

# Ever-growing, Ever-changing

*How community-built creepypastas can become mass media products*



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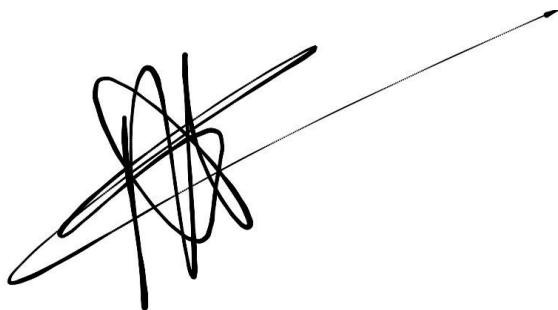
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# Introduction

Around eleven years ago I was an innocent pre-teen wandering unsupervised on the internet. And it was there, in between the let's play channels on YouTube and the pages upon pages of fanfiction, that I found something so horrifying that it has permanently seared itself into my brain. I am now twenty-one years old and I can still perfectly recall the mutilated bleached face of Jeff the Killer staring back at me from my computer screen that fateful evening. At that moment I stumbled into a dark corner of the internet where tall faceless men lurk in the woods and mono-yellow hallways stretch out into infinity.

I do not believe that I ever truly left that corner after this first encounter. My interest in the scary and just plain weird stories that pervade the niche of creepypastas might have given me several nightmares but it also gave me an insistent curiosity about the development of cultural products. It is this curiosity that has guided me into this field of study and eventually to the writing of this thesis. The coming three chapters will investigate the question: *How do some creepypastas develop into mass media cultural products?*

Creepypastas are, essentially, short horror stories that are posted and then spread around the internet. However, the really popular ones have a special way of developing into something much larger. While some are written, tossed around the forums for a bit, and then die a quiet death, others gain so much popularity that they, in essence, become crowd-sourced horror franchises made entirely by amateurs. Additionally, if one gets big enough it might reach the ears of the “professional” media producers and find its way into the industrial side of mass media.

The concept of creepypastas is not unknown to the academic community as researchers such as Trevor J. Blank and Vivian Asimos have written books about the subject. Both writers will return extensively throughout this thesis. However, their

writings tend to focus on the end products of the creepypasta phenomenon, while I aim to provide an overview of the processes that are used to achieve those products. Within this overview, there will be aspects that may be familiar to those interested in the field of fan studies. In contrast to current writings on the collision of “amateur” and industrial mass media production, I will show that the relationship between the two might be one of mutual borrowing rather than only fans taking from clear-cut industry authors. Additionally, I want to prove that concepts which are mostly associated with fan studies, such as participatory culture, produsage, and transmedia storytelling, have a far wider reach than proposed in earlier writings.

This thesis relies on a foundation of academic literature by a variety of authors. Most notably the works of the previously mentioned Blank, as well as Henry Jenkins and Axel Bruns play a large role in the basis of my analysis. Besides these academic writings, I also use my own experiences within the creepypasta communities to build my case. As I have been a fan of and contributor to these digital stories for over a decade, I have gained some insights regarding their development that have helped me form the overview that I present here.

I have divided my argumentation into three chapters. The first will provide an analysis of general storytelling processes on the internet to answer the question of “how are stories told on the internet.” Primarily this chapter dives into the history of “amateur”, or rather *folk* storytelling and shows how these old traditions have come back to life on the internet in a modern form, as well as laying out what this modern form looks like. Chapter two will introduce my first case study: the recently viral *Backrooms*. Here I will examine the development of creepypastas from their first introduction to their peak popularity and provide an overview of how the different media work together to further expand and popularize these stories. My third and final chapter will focus on the end of a creepypasta’s lifetime through the lens of my second case study: *Slender Man*. The main focus of this chapter is how a creepypasta is able to move from the internet into the general knowledge of society through the creation of an atmosphere of belief and

the efforts of the mass media industry. Lastly, I will discuss how popular creepypastas fade away into internet history after their stories have reached an end.

# 1. Storytellers

'Whether anthropologists are studying it or not, mythology is still being created and told' (Asimos 2021, p. 1). And whether or not anthropologists are studying the digital version of an age-old tradition, I am sure they will excuse my trespassing into their domain while I partake in my excursion on the internet's myth-making and storytelling.

This chapter's main focus is the question: *How are stories told on the internet?* To answer this query I will first examine how old traditions are reborn in modern media. After we have a solid grasp on the past we can see what has persevered and what has changed with the digital turn, as well as how contemporary users employ those practices. Finally, at the end of this chapter, I will offer a more thorough definition for this thesis' main concept: creepypastas.

## *The Death Of The Storyteller?*

In 1936 Walter Benjamin wrote an essay lamenting the death of the Storyteller. The craft of storytelling had fallen into oblivion due to industrialisation, the horrors of the Great War, and, most prominently, the age of information. These three conditions made the value of experiences drop dramatically as experiences from the past were no longer relevant and experiences from far were not only too horrible to tell but also reached every corner of the world through the rapidly spreading news cycle rather than weary travellers (Benjamin 1963). Thus, the Storyteller, whose craft relied on experiences, became obsolete.

At the same time, the rise of mass media was transforming the way in which culture and cultural texts were produced, largely taking away the ability of ordinary people to contribute to their own culture (Jenkins 2008). Before the twentieth century, cultural production took place on the grassroots level. Communities created their own traditions and entertainment through creative skills and artistic traditions passed down through the generations (Jenkins 2008). Today we use the word *folk* to refer to these traditions and activities being born from a community's interactions with each other untouched by

machinery or corporations (Bronner 2009). As Simon J. Bronner states: 'The folklorist's tradition signifies cultural production of earthy artistic expressions, from homey proverbs to handwrought pots, which are said to be folk because they attach culturally to groups and repeat and vary' (2009, p. 21). The stories and songs that were produced through this homey process did circulate broadly, some even stuck around and can still be heard today. However, in opposition to the wide-reaching mass media, these home-grown stories were not expected to return economic gain and had no definite named author attached to them (Jenkins 2008). As the mass media industry grew and set the standards for technical perfection and professional accomplishment at a height few folk "amateurs" could reach (Idem), folk production seemed to die a slow silent death alongside the Storyteller it encompassed.

When the internet came to be it was seen as the icon of mass media and the age of information. People were sure that it would cause folk cultural production to be wiped from the earth once and for all (Bronner 2009). Yet, Roland Barthes claims that 'narrative begins with the very history of humanity' and that it has been present 'in all periods, all places, all societies' (1988, p.95). Thus, indicating that grassroots storytelling practices would not simply disappear into the void due to societal changes. While the previous mass media, such as the novel, radio and television, worked with a one-way channel that suppressed the ability of the "ordinary" person to contribute to the culture they were entrenched in, the internet brought back that which enabled old traditions to return. An unrestricted shared space where people can connect and constitute their own culture (Bronner 2009). Where mass media created a society where cultural production was largely defined by a vertical relationship between the producer and consumer, the internet brought back the horizontality of old.

There are three main components of the internet that enabled the restoration of folk traditions: open and far-reaching distribution channels, interconnectedness, and interactivity. The first component is more practical than anything else. With the mass media industry not only fulfilling the role of producer but also the role of distributor of cultural products it is difficult to get your folk-made culture out into the world. The

internet offers a powerful independent distribution channel for the “amateur” makers to use (Jenkins 2008). With this distribution channel in place, folk cultural production was able to flourish to a reflection of its former glory (Idem). The freedom of distribution on the internet will become evident in the two case studies of this thesis, as without it they would not have been able to start, let alone develop in the way they did.

The other two components were identified as characteristics of internet storytelling by Christina Schachtner (2020). The concept of interconnectedness can best be described as a network. Schachtner describes how the structure of the internet connects people to other people, people to devices, devices to each other, and texts to each other. This structure, together with the fast-paced and dynamic way in which these networks evolve, break down, and/or build up again from a new point, defines how people on the internet gather and communicate with each other. This communication would not be possible without the interactive nature of the digital world. As I have said before, the internet has brought back a horizontal relationship between the users and producers of media and culture. In fact, the digital creation of cultural products, especially stories, relies on this horizontal nature of the internet and the way it blurs the lines between the two roles (Schachtner 2020).

To quote Henry Jenkins: ‘[...]the current moment of media change is reaffirming the right of everyday people to actively contribute to their culture’ (2008, p. 132) Furthermore, the new vernacular culture not only allows but also encourages everyone to participate and create and, through media convergence, it has never been easier to do so (Jenkins 2008). Most importantly, this participation is fully in the hands of the “consumer”. It is open-ended and shaped by self-developed cultural and social protocols rather than any prestructured design by corporations (Jenkins 2008). Enabling a grassroots level of creativity and cultural production, digital media has given people the ability to ‘archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content’ (Jenkins 2008, p. 136), the industry’s as well as home-grown (Jenkins 2008). This participatory culture will be further discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Thus, after decades of slumber, folk culture was able to return. But it did not do so unchanged. Different narrative spaces have different boundaries and characteristics that inform the type of stories that can be told, as well as what those stories look like (Schachtner 2020). So with the shift to a virtual space, folk storytelling traditions have adapted.

The main difference between old folk and this new digital version is the way in which the group of people creating something together interact with each other. Where in the past traditions and cultural products were created and given meaning in face-to-face interactions (Bronner 2009), contemporary folk cultural production does not include seeing each other's faces nor is direct interaction a necessity. Instead of a tight-knit community forming the gathering of people can be better described as a network, all connected to each other but still separate. Simon Bronner states: 'Unlike communities in which one resides and consequently interacts with others, networks are broadly expandable and transcend time and space' (2009, p. 40). The transcending of time and space is an essential part of why networks are better suited to describe interactions on the internet. Users are able to interact with posts that were posted yesterday or over a decade ago by other users living in the same neighbourhood or halfway across the world. Communities on the other hand are (usually) grounded in a certain location, can only interact with the present, and, crudely said, have a member limit. In short, communities have limits, while networks made up of individuals are limitless.

This does not mean that folklore and folk traditions cannot come to exist in this new type of gathering. Folklore was never fully group-determined in the past either. On the contrary, it was individually determined by the nature of the individual's interactions and experiences (Bronner 2009). The collective stories and culture of a group are simply a collection of these individual folklores. This is reflected in the stories that can be found on the internet. As can be seen in my two case studies, they are not one story continuously added to by multiple people but multiple stories connected to one central concept.

Another thing that has changed with the transfer to the digital world is the language used to tell stories. The “computer-mediated communication” is a form of language that sits in between speech and writing and calls for a fresh start when it comes to examining folkloric interactions (Bronner 2009). Another key aspect of digital language is the return to a primarily visual culture. Rather than being confined to words, stories are told through the visuals of still images, film, and/or videogames in a manner that most internet natives would understand at a glance, harking back to the time before the printing press. This, combined with the interactive nature of the internet, is ultimately a positive and enriching development as Bronner argues that ‘it expands the folkloric frame because it extends the creative, reproductive, and often transgressive capability of oral communication with visual imagery and instantaneous response’ (2009, p. 34).

The last major difference between pre-digital folklore and the internet version is the quality that its participants are able to achieve. As I mentioned earlier, folklore traditions were pushed away by the mass media industry because the folk makers could not reach the standard set by industrial production. This problem has solved itself in the age of the internet as the classic markers of amateur work have disappeared due to the far-reaching distribution channels the internet provides and the availability of new technologies to the wider public (Jenkins 2008). “Amateur” makers make their works with the intent of showing it to the public at large rather than containing it to their circle of friends and family and they do so through public platforms such as YouTube, forum websites such as Reddit, or blogs on social media. Additionally, the internet provides both free and paid-for versions of technologies that allow users to rival commercial quality on a minuscule budget. Even if the aim is not to reach this level of quality, these technologies still enable a massive amount of people to ‘archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content’ (Jenkins 2008, p. 136). This, in turn, strengthens the folkloric qualities of the internet by reinforcing the ability of the amateur to have power over their own culture.

Just like the activity of storytelling has become a mixture of old and new so has the form and content of the stories themselves. The internet provides its users with a massive

archive of expressive materials from both the mass media era and the folkloric stories of before (Bronner 2009). The old legends and myths are still taken as inspirations and formats for new stories today. But clichés and techniques from the realms of film and contemporary literature also have a strong influence on what our stories look like. Even concepts and aspects of the internet itself have served as an inspiration for stories (Bronner 2009), as can be seen in my case study of *the Backrooms*. In short, the communal stories that are told on the internet, and the “new folk” traditions at large, are not informed by one set of traditions but rather by a mixture of them, ranging from the ancient to the brand-new.

### *Many People, Many Media*

There are two concepts that fuel the type of storytelling on the internet that I will be talking about in this thesis. Both have been briefly touched upon already in the section above. The ability and encouragement of the “consumers” to actively engage with and participate in the making of narratives is an absolute necessity for general folk storytelling. Additionally, through the internet, a myriad of technologies has become available to the common user. This does not only affect the quality of the cultural products, but it also encourages a larger variety in the types of media used to tell stories. To develop the stories that make up my case studies, both this *participatory culture* and *transmedia storytelling*, as these concepts were named by Henry Jenkins, are necessary.

While most research surrounding these topics focuses on fandom and fan culture, their practical application is far more widespread than that. In general, the line between consumers and producers has become a jumping rope rather than a border. Digital media has created a space where amateurs experiment and innovate, their work unable to be contained or channelled by the media industries (Jenkins 2008). In fact, it is no longer rare to find internet-developed elements, techniques and creators being consumed by and absorbed into the industry (Idem). Even though there are instances of the industry stepping into the consumer role, it is far more common to see consumers playing this game of jump rope. It is, in fact, so common that multiple terms have

popped up over the years to describe this phenomenon. The one I will be focussing on here is *produsage* coined by Axel Bruns in the hopes to explain the intersection of user-generated content and social media where large groups of participants come together to collaborate on the development and continuous improvement of content (Bruns & Schmidt 2011)

However, while Bruns created the word by fusing “production” and “usage”, the actual phenomenon has very little semblance to the conventionally industrial sense of the word production, as that would require a final and fixed product at the end of the line (Bruns & Schmidt 2011). Instead, the process of produsage generates mass-distributed collaborations that are constantly changing, permanently mutable, and owned by both everyone and no one in the community (or network) that created them (Idem). These results are caused by the lowered barriers between the usage of existing content and the productive alteration and expansion of said content (Bruns & Schmidt 2011). These low barriers enable participants to jump between the two roles, ultimately settling into a hybrid *produser*, and engaging in activities that can no longer be described as one or the other, but only as “produsage” (Idem). The term can be best defined as: ‘the collaborative and continuous building and extending of existing content in pursuit of further improvement’ (Bruns 2008, p. 21). This, as will become clear later on, describes the development of viral creepypastas perfectly.

Produsage is enabled by the digital narrative spaces present on the internet, which, as Schachtner aptly describes, are characterized by their multimediality (2020). These are spaces where different media collide and converge, which, according to Jenkins makes the flow of content across media borders inevitable (2008). While the industry was already making franchises, such as Star Wars and The Matrix, spanning multiple media platforms, keeping the fans busy with an ever-expanding storyworld (Jenkins 2008), on the internet, the fans are able to mirror this trend and create not only their own works and worlds but also expand them and stretch them over the myriad of media at their disposal.

Very simply put, transmedia storytelling means that a story unfolds across platforms, with each medium adding something, often media-specific, to the overall narrative (Jenkins 2008). These media built off of each other to create one comprehensive story. However, they generally also work independently from their larger network, as self-contained texts, creating multiple doorways into the narrative rather than the usual one (Idem). They allow the storytellers to explore the storyworld in different ways. Rather than sticking to the silver screen, the gamer's console, or the reader's pages the world can expand and be shown in different lights and from different angles. And, because every instalment is self-contained, a consumer can engage with only the media they choose and still get all of the necessary information to make sense of the narrative presented. Transmedia storytelling works on additive comprehension. Rather than forcing "Joe Popcorn", as Jenkins likes to call the average movie-goer, to watch, play and read every part of a transmedia narrative, he can just watch the film and have a grand time. However, if he then wants to dive deeper into certain aspects, he can go on the internet and pool his knowledge with the network of enjoyers that has sprung up around the overarching story gaining additional information that will make him see the film with new eyes (Jenkins 2008). And for the hard-to-satiate hard-core fans, transmedia storytelling provides the well of almost unlimited information to over-analyze that they so deeply crave. In short, the various parts of a transmedia story work together to build a rich storyworld ready to explore and influence the perception of each other's self-contained stories. Additionally, this way of storytelling allows for a lot of freedom for both the producer and the consumer.

As every instalment of a transmedia story is part of a larger whole, it must be recognizable as such. It is not necessary for each work to reproduce every element of the grander narrative, however, it must use enough to be instantly recognizable as part of the same fictional world no matter what style of representation is chosen (Jenkins 2008). The world must be presented consistently but aside from that the "production team" has full freedom to play within the fictional realm. "Production team" is in need of quotation marks in this thesis because while the transmedia stories Jenkins analyzes, such as The Matrix and Star Wars, have official professional production teams for each

instalment, my analysis of creepypastas will show how an “unofficial” loosely joined gathering of like-minded individuals might establish the same kind of fictional world.

The combination of renewed folk traditions, participatory culture, or rather produsage, and transmedia storytelling on the internet enables the development of the stories I aim to speak about here. Neverending and open-for-all stories that are diverse in content, forms, and media are birthed by the digital environment created through networks of people working together and combining their skills to create “franchises” to rival the mass media industry.

At this point it is crystal clear that the storyteller has never died, they have simply multiplied and diversified.

### *Scary Stories To Tell On The Internet*

The stories they tell have not changed that much though. Creepypastas take their inspiration from folklore in terms of form, content, and way of developing. The finer details of this will become clear throughout the next two chapters. First, it is important to know what a creepypasta is.

The shortest way to describe creepypastas is as crowd-sourced and spread horror stories, but calling it that would oversimplify things. The storytelling practice has a history on the internet and finds its origins in the online activity and post type called *copypasta* (Blank & McNeill 2018). This term describes the text posts that were continuously shared through the copy-paste feature on the internet. In this process of sharing, the texts are often modified, annotated, and/or reinterpreted by their audience in a way that borders on the folkloric (Blank & McNeill 2018). Today we would call the humorous and more visual versions of this practice memes, but we have kept the name that was given to the scary and far more narratively inclined versions: creepypasta, creepy copy-paste stories.

However, as Blank and McNeill aptly state, creepypastas would be better defined as one of the emergent genres of internet folklore, whereby a particular style of creative horror is created and disseminated over the internet by its network of creators (2018). These stories and images are sustained by their communities' continuous development of them and the discourse that surrounds them the moment they become popular enough to be perceived as legends rather than the simple imaginings of some people on the internet (Idem). It is important to note that not all creepypastas go through the development and popularization that I will describe in this thesis. In fact, only a handful have reached the status of "mainstream" and even fewer get picked up by production outside of the internet.

## 2. Into The Backrooms



*Image 2.1: The image that started it all (unknown, n.d.)*

‘Few have ever officially made it out of the Backrooms, and it is currently unknown if it ends’ (Basics of The Backrooms: A Guide 2019). With this warning, the Backrooms wiki cautions aspiring “Wanderers” to prepare themselves well before stepping into the endless complex that makes up this mysterious space. For once you enter the Backrooms there is no returning.

But you will be in a full company as the Backrooms network is, to put it mildly, enormous. To give you an idea of its size: a quick google search for “the Backrooms” yields approximately 11.100.000 results, the official wiki currently has 2309 pages, and the Reddit forum has 247.000 members making it part of the top 1% of the largest communities on the platform (Backrooms Wiki Home 2019 and r/backrooms 2019 both retrieved 10 December 2022). Not only is the network that sprung up around this eerie palace of yellowed halls incredibly large, but it is also particularly prolific. Furthermore,

as it is still growing by the day it enables us to take a look at the development of both the network and the storyworld. That is why this chapter's main focus is on the question: *How do some creepypastas develop into popular media?*

The answer consists of two parts. The first has to do with the aesthetics and influences that play a role in the story itself and how those influences contribute to the popularity of this specific narrative. Part two is more focussed on how the network of different people and media continuously develops and disseminates the creepypasta until it starts to enter the "mainstream."

### *Noclipping In*

On the 12th of May 2019, the image above (image 2.1) was posted on 4Chan by an anonymous user responding to the call to 'post disquieting images that just feel "off"' (/x/ Paranormal 12 May 2019). A few months later the first sentences of what would become the extensive lore of the Backrooms joined the image. On September 12th 2019 another anonymous user posted:

'If you're not careful and you noclip out of reality in the wrong areas, you'll end up in the Backrooms, where it's nothing but the stink of old moist carpet, the madness of mono-yellow, the endless background noise of fluorescent lights at maximum hum-buzz, and approximately six hundred million square miles of randomly segmented empty rooms to be trapped in  
God save you if you hear something wandering around nearby, because it sure as hell has heard you.' (/x/ Paranormal 12 September 2019)

Even though this specific image had been floating around the forum website since at least 2018, and possibly much earlier, and some creepypasta stories surrounding the image had already sprung up before the above text was posted, it was not until the first "collaboration" between these two anonymous users that the yellow hallways of the Backrooms properly entered the creepypasta scene.

In the last three years, the original post has grown into a vast network of memes, textposts, short films, and videogames, all made by people at home. The main boom in popularity happened at the beginning of this year when Kane Pixels uploaded his first Backrooms video to YouTube: *The Backrooms (Found Footage)* (7 January 2022). YouTube has a history of being the spark that a creepypasta needs to get its fire truly going, but that will be further explored in the next section. What is important to note here is that its popularity reached its peak during the pandemic.

The lockdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic saw the birth of many online trends, but one, in particular, is of interest to the topic today. The idea and visual of liminal spaces started to pop up everywhere on the internet when the world was stuck inside. The visuals are best described as 'images depicting eerie locations in transition between their original purpose and vacancy' and became popular at a time when the images could be found everywhere in our daily lives of empty streets and closed doors (Zamecnik 2021). They seem to reflect on feelings of nostalgia, transition, and waiting for something to happen (Idem). Thus, at the time when all three of these feelings came together while we sat stuck in our houses, the trend does not feel so out of place. Of course, with this aesthetic idea floating around the digital space it did not last long before it influenced the storytelling happening in the same places. The Backrooms is practically drenched in this idea of eerie empty spaces of transition. The original post shows an office-like space completely devoid of life and furniture and every subsequent level added to the world of the Backrooms represents another such space, from empty hotel hallways to derelict concrete warehouses.

The eeriness of such spaces plays a large role in their popularity in the horror genre of online storytelling. In the last decade, a new subtler type of horror film has emerged and taken root in the industry (Walsh 2020). One that thrives on suspense, psychological manipulation of the viewer and a whole load of the weird and eerie. These last two terms are a bit tricky to define but both have a 'preoccupation with the strange', 'that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience' (Fisher 2013, p. 6). Together with the more popular concept of the *unheimlich* or uncanny, they form a trio of

narrative and perceptual modes rather than solid genres (Idem). However, while the uncanny deals with the strange within the familiar, the weird and eerie bring the familiar to the strange. The weird is characterised by that which does not belong, that which feels wrong and feels like it should not exist, yet it somehow does (Fisher 2013, p. 9). These feelings make the viewer of the weird feel as if their conceptions and perceptions have failed them and cannot be trusted, which, in turn, creates feelings of fear and suspense. The weird is, thus, constituted by a presence. The eerie, on the other hand, is defined by a failure of absence, or a failure of presence (Fisher 2013, p. 27). The feeling occurs at times when there is something when there should be nothing, or when there is nothing when there should be something (Idem). In essence, the strangeness comes from the fact that certain expectations are not met. In the case of liminal spaces, there is a failure of presence. Where we would expect people, furniture, and activity we are met with empty yellow halls devoid of those expectations. The centre of fear rests in the eerie's connection to agency. When there is a failure of presence we are confronted with questions about the existence of a deliberate agent in the space we find ourselves. The Backrooms lore is actually filled with the questions Mark Fisher asks in relation to this. 'Is there a deliberative agent here at all? Are we being watched by an entity that has not yet revealed itself?' (2013, p. 28). When there is a failure of absence we do not need to ask these questions as we know that an agent was behind the thing we are seeing. Instead, we are racked with questions about the purposes of those agents.

The weird and the eerie are both present within The Backrooms but in different aspects of it. As I explained through the liminal spaces, the storyworld itself is soaked in a bath of eerieness. We are confronted with a failure of presence throughout every iteration of the vast labyrinth. At the same time, the existence of the rooms and levels themselves indicates a failure of absence and makes the experiencer wonder about who or what caused these spaces to occur. The weird can be found in the things that do fill the empty hallways. As liminal spaces are meant to be empty the presence of something within them can automatically be labelled with "does not belong". Furthermore, the entities that roam the halls in various iterations, whether they are benign or hostile, are, simply put, things that cannot exist within our world. Thus, through the use of the weird

and eerie modes described by Mark Fisher, the Backrooms becomes part of a current trend within the horror genre.

The main and most obvious inspiration behind the Backrooms is the realm of videogames. Mostly in its content, but the creepypasta is also particularly suited to be transmitted through the interactive medium due to the common format of the stories told within this fictional world. I will elaborate further on that in the next section. The original textpost already hints at this inspiration by its mention of nocliping. This is a common cheating strategy in videogames defined as ‘to glitch through solid environments, such as walls’ (Collins Dictionary 2022). By nocliping through walls or floors, the player is able to reach their intended destination faster or even reach spaces within the game world that would normally be closed off to them. The Backrooms brings this concept into “real life” by creating a fictional world where one could accidentally (or on purpose) noclip through off-looking walls or patches of ground to reach the otherwise unreachable space behind reality that is the Backrooms.

Beyond that, the lore of the Backrooms mirrors common videogame formats and tropes. The, at this point, accepted presence of multiple levels within the story that grow more difficult the higher you go is a classic structure that is used in almost every game. Everything from *Super Mario* to *Portal* to *Doom* fits into this structure. Likewise, the use of a first-person perspective throughout the different media is reminiscent of many narrative-focused videogame genres. This perspective promotes immersion within the story being told and adds to the “creepy-ness” factor as the viewer/player has the same information as the character they embody. Additionally, the presence of helpful items within the hallways that a Wanderer can stumble upon or actively look for is an intrinsic part of survival or exploration games that the Backrooms seems to be copying.

In short, the Backrooms is a storyworld built up out of various influences that have specifically thrived over the last few years. Their combination undoubtedly contributed to the popularity that creepypasta now enjoys.

## *Becoming An Infinite Complex*

However, the influences described above did have to become stories and come together in one storyworld before it could become popular as the Backrooms. As I said in the first chapter, the development of stories such as this is fueled by the concepts of participatory culture and transmedia storytelling. But there is one more concept that plays an important role in the development of creepypastas in general, but especially in the Backrooms: roleplay.

Instead of creating a storyworld from the outside, the network immerses themselves in the reality that they themselves construct through their works to form this world from the inside. It is a process that Jeffrey A. Tolbert calls *reverse ostentation* (2018). Ostentation is the way in which old legends and myths were created through the combination of various personal experiences of a phenomenon or creature. The reverse of this process, and what is happening now on the internet, is that fictional experiences are created to expand a story. This involves the creation of new objects (the fictional experiences) and their embedding into a corpus of the “traditional” folklore narratives from which they largely derive (Tolbert 2018). While creepypastas are intentionally created and known to be fictional, they aim to emulate the ambivalent feeling of reality that the legends of old bring with them (Blank & McNeill 2018). The process of reverse ostentation brings this aim to fruition, but the insistence upon the experiential dimension of the narratives also elicits a certain type of behaviour when participating in the stories. Participants are immersing themselves in the narrative and roleplaying as people that live in a reality where their experiences are not fictional. They give tips on how to survive the Backrooms if you accidentally fall in, or what to pack if you want to enter the hallways willingly. The posts on the Wiki are all written as reports on the levels and entities that have been discovered. At the same time, there is a multitude of fictional theories about the existence of the Backrooms trying to answer the question of how it came to be and what its purpose is, thus creating an almost scholarly archive of information within a fictional world. The entire existence and development of the Backrooms online hinges on this roleplaying aspect. The users escape from this reality by entering one where there is no escape.

This roleplaying does encourage people to actively participate in the story more than if it were created “from the outside.” Because the world is created from fragmented experiences of one place, there is a never-ending supply of gaps that can be filled in by new creators entering the network. Blank & McNeill say in their analysis of Slender Man: ‘had [the original posts] been tidier, or more coherent, Slender Man may have been relegated to a small segment of internet lore.’ (2018, p. 4). This can just as easily be said about the Backrooms. The original posts created just enough of a narrative to capture the attention and excitement of the internet but left enough questions and blanks to encourage an endless cycle of new additions to the lore.

In these instances where creepypastas go viral, a horror culture is created. These are defined by Timothy H. Evans as ‘participatory cultures surrounding specific bodies of horror narrative’ and are embedded within “cultural inventories” consisting of ‘shared motifs, conventions and structures of horror stories in any media form’ (2018, p. 128-129). These cultures have been around since before the internet was created, as evidenced by one of its most clear examples: the Cthulhu mythos surrounding H. P. Lovecraft’s original iterations of the monstrous god. Lovecraft wrote his works with intentional gaps of information, which his fanbase eagerly filled in with their own additions to the story. Encouraged by the original author, the Cthulhu myth grew far beyond the original books in a manner similar to what we see on the internet today. The inherently participatory tools of the digital age have only made it easier to elicit this type of storytelling and maintain its momentum.

Whether it is encouraged by the author or through the continuous existence and creation of information gaps within a community-built narrative, the development of creepypastas is defined by the main characteristic of Bruns’ produsage. They are constantly changing, permanently mutable mass-distributed collaborations that could potentially develop until the end of time.

Thus, as both the content of the developing “myth” and the technology used to create it encourage internet users to participate in the narrative, it is no wonder that a vast network of Bruns’ “produsers” has sprung up around the Backrooms. This network is able to create a comprehensive narrative through the fact that everyone is free to judge what does and does not get picked up in their personal lore. Produsage hinges on open participation in both the development and evaluation of its content (Bruns & Schmidt 2011). The decision of what to keep and discard is as much of a collaboration as the content the process produces (Idem). If a lot of people pick and choose the same aspects to keep they become a part of the generally accepted lore. But this way of evaluation also allows everyone to create their own narratives within the overall network, thus keeping every part of it alive rather than cutting certain paths off completely.

What further encourages the produsers is the freedom to create whatever they want with the material already present within the network. Creepypastas of this size and popularity can only be created if the works that inhabit it are part of a creative commons and are thus free to use to create more content. H. P. Lovecraft and Slender Man’s creator Erik Knudson, better known by his alias Victor Surge, both actively encouraged the public to use their works in new creations and expansions of the original world. The Backrooms is even more free to use as the “original creators” are fully unknown. They have no authority over the story and which directions it develops into and they do not wish to. Neither does anyone else within the community have this type of authority, for that matter. Creepypastas are owned by both everyone and no one in the network that created them. This ability to contribute freely and without fear of any legal or technical roadblocks is another one of the characteristics that Bruns and Schmidt have attributed to the phenomenon of produsage (2011).

Thus, the creation of creepypasta hinges on the ability of the community to mimic reality, and the freedom to do so into infinity without fearing repercussions. However, as Blank and McNeill state: ‘a good story succeeds best when accompanied by good pictures,

videos, and discursive elements' (2018, p. 13). Especially when these different media work together to create all facets of said story.

While a clear chronology of a creepypasta's spreading over different media is almost impossible to trace, there are some main markers that can be discovered. The story starts with an original post, usually made up of an image accompanied by a short vague description of events relating to that image. After that, it tends to take on a life of its own on multiple forums and blogs where more textposts and images are added to the lore. In this phase, comprehensive overviews of the story are developed and presented on websites called "wikis" and the first people start to gather on different platforms, forming a network. These first two steps can be found in the first year of the Backrooms. The original post, a picture, was posted on the 12th of May 2019. The accompanying famous text post did not join the image until September of that year but in that time the wiki and Reddit had already been created on the 2nd of June and the 17th of May 2019 respectively. Multiple versions of narratives surrounding the image started wandering the internet before the "official" start of the creepypasta's development but the idea took a solid and unified form after the textpost joined the image in September.

The next progression of markers has to do with new media joining the storyworld. While this is by no means a strict map of development and videos and videogames were certainly made in the first phase as well, it can be noted that a creepypasta tends to go viral only once it enters the realm of audiovisual media. In the case of the Backrooms, it took almost three years before a YouTube video made the story reach its peak popularity. After amateur director and VFX artist Kane Pixels posted his first "found footage" Backrooms video on the 7th of January 2022 the creepypasta got a noticeable boost in popularity evidenced by a sharp increase in google searches from that date forward (Google Trends n.d.). This specific video now has over 42 million views and Kane Pixel's YouTube channel has amassed a following of 1.91 million people. Shortly after the video's release, several videogames joined the narrative, which were in turn popularized and spread around by letsplayers on YouTube and other video and streaming platforms such as Twitch.

However, as I mentioned in chapter one, every media brings its own media-specific strengths along and thus, usually, they have different roles in the development of a creepypasta. Images and textposts are not the media that typically sustain a creepypasta's popularity. They are mostly part of the start-up process and then slowly make way for other media to take centre stage once their popularity grows. However, they do stay present throughout the entire life of a creepypasta as can be seen by the growing number of pages on the Backrooms wiki. Additionally, these media offer an easy way to step into participation because it requires little technical skills that characterise the more advanced audiovisual media.

The main continuing iterations of text and image consist of humorous memes that like everything else within the creepypasta are part of the storyworld proper. Whether they are images of liminal spaces simply captioned with something akin to "the Backrooms be like" or a more straightforward joking about falling into the Backrooms or the entities that can be found within, the memes about the Backrooms work within the system of roleplaying and are incorporated into the lore itself rather than being reflections that stand apart from the fiction.

Videos and, in some cases, short films, especially when posted on YouTube, constitute the second phase of a creepypasta's development. It is in this medium that the popularity is boosted to new heights and a steady foundation for the generally accepted lore is laid down. There are two fairly simple reasons for this effect. One, videos are easier and faster to consume than most lore-significant textposts, as textual stories tend to be on the longer side. And, two, videos have a wider reach because they are planted in a recommendation algorithm spreading them to potential viewers. As I said, there is a significant spike in the popularity of the Backrooms after Kane Pixels uploaded his first Backrooms video. Now, almost a year later he has provided the internet with a steady stream of new videos in the styles of typical found footage and classified informational VHS tapes. While the videos also take inspiration from other parts of the narrative

network, it is here that the ideas of multiple levels and governmental involvement grow deeper roots in the collective consciousness of the Backrooms' Wanderers.

But the “lore videos” only describe one facet of how videos contribute to the overall development of creepypastas. There are two more types of videos that play a large role in accomplishing the growth of the narrative in this medium. The first is the “theory video”. Although theory videos are a bit of a niche on video platforms they tend to cover a wide variety of different topics and thus are an ideal space for potentially interested users to stumble across a creepypasta’s lore. For the Backrooms the most significant theory videos were produced by Matthew Patrick, better known as MatPat, on his channel Film Theory, which has 11 million subscribers. Rather than explaining the creepypasta from a non-fictional outside perspective, his videos join in on the massive roleplaying game going on in the community and approach questions such as “where do the Backrooms come from?” and “how do you get out once you fall in?” As new information is revealed through the development of the lore in the community new content streams out of these theory videos to update their viewerbase on how that new information has shifted or proven the proposed theories.

However, it is the last type of video that might very well be called the most significant in terms of spreading the narrative around. Letsplayers on YouTube and other video and streaming platforms have long held a reign of popularity. In their videos where they play and provide commentary to a videogame they do not only introduce their, most often massive, audience to that specific creepypasta-inspired videogame but to the wider lore that is attached to it. These videos allow creepypastas to reach an audience that would have otherwise never heard of them.

It is especially important that these letsplayers create publicity for the videogames within the narrative as they are essentially the lifeblood of a creepypasta’s existence. It is not a coincidence that a decade after their release the most significant aspects of the Slender Man lore that still spook around the internet, such as the collection of pages, are from the videogames. This is because videogames create an experience that is not possible

in any other medium. The inherent interactivity and the control that a player has to emphasize certain parts of a game while they ignore others, allow each player to have a fully personal interpretative experience of the game (Asimos 2021). The player creates their own story and lore through their interpretation of the gameplay and the presented story elements. This control of interpretation often leads to the player experiencing the narrative in a deeper and more meaningful way than if they were to watch a video or read a forum post describing the same story (Asimos 2021). Furthermore, videogames allow the player to directly experience the narrative. They are, essentially, living in that other reality where the Backrooms exist through the character or avatar they are playing. This direct experience or performance of a myth or legend is called *ostentation* or *legend tripping* and videogames offer ‘what is arguably the best opportunity for ordinary fans of the Mythos to legend trip’ (Tolbert 2018, p. 40).

While the original Backrooms videogames offer a direct and meaningful experience of the narrative, the Backrooms’ narrative aspects are also being added, officially by developers but also unofficially by tech-savvy fans, into other, more mainstream and mass media, games. The yellow walls have already infiltrated games such as *Minecraft*, *Among Us*, and *Fortnite*. It is especially the addition to Fortnite that signals the Backrooms dipping its toes in the waters of the mass media industry. A creepypasta’s presence in these spaces might be the first sign of a more significant move away from the internet niche it started out in and towards the addition of industry-produced works to the storyworld.

### 3. The Slender Man Franchise



*Images 3.1 (left) & 3.2 (right): The original photoshopped images entered into the competition by Victor Surge (Surge 2009)*



The first, and at this point still only, creepypasta to become bigger than its internet roots is my second case study, *Slender Man*. This narrative is no stranger to scholarly research as there have been multiple books and articles published that speak about the myth through the lenses of digital storytelling and contemporary legend creation, some of which have already been cited within this essay. However, as the Slender Man grew and slowly moved away from being “just” a fictional internet legend, the dynamic of its creation and the meaning attributed to the creepypasta changed. This chapter will first dive into how the monstrous man became more than fiction, before moving on to describing the interference of the mass media industry and finally the “death” of the Slender Man creepypasta.

#### *A (Not So) Old Legend*

Time on the internet moves at a breakneck speed where important narratives become yesterday’s news as soon as the next big thing rolls around, usually within a day or two. Thus, the fact that Slender Man still haunts the digital realm is a testament to the power

of its narrative (Asimos 2021). This power was achieved through a process that is quite similar to the one described in chapter two of this thesis. The narrative finds its birth in a paranormal photoshop contest hosted on the website Something Awful, where Erik Knudson posted the images at the top of this chapter with accompanying captions under his alias Victor Surge.

Image 3.1 was accompanied by the text:

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

Image 3.2's caption was slightly more elaborate:

'One of two recovered photographs from the Stirling City Library blaze. Notable for being taken the day which fourteen children vanished and for what is referred to as "The Slender Man". Deformities cited as film defects by officials. Fire at library occurred one week later. Actual photograph confiscated as evidence. —1986, photographer: Mary Thomas, missing since June 13th, 1986.' (Surge 2009)

These captions transformed the images from creepy pictures to the beginnings of a creepypasta. It did not take long for the images to go viral and spawn a large number of fictional works expanding the lore surrounding the character. This popularity grew even more with the addition of the Marble Hornets' video series and alternate reality game portraying a similar creature named "The Operator" but by many interpreted as Slender Man. Just like the popular Backrooms videos by Kane Pixels, the Marble Hornets' series uses a found footage style reminiscent of the plot and form of *The Blair Witch Project* (Eduardo Sánchez & Daniel Myrick 1999).

However, the media that contributed the most to the popularity and general knowledge of Slender Man are the two main videogames. These added new plot points to the story and were the gateway into the Slender Man experience for many of the network's members, not insignificantly through the fact that many letsplayers on YouTube picked them up. The most prominent new feature was introduced by the first videogame *Slender: The Eight Pages* (Parsec Productions 2012). From that point forward the presence of ominous scribbles on pages scattered around a location indicated that Slender Man is near.

In an interview with the website knowyourmeme.com, Victor Surge claims that his main inspirations for the ominous figure consisted of other creepypastas, (urban) legends, survival horror videogames, and Stephen King's *The Mist* (Tomberry 2010). Surge's aim was 'to formulate something whose motivations can barely be comprehended and causes general unease and terror in a general population' (Tomberry 2010, 3rd question). And cause general unease and terror it did. The narrative quickly grew out of Surge's control and he was happy to encourage the digital network to expand on his original ideas.

Up until this point, the resemblance between the Backrooms and Slender Man is clear. But where the Backrooms is still firmly planted on the internet, Slender Man has found its way into the real world. Slender Man was a story created with its atmosphere of belief as a priority. This means that the audience and creators of the narrative were open to the possibility of the no-faced entity being real (Tolbert 2018). Because of this, multiple instances of fictional historic evidence for Slender Man's existence popped up on the internet. Together with the photoshopped images and the made-up experiences floating around, this "evidence" could and has convinced people of the real-ness of the Slender Man legend through the suggestion that it existed before its marked appearance on the internet (Tolbert 2018). The Slender Man has become a boogeyman on the playground and has taken root in real-world belief systems. The legend's power is as prominent in these places as it was on the internet and its aspects are taken up by children trying to prank their siblings or, in more extreme and unforeseen cases, to

enact horrible acts of violence in the name of Slender Man, as was the case with the Waukesha stabbing incident where two young girls tried to stab their friend to death as a sacrifice to the faceless monster. Slender Man has long since slipped away from the confines of the internet and become a figure of oral legendry and belief that, despite its easily found fictional origins, is seen as real by many not directly familiar with its digital history (Blank & McNeill 2018).

### *Industry Take-Over*

It is this transition from the internet to real-world legend, and especially the Waukesha incident, that launched Slender Man into the consciousness of the general population, especially in the United States of America and, subsequently, into the realm of mass media.

The films and media produced as a reaction to the “Slender Man stabbing” in Waukesha were not the first instances of mass media touching the faceless creature. That title goes to the two videogames that make up the most prominent iterations of Slender Man’s narrative. They represent a refinement of what was, at that point, still a meme, and the first steps of a transition from a participatory cultural product to a mass media commodity (Tolbert 2018). Even though the studios that made the games, Parsec Productions and Blue Isle Studios, are independent, the fact that they are studios and not individual amateur videogame makers, as is the case with most of the Backrooms games, indicates a move towards companies taking advantage of the popularity of a creepypasta. This is reflected by the reactions of the network of long-time fans when the games first came out. Many were unhappy with, especially, *Slender: The Eight Pages*, because ‘it generated a great deal of interest in Slender Man, but the new fans who initially encountered Slender Man via the game were unaware of the complexity of the established Mythos’ (Tolbert 2018, p. 42).

These reactions show that the people creating these myths online are heavily invested in the participatory dimension of the narrative (Tolbert 2018). They pride themselves on having a deep knowledge of the subject and, though they are open to interpretations

and variations of the lore, they are also protective of it when external forces come knocking (Idem). It is for this reason that many fans were not especially delighted when the idea of a Slender Man movie was first proposed. They felt like a film made by established mass media production companies would represent ‘something official’ and would ‘undermine the communal aspect of the narrative’ (Asimos 2021, p. 206).

But, eventually, in 2018 an “official” Slender Man film was released and distributed by Sony Pictures: *Slender Man* (Sylvain White). Notably, they did credit original creator Victor Surge for coming up with the eponymous monster of the film. This acknowledgement of the legend’s digital roots shows that the filmmakers were not only aware of the larger community-built mythos but also wanted to insert the film within it. However, once the reviews started rolling in it quickly became clear that the community was not going to accept the film as a part of the Slender Man storyworld. Both critics and Slender Man fans were in agreement that the film was, ultimately, a huge failure. The general consensus can be summed up in one quote from critic Grady Bolding: ‘Screen Gems Slender Man takes the creepypasta and flushes it down the toilet’ (2019). So, what could have been a boost to the, at that point, decade-old tale, instead only caused people to dismiss the monster as an outdated internet phenomenon.

### *Life After Death*

That is not to say that the film is solely responsible for the “death” of Slender Man, nor that Slender Man is actually gone completely. The faceless monster still creeps around the internet and even within the halls of the Backrooms. Rather than disappearing into the digital void, Slender Man has established itself as an “old” legend, which many people know of, but most do not actively interact with anymore. What *has* died is the storytelling aspect of the creepypasta.

Considering the speed at which the internet usually moves on to the next big thing, it is a miracle that Slender Man lasted as long as it did. This lengthy popularity can be attributed to the sea of potential that the vagueness of the original post brought forth. As

I noted in chapter two, these types of stories thrive through the gaps in information that the narrative presents. However, at some point, those gaps will all be filled, leaving nothing to add and thus cutting off the momentum of the community creating it.

A story such as Slender Man simply could not have gone on indefinitely. Henry Jenkins notes that screenwriters have gone from pitching stories to pitching characters to pitching storyworlds to support the culture of film franchises and transmedia storytelling that has been on the rise in the mass media industry. A character, such as Slender Man, can support multiple stories but the potential will be exhausted quickly in comparison to a storyworld holding multiple characters and storylines. Additionally, the Slender Man could not be fleshed out completely without taking away from his scariness. Horror depends on the unknown and thus some gaps were left unfillable.

The truth is that Slender Man as a creepypasta had already died down long before the film came out. There have been efforts to extend his life in relevance through creating a “Slender family”, his mother-in-law’s *Granny* games released in 2017 being the most successful of the bunch, but they did not connect with the original mythos enough to cause a revival.

Ultimately, the popularity of Slender Man died a natural death. Aside from a few die-hard fans keeping him around, the internet has moved on to something new. Something which has the potential to become just as infinite as its yellow hallways.

## Conclusion

The three chapters of this thesis work together in examining the different components of the answer to the question: *How do some creepypastas develop into mass media cultural products?* The first chapter has shown that the current digital storytelling practices are really nothing new. Rather they are an old tradition reborn in a new and modernized form. Benjamin's folk storyteller returned through the horizontal cultural production that the internet offered and they adapted to the new narrative space by multiplying into networks and diversifying the media they use. These new aspects reflect the trends of participatory culture and transmedia storytelling within media consumption and production in general. Chapter two made clear that these two concepts play a large part in the popularization and development of creepypastas. Due to the amassing of a network of contributors who are able to produce narratives in different types of media a creepypasta is able to grow from a one-off story into a huge internet franchise. Within that franchise, every media serves its own function. Text, image, and video allow the narratives to take form and spread quickly across the internet, but it is the videogame that functions as the lifeblood of the creepypasta as it allows for a personal and "real-life" experience of the narrative.

These narratives are created through a process of produsage, allowing all consumers to become producers and freely contribute to the narrative in the literal sense of creating works to expand it further, but also in a more subtle way by evaluating the works already present in the network. This way of evaluation allows everyone to build up their own personal lore of a certain creepypasta. These different personal views of the narrative combined create the "generally accepted lore" of the creepypasta in a way that is similar to how folklore in the past was created. It also allows every part of the narrative to stay alive, even if it is not generally accepted.

Furthermore, these creepypastas are not developed within a vacuum. As can be seen in my analysis of the Backrooms, these narratives are influenced by a myriad of sources, from the realm of film to the internet and its functions itself. The use of already popular

influences, such as the liminal spaces in the case of the Backrooms, undoubtedly contributes to the popularization of a creepypasta.

Thus, a creepypasta becomes part of popular culture through a combination of different media working together to form a full experience of the narrative and popularize it, the network creating and evaluating the material in a way that leaves all avenues open for further exploration, and working with already popular influences from a variety of sources. Its ever-growing and ever-changing nature allows the creepypasta to develop from a captioned image into the huge online franchises that we see in the cases of the Backrooms and Slender Man.

The move from popular media to *mass* media took centre stage in chapter three. Essentially, mass media enters the network far earlier than the rest of the community realises as videogame studios capitalize on the popular narrative floating around the internet and join in on the fun by developing their own games for it. But it is not until the film industry starts poking around that most fans become defensive of their creation. The reactions of the community once a noticeable industrial force tries to invade their space proves that the open participatory dimension of a creepypasta's development is valued highly by the network itself. However, when this invasion happens after the creepypasta is already slowly fading into internet history, it might become a new boost in popularity and thus is able to prolong the life of the narrative. It is therefore disappointing that the 2018 Slender Man film was so bad that it had the exact opposite effect.

But it is of no use to wallow in this disappointment as the “death” of Slender Man shows us that, like Benjamin’s storyteller, creepypastas never really die. They rest easy as a part of internet history and are even able to survive outside of the internet due to a transformation into oral legendry separate from their digital roots. Additionally, their forms and content continue to influence mass media production and even the development of their successors on the internet. It is therefore clear that these pillars of

digital folk culture are afforded a sense of immortality, stretching into infinity within their narratives and certainly also outside of them.

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