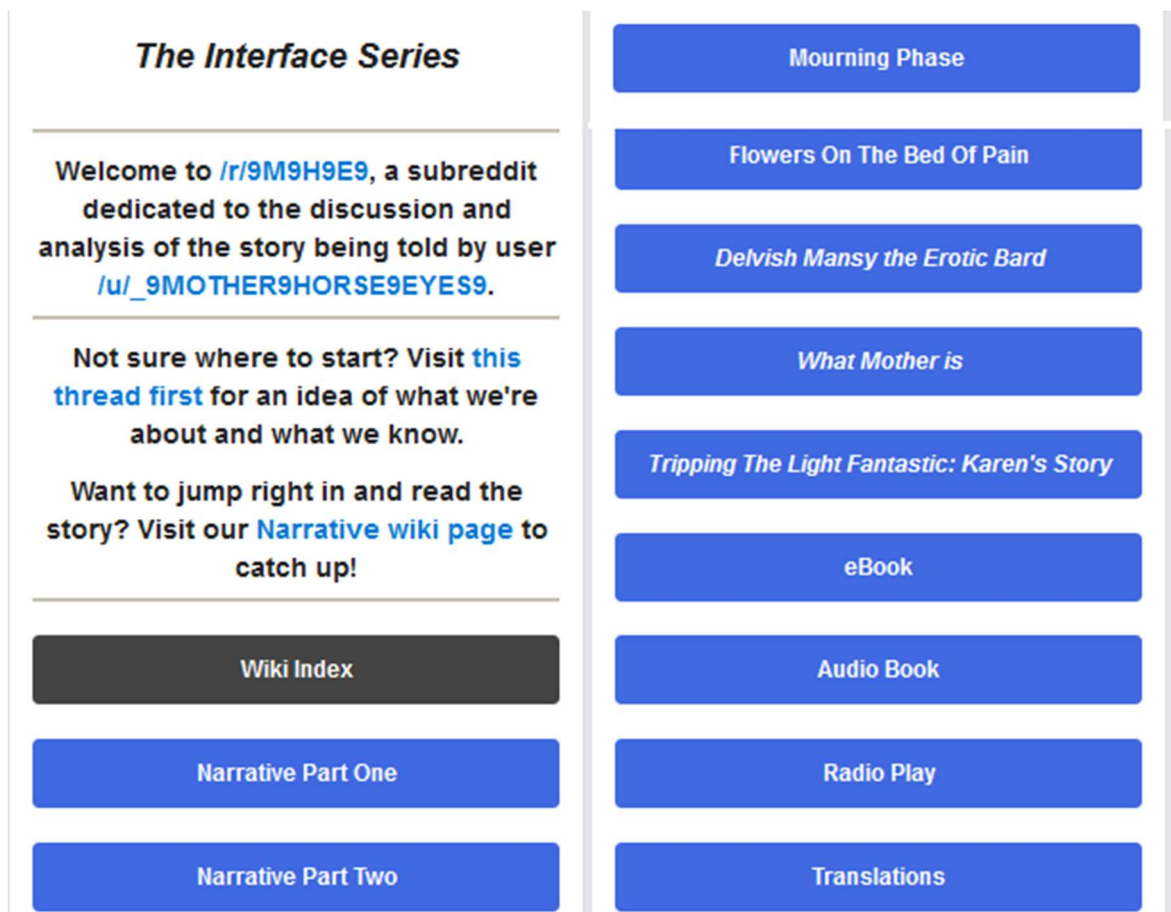


Fig 5.6: The sidebar of the /r/9M9H9E9 subreddit showing the links and fan creations curated by the community.

5.2 – Instruments to Examine a Flesh Interface.

To date, only one scholarly article has been written on *The Interface Series* (Riddell, 2018). This is despite the narrative gathering a flurry of press attention when the author first began to publish on Reddit largely focused on the unusual form of storytelling used. In this section, I will engage with Riddell's article as well as the media coverage that directly addresses *The Interface Series*. I will then propose and assemble theoretical approaches that are suitable for analysing the specific digital textual properties of *The Interface Series*. This will form the basis by which I will analyse how *The Interface Series* builds on creepypasta that has come before and their use of form to

reinvent Gothic tropes and departs from these earlier examples to creatively reinterpret and reinvent properties of Weird fiction.

As mentioned in the previous section, Kastrenakes's article for *The Verge* predominantly functions to call attention to *The Interface Series*. However, he points out that delivering "a narrative through online message boards isn't a brand-new concept – it was famously done in the early 2000s by someone claiming to be a time traveller named John Titor. But just because it was done before doesn't mean it isn't worth reading a new twist on the idea" (2016, n.p). Titor, whose narrative similarly teased at ontological borders through its form as digital fiction – albeit in the genres of Science Fiction and Thriller – similarly remained anonymous beyond his alias. In an article for *Vice* (2016), Sarah Emerson further explores *The Interface Series*' lineage in social media digital fictions, stating that in exploring

/u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9's comments:

you'll see a lot of talk about flesh interfaces (shudder), LSD, and trench warfare. His writings evoke creepypastas and stories by the SCP Foundation—an online horror community borne out of 4chan's /x/ paranormal discussion board. References to lost cosmonauts, the Russian Sleep Experiment, Hungarian serial killer Elizabeth Báthory (aka "the blood countess"), and macabre Soviet mythology seem tailor-made for internet readers.

(Emerson, 2016)

By referencing creepypasta broadly and specific narratives such as *The Russian Sleep Experiment*, as well as the SCP Foundation (site where narratives may be spread from to become creepypasta), Emerson shows that *The Interface Series* builds on the genre and establishes a dialogue with previous narratives of a similar kind. In addition, Emerson explores the closure of the original subreddit in more detail, including accusations of "gamejacking" (2016). Gamejacking is a phenomenon where a different anonymous party attempts to take control of and influence an already existing online

narrative, taking advantage of the anonymity involved so that those following the narrative are unaware of the change, and can occur on any online platform.

Gamejacking is usually used in reference to ARGs (Alternate Reality Games), but is applied by Emerson to define the way users reacted to *The Interface Series* presence on Reddit. Though the interpersonal details behind the subreddit swap are not relevant to this analysis, Emerson's use of terminology associated with ARGs shows how users were responding to and understanding the emergent narrative – framing it as inherently interactive and a mystery to be solved and also being aware of how, as Bryan Alexander describes, ARGs create a “home right on the boundary between fiction and non” (2011, p. 152).

In an article for *The Guardian* (2016), Leigh Alexander also introduces the narrative to a wider audience through an acknowledgement of similar stories of the past, stating that “Wikis, message boards, and image boards have a history of playing host to fascinating and often scary folktales that leverage the format and utility of these digital spaces in creative ways” (2016, n.p). In this comment, Alexander appears to gesture towards the aims of this thesis in understanding the ways in which fourth-generation digital fiction can reinvent and renew horror and Gothic traits. To further this point, she introduces *The Interface Series* as “a new work of digital fiction” and later considers the narrative thus: “‘Creepypasta’ is one name for scary text found in commonplace online communities, and users often borrow, reproduce and add to these texts to create a sort of fictive group collage”. Alexander explains the effect that the form can have on the reader when interacting with the narrative, especially with regards to the platforms where creepypasta propagates:

There is something extra-effective in fiction about the unexpected, the unsettling, the unknown lurking in plain sight within the tools we use for practical dialogue, and this principle has unique implications for horror buffs.

When the writer is technically a platform-user just like yourself, there's always the lurking possibility they might suddenly notice you, that the story itself could make contact.

(Alexander, 2016, n.p)

Here, Alexander explicitly addresses a key aspect of creepypasta, which is its ontologically flattened existence alongside non-fictional networked interactions, as explored in Chapters 3 and 4. Alexander also acknowledges the fuzzy boundary between fact and fiction that this textual arrangement allows and the particular applications it may have for interaction through the terrifying idea that the story itself may make contact with the reader, incorporating them into the narrative and folding them into a world where flesh interfaces exist.

Bryan Menegus's article for *Gizmodo* largely covers the same ground as other articles but offers one significant addition – contact with the author via Reddit's direct message system. The conversation Menegus has with /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 grants some insight into the process of the story, with the author stating that “[t]he endgame is simply that the story comes to a conclusion and everything is made clear i.e the connections between what wasn't, what is, and what can be. I am fairly in dread of the task [...] I don't exactly how I will do it. I think we shall see that what is actually uncovered is the uncovering itself [*sic* all]” (2016). /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9's answers show that the author, even when corresponding with journalists, maintains that he has experienced the events in the narrative and that he is the nexus of the various timelines and narrative strands. The same characteristics of /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 insisting that he truly experienced what he is writing about when communicating with journalists can be seen in Megha Mohan's report for the BBC (2016, n.p). In an exchange with the author, where she asks what *The Interface Series* is about, /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 replies: “At the distinct risk

of sounding like a grandiose crackpot, I would sum up my story as a warning to humanity. I believe we are rushing headlong toward a focal point at which the future of our species will be decided” (Mohan, 2016, n.p). Other answers provided by /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 to Mohan are similar to those given to Menegus in that he speculates that he “know[s] the information [he] wants to convey, which guides the story” towards an ending and that it is not pre-planned.

In his academic research focusing on *The Interface Series*, Cameron Riddell’s article, ‘“Ever seen horse-eyes up close?”: Entropoetics in _9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9’s The Interface Series’ (2018) considers the narrative in terms of cosmology and entropy. Riddell argues that “the horror of the narrative is based on the thermodynamic decline associated with rampant entropy” (p. 181). He positions the role of entropy in *The Interface Series* by using Barri Gold’s study of “Thermopoetics” (p. 184) with an emphasis on entropic properties to produce “Entropoetics” – that is, “the study of narratives of rampant entropy [...] the vector by which things break down – where meaning and order appear briefly, in wounded forms, to indicate the dissolution of temporal systems into atemporal systems wherein it is no longer possible for anything to happen” (p. 184). In *The Interface Series*, Riddell argues, this is represented in the narrative by the phenomenon of segmentation, and also by the narrative through its fragmented nature, connected under *The Interface Series* “yet their connection is also a distance, populated [...] by emptiness” (p. 183). The narrative, for Riddell, is in a constant state of entropic breakdown, haunted by the Mother who is, herself, outside of this entropic system. She “operates outside even our cosmological context, beyond the limits of perception, on the other side of a portal that kills and can undo death” (p. 187) – her stitched together parts both representing an existence outside the fragmented nature of the narrative and also part of “the Lovecraftian problem of representation;

How can a true Other be represented, even partially?” (p. 187). Riddell argues that in existing “outside” the discrete narrative threads of *The Interface Series*, Mother sees the inevitability of entropy – a Lyotardian “unbirth” (p. 187) and true eradication rather than simply death – and can be read as an “evolutionary singularity and agent of the unmaking of humanity [...] entropy threatens Mother Horse Eyes, too, as she attempts to resist it through the interface technologies” (p. 188).

Riddell, thus, sees two villains in *The Interface Series* that are pit in opposition:

Mother, as a threat to humanity as we know it in her attempts to resist entropy, and entropy itself as a threat to all. Riddell argues that this is realised narratologically through the author’s address in the post *Hello Friends* where he states that “[y]ou must understand that the present moment in which we exist is simply a nexus from which trillions of possible pasts and possible futures branch out [...] I am writing about what has never been, and what must never be” (2016, n.p). For Riddell, this reframes the story as “[e]very narrative that is introduced from this point onward (and indeed those that came before) exists, we take it, as narratives on this nexus or branching of time, and so they are precarious: their characters are not just in risk of dying, but in risk of becoming a dying timeline (a story that did not ever happen)” (2018, p. 190). Each narrative thread, Riddell states, is its own entropic system, and each is in a constant state of precarity. They are all separate worlds that are created and subsequently peter out: “[t]he narratives of the interface series all begin with a single world-introducing fragment. Many of these fragments grow to a certain point and then are not mentioned again. They have grown along a branch in that tree of narrative time, become chaotic and disordered, and have died out, too entropic to endure”. However, in the very existence of *The Interface Series*, entropy is staved off, at least for now as “[t]he least entropic narrative strains have, at least temporarily, survived. Out of this narratological

chaos, with narrative strains dying as often as characters within them, comes a seemingly paradoxical order. Something remains”. Riddell’s analysis of *The Interface Series*, then, functions to illustrate how an eye towards entropy can reveal new insights and perspectives on a complex narrative. However, while he gestures towards Lovecraftian elements within the narrative through his reading of Mother as a “true Other” (p. 187) of cosmic horror proportions, Riddell does not link *The Interface Series* to any literary genres, traditions, or periods, nor does he consider the uniquely digital and networked form of the narrative, instead focusing on the viability of his Entropoetic methodology as a way to close read the text.

The writing on *The Interface Series* above recognises it as part of a lineage of online horror, with Alexander and Emerson both explicitly referencing the narrative alongside creepypasta and recognising some of the affordances of its form that makes the narrative unique. However, both stop short of explicitly connecting *The Interface Series* to horror and Gothic fiction’s long history of exploring ontological ambiguity prior to the Internet, or how its form being written “within the tools we use for practical dialogue” (Alexander, 2016, n.p) situates it as fourth-generation digital fiction.

Menegus and Mohan both find themselves part of narrative, writing on *The Interface Series* but becoming part of it through their interactions with the author, who maintains that the story is composed of true experiences. Neither address how their articles provide key contextualising information for those who follow the narrative as, by maintaining that *The Interface Series* is true and by featuring as a part of the story beyond simply being a narrator, the quotes by /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 in their articles are part of the narrative itself. Finally, Riddell seeks to analyse what the affective and horrific qualities of *The Interface Series* are through a frame of cosmic horror and total annihilation through “unbirth” (Riddell, 2018, p. 187). While Riddell

does recognise how ontological ambiguity links to this affective quality by considering what it means to take /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 at his word on the factual status of each narrative strand, he does not situate *The Interface Series* within wider Gothic or horror traditions or analyse how the form of the narrative impacts its affective horror traits.

In what follows, I will analyse *The Interface Series* focusing on various aspects of its delivery and story. In section 5.3.1, I will examine how /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYE9 anonymity differentiates *The Interface Series* from previous creepypasta narratives, and how the choice to use Reddit as the main platform for narrative distribution shapes how it is received. I demonstrate how the reactions of users to an emergent and truly anonymous horror narrative (as preserved in Reddit comments) highlight the ontologically flattened conditions of Reddit at large, and how the use of a single author enables community discovery in a distinctly Gothic way through its form as fourth-generation digital fiction. Then, in section 5.3.2, I analyse the way in which /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYE9's interactions with the /r/9M9H9E9 fan community furthers *The Interface Series*' ambiguous and uncertain ontological status, reversing the dynamic of interaction found in *The Slender Man* by actively reaching out and interacting with readers in a way that can only be facilitated through its form. Finally, in section 5.3.3, I examine *The Interface Series* in relation to its resonance with developments and forms of the contemporary Gothic. Through three sub-sections, I consider how *The Interface Series* serves as an addition and development to the taxonomy of "techno-Gothic" fictions that "adapt to the speed of technological development" (Van Elferen, 2014, p. 138), ultimately arguing that *The Interface Series* represents what I define as a new 'techno-Weird' fiction not yet considered by horror and Gothic scholarship.

5.3 – Analysis.

5.3.1 – Anonymity, Narrative Distribution, and Controlled Creepypasta.

The Interface Series shares clear traits with earlier creepypasta narratives, predominantly being an unnerving narrative told through a social media platform and spread, via URL linking or copy and paste textual spread, to other parts of the Internet. However, as I briefly set out in the introduction to this chapter, there are key differences between *The Interface Series* and earlier examples of the genre. The clearest of these is that while *The Interface Series*, *Candle Cove*, and *The Slender Man* can all be traced back to an original author and post, in doing so the latter two reveal their fictional status. Both Kris Straub and Eric Knudsen are forthcoming that their works are fictional, even if their form and spread ultimately destabilise that boundary. By contrast, the author of *The Interface Series* is only ever known as /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYE9. He has never been identified as a writer of fiction (like Straub) or through any documentation planning to create hoax texts and images, like *The Slender Man*'s origins on SomethingAwful.com. Crucially, /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYE9 continues to maintain, through both direct addresses to readers and in messages to the press, that the story he is telling “is not a fiction. Nor is it true. It is a mix of things which happened and things which almost happened” (2016, *Hello Friends*). This positioning through a single author who establishes an ontologically unstable frame for his story prevents *The Interface Series* from being traced back as an explicit work of fiction.

While *The Interface Series* is by no means the only Creepypasta narrative to be written under true anonymity, its method of distribution sets it apart from earlier examples of the genre and serves to alter the way in which readers interact with the narrative. Earlier Creepypasta narratives which are anonymously written can be found on 4chan, where anonymity is inherently built into the platform “through its posting mechanisms” (Bernstein et al, 2021, p. 53). However, these narratives are undercut by the site’s disclaimer of “The stories and information posted here are artistic works of fiction and falsehood. Only a fool would take anything posted here as fact” (Mitchell, 2013, n.p).

Reddit, on the other hand, is far more open and accessible in terms of content and conduct – with active content moderation and enforced harassment policies. The site’s subreddits largely declare the ontological status of content, and the site is moderated to ensure community guidelines are maintained – for example, /r/news deals in factual reporting and moderates submissions accordingly. On the other hand, /r/nosleep, a subreddit for horror stories, advises newcomers that “[s]uspension of disbelief is key here. Everything is true here, even if it's not” (/u/ObliviousHippie, 2016, n.p). Though these conventions can be broken, active moderation and a widespread community adherence to rules means that this rarely happens in a way that gains traction or does not cause community upset. It is rare for content to span across multiple subreddits that are not closely aligned because of this sitewide understanding of how subreddits function. Therefore, *The Interface Series*, its distribution across multiple subreddits, and what those subreddits are is a key factor in its reception and delivery.

Table 5.1 shows the distribution of posts that make up *The Interface Series* across 49 subreddits with associated definitions for each subreddit. This table is in chronological order, but the author revisits earlier subreddits for later posts.

Subreddit Name	About the Subreddit ¹¹	Number of posts from <i>The Interface Series</i>
/r/mildlyinteresting	“Mildly interesting stuff. Stuff that interests you. Mildly.”	2
/r/tifu	“A community for the dumbass in all of us. We all have those moments where we do something ridiculously stupid. Share your stories and laugh along with the internet.”	1
/r/todayilearned	“You learn something new every day; what did you learn today?”	8
/r/dataisbeautiful	“A place to share and discuss visual representations of data: Graphs, charts, maps, etc.”	1
/r/funny	“You may only post if you are funny.”	16
/r/movies	A subreddit for movie discussions and interviews with those in the industry	3
/r/9mother9horse9eyes9	The now-closed first subreddit for fans of /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9’s posts	1
/r/nottheonion	“For true stories that are so mind-blowingly ridiculous, that you could have sworn it was an Onion story.”	1
/r/gifs	“Links to amusing, interesting, or funny gifs from the web!”	2
/r/jokes	“Please post a joke with a title and a punchline. Offensive jokes are fine as long as they are still jokes, we do make exceptions for extremely offensive jokes.”	9
/r/pics	A popular subreddit dedicated to all kinds of pictures.	5
/r/askreddit	A popular subreddit where submission posts are questions to the wider Reddit community.	3
/r/cripplingalcoholism	“Are you physically dependent on alcohol? Are you psychologically	1

¹¹ Definitions are taken from each subreddit’s sidebar where possible. Where they are not available, my own descriptions are given. These are marked in blue.

	broken without it? Is your alcoholism crippling? Then you probably belong here. Welcome.”	
/r/news	A strictly moderated subreddit for sharing news reports. “You need 10+ reddit link and comment karma to participate on /r/news.”	2
/r/WTF	“All (& only) things that make you say WTF*”	2
/r/aww	“Things that make you go AWW! -- like puppies, bunnies, babies, and so on... Feel free to post pictures and videos of cute things.”	3
/r/9M9H9E9	“Welcome to /r/9M9H9E9, a subreddit dedicated to the discussion and analysis of the story being told by user /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9.”	6
/r/writingprompts	“We are a subreddit dedicated to inspiring people to write! Find a prompt that moves you and respond with a story or a poem.”	4
/r/DIY	A subreddit dedicated to discussion of DIY projects and sharing results.	1
/r/cats	“Cats! Post pictures of your cats, talk about cats, ask questions, get advice.”	1
/r/gaming	A popular subreddit dedicated to all kinds of gaming.	2
/r/sports	A popular subreddit dedicated to all kinds of sports.	1
/r/books	“This is a moderated subreddit. It is our intent and purpose to foster and encourage in-depth discussion about all things related to books, authors, genres or publishing in a safe, supportive environment.”	2
/r/ik_ihe	A Dutch subreddit for posting “me IRL” memes.	1
/r/rant	“Angry? Annoyed? A tad bit peeved? We want to hear it.”	1
/r/talesfromtechsupport	“TFTS is where we post our amazing Tales From Tech Support, including	1

	but not limited to: Incredible Feats of Networking Heroics; Tech Troubleshooting Under the Direst of Circumstances; Unsolvable Problems Cracked by Sheer Genius and/or Pure Luck; Moral Support after Having Dealt with Difficult Clients; And of course, Stupid User Stories!”	
	Author post was deleted from /r/talesfrom techsupport and moved to /r/anythinggoesultimate	
/r/art	“This is a community of art lovers that share their favorite pieces, or news and information that will impact the art community.”	2
/r/relationships	“This sub is for requests for advice about your relationship.”	1
/r/unmoderatedanarchism	“This is an anarchism subreddit without moderators for all those who don't like that /r/anarchism has moderators.”	1
/r/casualconversation	“Share a story, ask a question, or start a conversation about (almost) anything you desire. Maybe you'll make some friends in the process.”	1
/r/celebrityarmpits	A subreddit dedicated to armpit fetishists.	1
/r/addiction	A subreddit dedicated to discussion and advice around all kinds of addiction.	1
/r/geek	A subreddit dedicated to ‘geeky’ content such as tabletop gaming, comics, gadgets etc.	1
/r/themountangoats	A subreddit dedicated to indie folk band The Mountain Goats.	1
/r/offmychest	“A mutually supportive community where deeply emotional things you can't tell people you know can be told.”	1
/r/sexstories	A subreddit dedicated to sharing stories about sex – often from a first-person perspective. Stories are labelled as fiction or non-fiction.	1
/r/truedetective	A subreddit dedicated to the HBO show <i>True Detective</i> .	1

/r/C_S_T	“Critical Shower Thoughts: A safe place to discuss outside-of-the-box thinking with similar minds.”	1
/r/horror	“The official horror subreddit”	1
/r/shortstories	“This is a place to submit your original short stories. Discussion threads regarding existing works are encouraged.”	1
/r/dankmemes	“A Place to Post the Dankest Memes.”	1
/r/lifeinapost	“In this subreddit you may post about your entire life story. That can be all of it if you wish. Posts can be as long or as short as you'd like them to be.”	1
/r/creepy	A subreddit dedicated to ‘creepy’ content (usually images).	1
/r/unsentletters	“We've all had times where we've wanted to spill the beans to someone, be they bad or good, but never did or can't for whatever reasons. Post a letter here, whether it's a Thank You note or something more somber [<i>sic</i>].”	1
/r/space	“Share & discuss informative content on: Astrophysics; Cosmology; Space Exploration; Planetary Science; Astrobiology.”	1
/r/proceduralgeneration	“This subreddit is about everything procedurally generated (pictures, games, music...), whatever you determine procedural generation to mean.”	1
/r/drunken	A subreddit for posting when drunk.	1
/r/shittynosleep	“Shitty NoSleep is a place to share your scariest, shittiest stories in the vein of NoSleep and Creepypastas. Any tired, dog-eared trope or popular genre trend is up for grabs.”	1
/r/videos	“A great place for video content of all kinds. Direct links to major video sites are preferred (e.g. YouTube, Vimeo, etc.)”	1

Table 5.1: A list of each individual subreddit that /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 posted in.

The first notable aspect from the table is the breadth of communities that /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 posted in. The distribution of *The Interface Series* ranges across subreddits from news to celebrity armpits, as well as subreddits that are places where one would expect to find fictional content such as /r/shortstories or /r/writingprompts. This ‘hopping’ across serves to keep the overall ontological status of the narrative ambiguous. As noted by Riddell, each post of *The Interface Series* is “autonomous” (p. 183), in that it can exist on its own as an intriguing, disturbing piece of text, or a potentially “world-introducing fragment” (p. 190). In this sense, each post, when taken on its own, has the potential to become its own Creepypasta if shared offsite by somebody else (e.g as discussed above in Fig 5.4).

In addition, each individual post of *The Interface Series* may also be taken as a Creepypasta narrative that has found its way to Reddit. Such a response can be found in the user comments reacting to narrative Post 13 (Fig. 5.7).

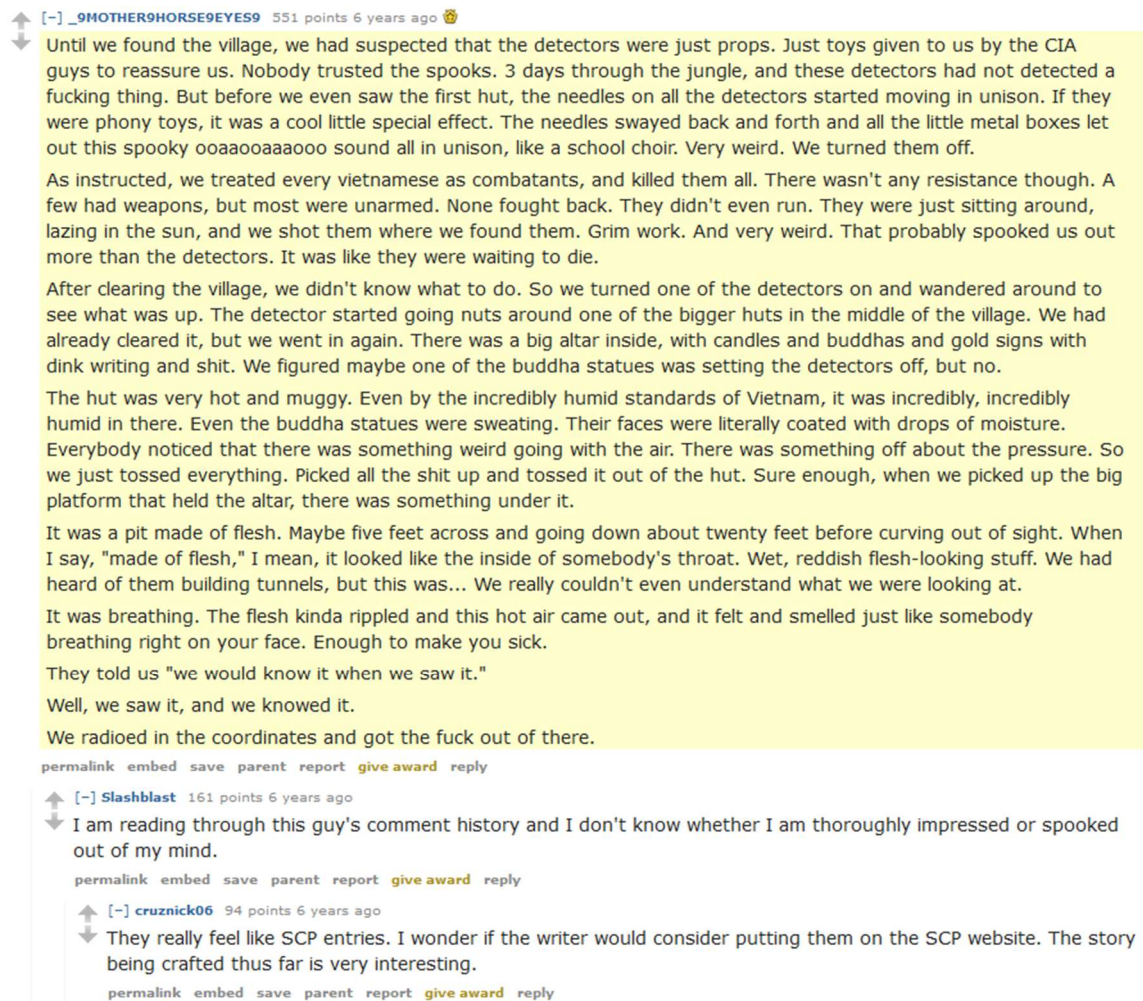


Fig 5.7: A reaction and exchange underneath post 13, with users speculating on what /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9's post is about.

This post is a vignette from the perspective of a US soldier in Vietnam discovering a “pit made of flesh” (2016, 14), and is a comment on a post in the subreddit /r/todayilearned about a failed primate to human heart transplant. Users reacted with a mixture of confusion, fear, speculation about the author’s mental state, and – as a way to contextualise /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9’s post – connect it to existing networked horror narratives. User /u/Slashblast comments thus: “I am reading through this guy's comment history and I don't know whether I am thoroughly impressed or spooked out of my mind” (2016, n.p). This is met with a reply from /u/cruznick06 who states that the author’s posts “really feel like SCP entries. I wonder if the writer would

consider putting them on the SCP website. The story being crafted thus far is very interesting” (2016, n.p). Connections to *The SCP Foundation* – a networked collaborative horror fiction in the form of an expansive Wiki that has spawned numerous Creepypasta narratives – are quite common in the replies to early posts in *The Interface Series*. However, so are many comments accusing the author of being on drugs (ironic given the importance the narrative places on LSD) and general confusion.



Fig 5.8: A reaction and exchange underneath post 36, where a user reacts to /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9's post with confusion, before being guided to the subreddit by someone following the developing narrative.

One such example can be found in the reaction to Post 36 (Fig 5.8), which takes the form of a post in the /r/cats subreddit: “I don't understand this post... Neither do I understand the reactions. What's going on? Sometimes I really hate not being a native speaker :(” (user profile deleted, 2016, n.p). The variety of responses to the author’s posts show how the perspective of the reader and their awareness of existing online culture can impact the reception of fictional posts that do not explicitly state their fictionality. As an ontologically ambiguous narrative, its success depends on prior knowledge of creepypasta and horror on ontologically flattened platforms as well as the receptiveness of the reader as, at no point, does the author attempt to outwardly deceive, only obfuscate: “this information is not fiction. Nor is it true [...] I am writing about what has never been, and what must never be” (2016, 15).

The responses above indicate varying awareness of the kinds of narrative – including existing creepypasta – that spread through social networks, and that the individual posts of *The Interface Series* may be read as individual instances of Creepypasta. Fragments of a narrative existing as individual or autonomous narratives in their own right, though, is something that earlier successful Creepypasta narratives have done as shown in Chapters 3 and 4 where entries into the meme or collection of texts that forms *Candle Cove* or *The Slender Man* are each their own autonomous texts as well as entries into a larger narrative. Where *The Interface Series* and its anonymous author depart from previous Creepypasta narratives, however, is by using a single account to control the spread and development of the narrative. Though not multi-authored through memetic spread in the way *Candle Cove* and *The Slender Man* are, *The Interface Series* leverages its form as fourth-generation digital fiction to focus the narrative through its single user on an ontologically flattened platform defined for other purposes to allow for a much more complex overarching story to be told.

According to interface.fandom.com, the complete text of *The Interface Series* is made up of forty-nine different narrative strands involving fifty two different characters (2016, n.p). Unlike *The Slender Man*, where the eponymous character is at the centre of a loosely defined mythos, acting as a central node between otherwise often discrete narratives, the various narrative strands of *The Interface Series* connect thematically, share characters, and closely inform one another to create an intricate patchwork of disparate voices and stories. These are brought together in a coherent thematic manner through the character of the author /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 who, both as a character in *The Interface Series* and as a user on Reddit, acts as a convergence point for the cast of characters and various narratives. In collating all strands of the narrative and acting as a point of reference for narrative entries as the character through which

they are all channelled and experienced, /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 focuses *The Interface Series* into a complex cohesive plot. Though the memetic spread of *Candle Cove* and *The Slender Man* also renew the “patchwork of textual modes [...] remediated into a single ‘narrative’” (Mandal, 2015, p. 91) associated with Gothic literature, the end result is an agreed upon mythos and plots that form discrete narrative experiences as new contributors create their own works. *The Interface Series*, on the other hand, weaves its patchwork through /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 as a character and profile. This means that the multiplicity of forms, styles, and voices, such as field reports and research notes mix with interview style vignettes and more traditional first-person posting befitting of Reddit comments can be maintained across forty-nine narrative strands and fifty two characters to form its single narrative without the risk that other users may create entries that disrupt its complex plot.

The continued delivery of the narrative by posts across Reddit under a single account imparts a sense of ontological ambiguity. The ability to view all posts made by /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 allows readers to discover the wider narrative by clicking on the user profile link. Just like the SomethingAwful thread that spawned *The Slender Man*, the posts that make up *The Interface Series* and the posts by those commenting on it occur at the same textual level on Reddit, leading to an ontological flattening where readers and platform users exist at the same ontological level as characters and narrative experiences on a platform. However, unlike *The Slender Man*, there is no explicit indication of fictionality in the narrative fragments of *The Interface Series*. This results in a dynamic where users react with confusion, fear, or wonder about the narrative fragment they have just read, before being resolved by a discovery of the wider narrative and the series of posts that make up *The Interface Series*. This confusion and discovery dynamic is a direct result of *The Interface Series*’ form as

fourth-generation digital fiction. Here we see how Reddit is “a significant part of the aesthetic expression and the meaning potential” (Bell et al., 2014, p. 10) through its ontologically flattened layout. In particular, the use of “a platform that is already defined, and defined for different purposes” (Rustad, 2015, n.p) as a characteristic of fourth-generation digital fiction manifests in the exchanges between readers during this dynamic as discovery of the wider *Interface Series* narrative is often aided by others who are already aware of the wider narrative (Figs 5.9 and 5.10).

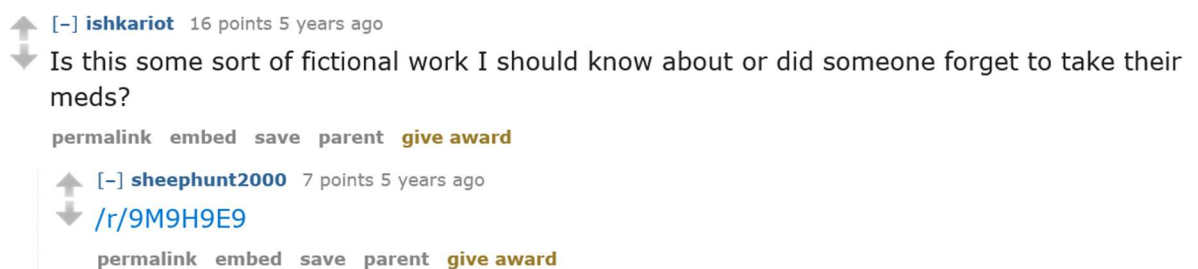


Fig 5.9: A brief exchange underneath post 2, with one user linking to the subreddit for The Interface Series to give context to the post.



Fig 5.10: A brief exchange underneath post 15, originally posted in /r/movies, with one user sharing their discovery of the wider narrative.

Figures 5.9 and 5.10 show exchanges between readers (of *The Interface Series* who are already aware of it) and users (of Reddit first encountering a post by

/u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9) underneath posts by

/u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9. In both cases, users link other users to the

/r/9M9H9E9 subreddit as a resource to give them answers to their confusion. This interactivity between users imparts a sense of Gothic discovery of “found manuscripts or interpolated histories” (Kosofsky-Sedgwick, 1980, p. 9) through community. Encountering a singular post from *The Interface Series* as it appears may be unsettling, but discovering that there are more and that they form part of something much larger – aided by the author’s Reddit profile grouping and displaying his posts automatically – positions the reader as the Gothic custodian of a found manuscript in the real world. This characterisation is further bolstered through the fact a community of ‘discoverers’ coalesced around the narrative, created a venue for discussing and deciphering the posts, and even named the collection of fragments *The Interface Series* and gave each post a title – thus implying a level of ownership of their discovery by packaging it for future readers. In this way, multiple readers enacted Horace Walpole’s framing for the first edition of *The Castle of Otranto* as examined in Chapter 2, section 2.2.1. First, Reddit can be read as an analog for the fictional library where the manuscript of *Otranto* was found. Their discovery of the posts by /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 among millions of others across Reddit mirroring the fictional William Marshall’s discovery. Moreover, like Marshall, they present their discovered narrative in a form that is easy to follow to allow newcomers to enjoy. As, in order to discover *The Interface Series*, multiple users needed to happen across individual posts by /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 before discovering the author’s wider set of posts, they will have discovered them as a patchwork of modes, styles, and voices, then assembled by the community into a single narrative. This, when coupled with the author’s stance that the narrative told is “a mix of things which happened and things which almost happened” (/u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9, 2016, 15), mirrors the

Walpolean blueprint of creating a single text that exists on the “liminal boundary between authenticity and counterfeit” (Mandal, 2015, p. 91).

5.3.2 – The Community, Interactivity, and Sustained Ontological Ambiguity.

As shown in the overview of the narrative, /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 sometimes directly interacts with those who comment on his posts. Both in post 15 (*Hello Friends*) and the numerous posts to the /r/9M9H9E9 (see Table 1), the author is open to answering questions from readers and talking about writing the posts. However, as shown above in the analysis of Fig 5.5, he is also insistent that there is no separation between the author of the posts and the author of *The Interface Series*, even extending this to exchanges with journalists. The author’s insistence that he is a “nexus” (2016, 15) for all the various narrative strands of the narrative allows him to play with the ontological status of the narrative. In post 74, he comments on a thread in the community subreddit about the BBC report on the narrative. In this post, he takes the stance of a critical reader who is debating whether the story is “written on the fly” (2016, 74). He continues in this way, giving a metatextual insight into the narrative while appearing to critique it from the perspective of a new character:

The story gives the appearance of vast scope because the storylines are from different eras and areas, but rather than a broad panorama, it only provides thin slivers of insight into each time and place. Everything in between these slivers is left to the player's imagination. And given the author's hints at branching timelines, he or she is not even necessarily required to link these little slivers together.

People also point to the various stories' interconnectedness and claim that the work has a structure too intricate to be improvisational, but how much interconnectedness is there really? For example, the stone age story has cats in it, and the cat story has cats in it (obviously). This is a point of similarity (obviously). But what is the significance? So what if both stories have cats? Is this meaningful coincidence or a meaningless one?

(/u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9, 2016, 74)

In this rather tongue-in-cheek comment, the author derides his own method of gesturing to connectedness between narrative strands and as well as the way in which the Reddit community interprets these implied connections. He also acknowledges that he is under no obligation to fully connect the narrative strands for the readers, even suggesting that there may be no connection at all. However, at the same time, as the author commenting on his own techniques, he also gives the community clues into how they might interpret the narrative. By claiming that the author “hints at branching timelines” while *being* the author, he all-but confirms such an interpretation.

In addition to directly reaching out to readers and fans,

/u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 implicitly recognises the centrality of interactivity in the discovery and piecing together of the narrative by referring to readers as “players”. The game-like elements are emphasised through the use of other Reddit profiles that are directly part of the narrative. For example, in a thread on the /r/9M9H9E9 community subreddit, a user sharing the name of a character Karen Castillo from the “sense feed bed” (33) narrative began to participate. Users quickly noted that the only other subreddit that /u/Karen_Castillo had posted to was an obscure community called “/r/dimensionaljumping” and that such a connection was in fitting with the character from *The Interface Series*. In an exchange with other users (Fig 5.11), Karen alludes to being in contact with the author and that he is the way her story gets shared, as well as mentioning that she will “never become familiar with keyboards” – a side-effect of her interaction with the Internet being through a sense feed bed.



Fig 5.11: Readers interact with the /u/Karen_Castillo account.

By presumably using a second account for a character within the narrative that was real within the story, but confined to communicating through the author due to being in another dimension, and have her jump into the dimension of the reader as a separate character, the author further attempts to bolster his claim that he has “personally experienced” the events of *The Interface Series* (15) and that the multiple dimensions forming the narrative strands of the story have as much claim to reality as the dimension in which it is read. This claim then recalls the community rules of *The Slender Man* and the bent towards posting contributions as real experience on ontologically flattened platforms or the game of whether or not a user sees footage in the static of *Candle Cove* videos, yet adds additional stakes through the concept of dimension hopping. Unlike *Candle Cove* and *The Slender Man*, where posts claim experience and contact with the monstrous in our own reality, *The Interface Series* offers up the possibility that other dimensions can reach into ours, and through representation on ontologically flattened Web2.0 platforms, claim to be as real as any other user.

Such an ontological disturbance can be read as an uncanny trait in the Gothic sense of things made uncertain (Bennett and Royle, 1999, p. 37) and especially as the realisation that “things are not as they have come to appear through [...] familiarity”. In this case, the familiarity of the Reddit comments section – a space where one would usually expect to engage in conversation with like-minded users from the real world – is disturbed by the appearance of a character from *The Interface Series*, supposedly from another dimension or timeline, engaging in those conversations. Here, then, is another way in which *The Interface Series* leverages its form to expand on Gothic characteristics and specifically the core trait of ontological instability. As Punter and Byron state, “the literary Gothic has been concerned with uncertainties of character positioning and instabilities of knowledge” (2004, p. 273). Though this is usually taken to mean unreliable narrators in print fiction and an inability for readers to discern what a character is truly experiencing within the text, *The Interface Series* literally casts uncertainty on the ontological positioning of characters in relation to the reader.

In Gothic print literature, the instability of knowledge leads to a “catastrophic decline as [the protagonist’s] subjectivity disintegrates under the pressure of paranoid fantasies” (p. 276). Here, however, it is the Reddit user’s subjectivity that is disintegrating in the face of interacting with a character in the narrative they are reading – as they are confronted with the fact that both hold equal footing in Reddit’s ontologically flattened space. Rather than leading to a “catastrophic decline”, this instead further affirms the ARG-like qualities of *The Interface Series* – since it functions like an alternate-reality game as its “contents are distributed throughout the world, usually online [...] quietly inserted into the world without fanfare or label” (Alexander, 2011, p. 152). Though the world in question for *The Interface Series* is limited to Reddit, the innocuous appearance of /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9’s first

posts and the unannounced arrival of /u/Karen_Castillo mirror this behaviour of the quiet distribution of a narrative. Alexander's observation that a community around a narrative use "collaborative detection work" (p. 157) to piece together and assemble the story similarly reflects the creation of the subreddit dedicated to the collation and discussion of *The Interface Series*. The arrival of /u/Karen_Castillo then reframes the "alternate" in alternate reality from implicitly meaning the curation of a fictional reality for a story using elements from the real world to tell a story, to – if we are to believe the author and the ontological status of his experience – a reality as real as our own breaking through to our Internet.

5.3.3 – Creepypasta, New Gothic Literature, and the techno-Weird.

As I have explored above, unlike other Creepypasta narratives, the spread and interactive development of *The Interface Series* is more focused through the use of the central /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 account. As it is tied to a single author account, the author can construct a coherent and consistent plot with a complex roster of characters and narratives as opposed to the multi-experience mythos of *The Slender Man* or singular unsettling event of *Candle Cove*. This plot, the characters introduced, and *The Interface Series*' form of fourth-generation digital fiction coalesce to form new renewals and reinventions of Gothic characteristics and traits.

In this section, I will use Isabella van Elferen's concept of "techno-Gothics" as an early-twenty-first century Gothic framework to analyse *The Interface Series*' complex assemblage of form and narrative. Van Elferen argues that "[a]s technological advances reshape our fears and our desires, new techno-Gothic modes arise" (2014, p. 138). She asserts that "the hybridization of Gothic with horror, science fiction, dark fantasy, new weird, and steampunk leads to three new techno-Gothic genres: singularity Gothic,

cloud Gothic, and weird Gothic” (p. 138) that each renews the Gothic. I will show how *The Interface Series* develops on Van Elferen’s techno-Gothics, interrogating its form through its plot, emerging as an instance of what I define as a “techno-Weird” narrative, whereby *The Interface Series* leverages its form as fourth-generation digital fiction to emphasise weird characteristics and impart them with an explicit sense of ontological ambiguity.

In her taxonomy of techno-Gothics, Van Elferen characterises “singularity Gothic” as “stories about all-too human machines [...] the (bio)technical enhancement or modification of the human body or mind [...] [or] the techno-human hybrid in which technological and human provenance have been amalgamated into a new type of being” (p. 138 – 139). Each of these, she argues, tend not to merge, instead being discrete entities that are “neither Self nor Other, but an uncanny blend of both” (p. 139). Here, Van Elferen highlights how Gothic representations of cultural anxieties remain fixated on threats to human subjectivity and encroaching developments in science as first popularised by *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* in the late Victorian era (see Chapter 2, section 2.3). Though Van Elferen shifts the site of anxiety of secular developments from science as a field to our increasing personal integration with technologies, her definition of singularity Gothic recalls Punter and Byron’s remarks on the Victorian Gothic abhuman as “liminal bodies [...] the product not of supernatural forces but of scientifically explainable processes” (Punter and Byron, 2004, p. 41). It is through this renewal of Victorian Gothic anxieties via the singularity Gothic of Van Elferen that I analyse the character of Mother within *The Interface Series*, and how she represents both the threat of a (bio)technological Other encroaching on human subjectivity and an abhuman “indefinable ‘thing’ that is mimicking the human, appropriating the human form” (Punter and Byron, 2004, p. 41).

When taken across the entirety of *The Interface Series*, Mother emerges as a character that is both ancient and stretching into the future. She is, as Riddell remarks, a Lovecraftian “true Other” (2018, p. 187), existing outside each of *The Interface Series*’ 49 narrative strands, but linking them together as malevolent presence under a variety of guises and aliases. From the perspective of a character in the year 2039, she is described as “beginning in prehistory, when the ‘hyperspace code’ was inserted into the human genome, and she went all the way to right now and the so-called plague of the flesh” (2016, 78). As well as being the “mother with horse eyes” (2016, 15), Mother is referred to in a variety of ways. In post 26, she is described as “Great Babylon, the mother of prostitutes and the abominations of earth” (2016, 26), referencing the apocalyptic female figure of the Book of Revelation, and thus implying that Mother is part of the end of the world. She manifests as an old crone in a narrative strand from the perspective of a young tribal boy, and is described by Karen Castillo – the character who ‘jumped’ to our reality from a future alternate version discussed in section 5.3.2 – as ‘Q’, “The Great Liar, The Great Deceiver, The Great Twister of All Realities” (/u/Karen_Castillo, 2019, n.p).

In the fragments of *The Interface Series* told from the perspective of the author as a young boy, Mother is positioned as an artificial intelligence in the role of a human caregiver, but rather than evoke a sense of the uncanny or any sense of ontological uncertainty around her status as a mother for the child author, it is abundantly clear from how she is described that she is not even close to human. Instead, she appears as a transgressive unnatural mockery of human maternal figures while also furthering “Frankensteinian anxieties [...] envisioned as able to destroy human life” (Van Elferen, 2014, p. 139). To further intensify these anxieties, her actions depict her as a destructive anti-mother. The boyhood author describes a harrowing scene where,

coming home from school, he saw “kids sitting at the breakfast table. [Mother] gave them medicine so they did whatever she wanted them to. It made them just sit there, staring and shaking. Then she would take them down in the basement and make them into things” (2016, 25). Here, Mother imposes her terrible will on the most vulnerable of humans to turn them into undefined non-human “things”. Though it is impossible to determine whether the transformation Mother makes to the children is a (bio)technical enhancement that Van Elferen argues typifies this second aspect of singularity Gothic, this un-motherly act can be read as the “becoming-machine of humans” (2014, p. 140), albeit using an unknown technology to unknown ends.

Mother’s singularity Gothic qualities are perhaps most obviously viewed through her depiction as the mother with horse eyes – a patchwork creature “made from all different sorts of animal parts. One of her feet was a big, heavy hoof. The other was a tiny little kitty cat paw [...] Her parts were sewn together with yarn, and there were patches of wet burlap” (2016, 25).

[–] [_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9](#) 82 points 6 years ago

When I was little, they took mommy away and put me with a new mommy in a smelly dark house.

They said she was a real person, but I knew she wasn't. They had made her.

Her face was made from pieces of animal.

- pig cheeks
- hairy goat jaw
- old horse eyes

They sewed her together badly, and the seams were crusty. I hated her.

Real mommy called me from underground. I opened the attic window at sundown and let the spring breeze flow in. I heard her song floating in on the cool air, soft singing from the grave.

[permalink](#) [embed](#) [save](#) [parent](#) [report](#) [give award](#) [reply](#)

Fig 5.12: The author’s post describing the creation of Mother and her some of her appearance.

In post 18 (Fig 5.12), a creator or creators are implied when the boyhood version of the author states that “When I was little, they took mommy away and put me with a new mommy in a smelly dark house. They said she was a real person, but I knew she wasn't.

They had made her” (2016, 18). The ‘they’ who made Mother are never explained. However, Mother’s artificial, fleshy, patchwork, abhuman autonomy invites direct comparisons to Victor Frankenstein’s creation – a progenitor of the singularity Gothic in being an artificial intelligence who “acquired human characteristics such as independent cognitive skills, creative agency, or emotion” (Van Elferen, 2014, p. 138). Moreover, this created form of Mother recalls a Gothic uncanniness through the author’s recollection that Mother’s unknown creators tried to pass her off as “a real person”, as well as being a symbol of abjection through her construction from poorly stitched together animal parts.

A final type of singularity Gothic can be found, ironically, in what Van Elferen refers to as a “dark inversion of the parenting instinct” (p. 142). That is, the human collaboration with destructive technologies in the form of “new Dr. Frankensteins setting out to betray human ontology”. In *The Interface Series*, this can be found not in the actions of Mother, but the CIA and Soviet scientists seeking to interact with the flesh interfaces that connect to her. The interfaces themselves are a technology repeatedly described in comparison to vaginas (Fig 5.13), and interaction with them is described as an unbirth by the narrator (post 15 and the epigraph to this chapter).

And then I started hearing about the magical space vagina.
 I had become friends with Paul, who was actually a nice guy who just wanted to fuck the girls and get stoned and didn't really get into the whole nazi thing.
 He said that they were searching for the entrance to the Bottomless Pit. He said that entrance would be made of flesh growing out of the rocks, like a giant pussy so big you could stroll right in.
 I told him he thought about pussy way too much.
 But he was serious.
 He said that the technology to turn rocks into flesh was from outer space, and its secrets had been taught to Charlie by Uncle Adolph.

Fig 5.13: An extract from /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 post 16.

Moreover, the flesh interfaces are revealed to have life-giving properties in a field report where “during an experiment, somebody was about to send a group of

genetically altered mice through when they noticed that one of the mice was dead. Perhaps out of curiosity, they sent it with the others anyways. All the mice came back alive” (Mother Horse Eyes, *Vice*, n.p). The scientists quickly move to human subjects so the interface will return a cognisant, living subject with experience of the “other side”. Here then, rather than the scientists inverting the parenting instinct through a quest to bring forth a technologically facilitated non-human or posthuman, they are directly inverting procreation itself using technologies unknown.

The Gothic preoccupation with the transgression of boundaries lies at the heart of narrative strands that deal directly with the research into flesh interfaces. Specifically, the flesh interfaces impart Gothic Oedipal overtones to the technological and uncanny anxieties signified by Mother. In her chapter *Psychoanalysis and the Gothic* (2012), Michelle A. Massé remarks that “psychoanalysis grows from the same cultural unease as the Gothic” (p. 308) and that going back to *The Castle of Otranto* and Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk*, the Oedipus complex is a “commonplace of Gothic criticism” (p. 315). However, neither “plot nor character [...] fit smoothly into the standard Oedipal outline, wherein the young male wants to kill daddy and bed mummy”. The same can be said of the singularity Gothic of Mother and her flesh interfaces. Here, the standard Oedipal outline is similarly unsuitable. Instead Oedipal imagery becomes a “Gothic element” (Bloom, 2012, p. 211) to be deployed to horrific affect.

The Oedipal overtones of *The Interface Series* loom as the greatest transgression of all when sending a living subject through the flesh interface. It is implied that flesh interfaces are a technology created by or to interact with Mother (see the depiction of these portals in Fig 13). This, when coupled with the narrative thread of the militaries of two world superpowers experimenting on passing through an interface, creates an abstract transgressive penetrative act of masculine forces entering the flesh interfaces of

Mother. This interpretation is emphasised when /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 describes the process by which subjects move through the interface:

When a human body is embedded in an interface, the independent (i.e. non-human) interface glands produce massive amounts of LSD which cause intellectual mutations (i.e. time-fracturing along several dozen axes).

Meanwhile, independent hormone regulators produce a [sic] emotional oscillation between two states:

euphoria

terror

Thus we have the typical sound of an interface: alternating waves of giggling and screaming that move through the interface population [...] Natural empathetic responses (mirroring) prepare the traveler's body for the process of "embrace."

(/u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9, 2016, 17)

The quote above describes a subject's oscillation between euphoria and terror at the prospect of being "embedded" or "embraced" by the yonic flesh interface of Mother. They are met with eventual annihilation through the embrace process. This is described by /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 as an "agglomerated mass of arms and hands and fingers, grabbing [...] combined with a school of piranha stripping a live cow of its flesh" (2016, 19). The abject and horrific description of a person cycling between the extremes of euphoria and terror while experiencing annihilation is, perhaps, the most extreme form of Oedipal punishment; annihilation via unbirth at the many hands of the nonhuman for violating Mother.

Mother's influence across *The Interface Series* can also be felt in the narrative strands set in the far future. It is here where *The Interface Series* and Mother specifically moves from being emblematic of Van Elferen's singularity Gothic discussed above towards "cloud Gothic" (2014, p. 144). The far future narrative strands of *The Interface Series* depict a world where the experiments conducted by the CIA and Soviet Union on flesh

interfaces lead to the development of “restraint bed portals” (2016, 1), otherwise known as “sense feed” or “hygiene beds” (33). These are interfaces to the “feedrealm” (71), a space analogous to the Internet described as “basically just another interface for sharing information and carrying out transactions. It is based on the metaphor of 3D space [...] They made it this way because that's how the human mind works” (71). The feedrealm, then, is a hyperreal and addictive parallel state of existence that, through the power of flesh interfaces, is far more advanced than the Internet, able to be experienced in a fully spatial way as a virtual reality. Users must be surgically augmented with “direct sense jacks” (66) to access the feedrealm, yet another way in which “(bio)technical enhancement or modification of the human body or mind” (2014, Van Elferen, p. 138) of the singularity Gothic permeates the text.

The feedrealm is portrayed as an incredibly addictive experience, with teams of “Readjustment Specialists” (2016, 42) needed to reintegrate users into the ‘real’ world (that is, the non-feedrealm world within the narrative). In a series of posts by /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 from the perspective of a Readjustment Specialist, the reason for this is explained:

When a hygiene bed breaks (say, the Healthy Limb System fails, or a catheter gets blocked up), it's supposed to cut off the internet feed, forcing the sleeper to get the bed fixed. But it's easy enough to override this cut-off function. Immersed in their feeds, people often forget that the bed is broken. But eventually pain or discomfort will force the sleeper to get their bed fixed. The pain of bedsores or the stench of a backed-up evacuator is a strong motivator. But if the sleeper has direct sense feeds, they can switch off these smells and discomforts. They can even switch off the worry associated with the broken bed.

At this point there is only one thing which can impel them to save themselves: basic human dignity. [...] (I would also say that an occasional fleeting desire to see the outside world could also prove advantageous, but for the sort of people I'm talking about here, this is simply not a factor.)

(/u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9, 2016, 33)

/u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9's post suggests that users of the feedrealm can override their senses and disable any feeling of discomfort that might cause a sensation of the 'real' world to interrupt their experience. Technology, in this instance, can be used to become a master of one's own domain in an infinitely configurable hyperreal world, yet this is, ultimately a way to 'trick' one's own sense, choosing to turn them off entirely if they are not desirable.

This Feedrealm is one of the ways in which *The Interface Series* explores what Van Elferen calls cloud Gothic, that is, Gothic texts that create "new liminal zones representing anxieties surrounding the pervasive nature of technology" (2014, p. 144) and ultimately the fear that through technology "the environment through which we move may itself acquire sentience". Van Elferen singles out narratives where the "creation of networked heterotopias" is facilitated by "technology that interferes with the human perception of reality by way of direct brain interfaces" (pp. 144 – 145) – a trait that clearly fits the feedrealm of *The Interface Series*.

In *The Interface Series*, the addictive nature of the feedrealm is deliberate and engineered. In this narrative strand, it is revealed that Mother is now known as 'Q' – an omniscient entity that is largely in control of humanity in Karen Castillo's version of reality. Q's dominance is achieved through the feedrealm and the fact that the technology that it is built upon was developed from the experiments with flesh interfaces. This is where cloud Gothic anxieties of the "sentient environment" (2014, Van Elferen, p. 145) come to the fore. The sinister Mother has shifted from manifesting purely through unknown technologies of flesh to existing through networks, information, and control, overwhelming the populous with sensation and stimulation to keep them placid. This alternate reality described by Karen Castillo is not, it seems, a too distant fantasy. As Van Elferen notes, "omnipresent, omniscient cloud networks

[...] deployed as a panopticon by domineering organizations and businesses” (p. 145) are realised every day through our reliance on various interfaces into the Internet; be they social media networks, payment and capital networks, or beacons that allow us to move unencumbered through the sentient environment created through the “unremitting generation and exchange of (user) data between machines [...] which hardly requires human intervention” (p. 146). The control of the feedrealm of Karen Castillo’s reality, then, functions as an uncanny – and often abject – double of our own reality.

A key difference between Van Elferen’s characterisation of cloud Gothic and the feedrealm is in her assertion that narrative personae in cloud Gothic narratives struggle to discern whether they are in a virtual or ‘actual’ reality. As shown above, feedrealm users are not trapped or unaware of the reality of their environment, and in fact choose to remain in one over the other. However, as a final facet of cloud Gothic, Van Elferen gestures to contemporary “‘possible worlds’ fiction” and its theme that “perceived reality does not necessarily coincide with the actual or even the only reality” (p. 147). Here, my analysis of *The Interface Series* must zoom out from one narrative strand and instead focus on the role /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 plays in his own narrative due to his claim of being a “nexus” (2016, 15) between parallel dimensions.

Van Elferen argues that television shows such as *Fringe* – an openly fictional *X-Files* style procedural predicated on the existence of parallel universes – “evoke the fear that alternate realities might be scientifically proven and might represent a version of reality that perception cannot confirm” (p. 148). However, /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9’s narrative claims that alternate realities do exist, and through *The Interface Series*’ form as fourth-generation digital fiction written on Reddit’s ontologically flattened platform, he does so without any boundaries of fictionality for the reader to retreat to. Unlike *Fringe* with its clear markers of fictionality which reassure the audience that while the

question of possible worlds remains, this particular vision was a fictional speculation, /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 directly interrupts virtually mediated conversations with visions of other, horrifying, possible worlds. He subsequently sustains the possibility that these possible worlds may, in fact, be real and reachable – or more worryingly, its threats may be reaching us. By leveraging Reddit as an ontologically flattened platform, *The Interface Series* asks the questions of cloud Gothic “pertaining to the ontology and epistemology of technoculture: What is reality and how can I know it?” (p. 149). It is through its form and specifically through the ontologically flattened nature of Reddit that *The Interface Series* forces the reader to confront the ontological instability of the virtual head-on rather than via a clearly fictional narrative. Here, *The Interface Series* demonstrates the fragility of ontology and epistemology of technoculture for the reader rather than merely asking them to consider it.

Van Elferen’s taxonomy concludes with a final form of new technological Gothic that differs from cloud and singularity Gothics: weird Gothic. She argues that while “[t]echnological ontology and epistemology disclose the impossibility of human Being and reality [...] the Real remains looming [...] safely tucked away in the zonic omnipresence of the Symbolic” (p. 149). That is, the sublime representation of true reality and the inability to reach it is highlighted through abstraction into virtual worlds or technological ontology. In order to reach, or represent true reality, Van Elferen argues that weird Gothic “negates the technological anxieties” (pp. 149 – 150) of the previous two forms and that crucially:

Weird Gothic’s theme is the splendor of the numinous, which it portrays as sublime nonhuman, nontechnological beings far outside the reach of human perception. Technology is portrayed as a mere instrument, an extension of man’s (feeble) efforts to touch upon such divine powers.

(Van Elferen, 2014, p. 150)

As such, weird Gothic narratives are often “untechnological or technostalgic” (p. 150), situated in steampunk fantasy worlds where characters cannot retreat to a virtual Symbolic order in the face of an unknowable and Gothically sublime.

As shown above, the examples that Van Elferen uses to substantiate her terms are ringfenced by markers of fictionality that are inherently part of their form: conventional novels, comics, and blockbuster films set in a fantasy past. By contrast *The Interface Series* sustains an ontological ambiguity through its form, meaning that while other realities do factor into the narrative, they are not delineated as fictional and therefore spaces of retreat or shields from a sublime nonhuman. Indeed, while we know her many names – Mother, Q, the Crone, Mother Babylon – she is, ultimately, an unknowable, sublime Other. The patchwork form of Mother with horse eyes is shown to be an avatar for something else:

I walk in her room, and her bloody pieces are lying all over the floor. The strange flute music slowly coalesces into a melody, and the pieces rise and float like flies. The music charms them into formation, and they come together to make Mother.

(/u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9, 2016, 45)

Her form, already an indistinct, fleetingly described, and abject vision is only animated when needed. These qualities are similarly noted by Riddell who observes that she is “a figure that operates outside the life of our narrator (others report meeting her), and outside even our cosmological context, beyond the limits of perception, on the other side of a portal that kills and can undo death” (p. 187). This depiction, or lack thereof, of the antagonist gives *The Interface Series* more in common with the weird of Mark Fisher (examined in section 3.2) that identifies the weird in relation and opposition to the uncanny than Van Elferen’s weird Gothic – representing an “entity or object so strange that it makes us feel that it should not exist” (Fisher, 2016, p. 15).

Karen_Castillo  12 points 3 years ago

Q - The Great Liar, The Great Deceiver, The Great Twister of All Realities is no idle enemy in this existence. I've been a little busy trying to sew this reality back to normalcy and yet at every turn there is a new spot burning or torn that must be patched or mended.

I miss the Fireflies, at least they helped. Perhaps it is time to ask favours of the Wind, Sun, and Starlight. All are indifferent creations of Mother, but they might be persuaded.

Fig 5.14: A post by the character and user /u/Karen_Castillo describing Q.

Existing outside and across *all* narrative strands of *The Interface Series*, Mother is an existential threat – not just to /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9, Karen Castillo, and the other 50 characters of the narrative, but to *all* of us, described in the narrative as “The Great Twister of All Realities” (Fig 5.14), including our own. In that sense, *The Interface Series* also contains the Lovecraftian weird trait of “the threat or actuality of destructive annihilation leading to oblivion” (Bloom, 2012, p. 216) and truly cosmic, sublime scale that is necessary for weird fiction. Moreover, this description as a “Twister of All Realities” when aligned with the reality-hopping nature of *The Interface Series* and the interactions between readers and characters further emphasises connections to Fisher’s weird and its “reality-effect” that de-realises the factual and real-ises the fictional” (p. 24). Mother achieves this by twisting together characters from her fictional reality (or realities) with real people on Reddit – both exist as real as each other as ontologically flattened textual presences and can have conversations with each other and other users.

Van Elferen argues that the fundamental questions of the weird Gothic are: “What is *nonhuman* Being? What is *unreality*, and how can I know it?” (2014, p. 152 - emphasis in original). Ultimately, I argue that *The Interface Series* intensifies these questions through its form as fourth-generation digital fiction and especially through the affordance of direct interaction with characters in ontologically flattened spaces, to create further dread by asking: What is nonhuman Being? What is unreality, *and what if*

it wants to know us? Thus, through the ontologically flattened state of Web2.0 and social media platforms, *The Interface Series* exhibits not just characteristics of the weird Gothic but to what I define as the “techno-Weird”: a state in which a creepypasta’s form as fourth-generation digital fiction that manifests on ontologically flattened platforms is leveraged to emphasise weird characteristics and give them an explicit sense of ontological ambiguity. It is a medium-specific form of the weird, utilising the affordances of digital and social media to emphasise the “reality-effect” (Fisher, 2016, p. 24) of the weird and imbuing nonhuman Beings with a sense of real agency in online spaces.

5.4 – Conclusion.

In this chapter I have demonstrated how *The Interface Series* represents a departure from Creepypasta narratives that have come before, building on their affordances and traits, such as interactivity, ontological ambiguity, and to an extent, memetic spread, to exist as a true evolution of the genre. This evolution is exemplified through a more controlled and localised narrative spread and distribution – predominantly on one platform and by a single author. This spread allows for single posts to function autonomously as “world-inducing fragment[s]” (2018, Riddell, p. 190), but also for readers to become Gothic discoverers and curators of the wider story disseminated by /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9. However, through its form of fourth-generation digital fiction, *The Interface Series* moves beyond simply participating in these Gothic archetypes, and instead develops them via interactivity and the ontologically flattened platform of Reddit to create a true ontological ambiguity. This is typified by /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 directly addressing readers as both an author and a

character and insisting that the story being told is true and happening in multiple dimensions. Such interactivity and ontological ambiguity is furthered when other characters referenced in /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9's posts, such as Karen Castillo, begin appearing on Reddit and similarly interacting with readers and platform users. This then taps into the Gothic uncanny through "uncertainties of character positioning and instabilities of knowledge" (2004, Punter and Byron, p. 273), but due to character and reader existing in the same textual space, this instability of knowledge and sense of uncanniness is directly experienced by readers on the platform. Offering a new way on conceptualising the weird in digital media, I have demonstrated how *The Interface Series* expands on understandings of Gothic literature that "adapt[s] to the speed of technological development" (Van Elferen, 2014, p. 138), by participating across Van Elferen's taxonomy of "singularity Gothic, cloud Gothic, and weird Gothic" through the figure of Mother throughout the narrative. Ultimately, I show that Mother, and *The Interface Series* more generally, expands beyond Van Elferen's taxonomy towards what I define as the techno-Weird by using the form of fourth-generation digital fiction to emphasise weird characteristics of contact with an Other outside human subjectivity and imbue it with an explicit sense of ontological ambiguity.

6. Conclusion: Digesting Creepypasta.

In this thesis, I have demonstrated that creepypasta is a distinct and recognisable genre of fiction with its own traits, characteristics, and formal qualities that participates in and renews horror and Gothic traits through the form of fourth-generation digital fiction. In this chapter, I outline the contributions to knowledge that this thesis has made and suggest avenues for future scholarship that could build on that work.

6.1 – Chapter Contributions.

In Chapter 1 I assessed existing approaches to creepypasta, including work from Line Henriksen (2013; 2016), Chess and Newsom (2015), and Andrew Peck (2015) and focussing particularly on the traits and properties that these scholars have emphasised when regarding examples of creepypasta narratives. I concluded that while existing approaches to creepypasta all recognise the importance of spreading the narrative, the affordances of Web2.0 platforms as a storytelling venue, and that creepypasta stories should unnerve the reader, they fail in two key areas: situating creepypasta within a wider horror or Gothic lineage, and examining creepypasta in the context of digital fiction. To bolster the latter claim, I also examined scholarship on digital fiction to position Creepypasta's form in a lineage of "[f]iction written for and read on a computer screen" (Bell et al., 2010, p. 4) and specifically fourth-generation digital fiction which "takes the shape and structure of a platform already defined, and defined for different purposes [than as a fiction writing platform]" (Rustad, 2015, n.p) and where "the [social media] platform is a significant part of the aesthetic expression and the meaning potential" (Bell et al., 2014, p. 10).

In Chapter 2, drawing on my assessment that existing scholarship on creepypasta recognises the necessity for creepypasta narratives to unnerve the reader, I critically engaged with scholarship on Gothic, Horror, and Weird fiction to determine their respective traits, drawing out the broad categories of threats and ontological ambiguity as fundamental affective building blocks to unnerving genres. These elements then form the basis of my methodology for analysis: to examine and demonstrate how creepypasta derives its horror and Gothic affect through its form as fourth-generation digital fiction.

Chapters 3 – 5 develop analyses of the interplay between formal characteristics and narrative in three creepypasta narratives. In these three chapters, I demonstrated how creepypasta leverages its form as fourth-generation digital fiction to derive, emphasise, or reinvent its horror or Gothic affect. In particular, I showed that the affordances of digital text, such as multimodality, interactivity, and mutability, as well as the specific qualities of networked writing on social media and Web2.0 platforms defined for other purposes significantly impact how creepypasta embodies Gothic conventions in a way that would not be possible if it were not in a networked digital medium.

6.2 – Ontological Ambiguity.

Across the chapters of this thesis, I have shown that creepypasta narratives place an emphasis on creating a sense of ontological instability – a long-standing trait of Gothic literature as shown in chapter two – but do so specifically through their form and delivery through social media platforms and other forms of networked Web2.0 venues for interpersonal communication such as forums and blogs. While Gothic novels such as *The Castle of Otranto* and *Frankenstein* created a sense of ontological instability by

simply declaring the story to be true and supplementing that claim with elaborate conceits of lost and translated manuscripts or narratives assembled from numerous scraps of writing, creepypasta creates this ontological instability by being told through a form that disguises its fictionality.

6.2.1 – Ontological Flattening, collaborative interactive fiction, and the “techno-Weird”.

In Chapter 3, section 3.6.1, I developed the concept of “ontological flattening” which I define as a state when real users and their responses, and the fictional story they are reading and responding to exist in the same textual space without borders, implied hierarchy, or explicit indicators of fictionality in the story text. This concept was then applied to subsequent chapters to show the centrality of ontological flattening for creepypasta in general. In Chapter 3, I show that the game played by those aware of *Candle Cove*’s fictional status – to the confusion of those unaware – is only possible because these iterations of the narrative take place on a platform, and therefore, in the form of, a space where users expect to interact with other users sincerely. In Chapter 4, I demonstrate that the confusion between “play and reality” (Lyle Enright, 2017, p. 10) experienced by users who encountered elements of *The Slender Man* is caused by the same leveraging of platforms and distribution. In Chapter 5, I argue that the delivery of *The Interface Series* through Reddit led the story to be met with confusion and speculation about its ontological status (section 5.3.1) that is only sustained when the author directly addresses readers as both character *and* writer, deliberately undercutting any sense of ontological stability (section 5.3.2).

In my analysis of the *Create Paranormal Images* thread that spawned *The Slender Man* in Chapter 4, I developed Klaiber’s “double plot” model of collaborative interactive

fiction to show how ontological flattening allows for a play with reality and fiction as the participants of the thread offering iterative feedback on the development of The Slender Man character shift from a stance of offering critique of the design and traits of the *character* to offering up new iterations of the creature through accounts of ‘research’ into the mythological figure from history (although that history only existed in the thread at the time). This play facilitated by an ontologically flattened state for reader and fiction can be seen again in Chapter 3 through the game played by readers around multimodal aspects of *Candle Cove*. Comments under a Reddit post linking to a video of a supposed episode of Candle Cove feature a variety of replies from users remarking on the disturbing nature of the video, while others insist they can only see static – thus re-enacting the twist of Straub’s original *Candle Cove* story on a social media platform with other users. In Chapter 5, /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9’s insertion into his own story, interacting directly with readers while also maintaining the position of both author *and* character and insisting that the story he is telling is both “not fiction. Nor is it true” (/u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9, 2016, 15), is possible due to the ontologically flattened state of Reddit as a platform.

The notion that social media websites offer a medium where readers and fiction can exist at the same ontological level is underpinned by Johan F. Hoorn’s assertion that in “mediated communication [...], we enter the realm of fiction” (Hoorn, 2012, p. 49). For Hoorn, the process of mediation requires the fictionalisation of real people – such as during a phone call or in a conversation on social media – as either party is interacting only with the mediation of the other rather than the ‘real’ person, constructing a version of them from the information relayed via the medium. Hoorn elaborates that “talking to a friend over your cellular phone is a highly realistic experience of a mediated person and therefore, of a (partially) fictional character that probably truly exists. But you

never know” (p. 50). Though the same form of interaction takes place in written exchanges, Hoorn’s analysis undermines the assumed positions of immediacy and truthfulness held by subsequent technologically mediated forms of communication. Textually mediated interactions on social media follow the same principle – the person or people you are speaking to probably exist in real life, but they are ultimately as much a fiction as /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9. Networked textual communication and social media ontologically flatten real users and deliberate fictions alike through their identical textual mediation based on the conditions of the platform. It is Hoorn’s assertion that you “never know” the true reality of other parties in online interactions that creepypasta exploits, creating an inherent tension through its form.

In Chapter 5, I develop the concept of ontological flattening further to account for what I define as the techno-Weird. Through the analysis of *The Interface Series*, I argue that the techno-Weird is exhibited when a creepypasta’s form as fourth-generation digital fiction is leveraged to emphasise weird characteristics and give them an explicit sense of ontological ambiguity. The affordance of an ontological flattened platform allows the author to directly address readers as both character and user and explicitly tell them that the story he is telling is “not fiction. Nor is it true”

(/u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9, 2016, 15), thus undermining any markers of fictionality previously assigned by readers while weaving a story that emphasises the Lovecraftian weird trait of “the threat or actuality of destructive annihilation leading to oblivion” (Bloom, 2012, p. 216).

The tension presented by creepypasta and the ontological flatness of its form as fourth-generation digital fiction, and ultimately that tension’s resolution, can be considered in distinctly Gothic terms. However, throughout the chapters, I have shown that it is this ontological flattening that separates creepypasta from earlier examples of ontologically

ambiguous Gothic and horror fiction. As I explored in Chapter 2, the exploitation of mediation to create ontologically ambiguous fictions is an established part of the Gothic tradition. From anonymously published novels that leverage “a patchwork of textual modes” (Mandal, 2015, p. 91) into a single narrative to contemporary examples such as *Ghostwatch* (1992) or *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), the use of mediation to present a fiction as ‘true’ or authentic, often using elaborate framing to bolster these claims, is a centuries-long practice. I have shown in the analyses in chapters 3 – 6 that creepypasta differs from these earlier examples in precisely the same way it differs from other forms of ontological hoax (Gibbons 2012). The reader or viewer of these earlier examples and the reader of ontological hoaxes, is positioned at a different ontological level to the fiction itself. In creepypasta, the reader (and other users) and the fiction are positioned at the same level because ontologically flattened social media platforms and other forms of networked text are the storytelling venue, with all posts appearing ontologically indistinguishable through the participatory and multimodal affordances of the platform(s). To the reader, other users and creepypasta narratives have the same chance of “probably truly exist[ing]” (Hoorn, 2012, p. 50).

As I have shown throughout this thesis, ontological flattening functions at the uncanny heart of creepypasta as a genre. It succeeds in leveraging its form as fourth-generation digital fiction to cast an uncanniness over social media and other forms of textually mediated digital communication, embodying Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle’s definition of the uncanny by “making things uncertain: it has to do with the sense that things are not as they have come to appear through habit and familiarity” (1999, p. 37). It turns the familiar venue of social media into a home for the paranormal and draws attention to the uncanniness of mediated communication and the ontologically flat surface of social media. As David Punter and Glennis Byron remark, “the literary

Gothic has been concerned with uncertainties of character positioning and instabilities of knowledge” (2004, p. 273), and by leveraging its form to highlight the lack of a boundary between reader and fiction, creepypasta makes readers aware that they are positioned just as much as a character than they are as a reader on social media, both creating a sense of uncanniness and, even if momentarily, threatening their perceived sense of subjectivity online.

6.2.3 – A Model of Ontologically Flattened Digital Spaces.

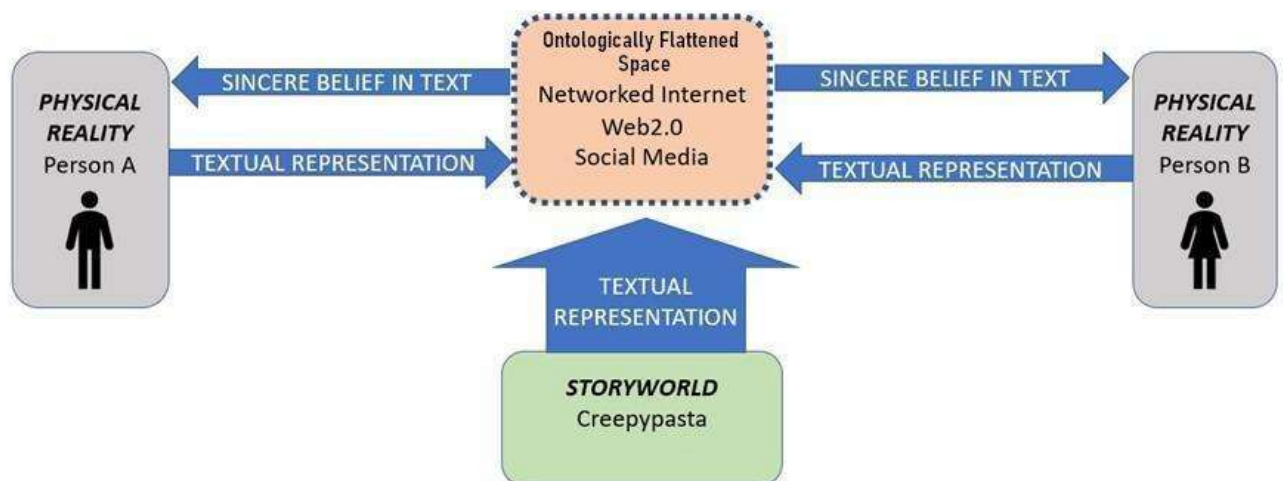


Fig 6.1: A model of ontologically flattened digital space.

In defining ontological flattening – a state when real users and their responses, and the fictional story they are reading and responding to exist in the same textual space without borders, implied hierarchy, or explicit indicators of fictionality in the story text – I have shown how networked digital spaces and social media venues have been leveraged through fourth-generation digital fiction to become a textual device for new forms of fiction. I have also shown that for creepypasta, ontologically flattened spaces allow for a transference of the uncanny affect usually experienced by the protagonist of

a Gothic or horror novel onto the reader themselves, repositioning them as discoverers or curators of found manuscripts and presenting them with the opportunity to engage with characters, create additional content, and share the narrative with a wider readership

Fig 6.1 shows the relationship between ontologically flattened online spaces, and creepypasta's form as fourth-generation digital fiction. Person A and Person B both exist in physical reality, but to communicate on the networked Internet, must put forward a textual representation of themselves on social media or other ontologically flattened spaces such as forums or blogs on the Web2.0. For communication with Person A to be meaningful, Person B must believe the textual representation to be real and read their thoughts and feelings (as text) as sincere. For meaningful communication in the other direction, the dynamic is the same. Both Person A and Person B must become part of social media's textual ontology and abide by the formatting and conventions of their chosen platform, expecting that posts in these spaces are non-fictional and representations of other users.

Throughout this thesis, I have shown that creepypasta adopts respective platforms' ontologically flattened state, formatting, and conventions to present fictional horror and Gothic narratives that appear alongside real users and their real stories about their lives (represented by the blue "textual representation" arrow into ontologically flattened space). In doing so, these narratives are, for a brief moment, as real as other users as all rely on textual representation (represented by the same arrows from Person A and Person B) as dictated by the platform. This textual representation must be met with a level of sincerity by the user (represented by the arrows from the ontologically flattened space towards Person A and Person B). Therefore, any textual representation – be it

that of another person's experience, a creepypasta narrative, or a character – must be sincerely considered. This creates a tension that is resolved when a reader aligns their experience of the world with that portrayed in the textual representation of a user's experience.

As shown throughout my three case studies, this uncanny tension varies depending on how outlandish the horror presented in the narrative is, and whether the narrative is spread across multiple ontologically flat platforms. This boosts a narrative's believability by being an apparently real experience in multiple spaces. In Chapter 3, I demonstrated how readers of *Candle Cove* are presented with contradictory experiences when watching video versions of the 'Candle Cove' show – mirroring the mystery presented in the original narrative about the ontological status of the television show. Whether they claimed to see static or footage of 'Candle Cove', a reader can never truly be certain of what experience is true, thus creating a Gothic uncanny uncertainty around interpersonal exchanges online. In Chapter 4, I demonstrate how the ontologically flattened space of the *Create Paranormal Images* thread on SomethingAwful.com allows participants to seamlessly move from offering feedback on the iterative creation of The Slender Man as a creature to posting iterative developments to *The Slender Man* narrative by positioning themselves as researchers uncovering an already existing paranormal entity. Here, interpersonal communication in an ontologically flattened space allows the transition from discussion of The Slender Man as an open work of fiction to discussion of The Slender Man as a creature with a(n apparently) real history in our world. Finally, in Chapter 5, I showed how /u/_9MOTHER9HORSE9EYES9 leverages the ontologically flat space of Reddit to sustain a level of ontological ambiguity around *The Interface Series* in a way that ensures that one can never truly determine whether it is fact or fiction.

Ultimately, I demonstrate how each narrative challenges the tenuous nature of certainty and trust in Web2.0 spaces and social media platforms. In this way, creepypasta continues the Gothic tradition of examining cultural and social anxieties. While *Candle Cove*, *The Slender Man*, and *The Interface Series* each feature monstrous threats that can be analysed individually as representative of a variety of anxieties, when taken together, they all disrupt the sincere function of apparently real spaces. This is another way in which creepypasta renews the Gothic. Rather than exhibiting a “displaced engagement with political and social problems” (Punter, 1996, p. 54) through metaphorical representation in fictional stories, creepypasta grapples with anxieties about online interaction and social media by demonstrating the fragile stability of interaction with what appears to be real.

6.3 – Further Research Directions

The research presented in this thesis presents numerous avenues for further research. Though limited to only three case studies, the genre of creepypasta is rich and varied, with a variety of sub-genres and memetic variations. A complete history of the development of creepypasta, from early examples to contemporary departures could be conducted and generate a diachronic understanding of this under-examined genre. Continuing an understanding of creepypasta as a form of fourth-generation digital fiction would allow for an analysis of how technological developments and changes in platforms and their iterations have impacted the development of creepypasta. Empirical research into the reception of creepypasta could grant meaningful insights into just how the genre’s ontological ambiguity impacts readers.

My new model of ontologically flattened digital space can be applied to more contemporary forms of fourth-generation digital fiction. Crucially, it could be advantageous as a framework through which to analyse recent developments in online conspiracy and disinformation campaigns such as QAnon, a conspiracy theory that alleges that Donald Trump is fighting a secret war against a cabal of cannibal satanists that operate at the elite levels of society. When one considers QAnon through its proliferation on ontologically flattened platforms, the similarities between it and creepypasta are striking, from memetic spread, to interactivity, and an emphasis on believability by presenting itself as apparently real. Applying the framework of ontologically flattening to QAnon and its more recent offshoots, such as the various conspiracies surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic, could grant a greater understanding in how such narratives gain such a wide readership who interact with, spread, and importantly believe the outlandish claims therein. Such insight may be useful in generating methodologies to counteract online conspiracy ideation and ultimately lead believers away from radicalising narratives.

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