The Digital Campfire: Interactive Horror Storytelling and Web 2.0

In telling a story, one must aspire to create a *world* first, a context in which the emotions and ideas the work contains can be properly understood by the audience. In a traditional piece of literature or film, this is limited to establishing setting, character relationships, and a driving conflict, all of which will play off each-other to bring intended themes to light. Successful genre fiction in particular exemplifies the process, as a pursuit of very singular reactions—thrills, chills, or laughter—infuses every sentence or framing angle. Today, the social sharing networks and openly-editable internet pages which characterize "Web 2.0" have allowed textual and audiovisual storytelling to merge with videogames, computer programs, and other interactive digital media. Mainstream application of such collaborative traits has so far been devoted to transmedia "viral marketing," where a series of fake materials such as websites, news broadcasts, and posters are dispersed by the producers to foster a stronger sense of involvement with the narrative.

Yet exclusive to smaller online communities, behind the scenes of members-only message boards and literary subculture blogs, are narratives which not only alter under direct audience input but are structured as though the fictional stakes are real, and one's continued investment will have a legitimate bearing on the piece's progress. Most intriguing is the particular genre which dominates this field: independent horror stories. The reason is simple enough—horror's chief purpose is to frighten, an effect intensified by making the story more personal and realistic. Also, the internet is historically populated predominantly by young males, many of whom who grew up watching films such as 1998's *The Blair Witch Project* (which combined documentary-style "found footage" cinematography with an online campaign designed to make it seem like the "Blair Witch" was a real legend) and wanted to try their hand at the craft with a new generation of technology.

But uncertainties remain: which models and media combinations are most effective in not only producing something frightening, but getting people interested in the narrative to start with? Can the

techniques which produce these narratives sustain themselves in mainstream corporate media, or are

the internet and "indie" projects their sole domain? Must a demarcation of "author" and "audience" still

be drawn—or at least gestured at—if an internally-consistent (linear) story is desired? The following

essay will provide a tentative answer to these questions through an analysis of three digital horror

narratives that are dramatic evolutions of traditional storytelling. It closes with the study of a

comparable number of Hollywood films, to consider how the industry's attempts at narrative

engagement reflect the mainstream potential of internet-enabled interactive fiction.

The SCP Foundation: *The Wiki as a Multimedia Medium*

> "The idea that there is no canon is a bit silly at times. It's not that we don't have any. It's that we have a
> multitude which touch, cross, and dip into each other. It's up to you, as the reader, to decide what you
> believe and what you embrace as the heart of the universe. That doesn't mean, though, that authors lack
> intent or design, and collaboration is the heart of innovation."

So reads the introductory text for the "Canon Hub" section of a website titled "The SCP

Foundation" (scp-wiki.wikidot.com) established in 2008, and the links which follow beckon towards a

cavalcade of horror/fantasy tales: "They Will Leave Us with a Shaken Earth," "Prelude: A Terminus,"

and others scroll into view as one moves down the minimalistic, red-on-white page. These stories have

many authors (under such pseudonyms as "Jekeled" and "Zyn"), and all of them are based in "shared

universes." They sound like some kind of fanfiction—stories composed of characters or worlds

designed by another writer, such as *Harry Potter* or *Dragonball*—but these stories are not based on any

film, book, or videogame. In the reversal of a longstanding norm both online and off—dedicated

archives of information on actors or installments from a given media property—the basis for these

stories is the website itself.

Indeed, these works are a mere side attraction, for the "The SCP Foundation" proper claims to

be the online database of a covert international organization whose mission is to "Secure, Contain, and

Protect" aliens, monsters, and other unearthly phenomena from humanity. Doubtless, the Foundation's mythos owes a debt to a few pop cultural giants—the *Men in Black* and *Hellboy* franchises come to mind—but its scares nevertheless stem from collaborative storytelling supported by three factors: a selective editing model, freedom of modification and reappropriation, and metafictional composition. Its central "text" encompasses a list of over 1,500 separate articles, each of which details a different "SCP." Their variety is staggering, ranging from a spider that feeds on shadows to a virus which causes computers to explode, yet these fantastical files are portrayed with the structure of a Wikipedia entry and the clinical rigor of a scientific experiment: the size, supernatural properties, and "containment procedures" of each entry are dutifully logged as "Safe," "Euclid," or "Keter." In isolation, virtually any one of these files could suffice as experimental fiction, a piece of truncated faux-documentary analogous to the *Blair Witch Project*, which casts an air of grave realism over an unreal subject. However, it is only after reading two, three, and then a dozen more entries that the "world" of the Foundation comes into focus; the page for an SCP may reference the aid of a "Mobile Task Force," while a particularly dangerous one will include addenda from "O-5 Command." Other pages divulge shady practices of the Foundation; among them: the employment of criminals as "D-Class" guinea pigs, the use of amnesiac drugs, and its agents' regular conflicts with the paranormal antiquities dealer *Marshall, Carter, and Darke, Ltd*.

Just as these fictional classified documents must be read in bunches to understand the SCP Foundation "canon," so too must its significance be understood as the result of a collective creative endeavor. To fully comprehend this uniqueness on a textual level, a definition of the *wiki*—and its distinction from other forms of online data creation and sharing—must first be established. As Karen Weingarten and Corey Frost explain in "Authoring Wikis":

> "[A] wiki is an online platform that allows many users to create and edit a simple webpage or several linked pages... [and] posts are not ordered chronologically. Instead, the entire text of the wiki is constantly being revised and updated... any user can edit information posted by any other user" (48).

Weingarten and Frost go on to position wikis as "a collaborative chorus"—as opposed to a connection formed between discrete, individual authors on a blog, which amounts to "an online dialogue of distinct voices." The SCP Foundation fits this criteria perfectly: not only are newly-written entries—organized from 001 to 1999, with a colloquial title for each—frequently cataloged out of sequence (available slots bear a coy "[ACCESS DENIED]"), but all entries can be renamed or replaced as the site's community deems appropriate. In other cases, links between entries extend beyond sharing the same website; cross-testing or connections between certain SCPs are presented as another common occurrence, creating further mysteries that must be explored via hyperlinks to their respective pages.

Ultimately, it is the definitions of "user" and "information" which most distinguish the site, for unlike Wikipedia, the intent of The SCP Foundation is not to educate but entertain. Those who hope to craft or modify articles must register with an administrator and prove through a brief exercise both their competence in text formatting via the wiki engine and comprehension of the Foundation's tone, terminology, and "protocol." The site is fairly helpful in this regard, though, with an ever-present sidebar which breaks the fourth wall to proffer a "Guide to Newbies," "How To Write An SCP," and "Join the Site!" By preventing any random internet passerby from defacing an acclaimed entry (a ranking system does exist; "Top Rated" and "Lowest Rated" pages are readily accessible from the homepage) and still making the only bar to admission a display of dedication and skill, the Foundation invites collaboration, but only from those committed to its creative goals. In essence, the site becomes an evolution of the horror anthology—except that textual integration is accomplished directly by the author, and peer editing can continue long after the "Submit Changes" button has been clicked.

But with close to 6,000 registered members and a comparatively slim one hundred or so regular contributors (according to the official registry), can the already tenuous narrative threads of the Foundation sustain a collectively sinister air? The answer lies in the many ways the site's "personnel"

expand on media and pop culture while still generating a wholly independent entity. For example, many SCP entries are accompanied by a photograph, an addition which bolsters authenticity but also illuminates the multiplicity of creative starting points the format affords. Some are photomanipulations an author has personally adjusted, or creepy pictures adopted from an external horror-themed website; others are of art installations or natural wonders, presented out of context. Still other entries display a mundane object, to which they ascribe supernatural properties (for instance, SCP-443, "Thought-Streaming Crayons," is represented as a seemingly unremarkable Crayola box).

Although some SCPs are too fantastical to be believably illustrated, the wiki's members and staff embrace the potential of preexisting pictures to be reappropriated, as evidenced by the "Visual Records" section, a library of peculiar objects that have yet to be formally classified and "may be included freely... in Foundation documents." To nudge the effort along, contributors without the time or wherewithal to produce a full article will complement these orphaned images with captions; as of this writing, a picture of a cardboard box with a smiling face cut into the surface, subtitled "E-129 attempting to interact with photographer," awaits further study. Sometimes, though, it is not just an image which provides the basis for an entry, but "real" mythology, religion, or mysteries. That is, as opposed to SCP-1104 (a crab which lays eggs in the human nose—inspired by the life cycle of some insects, but lacking any direct cultural referent), SCP-169 is the legendary Leviathan, and SCP-1000 is Bigfoot. On the other hand, certain "original" entries do carry over from popular culture; the most renowned article on the site, SCP-173, is about a killer statue which can only move when no-one is looking—a concept lifted from the Weeping Angels of the *Doctor Who* TV series. Still, taken altogether, the universe of The SCP Foundation is one in which the deities and demons of every religion exist, mad scientists are in plentiful supply, and any inanimate object could be cursed—an incomparably rich creative ground which gives every new entry that much more to build upon and reference.

However, the most freedom offered by the Foundation comes from its handling of space and time, both in a (meta)fictional context and as a product of the wiki engine. In the case of space, numerous SCPs are portals to parallel dimensions, which expands the potential pool of articles to virtual infinity, as concepts which contradict history or science can be said to have come from "another world." This acknowledgment is a particular boon to the Canon Hub, which is divided into subsections focusing on everything from an alternate universe where a matriarchy rules Antarctica to a post-apocalyptic Earth. In the case of time, the conceit that the Foundation has existed for centuries and is always securing new items is directly connected to the process of communal updating—a reader who visited the site in 2012 would be able to learn about SCPs "discovered" from the late 19th century to the present, but would have to had come back recently to learn of SCP-1393, which was discovered on February 15, 2013. "Addenda" will also appear on an SCP if dramatic "new" events regarding it come to light, in some cases necessitating a strikethrough of previous data to officially honor it (these can also be included with a new SCP to produce the appearance of prior research).

Both of these characteristics combine to shape some of the most entertaining and intriguing entries: "Memetic" SCPs, with the ability to manipulate one's mental state. This capacity can manifest on the level of a perspective (SCP-426 is a toaster which compels everyone to discuss it in first-person) or literary style (SCP-931, an ancient rice bowl, forces people to communicate in haiku) which deviates from the formal wiki layout. Meanwhile, some entries tease at a riveting story by what they *don't* say; SCP-048 is vacant because "objects given to this designation tend to be lost, destroyed, decommissioned [or] stolen" and SCP-055 is assumed to be extremely dangerous because its memetic influence prevents *any* knowledge from being formed about it. "One view is that of writing being about form, conventions, and correctness; however, the other view is... about function, communication, and message" (Black 414), and when the message is "be afraid," uniformity can take a backseat to customized chaos. By imposing the importance of a standard cataloging protocol across so many other

pages, the authors of these offbeat entries embrace and then immediately abandon the structural glue

which binds their efforts—and ironically, the Foundation becomes all the more eerie and creative for it.

In another bold reversal of wiki conventions, a lack of transparency and specificity is the chief

boon to The SCP Foundation's (metafictional) spooky stability. Virtually every entry obscures some

information about its subject—whether it be the date and location of its possession, a mode of attack, or

a memetic effect which would supposedly endanger the reader—with the phrase "[REDACTED]" or

"[DATA EXPUNGED]", or hypertext blackout blocks. The effect is in keeping with a top-secret

persona—where numerous levels of authorization exist, and secrecy is right there in the title—but it

also benefits the faux-authenticity which nurtures the site's interactivity. With names of Agents,

witnesses, and towns removed, who could prove an SCP *doesn't* exist, or that one event contradicts that

of a different entry? Also, with horror in mind again, there are cases where not knowing precisely what

happened to somebody after their brush with a nasty SCP is scarier than an explicit report. Not that the

reader is always relegated to the bottom of a classified ladder, for another remarkable interactive

element comes from how a number of SCPs contain nested subsections: in coming across the header

"Incident I.J77.82" or "LEVEL 3 CLEARANCE REQUIRED," one must decide whether to click and

expand, or leave well enough alone (But really, who could resist knowing the *real* reason Sasquatch is

deadly?). The site therefore has not only an extensively interconnected "network" structure, but also

that of the branching "sea anemone" detailed by Marie-Laure Ryan, where "the reader can bring a

magnifying glass to certain parts of the story without losing sight of the whole" (40). Even though their

site is deliberately fictional, The SCP Foundation's community actively embraces the wiki's strengths.

So too does it mine the format's flaws for chills: ulterior motives, half-truths, and the subjective

nature of "reality" are themes which pervade the Foundation. For example, SCP-1184 (a ring which

causes anything the wearer says to be perceived as fact) and SCP-1237 (a brain wave which allows

dreams to alter the world) hint that our lives, like a bad Wikipedia article, may be made up of so many

illusions and disinformation. In other words, following in the tradition of horror films such as *The Blair Witch Project* and *The Ring*, the site's entries "imply, because of their emphasis on perceived threats to documentary authenticity, that... the Internet will undermine our grounds for interpretation and knowledge." (Tryon 40). Yet as with any dedicated online encyclopedia, a survey of SCP entries confirms that diverse knowledge is an invaluable resource: SCP-712's entry, for example, details a device which produces "impossible colors" with the precision of someone clearly educated in engineering, as the SCP-1859 entry (about secluded caverns where time moves faster) bespeaks an author well-versed in electromagnetic radiation. A modicum of scientific know-how may be all that's required for admission to the writers' crew, but standouts such as these demonstrate that just as false facts can damage an educational wiki, so too can scientific rigor make a freak show jump to life.

With all the effort put into this narrative world, does the Foundation have the potential to sustain a thriving collaborative structure outside the wiki? Certainly, "spin-offs" over time have not been limited to short stories: a prominent link to "Projects" reveals a card game, a "Choose Your Own Adventure" game (meta-interactive!), and an initiative to take the site's veneer further with "atmospheric PDFs," SCP entries converted to resemble typewritten documents. With this more directly collaborative work, though, stumbles also seem more evident; an "Inactive Projects" subsection shelters several tantalizing undertakings that either disinterest or a lack of focus have left spinning their wheels in the digital mud. One, a mock-up of the Foundation employee handbook, is "currently waiting for any persons willing to take out the time and effort," an admission which comes across as plaintive from a page that has not been updated in months. On the site's forum, a "Meta-Reality Projects" board collects threads aimed at "moving the SCP world into our world," and discussion abounds over the exciting possibility of an SCP Foundation film, or at least an official booth at a notable convention. Unfortunately, resources have so far been spread too thin for such grandiose goals to come to fruition, and only minor projects disseminated by artistic individuals have realized

their potential (e.g. Foundation warning stickers and posters to place in public places).

Whatever its mainstream ambitions, The SCP Foundation remains most productive when working solely within the element it has defined and refined: the faux-documentary wiki. Whole other chunks of the website are devoted to parodying that basic entry structure: for instance, Joke SCPs such as "Creepy Speedo Man" catalog humorous subjects with the same manner as a "legitimate" article, while a small "SCP-EX" section covers SCPs that have become "a complete non issue" (e.g. A dead time-traveler from the now-present). *Could* the Foundation ever enter popular culture? The site's accessibility, openness to diverse viewpoints, and thematic similarities to renowned entertainment properties hold great promise, but specific writing standards and a reliance on vague yet dense hyperlink narratives (as well as sometimes surreal or disturbing subject matter) means its work is not exactly cut out for it. Decreeing the standards of a successful wiki, Mandiberg *et al* say that "All edits are supposed to advance the collaborative goal... new articles are supposed to be on relevant topics... These are socially agreed upon contracts, and their fabric is always permeable. The strength of that fabric is the strength of the community." (55) The Foundation may have an immaculately-kept fabric for going on five years, but publicity and company ties require a sizeable level of collaboration; for the fans who have made the website what it is, there may be more fun in simply keeping things small. In a way, The SCP Foundation wiki becomes just like its bogus bureau: an amply-staffed yet virtually unknown repository of the mind-boggling, where cooperation is everything and sharp skills are the difference between life and death... or an entry on an evil wizard done in by too many comma splices.

The Slender Man: (Shared) Dreaming Up a Nightmare

> "[W]e didn't want to go, we didn't want to kill them [the children], but its persistent silence and outstretched arms horrified and comforted us at the same time . . ."

On June 10, 2009, the above text was posted by "Victor Surge" to a thread on the popular Something Awful online forums. Accompanying it were a pair of startling black-and-white

photographs: in the first, a small group of kids cavort about a playground slide, but in the shadow of a tree in the background stands a tall, thin figure with tentacles for arms. In the second, a procession of frightened teenagers move towards the camera—taking up the rear is a similar figure, what now looks to be a pale man in a suit with no face. Incidental text went on to claim that the former image's origins were unknown, but the latter was recovered from "the Stirling City Library blaze," which occurred on the same day in 1986 that "The Slender Man" was implicated in the disappearance of fourteen children.

In any other discussion, on any other website, this account would have been met with equal parts paranoia, skepticism, and cries of "Photoshop!" from members. Yet here, the response was one of swift and widespread eagerness, for the thread in question was titled "Create Paranormal Images." Started by the user "Gerogerigegege" on June 8, the thread issued a clear challenge: using Photoshop, alter a preexisting picture to produce fake evidence of the supernatural. The results would ideally be both off-putting and technically competent, and mere hours passed before pages were filling up with responses that fit both criteria. Initially, the collaborative fingerprints of the images were limited to an indirect two-step process: the original image (and whoever might have produced it), and then the final "paranormal" edit (sometimes, both were presented by the poster for comparison). When the Slender Man images appeared two days later, the community was electrified; whereas previous photos had leaned on familiar additions such as flying saucers and disembodied heads, Victor Surge was presenting what looked to be a seven-foot-tall, faceless, black-suited child-snatcher with tentacles. The combination of a comparatively ingenious character and a mysterious chopped narrative unofficially transformed "Create Paranormal Images" into "Create Slender Man Images."

For the next week, dozens of users responded to Victor Surge in chronological, individually-dated posts, but their output now centered around "new photographs, drawings, short fiction, and even wood cuttings showing [Slender Man's] appearance in different times and places" (Chess 375). A virtually unheard-of process had begun: the deliberate, collaborative formation of a horror story villain,

in a format which could later be precisely tracked over real time. Essentially, Chess argues in "Open-Sourcing Horror," the character's development became a venture akin to Open Source software, which the author defines as "cheap or free, [and] modifiable, involving distributed, voluntary labor" resulting in "voluntary participatory negotiations." Indeed, the collective resourcefulness and judgment of Something Awful members as they pruned and polished the Slender Man mythos throughout a multimedia series of narrative "chunks" was impressive (tentacles were deemed ostentatious by a majority, while the creature's business suit and blanched, featureless head were emphasized), but a couple of important preconditions contributed to this success. Like The SCP Foundation, the Something Awful forums have a minimal barrier to admission: a one-time $10 fee. Therefore, the message board maintains just enough security to block spam accounts and casual trolls from flooding threads with drivel, and moderators make a point of speedily banning those who slip through the cracks. Another factor is the creative pedigree of its members—"Something Awful" proper is a comedy website, one which showcases its members' oddball imaginations and computer skills in such weekly features as "Photoshop Phriday." Despite a reputation for juvenile and antisocial behavior, then, the site nonetheless fosters an environment ripe for collaborative construction of a deadly creature.

Enthusiasm and Photoshop chops could only take the Slender Man's development so far when confined to a single thread, though. Perhaps that was why on June 19—little over a week later—a user by the name of "ce gars" posted claiming that a friend had asked him to destroy a series of videotapes, before disappearing from town. To the members' anticipation, he uploaded the footage, and the resultant YouTube channel marked the point where the "acts of authoring, reading, and producing text converge[d] to create a profound and responsive system" (Higl 38). That system, an episodic found-footage video series known as *Marble Hornets*, took the collaborative background of Slender Man and turned it into a sprawling *interactive* narrative beyond the confines of "Create Paranormal Images." The first two installments hinted at the nonlinear plotting this implied: now going by "Jay," ce gars

introduced the tapes' backstory (*Marble Hornets* is the inconsequential title of a student film his friend,

Alex, was making) and claimed he was unable to determine the order of the footage—giving watchers

initiative to puzzle over the chronology of what followed. Then in "Entry #1," shaky footage of a dark

house is interrupted as Alex (behind the camera) pulls back a curtain to reveal a man in a suit sitting on

his porch bench. The figure turns—and has no face.

A frightening moment, to be sure—even if one has no knowledge of Slender Man—because

Marble Hornets' creepiness grew from a reimagining of its source material that allowed both passive

and active ways for viewers to feel involved in the narrative. For starters, Slender Man is never named

—the closest Jay or anyone else comes to directly referencing him is as "The Operator," after a symbol

resembling an oval with an "X" through it, a clue to the being (and series logo) in the same vein as *The*

Blair Witch Project's stick-figure. As the "Entries" accumulated, more compelling touches were added

to Slender Man: he can teleport, his presence produces distortions in videotape, and those "chosen" to

be stalked by him receive flulike symptoms or amnesia. All the while, the subscriber base was able to

post comments about the videos, some of which Jay would reply to "in character" regarding questions

about upcoming footage or perceived discrepancies. As the tapes attributed to Alex were exhausted and

Jay began to film his own ventures, gaps between uploads (attributable to the team's filming schedule)

mimicked real-time delays. Extended breaks were preceded by tense "season finales": in Entry #26, Jay

shared recent footage of Alex, from a package somebody sent to him. In it, Alex looks alive and well

with his girlfriend, but is still filming apprehensively; at the end, the camera turns, and Slender Man is

in his well-lit hallway. Several months passed before Entry #27, where Jay explained that he woke up

in a motel with no memory of the interlude. By maintaining a selective but steady rapport with viewers

which carried from the SA Forums to YouTube, Jay fostered greater interest in and sympathy for his

character, and by extension, investment in the terrifying realism of the videos.

This relationship shifted dramatically with the appearance of several videos which Jay claimed

to have not personally uploaded. These illicit Entries were mere seconds long, with inscrutable titles

like "######," and consisted of seemingly nothing more than white noise played over illegible gray

footage and random symbols. Similar clips, uploaded as "video responses" on a separate account,

would later be attributed to "totheark," and attentive viewers noticed that hidden in the quick frames

and lines of gibberish were clues and coded messages. But who was "totheark," and what did he want?

As the creepy clips intermittently continued to follow up Jay's recordings, dedicated followers in the

comments section "helped" Jay compile and analyze their relationship to a couple of masked figures

that had been stalking him and his friends. By letting the story's developing villain "intrude" (in a

format—the video-sharing service—which has not traditionally lent itself to meta-narrative expansion),

the conflict once confined to Jay and Alex's footage collided with the real world, raising the stakes for

both the characters and those watching at home. Even with interactive involvement, though, the plot

moved at its own pace; viewers might have offered commentary, but the story was not theirs to control.

Four years later, with over seventy Entries and almost 300,000 subscribers, *Marble Hornets* has

yet to reveal all its mysteries. In the meantime, the spirit of modification and imagination that Slender

Man's joint creation evoked has not been limited to the saga of Jay and Alex. Several months after

Marble Hornets' debut, two video projects by separate groups told the tale of new parties ensnared by

Slender Man. The first, *EverymanHYBRID*, started off under the guise of a fitness show before taking

its dark turn; the later *TribeTwelve* hewed closer to Jay's narrative, with "Noah" studying the footage

his cousin left behind after committing suicide, but began to distinguish itself with such innovations as

an on-screen tentacled Slender Man and the creature's connection to a German bogeyman. While

neither has been as popular or consistently updated as its spiritual predecessor, serialization and filming

styles akin to *Marble Hornets* permitted these adaptations to expand the "Slenderverse" while still

resting in the accessible found-footage subgenre. Not that other media have been unable to convey the

same type of interactive horror, though: the blog "Just Another Fool" told the secondhand story of an

Iraq veteran who encountered Slender Man, and—as with *Marble Hornets et al*—comments on the posts were invited as the narrative progressed.

Viewing *Marble Hornets'* lengthy run, it is easy to believe that "the author... is more interested in actions that produce opportunities for interesting plot developments than in efficient problem solving" (Ryan 49), but the series' producers can be forgiven for doing so when the narrative hook is to make viewers feel more like personal "witnesses" than a homogenous audience. In any case, the final creative control still rests with two men: Troy Wagner and Joseph DeLage (Jay/ce gars and Alex, respectively), and unlike the unsung writers of The SCP Foundation, their skills in storytelling have not escaped the entertainment industry. In fact, the duo was recently tapped to script the PC horror game *Slender: The Arrival*, and a feature-length film is currently in production by Mosaic Media Group. Thus, the legacy of Slender Man proves not only that a hair-raising horror can enter the public consciousness by committee, but that it may even function better that way, for old myths and hearsay have nothing on a concerted mission to design the stuff of nightmares. However, once a gripping framework is laid forth, the time comes to translate a group's output into a project under more manageable oversight. That is, interaction can surround a linear story, but the more specific a narrative wishes to grow, the less an Open Source free-for-all can be allowed to affect it—and the opposite is true as well. *Marble Hornets'* final episode may never end up resolving every mystery of Slender Man, but even a weird and unpredictable creature deserves a story with steady focus to the very end.

Ben Drowned, Story Thrived: Nostalgia and the ARG

The interactivity of this final frightening narrative is the most remarkable of all, for it simultaneously draws from both ends of the collaborative spectrum: a relatively passive reliance on pop cultural awareness, and later, a very active reliance on the direct contributions of many "players." As a result of its experimental transmedia composition—spanning blog posts, manipulated videogame

footage, YouTube videos, and an algorithmic program—the project has no officially agreed-upon name. For this essay, it will be referred to as "Ben Drowned," a popular title to be explained below.

Before moving any further, though, it is important to understand the breed of horror story upon which Ben Drowned is founded: *creepypasta*. Derived from the neologism "copypasta" (scandalous or lurid stories *copied* and *pasted* on different websites to amuse or antagonize), a creepypasta story is a shamelessly concentrated dose of horror: short, scary, and without a comforting resolution. These bite-size tales are the message board's evolution of the old campfire urban legend, "true" accounts of encounters with monsters, curses, and sinister technology. It is the last of these topics that most distinguishes the *sub*-subgenre to which Ben Drowned belongs, called "ruined childhood." The formula for these stories is as follows: the author recounts coming into possession of an old copy of a beloved animated film or videogame, only to be horrified when a playthrough produces a surreal and disturbing distortion of the source material. Although creepypasta is not inherently collaborative, ruined childhood narratives nevertheless possess a unique *passive interactivity*, in that their scare factor is directly proportionate to the reader's familiarity and positive emotional connection with the piece of pop culture being perverted (owing to the young, internet-savvy age of most creepypasta fans, almost exclusively media from the late 1980s to early 2000s). For example, "Dead Bart" (by "KI Simpson") describes a paranormal episode of *The Simpsons*, but only with a learned appreciation for the tone and visual style of the show would a reader truly be shaken by the story's disturbing imagery.

With that in mind, we turn to the "Paranormal" message board of the image-sharing site 4chan. On September 7, 2010, an individual going by "Jadusable" started a thread claiming that a copy of *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* (Nintendo, 2000) he had purchased at a yard sale was exhibiting unnerving glitches centered around someone named "Ben." Jadusable's was not the first *Zelda*-centric creepypasta, but its popularity soared within days—because not only was it unfolding in real time (a la *Marble Hornets*, which Jadusable would later recognize as an influence), but the footage described in

the post was actually viewable. On his YouTube channel, users could watch as Jadusable—controlling

the main character avatar, Link—documented the deviations: other characters referred to Link as

"BEN;" the music was distorted, and an uncanny statue resembling Link began trailing him around the

game world. Jadusable fielded questions from those following on both 4chan and YouTube,

contributing to the project's seeming authenticity as three more video "updates" were posted online.

How many people believed the story is hard to say; to a degree, suspension of disbelief is still

an element of horror, and creepypasta readers will often play along en masse to enhance the overall

thrill. Regardless, unlike Marble Hornets, nothing Jadusable presented appeared blatantly paranormal

—until September 15, 2010, when the fifth video was accompanied by a statement from "Jadusable's

roommate," who said he'd been given a document to release before Jadusable abruptly moved out. In

the document (distributed via Mediafire), Jadusable confessed his discovery that "Ben" was the ghost

of a boy who had drowned, and the software used to share the game footage allowed the vengeful spirit

to escape into his computer and manipulate his internet uploads. This chilling "twist" was accentuated

by the claim that Ben also started communicating with him through Cleverbot, a website which allows

users to text-chat with a computer program. As Cleverbot's responses are partially culled from

previously-input data, the resultant deluge of users asking Jadusable-related questions soon caused it to

actually start responding as the ghost would, with variations on "Ben drowned" and "You shouldn't

have done that" (a roundabout catchphrase for the project, which the game tormented Jadusable with

before "freeing" Ben). Meanwhile, Jadusable said he had planted clues to his plight in the items which

Link used in the footage, as well as each video's YouTube tags, enticing viewers to review what they

had previously seen and thereby extend the ever-widening net of interactivity. But involvement only

increased the story's horror instead of reducing it—if Ben were hypothetically "real," there was no

telling what pleas for help or critical revelations he would alter.

Jadusable was keen to this possibility, both inside and outside the project's narrative; he

concluded the document with an admonition to "not download ANY of my videos or anything ABOUT

my videos... I don't know how he can spread," and that "If you see any further posts from me, after

today's current date... DISCREDIT them." Fulfilling the threat hinted at by this sign-off, Ben "took

over" the channel on September 12, when Jadusable's profile picture changed to the leering stalker

statue and his "Location" status to "Now I am everywhere." Following in *Marble Hornets*' footsteps

yet again, the YouTube channel itself had been transformed into a canonical field of play—but even a

combination of text and video(game)-based storytelling (and, in the case of the document's "diary

entries," epistolary form) was not enough for Ben Drowned. Five days later, an encrypted link to the

website of a cult called the "Moon Children" appeared on the channel, marking the beginning of an

alternate reality game (ARG) later referred to as "Arc 2." An ARG is defined by a real-time fictional

narrative which relies on the actions of "players" to move the story forward across multiple media, and

for Ben Drowned, the Moon Children site signaled just such a shift from passive engagement (a

presumed fondness for *Majora's Mask* being warped into terror) to active collaboration.

Perhaps Jadusable was aware of how the original plot of *Majora's Mask* resembles *Alice in

Wonderland* when he made this narrative choice, because as Barbara Hayes-Roth notes in "Getting Into

the Story," Lewis Carroll's yarns were an "immersive story experience" which the author "actually

improvised... around an actively participating child." In Arc 2, Ben Drowned expanded exponentially

as videos and messages submitted by *other* people were allowed to affect the story's course. With an

apocalyptic-looking countdown clock on the new site's homepage, players unraveled posts by supposed

cultists planning to "ascend;" on September 18, a riddle from one such cultist, "Ifrit," was accompanied

by an email address, and those who sent questions found themselves actually receiving answers (albeit

obviously phrased to not reveal *too* much about the bizarre turn of events). Then, as the countdown's

end drew near, "TheLinkMissing" posted a YouTube response to Jadusable's last video, depicting the

character of Link playing the "Song of Time"—a magical tune which, in the *Legend of Zelda* games,

alters time. Whether this was a controlled "plot point" initiated by another of Jadusable's alternate

accounts or the act of a wholly separate individual is irrelevant; when players saw that the Moon

Children site had "gone back in time," with the last three days' posts missing and previously locked

pages open, it was understood that sharing videos of in-game actions could now affect the "real world."

What confidence might have grown from this soon reverted to fear, though; when another

player responded with footage of the Song of Time played backwards (which slows down time, per

Zelda logic), Ben counter-responded "You have learned something new. How long until your blessing

becomes a curse?" So as in The SCP Foundation, creative reappropriation became a critical element of

the ARG; the narrative may have branched out from basic shock-value scares, but players' knowledge

of the source material's rules was still vital. The Moon Children, time travel, a countdown to

Armageddon, and magical songs were all key plot points in *Majora's Mask*—and yet their significance

had been changed just enough that nobody could be positive what would happen next. As players tested

the effects of other songs via YouTube, one allowed Ifrit to resume contact but another "killed" a

character, and when the player "MFGreth" rushed to the latter's aid with game footage of Link being

resurrected by a fairy, it heralded the acceptance of non-song-related videos to impact the narrative.

Just when it seemed like this milestone would usher in a whole new level of interactive

possibilities, Jadusable "broke character" on September 20—his real name was Alexander Hall, and the

project was indeed an elaborate game. Citing financial stress, Hall pulled the plug on the ARG,

following up with a 4chan interview to resolve unanswered questions about the narrative. Still, the

potential for continuation was acknowledged, and players spoke their enthusiasm with their wallets.

Within 24 hours, Hall declared that donations had made further additions possible (later, donors were

mailed fake newspaper clippings related to Ben). Over the next weeks, new clues about the cult's

activities were found on the Moon Children site, and a "character" named Ryukaki arose. Ryukaki's

role in Arc 2 was as a complement to Jadusable; he was a real person, but his online (inter)actions were

choreographed for the benefit of other players. Drawn into the narrative by the message "KAYD

HENDRICKS YOU ARE IN DANGER" (the man's actual name), he began to fill a YouTube account

with footage of strange sounds and lights around his house—connected, it was later revealed, to having

moved into Ben's old home. As Hall, announcing work on a full videogame, scaled back Jadusable's

input to the occasional cryptic instruction, Ryukaki began sharing his own files and further videos.

While their cooperative storytelling seemed to be progressing smoothly, an email from the

player "Mugen Kagemaru" in February 2011 about Ryukaki planning a solo Q&A session concerned

Hall: "If he is doing this, then it's without my knowledge. I'd advise him against it... He doesn't even

know the actual significance of what his role in the game was". For those dedicated to the carefully-

maintained scares of Ben Drowned, the greatest puzzle of all was brewing: in an underground, largely

anonymous narrative game, how much involvement was *too* much? Ryukaki pledged to hold off on the

Q&A until the ARG was officially over, but a few months into a third Arc ("Within Hubris,"

communicated largely through binary codes and a new Twitter account), the issue of Hendricks' agency

came to a head: when players voiced frustration over the character's inactivity, Hall furiously replied

that Ryukaki was never meant to be so prominent, and that Hendricks "gamejacked" Arc 2. Hendricks

retorted that it was not his intention to crowd out Jadusable, only that he had to take matters into his

own hands after interest in his "sub-Arc" exploded—and that Hall had originally lauded his progress.

Hendricks may have honestly misunderstood, but his role stayed dead; Ben Drowned thrived on an

active, attentive base of viewers, writers, and decoders, but there was no room for error in Hall's plan to

accommodate anyone else who had to juggle both acting and autonomy.

Since then, Hall's creative goals have evolved considerably: early 2012 saw Arc 3 fizzle out

when the promised videogame appeared (a virtual tour of a dark house shown in an earlier video), and

the "Within Hubris" Twitter was overshadowed by a more professional account, @AlexanderDHall.

There, a clean-cut Hall can be seen promoting his upcoming independent drama *Methods of Revolution*,

as well as raising awareness of current social issues and others' artistic projects. So from a humble

4chan post to a transmedia ARG, how does the interactive horror of Ben Drowned compare to *Marble*

Hornets, or a traditionally singular story? While simple entertainment was the initial appeal, deeper yet

instantaneous collaboration pushed its way to the forefront, and the gift *and* curse of this is that the

narrative has, ironically, become locked in time. A latter-day reader can go to YouTube and the

Jadusable Wiki (which exhaustively catalogs every Arc—but without The SCP Foundation's pretense of

reality) to watch the videos and read the concomitant posts, but the experience of playing along with

others is forever lost. Also, many modifications to the Moon Children blog and Jadusable/Ryukaki's

YouTube were removed or retconned within days, to say nothing of crucial messages distributed via

filesharing service and message boards that are now offline. Even during the ARG's prime, anybody

without the time and technical know-how to spend hours decrypting minute changes to multiple

websites would be mercilessly out of the loop. Looking back, Ben Drowned is therefore better judged

as more of a years-long role-playing party than an open-and-shut saga; you can revisit it through

images and summaries, but much like the memories of an old-school Nintendo adventure which

haunted protagonist and players alike, you just had to be there.

Money Asks: When Corporate and Casual Interest Collide

So if independent horror projects fueled by the engagement of anonymous collaborators can

flourish among a comparatively small crowd, is it possible to replicate the same impact on a larger

scale? The question has been asked by many companies since the advent of the internet, from film

studios to videogame developers, for spreading a narrative—or its advertising campaign—over a

socially-networked transmedia array has the potential for broader consumer investment. By studying a

few examples from the past several years, it appears the key to that success is *balance*, to release not an

unfinished work which directs people to continue on their own, but a narrative enjoyable on its own

merits with greater complexity for those still inclined to pursue it.

On one end of the spectrum, consider the 2012 horror film *The Devil Inside* (Paramount Pictures, dir. William Brent Bell). A faux-documentary about a woman whose mother is possessed by demons, it was met with quick derision from both critics and audiences—but while "amateur acting, writing and directing" (Travers) were factors, the greatest scorn was leveled at the ending. The movie concludes with two of the main characters dying in a car crash, upon which something even more abrupt happens: the screen goes black, and text appears saying "The facts surrounding the Rossi [protagonist's] case remain unsolved. For more information about the ongoing investigation visit www.TheRossiFiles.com." In an attempt to distinguish itself from other recent found-footage films about possession (*The Last Exorcism*, *Paranormal Activity*), Paramount had decided to give *The Devil Inside* a staggered narrative—a primary story on film, with secondary materials available online—that backfired tremendously. It was not this lack of a clean resolution that wrought ire (a sudden, unsatisfying ending *is* a trope of found footage), but rather the way it was framed; as Devin Faraci judged in "Why Everybody Hates The Ending of *The Devil Inside*," "the title card feels like a cheat... Without the text audiences would have been more or less okay with the movie." This is because the (now defunct) "Rossi Files" website presented not additional footage which resolved the ending or solicited help in shaping a sequel, but a gallery of materials akin to the viral marketing typically used to *promote* a film. Despite a $34 million opening gross, the studio worked itself into a corner here— continuation may not have been explicitly promised, but the sight of "standard marketing glurge" (Faraci) felt more like a rip-off than tantalization. The film worked within a subgenre which blurs truth and fiction, yet gave no worthwhile incentive to pursue either.

A film from six years prior demonstrates the folly of going too far in the opposite direction, by crowdsourcing the creative process at the expense of quality. A thriller rather than a horror movie, 2006's *Snakes on a Plane* (New Line Cinema, dir. David R. Ellis) attracted a similar, predominantly

young male following, though not because of any deliberate marketing ploy. On the contrary, it was

merely the film's announcement that did the trick; action fans, amused by the bluntly B-grade title and

premise, flooded the web with giddy hype in the form of customized clothing, homemade trailers, and

dedicated creative offshoots like Brian Finkelstein's "Snakes on a Blog," which presented

photomanipulations of serpents on various other objects. So unexpected was this celebration that the

studio thought nothing of changing the film to "Pacific Air 121," but an online outcry demanded the

shameless name's return. New Line and associates realized they had prematurely tapped into a key

demographic—irony-minded teens and twenty-somethings—and development took a hitherto untested

turn, as producers began to directly integrate the more popular plot additions suggested on Snakes on a

Blog's message board. Spurred along on-set by the shared gusto of leading man Samuel L. Jackson

(whose casting to begin with was another "yes!" factor for fans), five extra days of shooting were

allotted to net an "R" rating with more graphic snake attacks, an airplane bathroom sex scene, and the

catchphrase "I've had it with these motherfucking snakes on this motherfucking plane!" A contest was

also held inviting people to submit *SoaP*-themed songs to potentially appear in the soundtrack, with

such amateur tracks as "Snakes on the Brain" eventually gracing the album.

Despite all these collaborative retouches, though, box office numbers belied the raucous

reception, with an opening gross of only about $15 million over its $33 million budget. Critics were

lukewarm, either bashfully embracing or rolling their eyes at the exploitative flick, even as some

audiences were noted to engage in intermittent cheering and *Rocky Horror Picture Show*-like

conversation with characters, proving that the glee which birthed the collaboration on-screen could spill

over into passive interaction. Still, while its artistic aspirations may never have been high, *Snakes on a*

Plane became so intent on tongue-in-cheek cult status (what Ty Burr of the *Boston Globe* called "mass

camp") that it failed to maintain perspective on its medium: it was not a goofy YouTube clip like those

which celebrated its arrival, but a major motion picture years in the making, and both environments

demand a unique approach. Just as a teenage crowd which revels in violence and cursing online would

not be allowed into the R-rated screening, a college student who draws "Snakes on a Hamburger" does

not necessarily have the time, money, or inclination to see the parody's basis in person. Perhaps most

defeating for chances of the next *SoaP*-style Hollywood buzz is the attention-deficit yet discerning

attitude of "the internet" as a collective entity; fads rise and fall on a weekly basis, and too blatantly

trying to get people on-board with a property can produce backlash instead. It may be so that "[if]

every user of the Internet is complicit with capitalism, fans are by definition more complicit than most"

(Lothian 135), but if a thinly "interactive" film like *The Devil Inside* is merely insulting for viewers,

then feeling winked-at and nudged to become the tail that wags the marketing dog is outright offensive.

A film which falls somewhere between the above pairing is Matt Reeves and J.J. Abrams' 2008

blockbuster *Cloverfield*, which while financially prosperous and promoted through a cunning

transmedia network, left some audiences dissatisfied by toying with vague expectations. Of primary

note is that the film's production and presentation predate several aspects contributory to the small-

screen scares of *Marble Hornets*—a head-scratching title, a nail-biting aesthetic, and a threateningly

inexplicable foe whose characteristics are a blend of older pop culture antagonists. *Cloverfield*'s

camera-carrying protagonists are besieged by a building-sized creature in the vein of Japanese *kaiju*

like Godzilla—and yet for many months, this simple information was not confirmed, as teaser footage

showed only the panic and destruction caused by the beast, with the film's name left unstated beyond

"1-18-08" (the release date).

The online enthusiasm for this mystique caught Reeves off-guard, but the trailer was not to be

the film's only hook—uploaded shortly thereafter, an official website contained a scattering of digital

photographs that users could "flip through" and attempt to sort into a mini-narrative complementing the

main plot. An iTunes album, *Rob's Party Mix*, was presented as a collection of music played during the

party scenes in the film's first act, which invited people to *listen* and get involved with the story's

world, instead of merely watching. Later, websites for Tagruato and "Slusho!" were also launched;

while the former is a drilling company implicated in the monster's rise, the latter is a fictional drink

Abrams inserts into the narrative universe of all of his productions. Reeves regarded these tie-ins as

"involved connectivity," adding that "[the] Internet sort of stories and connections and clues are, in a

way, a prism and they're another way of looking at the same thing." People still didn't know exactly

what the "same thing" to look at was, though, and so when the film was finally released and the

monster was revealed on-screen, imaginations building up in many audience members were roughly

deflated by the sight of not a colossal robot or Lovecraftian horror, but a spindly bug-like beast.

Expectations may not have been so lofty, were it not for the fact that the studio stirred up interaction

early in production by running a content which solicited fan renderings of what the monster might look

like. Submissions ranged from a colossal whale to a dinosaur, and at least one was misinterpreted

across the internet as an official preview (Reeves' praise of the drawings probably did not help matters

any). Lesser controversy surrounded the balance between the film's self-contained storyline and the

amount of exposition clarified exclusively through an ARG; the Tagruato Corporation, their role in the

monster's appearance, and the "TIDO Wave" environmentalist group are never mentioned in the film,

but figure prominently across those additional websites launched after the initial teaser trailer.

     While the film received generally positive reviews and grossed over $170 million, "we cannot

analyze what is produced without paying just as much attention to how it is produced and made

available to others" (Thomas 3). In so doing, the sum of *Cloverfield*'s narrative can be said to have

precariously walked a line between overexposure and buckling under its own ambiguity. While the

ARG offered early access to certain plot elements (such as the creature's underwater origin, and the

existence of smaller parasites which cling to it), none of these transmedia offerings gave away the

monster's appearance or what would happen once it surfaced, aspects which naturally formed the core

film's appeal. For the most part, viewers were as disoriented as the protagonists—and by offering a

diversity of materials in *advance* that enhanced the narrative without letting pandering hamper

production, *Cloverfield* can be said to have stood tall where *The Devil Inside* would stumble (and

Snakes on a Plane fell on its face). In the end, its weakness was only letting anticipation run untended;

"We better shut up or people are going to be deadly sick of us by the time it comes out," Reeves once

joked about expectations for his project. But all the way back in September 2007, tension was too much

for even the diehards: as Doug Williams wrote beneath a monster sketch on his blog, "The movie... can

never live up to the hype, but man what a great teaser that was." The constant critical eye cast on

Hollywood has only narrowed its gaze with Web 2.0, but letting audiences choose between utter

bewilderment and transmedia participation is dampened when the concept really is as straightforward

as it initially seemed (a "Godzilla/Blair Witch mash-up," as Max Evry said). It seems the ideal for a

big-name interactive narrative to strive towards is to announce its intentions, provide transmedia

supplements for those interested, and not turn molehills into mountains. When the audience looks away

from the screen, it should be with apprehension, not cries of "That's seriously *it*?"

Conclusion

The psychology of why people, particularly young men, flock to media which produces fear is a

hefty topic deserving of its own essay. Suffice it to say, those with a horrific tale have more avenues

now than ever to tell it; the circle of acquaintances who can gather to hear a scary story has grown to

global proportions, and the technology to seamlessly join in is no longer limited to a privileged few.

Having studied how the conventional binary of "author" and "audience" has been blurred by Web 2.0,

it is apparent that three factors must be maintained for an interactive horror narrative to have maximum

impact and staying power: a prudent screening of potential collaborators (The SCP Foundation), a

cautious relationship between the liberty of mass modification permitted and any agreed-upon direction

for the overarching plot (*Marble Hornets*), and a commitment to authenticity that is only breached

when the first two criteria are jeopardized (Ben Drowned). That these guidelines have so far been too

fine to net success outside comparatively small-scale projects leaves the interactive horror story a more

private affair—and yet it is for the best. For when the sun has set and we are alone at our computers,

we take up a glowing venue to connect over and a terrifying presentation to experience. Or as it once

was: a log to sit on and a crackling campfire, enough to see the storytellers, but not what waits in their

shadows.

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