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Haunted objects, networked subjects: The nightmarish nostalgia of creepypasta

ABSTRACT

In this article, we argue that the digitally networked horror genre 'creepypasta' and its networked horror collapses the comfortable dichotomy of subjects acting upon objects by creating narrative spaces in which haunted objects encroach upon the lives of their victimized subjects. Particularly, creepypasta legends such as 'Candle Cove' and 'BEN Drowned' upset the subject/object relationships of the technological nostalgia that fuels a mutating genre of Internet discourse. By alienating mythologized childhood artefacts (i.e., television shows, video games), these networked narratives depict not how properties can be made strange, but more accurately, are revealed as having always been strange. The perversion of the nostalgic text is only one part of what generates horror in these stories. It is that the texts themselves were always the perversions to begin with; always performing an eradication of object and subject, player and game, reader and text.

KEYWORDS

creepypasta
nostalgia
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actancy
material performance
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The saddest thing about nostalgia is that it is always the seed of tragedy. We fall in love with a story, we tell it to ourselves again and again, we fall in love with our retellings, we forget to consider whether there was ever a meaningful difference between the story and our retellings and, eventually, we make the decision to revisit that story: expecting, of course, the static object we've immortalized in our minds to exist just as we think we've left it.

The Internet and its many social media practices only further this fixity of what one could call object-oriented ontology, but what might be better described as object-oriented *hagiography*. With the advanced affordances of extended community and instant connectivity, nostalgia is inevitably networked. Entire pages dedicated to what ‘Only 90 Kids Remember!’ proliferate beside posts that comparatively bemoan the state of every issue and idea ‘these days’. We have arguably always lived in nostalgic times, but the Internet (connecting corporations to consumers) seems to have learned our past-glutted preferences and fed them back to us for profit, as endless remakes of beloved childhood franchises flood the marketplace. The recent smash hit of the Netflix original series *Stranger Things* (2016–present), 1980s influenced flair and all, definitively marks nostalgia as definitively in. But if we probe beyond the commercial appeal of the Upside Down, we can highlight the more subtly intriguing promise that *Stranger Things* popularized: the nearly contradictory connection between nostalgia and horror. When we peer past the profit motive, we can see how online horror communities tapped into that contradictory connection first, outside of commercial gain.

Online horror and its subversive commentaries on social media practices do not permit a safely linear relationship with the things we love. It forces us out of the familiarity of our comfortable perch in the position of subject, disarms us of the ability to identify narratives and other agents as objects, and reveals that the screen we thought we could watch horror unfold behind with a tense handful of popcorn was never a one-way window. For the Internet lore known as ‘creepypasta’ often indulges in haunting tales that collapse the subject/object dichotomy and alienates the nature of nostalgia intrinsic to our presumptions of safety and subjecthood. As it metatextually unfolds via technology, many iterations of creepypasta reach for technological nostalgia as they spread terror and tellingly reveal how this symptom of the cultural upgrade path is sewn up with the logic of subject-object relations. Statements like ‘I played that as a kid!’ and ‘I remember that show!’ weave a web in which it is only possible to conceive of the electronic narrative text as an object and the reader/player/viewer as a subject who explores it. When creepypasta’s networked horror destabilizes this dichotomy of subject and object, then, the familiar does not just become unfamiliar, but uncanny: entirely unlike the illusory memory of the seemingly stable object of our nostalgia.

In this article, we argue that creepypasta’s networked horror collapses the comfortable dichotomy of subjects acting upon objects by creating narrative spaces in which haunted objects encroach upon the lives of their victimized subjects. Particularly, creepypasta legends such as ‘Candle Cove’ and ‘BEN Drowned’ upset the subject/object relationships that fuel technological nostalgia. By alienating mythologized childhood artefacts (i.e., television shows, video games), these networked narratives depict not how properties can be made strange, but more accurately, are revealed as having always been strange. The perversion of the nostalgic text is only one part of what generates horror in these stories. It is that the texts themselves were always the perversions to begin with; always performing an eradication of object and subject, player and game, reader and text.

CREEPPASTA, OR NETWORKED NOSTALGIA GOES BUMP IN THE NIGHT

Creepypasta has proliferated in certain corners of the Internet for some time now. The term ‘creepypasta’ is a portmanteau of the words ‘creepy’ and ‘copy pasta’. ‘Copy pasta’ came into use around 2006 to refer to texts

that could be easily copy/pasted and spread virally. Its creepier counterpart became a recognizable term after the founding of creepypasta.com in 2008 and the Creepypasta Wiki in 2010. Many early creepypasta in the late 2000s were shared on the imageboard website 4chan's /x/ board, concerned with paranormal activity. But the form already had origins in Internet legends like 'Polybius', a story involving a psychoactive arcade game first shared on coinop.org in 1998. For a pre-network inspiration, creepypasta could be considered 'a digital version of folklore', according to Christi Williams (2015), in that they are 'are easy to read and get to a central point that allows others to relate to it' and 'usually have a core "story"' which is continuously retold, causing 'variants in the original story, much like old folklore used to spread'. Will Wiles (2013) agrees that creepypasta is 'a folk literature of the web', adding that it is a 'a widely distributed and leaderless effort to make and share scary stories' which, 'instead of the campfire', gathers us 'around the flickering light of our computer monitors'. Creepypasta are now as plentiful as those countless folk tales of long ago, and academic criticism on the subject has begun to treat it as a fascinating form of digital storytelling worth analytical consideration

Our article is not the first to analyse creepypasta as a unique genre of networked narrative. Line Henriksen (2014), for example, has been presenting and publishing on 'how to eat your creepypasta well' for a few years now. But much of the academic criticism thus far congregates around this netlore's most popular figure: the Slenderman. Shira Chess and Eric Newsom (2014), among others, have faced down the faceless Slenderman. But what we explore in our article, away from the 'spectre' of the Slenderman, is how other creepypasta are similarly manifested into believability in a liminal space between fact and fiction. Stoking that digital campfire again, Wiles argues, 'Spooky stories around the campfire require an element of game-playing, a collective suspension of disbelief – these rules are now being adapted and elaborated for an age of YouTube and open-access wikis'. This suspension of disbelief is a literal one, as evidenced by the actual rules dictating decorum on Reddit's /r/NoSleep subreddit, a popular repository for creepypasta:

Are the stories here true?

While you're in /r/NoSleep, everything is true. Outside of NoSleep, a story may be fact or may be fiction. The important thing is that while you're here, *treat everything as though it is a true recount of events.*

(ibitemynails n.d., original emphasis)

For the power of creepypasta as a digital extension of folklore is its playfulness as 'true' retelling, further spread into the mythos of the web by readers and players who willingly suspend disbelief for it. Speaking to a different sort of imagetext, Joseph Witek's (1989: 116) words nevertheless apply well to creepypasta, in which 'realism [...] becomes a conspiracy between the writer and the reader, not an essential relation between certain texts and the world of experience'. But the scholars who write about creepypasta and all its 'ghosts' as objects of study, are nearly always like the image of the scholar Jacques Derrida describes in *Specters of Marx*:

A traditional scholar does not believe in ghosts – nor in all that could be called the virtual space of spectrality. There has never been a scholar who, as such, does not believe in the sharp distinction between the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living,

being and non-being [...] in the opposition between what is present and what is not, for example in the form of objectivity.

(2006: 12)

We the authors of this paper would feel safer being sceptical of things that virtually go bump in the networked night. We cannot deny, though, the softening of that 'sharp distinction between' the real and the unreal which creepypasta like 'Candle Cove' and 'BEN Drowned' estrange so well. To begin, we consider the ways that nostalgia tells its own ghost stories, helpless before the revelations of inherent horror brought out in these legends.

Much of creepypasta's netlore hinges at the nexus of nostalgia and horror. This disturbing dyad likely prompts questions regarding what could be nostalgic about horror or horrific about nostalgia. The concepts appear to be opposed as nostalgia often elicits positive response and horror quite the oppositely negative. But the etymological roots of nostalgia trace back arguably to a Greek word for either 'the agony of homecoming' (Suominen 2008), or 'the pain from an old wound' (Bergstrom 2016). Aren Bergstrom calls nostalgia 'intrinsic to horror', as 'horror is about experiencing trauma and nightmare without living that trauma'. For Bergstrom, this means that 'in a sense, all horror is nostalgic, as it stylizes and recontextualizes a past experience in the safety of the present'.

Yet the first root too, 'the agony of homecoming', offers a different vantage into both the nature of nostalgic horror and our article's two example texts of creepypasta. The agony of homecoming here is the realization that, as the old adage says, 'you can't go home again' – not, at least, to the idealized version of a safe "world that seems entirely composed of memory and feeling" which never existed' (Bergstrom 2016). This confrontation with the past that never was and the estranged present that takes its place puts 'time out of joint' and calls for Derrida's (2006: 202) concept of 'hauntology'. As a punning on 'haunted ontology', hauntology describes the uncertainty that comes from the past returning to disturb the present. Reversing Bergstrom's claim that 'all horror is nostalgic', we therefore suggest in turn that 'all nostalgia is horrific', in the way it embalms past experience (often from childhood) into an unwitting *memento mori*, a reminder of death brought on by ever-fading memories and unheeded by our idealized remembrances. It is this evocation of the *memento mori* that creepypastas like 'Candle Cove' and 'BEN Drowned' make explicitly sinister as the reminder of death infects the nostalgic memory and reveals how the past is made dangerous to the present. Eva Zekany (2014: 2) usefully attaches Derrida's concept to the very network media that these creepypastas spread across, describing haunting as 'an adept way of approaching the subject of the human's interaction with technologies of communication'. For Zekany (2014: 2) hauntings "are a way of discussing the not-quite-present but not-quite-absent" quality of embodied media consumption'. Regarding the embodied nature of the subject/object relationships integral to our analysis of creepypasta, we also propose a consideration of the not-quite-present but not-quite-past quality of nostalgic horror through the technologies of communication Zekany analyses. For, the horrific nostalgia of these creepypasta legends all intersect particular objects that eerily threaten subjecthood, resulting in an object-oriented hauntology.

Horror mutates net culture's mythologized commodities into creepypasta's mutant corporealities. Henriksen (2014: 40, 41) paints these creepypasta as entangled in what she terms 'respons(e)ibility', asking 'how might one

respond to the response of the non/human other, if the non/human other is considered not to exist; not to be present as such; a virtual possibility, or a figment of one's imagination?' In other words, what is our 'respons(e)ibility' in such haunted interactions? 'Candle Cove' and 'BEN Drowned' both channel what Henriksen (2014: 47) considers 'conjurations' of nonhuman horrors and weave intricate webs of respons(e)ibility within their narratives and as texts copy/pasted, shared widely, replied to, and made *true* through reader/player interaction. Nostalgia in the creepypasta legends we discuss is nostalgia for *something*, but that label of 'thing' does not create the usual safe distance expected, as nonhuman objects vie for subjective response. As the characters within these tales confronting haunted media grow to fear right alongside the readers of their mediated hauntings, uncanny objectivity begins to threaten securely separated subjectivity. In fact all the way back to its definition, Sigmund Freud's (2003: 123) famous discussion of the uncanny addresses objects that elicit all that's 'frightening [and] evokes fear and dread' in such a double-take on subject/object relationships. Freud (2003: 124) defines the uncanny as 'that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar'. Dealing extensively with Ernst Jentsch's earlier evocation of the uncanny, he dedicates some considerable space in his paper to explicating Jentsch's idea that "'one of the surest devices for producing slightly uncanny effects through storytelling...is to leave the reader wondering whether a particular figure is a real person or an automaton'" (quoted in Freud 2003: 135). In our creepypasta texts, 'what [...] had long been familiar' meets a newer uncertainty that questions if the 'either/or' of human being vs. automaton even matters anymore, as nostalgia attains horror in uncannily animate objects.

Creepypasta explores the inner nightmares of technological nostalgia for seemingly static objects by rendering them sinisterly active subjects. For the human subjects that enact them, this move into animacy is deeply unnerving. Nostalgic objects rendered nefarious upset not only human and nonhuman but past and present interactions between consumer and commodity. Wiles considers this move to be built into the nature of creepypasta itself, as countless examples beyond our two example texts have spun yarns on the frightening aberration of things attaining terrifying selfhood. Creepypasta navigates what happens when technological nostalgia goes wrong. Wiles (2013) notes a 'preponderance of [...] "haunted software" riffs', and he wonders whether they are 'a product of the web's innate tendency towards pop-cultural nostalgia' or the product of adults who grew up on 'children's TV and computer games' musing over the 'deeper effects of that immersion on their adult minds'. The saturation of stories considering the horror of haunted objects that reveals how creepypasta unmasks what was made safe by nostalgia; it is the estrangement of what was always strange.

FELT TERRIFIED BY 'CANDLE COVE'

Kris Straub's terrifying creepypasta 'Candle Cove' begins with user Skyshale033 opening up a new thread on the local television subforum for a social site called NetNostalgia about a strange children's show she recalls by the name of *Candle Cove*. Through the collective recollections of Skyshale033 and three other posters, the subforum pieces together the basic premise of the show: a young girl, Janice, becomes enmeshed in a disturbing and puppet-filled world of pirates. She accompanies Pirate Percy, a buccaneer made from

the decapitated head of an antique doll, who is too easily terror-stricken to be much of a pirate. He has good reason to be something of a scaredy-cat, especially since, as the forum participants recall, the villain of *Candle Cove* is a malignant marionette called 'Skin-Taker', a skeleton clad in a top hat and cape both made from human skin. The creepypasta ends with user mike_painter65 querying his elderly mother about the show only to be told that, as a child, he would 'tune the tv to static and juts [sic] watch dead air for 30 minutes'. The story concludes on this horrific note, implying that the other forum participants shared this collective vision. Nostalgia here is laid bare as a shared delusion of something that never was, something that was always creepy to begin with.

The disturbing bricolage of nostalgia that 'Candle Cove' closes with is all the more disturbing in that it is not entirely unreal. Straub first posted 'Candle Cove' to his personal website Ichor Falls in 2009, where it quickly migrated to the creepypasta wiki and from there to the creepier corners of the Internet (Burkart 2016). But diegetically, that the television show *Candle Cove* first aired in 1971 or 1972 is mentioned three times, with each user taking care to recall their age at the time of its airing ('I was 12 and I watched it a few times with my brother', writes user Jaren_2005, for example). mike_painter65's mother marvels at the creativity of her young son, remarking 'i used to think it was so strange that you said "i'm gona go watch candle cove now mom [...] you had a big imagination with your little pirate show"'. The malleability of childhood has not yet drifted away from these young viewers; the social priming that teaches us that subjects *act* and objects are *acted upon* has not finished giving form to their consciousness. The *Candle Cove* viewers were closer than most of us, after all, to the age where psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (2005: 13) theorizes that the child makes use of the 'transitional object', a totem of some kind, most often a toy, doll, or stuffed animal, by which they learn to navigate the self, the body, and how that conjoined self-in-body is not the external objects it interacts with. Puppetry theorist John Bell (2014: 47) argues that the anthropocentrism of the scientific method and Western Enlightenment political doctrines 'depended upon strict separations of humans (culture) and nonhumans (nature) and the dominance of the former over the latter' and that, in these rational systems, '[...] belief in the uncanny power of performing objects is connected to the infancy of modern children [...]'. 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. What 'Candle Cove' estranges here is the subject in the object, the object in the subject, and their melding into what Bruno Latour (1999: 13) calls the 'actant'. In *Pandora's Hope*, Latour illustrates the example of a citizen with a gun to suggest that,

You are different with a gun in your hand; the gun is different with you holding it. You are another subject because you hold the gun; the gun is another object because it has entered into a relationship with you.
(1999: 179)

The 'citizen-gun, gun-citizen' becomes a 'hybrid actor' (Latour 1999: 179, 180). Latour (1999: 180) theorizes that this 'hybrid actor' should compel us to 'abandon the subject-object dichotomy, a distinction that prevents the understanding of collectives. It is neither people nor guns that kill. Responsibility for action

must be shared among the various actants'. So, thus chastised by Latour, we should question what the role of responsibility is in horror that breaches yet nevertheless indulges subject/object dichotomies. That our original poster sought out other viewers and that these commenters felt compelled by nostalgia to seek this forum out is in and of itself telling of the eventual downfall of this facade of the subject/object dichotomy. 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. After all this time, the posters are brought into a direct confrontation with their own uncanny actancy.

But it is not just the claim of nonhuman beings made from nonbiological material to a rightful space in the network that is so unsettling; the obvious falsity and slipshod craftsmanship with which those materials are conjoined intensifies the terror these puppets elicit. They scare us with their immediately evident sloppiness, their shoddy construction which grates against their human-like autonomy. All of the posters directly associate the horror of the models with their third-rate composition: Skyshale033 derides the animate pirate ship Laughingstock's grotesque character design, recalling 'I remember the bow of the ship was a wooden smiling face, with the lower jaw submerged' and lamenting that 'It just looked so cheap and awful' with 'his two eyes askew and that flopping foam jaw and the fishing line that opened and closed it'. Skyshale033's haptic recollections of spectatorship confuse the boundaries of sight, touch, and affect. They enact stopmotion filmmaker and theorist Jan Švankmajer's (2014: 169) idea of the 'tactile memory', an effect of visual arts whose function is a sort of synaesthetic 'transfer from visual perception to the sphere of touch' from memories viewers awaken in compliance with visuals from a bank of remembered tactile engagements. We see tactile memory decentering the generally accepted subject-object dichotomy here as we 'project a sensation outwardly, outside of us' through imagined touch, and 'at the same time we perceive it subjectively, on our skin' (Švankmajer 2014: 2). The tactile memory grants us access into an unusual network; a network in which relations between human and nonhuman are uncannily democratic. We are no longer only seeing as we look: we are touching; we are no longer only touching as we touch: other actors touch us; we are no longer subjects acting upon objects: we, like all things, simply act. The tactile memory shakes the foundations of western logic, and here, the consequences can be horrific. The Skin-Taker, for instance, is described as a being that viewers can see through the tactile memory as a 'dirty skeleton' with 'glass eyes that were too big for his skull'. Skyshale033 asks her peers, 'wasn't his top hat and cloak all sewn up crazily?' seeking communal confirmation to nail down the visual and haptic conclusions of her tactile memory. 'Was that supposed to be children's skin??', they follow up. The question itself is as much of an answer as it needs. mike_painter65 responds, reminding Skyshale033 and the others

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' [all *sic*.]

With this move, Janice mimes the motions of seizing the subject's vacant throne. She acknowledges the limitations of (what should be) an extradiegetic formal feature: the materials of Skin-Taker's body which only viewers,

not characters, should be equipped to see. And we are invited to masquerade as objects by Skin-Taker's gaze: it is *our* skin that will be ground, and it is our subject status that will be shredded by Skin-Taker's uncanny autonomy. It is a horror of pop-cultural nostalgia that Neil Badmington documents well in *Alien Chic* in which he considers the way humans distance themselves from representations of aliens (a term we find applicable to skeletons garbed in human skin) in media by rendering them as objects. Badmington's (2004: 155) closing provocation considers how humans should learn to fear again by realizing their subjectivity is tied into objects: 'this otherness has always been part "us," parting "us" from "ourselves." Posthumanism, as I see it, is the acknowledgement and activation of the trace of the inhuman within the human... In the end, humanism finds itself a little alien'. By grinding our skin, the Skin-Taker threatens to fish out that trace of the inhuman, reminding us that we too are made of objects that can be cut up or ground, and we too are a little alien. What is alien about the mythologized commodities of childhood hits much closer to home – in the recesses of our memories, spanning all the way back to afternoon cartoons and puppet shows – and promises to be perhaps even scarier. Later, the posters mutually remember an episode where all of the primary cast simply stares at the audience and screams for its full runtime. Skin-Taker is, according to Jaren_2005, 'screaming through his gnashing teeth', his mobility-limited jaw 'careening so wildly I thought it would come off its wire hinges'. What response does such horror require?

Our responsibility and respons(e)ibility are to see what horrors of creepypasta are not necessarily that horrifying, Latour might say. What many 'see as a horror to be avoided at all costs – the mixing up of objectivity and subjectivity – is for us, on the contrary, the hallmark of a civilized life' Latour (1999: 2000) claims, 'except that what time mixes up in the future even more than in the past are not objects and subjects at all, but humans and nonhumans, and that makes a world of difference'. But as much as Latour may want us to move beyond the subject and the object, we have to analyse the fears of the society that shivers at what a creepypasta like 'Candle Cove' shows to be adversarial between the subject and the object, between viewers and the Skin-Taker, between what childhood implicitly understands and what nostalgia denuded forces us to reflect upon. Actancy, however, does provide a useful heuristic for seeing conversely what was never normal, despite the inoculation of nostalgia, but what has always been horrifying. It asks us to see our role in putting puppets on the small screen, over the static, and the puppet's role in drawing us to the television and to one another. As actancy is situated within Latour's larger conceptual project of actor-network theory, the implications of the network itself should be investigated for creepypasta as a form of networked narrative, with all its subjects, objects and actants.

Skin-Taker's sinister shtick is all the more terrifying in that it is grounded not only in the real (and very horrifying) low-budget puppet shows of the 1970s and 1980s, but also in the networked conversation around those shows. Straub harnessed the idea for the 'Candle Cove' narrative from the 2000 Onion article, 'Area 36-Year-Old Still Has Occasional *Lidsville* Nightmare', a mock news story about a man, Pete Meijer, plagued by the unsettlingly surreal 1972 children's television show, *Lidsville*, in which a child is whisked away to a surreal land of anthropomorphized household objects (mostly hats) and costumed performers (Burkart 2016). With its similar release date, disturbing content and reliance on puppeted bodies, *Lidsville* is an obvious real-life analogue to the television show *Candle Cove*. *The Onion's* article about *Lidsville*

parallels and precedes the creepypasta 'Candle Cove' in that both networked media forums draw forth the morbidity of childhood object-narratives and envision the stark fallout of these narratives in the lives of the adults who consumed them as children. *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. The piece exercises what Berkowitz and Schwartz (2016: 6) call mock news' power over 'an epistemic authority, the legitimate power to define bounded domains of reality'. Like *Candle Cove*, *The Onion* claims that *Lidsville's* 'poor puppetry and cheap special effects contributed to the show's queasy, disorienting feel'. *The Onion* piece (Anon. 2000) brings in fake psychologist Deborah Kreutz, who informs us that 'approximately 40 million Americans were exposed to this show as children', and calls the viewership 'a mass, televised trauma whose psychological ramifications continue to weigh heavily on our collective national psyche'. That the *Onion* piece registers as humorous marks Kreutz' claim about the collective psychic weight of disturbing puppet programmes as applicable to our society as it is hers: we laugh because we know that terror, and we share because we know that our friends know too.

These networked spaces that connect laughs and screams – *The Onion* piece, the imagined networked web forum, and the real network web forum – are the same spaces that give rise to 'Candle Cove'. Creepypasta is a narrative phenomenon of the network, and its aesthetic is informed by that platform. Patrick Jagoda (2016: 3) defines network aesthetics as a way of sensing and grasping 'the complex of material infrastructures and metaphorical figures that inform our experience with and our thinking about the contemporary social world'. 'Network aesthetics [...] seek to defamiliarize and make networks sensible' according to Jagoda (2016: 5), and creepypasta aids in that defamiliarization by illuminating the darker side of net nostalgia. Where that dark side becomes diffuse though, is at the realization that networks 'are accessible only at the edge of our sensibilities', especially since 'a network is never a static structure, even as network graphs, maps, or visualizations might sometimes suggest a fixed form' (Jagoda 2016: 8). So all the subject/object negotiations of creepypasta are atomized into the distributed nature of the network, and therefore creepypasta as a genre and form are shaped by that shapelessness. The pirates and puppets of this creepypasta are ultimately effective in their deconstruction of the sanctity of the subject because of 'Candle Cove's' embodiment of digitally networked communities, the very spaces which gave rise to 'Candle Cove' to begin with. Skyshale033 weaves a network with fellow *Candle Cove* viewers to make sense of her mixed nostalgia and anxiety around the show, but that her anxieties around the show were *always* a part of a network is ultimately the source of its horror. Skyshale033's position as the subforum's creator is not so different from that of the creepypasta's creator, Kris Straub; both creators bring the text of their analysis into a public network where community engagement with that text (*Candle Cove* and 'Candle Cove', respectively), illuminates the text's horrific shattering of the Subject position. The tendency for the creepypasta wiki to scavenge dark digital material from strange corners of the Internet becomes crucial context for understanding the story: because it is presented as a forum, it very well may *be* a forum – an actual conversation in cyberspace lifted out of context for its morbid conclusion in the manner that we will see that 'BEN Drowned' was lifted and preserved from 4chan.

'Candle Cove's' opening line certainly suggests this reading, claiming positioning for its provenance in the very real-sounding site 'NetNostalgia Forum – Television (local)'. Many real-world (but not entirely non-diegetic) commenters, even after this specific pasta's creator has come forth, are still entirely unaware that the thread is not real, some even insisting themselves that *they* remember watching *Candle Cove* as a child. 'The worst part is Candle Cove was a real show not even joking', claims user MinecraftMan1234 (2016) in the comments beneath the initial post. 'Its almost like i can remember it. even though i wasnt alive in the 70s' claims user NootleSoup (2015), and Meisi5012 (2015) replies 'Same with me! I feel like I can remember it and I wasn't even alive then either'. User Pookie Bear's (2015) dark post mars the comment section with the grim permanence of a roadside memorial: 'I'm so confused i havent finsh watching the video but can someone please tell me, Is this a real show or am I seeing staic? By the way i'm 12 years old', the user writes, a foreboding '(USER WAS BANNED FOR THIS POST)' following it up in blood-red. It remains unclear whether Pookie is a legitimate 12-year old removed for not meeting the age requirements, a prankster looking to cash in on Kris Straub's fun by convincing other posters he is another victim, a parodist mocking the habit of young users to announce their age online, or (who knows) a *real* victim of the *Candle Cove* curse. What is clear is that they are neither author nor reader, subject or object. They are 'folded into nonhumans', as Latour puts it, and they assert for themselves a place in the story as an actant composed of a username, an avatar, an assumed persona, a human body (or bodies), a set of narrative rules provided by *Candle Cove*, and a host of other nonhuman (and perhaps human) entities (Latour 1999: 189). All of these disparate elements are folded into an assemblage that energizes the amorphous, networked narrative of 'Candle Cove'. Pookie Bear's networked involvement enacts Patrick Jagoda's (2016: 5) claim that 'new media forms [...] offer new vistas for apprehending networks by inviting people to play with, alter, and experience them from the inside'. This altering-from-the-inside happens time and again, both within spaces officially sanctioned for 'Candle Cove' and without: user XaxtonRevolution (2015) asks 'So does the camera zoom in while The Laughing stock is talking or while it's NOT talking?' and StarCounter (2015) provides an ekphrastic clarification: 'It's like this: *zooms in a bit* YOU HAVE [...] *zooms in* [...] TO GO [...] *zoom in* INSIDE [...] Much like mike_painter65, Skyshale033 and Jaren_2005, the posters in this thread are here to piece together the elusive narrative of a show that both exists and has never existed. The energy which varying non-authorial actants bring to the story propels it forward: hundreds of visual representations (comics, filmed episodes, fanfiction prose) pepper any cursory Internet search for 'Candle Cove'. Straub matched this surge of 'Candle Cove' fan-narratives with a short story collection and an annotative YouTube video, while the SYFY channel commissioned a six-episode arc in its anthology series *Channel Zero* that reimagines 'Candle Cove' as a longform narrative. 'Candle Cove' becomes a crowd sourced franchise unanchored from any corporation – it drifts captainless across a digital sea, moved by a number of actants approaching infinity so fast that it may as well be moved by nothing.

HORROR AFTER GAME OVER IN 'BEN DROWNED'

While 'Candle Cove' brings an imaginary franchise to life by plugging it into a very real digital network through creepypasta, many examples of networked horror engage more explicitly with pre-existing franchises. The fond memories

that readers, viewers, and players cherish with these games are ripe, after all, with nostalgia to be fermented into fear. One of the more common genres of creepypasta is the 'haunted software' story, in which a digital file, software application, or, most frequently, a video game is possessed by (or is itself) a demonic entity. Will Wiles ties creepypasta's preoccupation with digital technology into an increasingly networked life 'daily coloured by fear of infection and corruption' that inevitably begs us to ask the questions: '[w]hat if something dark is able to breach that all-important final firewall, the gap between the central processing unit and the person sitting at the keyboard?' and '[w]hat if it already has?' Creepypasta such as 'BEN Drowned', the best known example of the 'haunted software' genre, ask us to think that it *has*. Wiles suggests that 'creepypasta is ahead of a good deal of high art and literature' in its versatile exploration of a hypersaturation of networked media, and we would add that creepypasta has a certain edge on much academic work as well in its fascination with actor-network theory (which is present even if it is dressed in a vernacular that is not Latour's language). Videogame scholar and economist Edward Castronova (2005: 22) for example, opts for the term 'synthetic world' to describe video game networks, a term which he describes as 'any computer-generated physical space, represented graphically in three dimensions, that can be experienced by many people at once' – but his arsenal of synthetic worlds is tied up only in video games that feature overt involvement with MMORPGs. This definition of a 'synthetic world' closes out the possibility of networks created outside of multiplayer videogames, privileging only the most obvious interactions between human subjects and other human subjects. It fails to acknowledge networks created outside of a subject-object dichotomy (within videogames and without), and it closes out the productive work that metagaming can perform to cultivate these more democratic networks. Consider what Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux (2017: 98) point out in *Metagaming* – that 'videogames, like all digital media, are built upon mechanical, electrical, and computational processes that inform, yet operate outside human experience', and it is the metagame that usually attempts to acknowledge that non-human register. Boluk and Lemieux (2017: 2) define a metagame as that which 'ruptures the logic of the game, escaping the formal autonomy of both ideal rules and utopian play via those practical and material factors not immediately enclosed within the game as we know it'. While 'BEN Drowned' is clearly a metagame of sorts in the ways it draws upon the material support of a popular videogame before it as digital palimpsest, we could argue that critics like Castranova are simply playing the most common metagame there is: what Boluk and LeMieux (2017: 280) call the 'standard metagame' that ignores the fact that videogames are not purely games but technological media that limit play to particular mechanics. For Castranova to give himself over to a synthetic world that only privileges subject relations, he must ignore much of the material that often function 'beyond the domain of human phenomenology' (Boluk and LeMieux 2017: 280). 'BEN Drowned' instead explores a sinister world quite like our own that clashes with non-human systems in a frightening framework of haunted objects.

'BEN Drowned' is a creepypasta and alternate reality game created by Alex Hall that feeds off the unsettling classic N64 game *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*. Understanding how the parasitic creepypasta 'BEN Drowned' operates requires an understanding of the already horrific game its premise is grafted onto. *Majora's Mask* is a sequel to the wildly successful and nostalgically adored *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, and it picks up with that

game's hero, Link, who is searching for the missing Navi (the fairy who serves as a navigational aid from *Ocarina*). After being attacked by 'Skull Kid', a friend of Link's who has fallen under the influence of the demonic entity 'Majora's Mask', Link stumbles into the land of Termina, an unsettling fantasy kingdom populated by exact doppelgangers of characters from *Ocarina*. With Majora's Mask manipulating him, Skull Kid plunges Termina into chaos, bringing a red-eyed, semi-anthropomorphized moon crashing down from the skies in 72 hours' time. With the ability to manipulate time, Link must continuously relive the final three days of Termina's existence until he has gathered the necessary tokens and treasures to stop the moon's collision with the world and to defeat Majora's Mask.

Even before 'BEN Drowned', *Majora's Mask* was predestined to become the kind of game that would lead players to declare, like 'Candle Cove' poster Jaren_2005 (Straub 2009), 'I can't believe what they let us [play] back then'. *Ocarina of Time*, for all of its innovation as a game, was a simple narrative about fighting a cardboard villain and saving a princess. *Majora's Mask*, on the other hand, rendered *Ocarina's* nostalgic visuals nightmarish. The owner of the 'Happy Mask Shop' from *Ocarina* become an inter-dimensional traveller collecting tortured souls in his masks, and Link's face contorted in gruesome fashion as he donned these masks and took the form of the dead. Even the magical songs players performed in *Ocarina* were swapped out for tunes like the 'Elegy of Emptiness', which created frozen, ghostly doubles of a creepily photorealistic Link. The game's primary use of these statuesque Links was to weigh down broken switches, an eerie reminder of their physical weight and presence. Visually overlaying all of these horrors, *Majora's Mask* taunted young players with the always-looming clock on the screen, which ticked away every second until Armageddon. Timeless summer afternoons of playing *Ocarina of Time* were no longer possible; *Majora's Mask* fixed nostalgia mercilessly into ever-moving time.

What makes the creepiness of the *Zelda* series' most unorthodox entry even creepier is the player's role in Link's darker-than-usual quest against the clock. It is not just Link collecting and channelling angry spirits through unsettling masks; the player participates in the play through Link as avatar. Just as the subtly disturbing statues created by Link playing the Elegy of Emptiness uncannily double Link's image back to him, the interactor channelling Link's avatar as a 64-bit mask of their own doubles Link as well. Consider the creator of the franchise Shigeru Miyamoto's explanation of the protagonist's name Link: 'We named the protagonist Link because he connects people together [...] Link came from his role as a connector, but Link is you, the player' (quoted in Osborne 2014: 4). Players are therefore 'Linked' to the avatar and to his materially commanded actions. The Link-player actant becomes what Gretchen Papazian (2010: 454) calls the 'fourth person' that which 'breaks through that fourth wall, messing with time and space' and which collapses 'the narrator-narratee relationship into the plural "we"'. Sterling Anderson Osborne suggests that this linking motif of the *Zelda* series is exponentialized in *Majora's Mask* through the titular prop of the mask. This game and its mechanics reveal, he argues, just how culturally formed the *Zelda* series is, as *Majora's Mask* in particular draws heavily on the Japanese tradition of Noh theatre and its themes of connection between human and spiritual planes. *Majora's Mask* mines sacred Japanese histories and hallowed childhood nostalgias for newly sinister associations, and creepypasta overtly transforms these bits into the bitmap of the network's

dark side. For our argument to come, that liminal space between human and spirit, known and unknown, gives way to horror once 'BEN Drowned' makes the technology itself the gateway to malevolent rather than mystic forces beyond human subjectified understanding. But before the creepy game becomes the catastrophic metagame, Osborne tells us how Nintendo's technology plays a more constructive role in experiences of its foremost flagship franchise. For example, 'During certain cut-scenes, clever placement of the in-game camera makes of the television a mirror into which the player may gaze at their avatar staring back at him or her' which 'suggest the experience of the Noh actor who gazes at his masked face in the theater dressing room [...] in order to blend his personality with that of the spirit inhabiting the mask' (2014: 5). Therefore, whether within or outside of the game, *Majora's Mask* depicts through ludic fantasy the more unsettling side of Noh and its 'traditional Japanese views of the world as a sacred space, alive with spirits which inhabit various objects and places and with whom the living individual is obliged to interact' (Osborne 2014: 2). But what happens when that space and its objects intersect the network and become far more sinister than sacred? To answer in both past and present tense: 'BEN Drowned'.

Far away from the halls of Noh theatre and the Japanese countryside of Miyamoto's childhood that inspired him to create *The Legend of Zelda* are the domestic spaces of the western home where children play their videogames. And there are the college dorm rooms where those adolescents look back nostalgically on and attempt to relive the days of their gaming youth. 'BEN Drowned' begins at such a nostalgic juncture when 4chan user Jadusable (who would later be revealed as a fictional character portrayed by 'BEN Drowned' author Alex Hall) begins a thread on the /x/ board relaying how his troubles started with a hand-me-down Nintendo 64 console and a sharpie-marked yard sale copy of *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*. Remarking upon the authorial decentring of anonymous usernames and fact-fiction playfulness that defines creepypasta like 'BEN Drowned', Wiles (2013) states, 'creepypasta has an eerie air of having arisen from nowhere', just as the infected copy of *Majora's Mask* Jadusable materializes amid the domestic residues of a vague Yard Sale whose proprietor ultimately disappears without a trace. The domesticating function of the yard sale as an innocuous exorcism of a past turned into clutter becomes the inciting incident of a tale of nightmarish nostalgia. At first, Jadusable only notes minor anomalies in the shifty game cartridge: a few textures seem to be missing here and there, and NPCs occasionally refer to him by the name 'BEN', the moniker of the other Save File occupying one of *Majora's Mask's* two file slots, and, presumably, the name of the cartridge's previous (deceased?) owner. From the beginning, 'BEN Drowned' preoccupies itself with those elements of *Majora's Mask* that bring it out of closed conceptions of gaming and into metagaming – into networked play in a networked world, and cultivates them as sources of horror. Boluk and LeMieux (2017: 54) claim that 'Nintendo's console games are designed to exist as islands, isolated from social networks', and while it may be fair to say they were designed by their human players towards such an effect, the effect is never quite achieved. The two most obvious bridges jutting off *Majora's Mask's* 'island' come in the form of the human-nonhuman interactions the game demands, and in the interplay between players that both its basic parameters and glitches within those parameters permit.

Grounding the human-nonhuman interactions that 'BEN Drowned' will eventually explore, *Majora's Mask* was one of three games made for the *Nintendo 64* that required a hardware modification called the 'Expansion Pak',

and, of those three games, outsold the next highest-selling (*Perfect Dark*) by 3.8 million copies at a grand total of seven million. The crucial Expansion Pak (NUS-007) increased the N64's RAM capacity and improved its graphics, and it required players to physically open their consoles and replace the Jumper Pak (NUS-008) using the included 'Expansion Pak Removal Tool' (NUS-102). The process was tricky; Reddit threads as recent as 2016 feature posters asking for advice and recommending spoons and butter knives as substitute tools. As a metagame, the process prompted young players, in many ways, to cease thinking of the N64 as a cohesive blackbox, but instead as a network of parts that could be explored, interacted with, and even surgically modified to perform play. It was, in other words (as we can personally attest) the first exposure of millions of child players to these game systems as something other than nostalgically enchanted bricks that brought games to life, but as networks of actants in themselves. As a very literal black box, the N64, like many game systems, underwent 'blackboxing', which Latour (1999: 183) defines as 'a process that makes the joint production of actors and artifacts entirely opaque'. Boluk and LeMieux (2017: 9) echo Latour and apply the metaphor of the blackbox to gaming in general when they explain how, 'videogames blackbox not only nonhuman processes but also human activity – the ideological avatar of play masks the metagame'. Therefore as a total subversion of this unquestioning attitude towards closed systems, Jadusable's metagame requires a host of technology and materials that goes far beyond one blackbox: he illustrates the physicality of the bootlegged cartridge (in the 'standard grey color', unlike the iconically gold *Majora's Mask*), inherits one yellow controller (clearly lacking the history of a basic grey or a transparent purple), purchases two two-dollar controllers while garage sailing (was he hoping to lure friends over?), picks up cheap copies of *Goldeneye* and *F-Zero*, journals with a 4chan board where he will record his eerie findings, and records his bizarre experience with video capture technology. With this network of materials that bear obvious nostalgia for millions of millennials, Jadusable performs a more elaborate incarnation of the Expansion Pak ritual in his metagame, unknowingly positioning himself as one decentralized agent in the network that makes the nostalgic and dangerous game possible.

Jadusable's actions dramatize the networked play that glitching and cross-pollination between files permits. Emily Crawford (2017: 1) calls the genre – of which 'BEN Drowned' is creepypasta's exemplar – 'glitch horror', or 'horror media that exploits anxieties surrounding the fallibility of technology'. She even helpfully suggests that, 'There is a connection between video game nostalgia and glitch culture' for 'glitches and technical flaws [...] [become] a part of gaming culture' and its histories (Crawford 2017: 9). 'Glitches can expand the experience of play' Crawford (2017: 9) continues, 'and even take on mythic roles, such as in the case of the "4th day glitch", an error that players can manipulate for extra time before the in-game narrative cycle resets, that Jadusable references in 'BEN Drowned', that glitch he remembers from childhood playthroughs but now betrays him in this possessed version. The trouble really begins when Jadusable enacts the 4th day glitch and enters where game designers did not intend for players to access. Thinking that deleting the BEN file will stop NPCs from misidentifying him by the name of the previous owner of the game cartridge Jadusable is horrified to learn that his copy of the game is not speaking to BEN or the avatar Link, but to Jadusable himself: the fourth person who is Link-as-Jadusable. The game, seemingly haunted by the malignant presence of BEN's networked ghost, takes him where he didn't

intend now and begins to play with him: it steals the player's power to travel at will and warps Jadasable's fourth person avatar into violent encounters with a glitchy Skull Kid and grim Happy Mask Salesman. Crawford (2017: 7) reasons that these transports aren't that different from other games' mechanics, even though 'Jadasable marks these as aberrant, illogical events, because they don't follow "what's supposed to happen" in the game'. The logic of 'supposed to' (which Crawford (2017: 7) calls a 'flawed logic') and its reassurance of security operates on assumptions of how objects should (or shouldn't) act. Glitch horror plays on 'gamers' collective anxieties about the restrictions of digital game technology', according to Crawford (2017: 2), but it might be more accurate to say it upsets their sense of safety wrapped in those restrictions.

All the while, the macabre Link statue produced by the 'Elegy of Emptiness' begins to stalk Jadasable-Link across the realm, warping behind him and watching, even as Jadasable tries to escape. It does not take long for Jadasable to abandon any notion that the game is isolated to its contained world: at the Link statue's first appearance, Jadasable writes

[...] the screen flashed for a brief moment of the Happy Mask Salesman smiling at me not Link – me with Skull Kid's scream playing in the background and when the screen returned I was staring at the Link Statue from playing the song Elegy of Emptiness.

(2010)

It is the Link Statue's intrusion that marks the shattering of an illusory subject-object relationship with the game; the uncanny statue with its 'shit-eating grin' mocks the doubling player in the shape of the avatar, reminding us we are not as human as we think we are. As if struck by the horror of a challenge to his subject position, Jadasable (2010) tells us '[...] Link turned to face my screen, standing upright mirroring the statue, looking at me along with his copy. Literally staring at me'. Jadasable's screen capture corroborates his recollection of Link's challenge. We see in wildly authentic graphic reproduction that Link stands at the right hand of his statue and turns to face the player like a mismatched mirror, reminding the player Jadasable that he can see the nonhumans folded into himself with an honest look at his reflection. Jadasable (2010) concludes this incident with the claim that 'whatever was left of the 4th wall was completely shattered while I ran out of the dojo terrified'.

Strangely compelled to continue the horrific game, Jadasable continues to play and post his progress for the increasingly concerned 4chan community. He begins to see the statue outside of the conventional game space of *Majora's Mask*, reporting 'he's following me now, not just in the game [...] I see him all the time, behind my back, just watching me'. After an abrupt post by Jadasable's roommate, who assures readers that Jadasable is safe, but has skipped town, a fourth video, 'Jadasable.wmv' appears. It closes with Link and the Link Statue merging definitively, and the text 'Please [...] help me [...]' appears, as if Jadasable were lodged in the game. In a final entry – a text file uploaded by Jadasable's roommate at his request that turns out to be Jadasable's diary – it is revealed that connecting the N64 video capture to his computer connected Ben into a wider network, infected his laptop, and manipulated the video uploads players have been watching. He laments that he was 'the genius who picked to live in a single', in the post that immediately succeeds his alleged roommate's comments, hinting that Ben has meddled with forum posts too. Jadasable theorizes that 'just watching them [his videos]

on youtube/reading my text won't be able to allow him to spread', but he is woefully wrong. The final text of the story rings of a disturbing ambiguity now that we're aware Ben has the ability to manipulate not just the game *Majora's Mask*, but the metagame that is encapsulated by 'BEN Drowned'.

Lastly, thank you for taking the time to open this and open yourselves up to me by hearing my story, despite maybe not believing me. You didn't have to do that – really, you shouldn't have. Your support this entire time has kept me going and now I am finally free of this.

The reader realizes all too late that they actually *shouldn't have*. They have fallen into the same trap that Jadasable has by making themselves a part of 'BEN Drowned': assuming they are safe in the position of Subject, and subsequently inserting themselves into a metagame that they cannot escape. Later that day, the Jadasable YouTube channel uploads a video called 'Free.wmv', in *Majora's Mask* text that says 'I'm glad you did that', and is repeated several times. As participants (think) they move forward from the networked horror yarn of 'BEN Drowned' and go about our daily lives, perhaps those who stuck through 'BEN Drowned' to the end remember Ben's warning to Jadasable, 'I wonder how you would have reacted [...] If I hadn't revealed myself and stayed hidden, only doing little things to play with you. Close out your windows, turn off your computer, move your mouse by itself. Little things'. Ben's words prompt participants in 'BEN Drowned' – readers, viewers, creators, modders, players and posters alike – that whenever we are part of a network, we are always playing 'BEN Drowned' (after all, we certainly waited with bated breath for tech problems to resolve themselves while writing this article). If we are playing 'BEN Drowned' when we are part of a network, then participants would be justified to ask themselves: when are they *not* part of a network? When are they not connected to an ensemble of nonhumans and humans that shape them?

CONCLUSION

We cannot guess an answer to this question other than 'we are always part of that network of nonhumans'. It seems, unfortunately for the characters of our creepypastas, that escape from their aggressors is impossible. Ben will always rope you into playing his game, because even putting the controller down is a move in that game. Skin-Taker will never need to skin you to take away your skin – he sliced it away with his marionette strings by showing you the skin was never *you*, that there was never a *you* for the skin to delineate – and he performed the surgery the moment you envisioned him. Nostalgia for a time when we thought we were subjects is only ever bait for these network-haunted horrors. Some horror icons can be beaten, but not these. Most movie monsters can be clobbered with their own machetes, staved off with garlic, or lured into the sunlight. The monsters we fear defy resistance. They wield the earth-shattering ability to topple the standard arrangement of subject and object, and they proudly redistribute agency, the alleged birthright of humans, to computer chips, digital demons and felt-people. We do not stand a chance against these horrors. The utter terror that petrifies readers and the raw and euphoric catharsis that makes that petrification pleasurable drives most horror, and this duo of affective responses intermingles with the inevitability of the subject's defeat in networked horror. These chilling stories would not tempt

participation though, if they did not promise cathartic fun – readers will surely have fun with ‘Candle Cove’ and ‘BEN Drowned’, even if they lose some sleep in the process. But this catharsis’ other side will always be present: the terror of being *caught*. Perhaps it would scramble our subject status, redefining us as something that is not human. Or maybe we would simply die. Does Ben catch Jadusable, dragging him into a digital dungeon so that he might drown in non-humanity and become what Ben is? Does Skin-Taker catch Skyshale033 and her peers in an omnidirectional net of static, unsure who and what can network with their minds? Being caught means *we* will not survive, or so one might guess – but it also means questioning what it means to be a *we* or a *one*. The creepypasta, then, leaves us with one viable option outside of futile resistance to the violent death of our sacrosanct status as subject. Perhaps we might try letting the object-monsters catch us, even if it is only to find out what it means to be caught.

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