“This Is Not For You”

Reader Agency and Intimacy in Contemporary Horror Fiction

Aslak Rustad Hauglid

A Thesis Presented to
The Department of Literature, Area Studies and European Languages
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Master of Arts Degree

 UNIVERSITETET I OSLO

Spring 2016
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http://www.duo.uio.no/

Print: Reprosentralen, Universitetet i Oslo
Abstract

This thesis examines how recent/contemporary horror fiction uses the establishment of reader intimacy and challenges to reader agency in order to create experiences of horror. The discussion focuses on a selection of horror texts from different media published between 2000 and 2016. The thesis argues that these two techniques have come to be increasingly important horror tropes over this period, and examines how they are applied in order to propose a new perspective for understanding how contemporary horror operates. Two central arguments structure this discussion. The first argument is a claim that the aesthetic, narrative and in some case interactive dimensions of the examined horror texts illustrate how these texts seek to shorten the distance between reader and author, while simultaneously questioning the power the reader possesses in relation to the text. All of this takes place in the pursuit of creating an effective experience of horror. The second argument is that audiences of contemporary horror, in the shape of Internet communities, can to a much greater degree shape the genre and its texts than before, an agency that takes several forms. This thesis concludes that the experience of horror presented by these texts and their audiences call attention to the act of invoking the monstrous, an act which the reader is being made responsible for.
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Erika Kvistad. She has been everything I could hope for from a supervisor: encouraging and open-minded about some of my more unorthodox ideas, extremely available, and always gently keeping me on track. Without her, this thesis would certainly have collapsed on itself at some point. She also deserves credit for “infecting” me with her passion for horror in the first place.

I also owe many thanks to my good friends at the 8th floor. They kept me from spending quite a fair bit of the last year in solitude, and their constant encouragement, insights and helpful advice went a long way in making this thesis cross the finishing line. I am extremely grateful for the time we got to spend together. On that note, I would also like to thank the English Masters Society for reminding us that we are a community that can help each other along while still finding time for the occasional session of tea and cakes.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for all that I owe them: Torill, Nina, Sverre, Signe, Frida and everyone else who were there when I needed them. They understood what it took to write this thesis, kept me in good spirits every step of the way, and provided much needed proofreading.

Thank you so much.
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Introduction

This thesis aims to explore the role of reader intimacy and interaction, or reader agency, in contemporary horror fiction. Contemporary fiction here refers to texts published from the year 2000 up until the first half of 2016. The main argument presented is that the concept of reader intimacy, referring to literary texts which endeavor to shorten the distance between the reader and the narrative, has seen a surge in popularity within horror fiction over this period of time. Linked to this development is a rise in the number of texts which challenge the concept of reader agency. Through their aesthetic, narrative and sometimes meta-textual dimensions, the texts call attention to and then redefine the power over the text possessed by the reader. What I consider to be particularly interesting is that both these developments seem to have evolved for the shared purpose of creating a new form of horror experience for the reader. While older horror texts have also used familiarity, intimacy and reader involvement to create frightening experiences, these conventions have grown over the last decade to take up a much more central position within the genre, allowing us to consider this gradual development a reconsideration of that core question of horror: what exactly is it that audiences fear? Given that the answer to this question will likely dominate how horror develops as a genre in the years to come, I consider it important to examine how fostering intimacy and challenging agency plays into horror today. My interest in this perspective is substantiated when we consider how the development of these two conventions can be found in horror texts on several different media platforms, adapting to fit the aesthetic and narrative framework of each new platform they inhabit. Finally, a surge of audience-created and audience-moderated horror fiction, blurring the line between horror reader and horror writer, can only serve to emphasize what will become the conclusion of this paper: in order to understand the contemporary horror genre, we must understand both how horror texts interact with horror audiences, and how audiences in turn interact with the texts.

Although horror is subject to the same problems of definition as any other genre, it is generally agreed within academic circles that horror fiction is written with the intention of providing readers with a frightening experience. It is this definition of horror, after all, which has led recognized scholars within the field, such as Noël Carrol (The Philosophy of Horror) and Matt Hills (The Pleasures of Horror) to consider at length why the genre has an audience at all. This thesis is not written with the intention of defining the horror genre in general, and as such it adheres to this affect-based definition. For the purposes of this thesis, the word
affect refers to the emotional impact of a text. This paper instead intends to examine how two concepts which can theoretically be applied to any piece of fiction have been applied within the horror genre in order to enhance the sense of fear experienced by the reader. I find that their use provides us with certain insights into the evolution of the horror genre that are highly relevant to any discussion on how horror operates today, and on how it may operate in the future.

**Background**

At this point I would like to briefly outline a few key traditions within the horror genre, and what elements of horror they centered on. This limited historical overview, restricted to British/American literature, will help me to point to some of the roots of the texts we are discussing. It will also serve to remind us that although the conventions we will be discussing in this thesis have deep-seated roots in previous horror traditions, their recent use in horror texts represent a swifter, more visible development both in theme and narrative. For this section, I will refer to the history of horror as outlined by Gina Wisker in her 2005 book *Horror Fiction: An Introduction*.

As a literary form, the horror genre as we know it today has its roots in the Gothic tradition of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The major theme of Gothic horror in general is the transgression and destabilization of societal norms. Monsters appeared as walking embodiments of these transgressions, emerging from the dark corners of society to threaten it with collapse. The monster of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) is, among a host of other interpretations, interpretable as an embodiment of man transgressing the laws of Nature to satisfy his own ego, a cautionary tale against meddling with God’s creation. Edgar Allan Poe wrote short fiction built on “terrors about the proximity of death to life”, his protagonists clinging to their humanity in the face of a terrible unknown (Wisker 53-54). The vampires of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) embodied debauchery, lust and the corruption of the pure, transgressing death and decay through their sexually charged indulgence in drinking human blood. As Wisker explains, Gothic stories caused readers to question norms they took for granted, warning them against the inherent monstrosity of crossing the boundaries set by God and society (43). Horror was based on the revulsion caused by the immoral monsters, and only through the destruction of these creatures could order be restored. The fantastical elements and often romanticized environments of Gothic texts established great narrative
distance between reader and text. These environments remain popular in certain kinds of horror texts, and the established theme of transgression endures throughout the history of the genre. However, horrific experiences in Gothic horror were derived from the challenging of established norms, not from an implicit connection between the story and the reader.

Horror remained popular throughout the Victorian period and into the twentieth century, among other factors due to the popularity of the ghost story. Like monsters, ghosts also represented transgressions, but they were usually closely tied to the passage of time, and especially to the past. Ghost stories frequently took the shape of cautionary tales warning inhabitants against repeating transgressions which had taken place in the past. Charles Dickens, for example, was known to use ghosts in this fashion: *The Signal-Man* (1866) and of course, *A Christmas Carol* (1843), are both preeminent examples. Later ghost stories would also incorporate ghosts that warned against intruding upon the past - the short stories of M.R James contain several excellent examples. We see that the general themes of horror largely remained the same. Monsters still represented the dark side of human nature and society, and encounters with them still ended with destruction, whether humanity prevailed or failed in the attempt to end the threat they posed to our existence. Many influential horror stories still retained shades of the moralistic fairy tale. We can note that the fantastic trappings of the Gothic were gradually phased out in favor of more familiar environments that evoked the past. In spite of all the boundaries they endeavored to question, however, horror texts remained explicitly fictional and made little to no attempt to involve readers directly with their imaginary worlds. What we should note, however, is that ghost stories often warn people about trespassing on domains they do not belong in. Sometimes, inquisitiveness can be dangerous. This is a theme we shall frequently return to.

The twentieth century witnessed the birth of many subgenres of horror directed at different audiences. The tradition of “weird” horror, pioneered over the first half of the century by authors such as Algernon Blackwood, Robert Chambers and H.P Lovecraft, concerned the collapse of human values and reasoning in the face of an utterly alien unknown. Wisker notes that “suggestive” horror, leaving out details for the reader to speculate over, is a horror tactic that directly involves the reader, and that it is prevalent in the works of writers like Blackwood (73). In other words, we note in this genre a burgeoning sense of encouraged reader agency (in the interpretive sense), which in Chapter I we will see fully developed in the often hard to read novel *House of Leaves*. “Weird” horror is also notable to us due to its emphasis on helplessness. Faced with the alien unknown, humanity will frequently end up
with no hope of prevailing. And as Lovecraft emphasizes in his seminal short story “The Call of Cthulhu”, our encounters with these unsurmountable horrors often stem from our foolish ventures outside of the “placid island of ignorance” humanity inhabits (52). Like ghost stories in which spectres return to punish transgressions onto spaces that belong to the past, “weird” horror punishes the exploration of the unknown, associating the unexplored with the forbidden and unknowable. This theme will prove helpful to the process of understanding the contemporary horror texts we are discussing, especially since quite a few of them toy with the idea that the readers, in “exploring” the text, expose themselves to danger.

Only a small proportion of twentieth-century monsters are alien to humans, however. Uncanny literature in the shape of texts which transform the familiar into the monstrous remains enduringly popular during this period. The embodiment of the monstrous still changes somewhat: horror literature develops a solid body of texts concerning the monstrous within us, featuring ordinary people who have turned monstrous due to selfishness, madness or oppressive upbringings. Wisker mentions texts such as Daphne du Maurier’s Rebecca (1938), Robert Bloch’s Psycho (1959), and Angela Carter’s “The Fall River Axe Murders” (1981) (86, 93 and 98). The latter two are particularly notable because their myths are partially based on the circumstances of real-world murders. It is tempting to read this growing convention of using real-world events in horror fiction as an increasing willingness to shorten the distance between the world of the text and the world of the reader. In fact, Wisker dubs Carter’s story an “urban myth”, a speculative story based in the real world (98). This definition, as well as the term itself, places this kind of story very close to that of the “urban legend”, the semi-folkloristic form of storytelling which the horror subgenre known as “creepypasta” has adapted to the Internet. Creepypasta will be central to our discussion partially due to its tradition of passing off its narratives as true stories. As we can see, this convention of imitating the real world to increase suspense has visible roots in the aforementioned psychological thrillers.

As the century passed, horror spread to the cinema, and the genre was soon associated with film as much as with novels and short stories. Horror films were usually adaptations of specific novels, short stories, or the conventions of a specific horror subgenre. Wisker notes that the Gothic horror film originated around 1920, and found great popularity in the films produced by Hammer Studios in the sixties (123-124). Suspense stories and thrillers were pioneered by Alfred Hitchcock, who directed a famous adaptation of Psycho in 1960. Then, in the eighties, directors such as John Carpenter and Wes Craven spearheaded a series of
horror films targeted at teenagers. This form of horror was visceral, typically portraying brutal violence inflicted on young people by maniac killers. The slasher horror trend truly commercialized horror, spanning cash-cow franchises like Friday the 13th, Nightmare on Elm Street, Halloween and Scream. The violent and gruesome content of these films led scholars like Hills and Carrol to consider horror fans and what sort of enjoyment they derived from horror. It might also be worth noting that horror lost some of its literary reputation during this period, seeing how filmmakers appealed to young audiences with graphic violence and “cheap” scares, no longer trying to pass off their texts as moralistic or highbrow. In the nineties, however, studies of horror films flourished, with many critics considering how they challenge norms of society (for instance Wisker), gender (for instance Carol Clover) etc. In the interest of relating horror cinema to our discussion, however, I must admit that there is little to point to thematically. Apart from the rituals of cult film followers, like those practiced by fans of the 1975 horror comedy Rocky Horror Picture Show (dir. Jim Sharman), and the gimmick of scaring the audience with props installed in the theatre used by director William Castle, horror cinema offers little new when it comes to audience interaction or participation. All of the conventions I have mentioned as roots of contemporary horror are represented through film adaptation, but not expanded on. What is interesting for the purposes this thesis is the aesthetic dimension offered by film. As we shall see, horror video games, web series and even horror novels borrow heavily from the visual aesthetic established by cinema.

As previously stated, this thesis draws on texts from the year 2000 up until the year 2016. This definition of “contemporary” horror is rather broad and includes a huge body of texts. Horror novels are still an enduring medium. Horror film is still enduringly popular, but the tide of slasher films seem to have receded, replaced by psychological thrillers and films that focus on haunted or possessed people, locations and objects. Horror-oriented urban legends sparked the creepypasta genre, consisting of small pieces of anonymously written horror fiction that pass themselves off as accounts of real events. Horror video games have surged in popularity, appealing to an audience which demands simulations of a multitude of horror experiences. All of these texts make full use of the aesthetical and narrative possibilities offered by the media they exist within in the pursuit of creating the scariest possible experience, providing an immense variety of horror conventions to draw on and discuss. It is within this context that my thesis situates itself. I have considered three themes rooted in horror history: a sense of the border between fiction and reality being blurred, the punishment that follows trespassing into the unknown, and the futility of pursuing the
unknown. Today, we see these themes fully realized within a broad variety of horror texts that target readers directly. The fourth wall, the metaphysical barrier between narrative and audience, is being gradually eroded, and monsters are crossing it, but in what direction? In any case, more and more contemporary horror texts place unexpected responsibility on the reader.

**Structure of Arguments and Chapter Outline**

Two considerations lie behind the dividing and structuring of the arguments presented by this thesis: how the major themes considered apply to texts from several different media platforms, and how the audiences of these platforms, in the shape of online reader communities, contribute to the developments which I will discuss. First of all, it seems that the use of intimacy and the challenging of agency are horror conventions that are being applied to texts across several media platforms. We will see them in printed novels, where they are reflected in textual forms as well as narrative. However, further investigation reveals that media with different aesthetic and narrative dimensions: images, film and even games, are just as fertile ground for introducing reader participation as a horror theme. The different aesthetics simply mean that this thesis has to consider different ways in which the theme can be incorporated, which proves very rewarding as we realize how wildly different components can ultimately serve the same purpose: to make the reader feel more involved with the setting, more active within the narrative, and, hopefully, more frightened as a result.

This thesis considers texts from three different media in order to draw conclusions about those specific texts, while also considering what they imply for their media in general. The first chapter discusses the horror novel, represented by Mark Z. Danielewski’s rather unique first novel, *House of Leaves*. This novel is notable for the unorthodox aesthetic and narrative choices it incorporates into its presentation. A multilayered narrative, large sections of text unrelated to the plot, and page layouts printed to simulate images and motion all contribute to a challenging reader experience. It is also written with a large amount of textual and metaphorical “empty space”, blanks in the text and the narrative intended for the reader to fill in on their own, investing their own contributions in the story. Finally, the multilayered narrative invites readers to consider themselves as the last link in a chain of interpretive experiences that transcend the confines of the novel through the act of someone reading it, possibly spreading even further through that reader. As the text contains elements of horror
and monstrosity that are referred to as “infectious”, readers may consider themselves collaborators in spreading and perpetuating these elements.

The second chapter considers a medium which is actually a relatively young (the term was coined in the year 2007) subgenre of horror: creepypasta. Creepypasta is a term for short pieces of horror fiction that are published and circulated exclusively on the Internet. Writing creepypasta is a non-profit effort, and writers are often anonymous. In addition to the more traditionally written short stories, creepypasta can incorporate images, sound and even video. In order to discuss how the themes of interaction and intimacy might be applied to audiovisual presentations as well as text, I discuss the creepypasta “The Curious Case of Smile.jpg”, which uses both text and image, and *Marble Hornets*, which is a video series published on YouTube. Sensory distortion, nondescript settings which can be projected upon and a sense of participation through reading and sharing are all discussed within the context of this subgenre.

The third and final chapter of this thesis examines medium of the video game, a platform which contains a large amount of texts that fall under the horror label. Here we continue discussing the conventions allowed by audiovisual aesthetics, paying particular attention to the ways in which they can be read as tools in adapting certain horror experiences from other media. Video games also add a new set of conventions by virtue of their gameplay dimension, so the gameplay-related components that challenge reader agency are given proper due. Two video games are chosen, based on their different horror roots. *Resident Evil* has been a horror game classic since video game giant Capcom released it in 1996, and its enduring popularity is demonstrated by a well-selling re-release in high definition, published in 2015. It will be discussed as an adaptation of horror film, utilizing plenty of cinematic techniques, also in its agency mechanics. By contrast, *Slender: The Arrival*, released in 2013, was developed by a smaller, independent game company, and takes its forms and aesthetics from creepypasta like *Marble Hornets*. How it handles agency in the context of horror is, as such, notably different from what we see in *Resident Evil HD*. This chapter also uses the independently developed game *Undertale* (published in 2015) to discuss agency as a tool which the players can use to create horrific experiences for themselves as much as the game does on its own. *Undertale* also illustrates how audiences can modify their own games and the implications of this form of agency.

The other major focus of this thesis is the role that audiences, especially online communities, play in the interpretation and even creation of new horror texts. More
specifically, my discussion hopes to prove how the agency possessed by fan communities as well as individuals can contribute to the overall themes and affect of horror texts. The sections of my three chapters that do not discuss specific texts will be presenting different online discussion platforms relating to the texts or platforms discussed in those chapters, both specific and non-specific, and consider what sort of agency they illustrate and what those powers may imply for current and future developments within horror. The first chapter discusses an online message board dedicated to interpreting and discussing the work of Mark Danielewski, the author of *House of Leaves*. This message board, which is the community I find to be closest to an online authority on this novel, illustrates interpretive reader agency and how fan discussion can be said to perpetuate the chain of interpretive readings that originates within the pages of the novel itself.

The second chapter concerns creepypasta, a form of writing which survives through redistribution. This form of reader activity is only mentioned in passing, however; the main focus of my discussion of this subgenre concerns creative agency. Online communities have, through creepypasta, a newfound power to collaboratively create horror stories and share their creations. The stories base themselves on a collective ownership, meaning that anyone can contribute to the monsters they create. Illustrating this theory is the *Something Awful* message board, which collaborated to evolve a relatively simple concept into a fully-fledged mythos centered on a new horror villain: the Slender Man. This creature was built from a collection of fearful experiences contributed by a wide variety of Internet users, meaning that it had the potential to frighten a large audience. In addition to illustrating creative agency, the collaborative effort that spawned the Slender Man also serves to highlight a mediating agency: the community also evaluated proposed traits and characteristics of the villain, ensuring that only those horror tropes deemed to be most effective survived into the final product. The concept of mediating agency is further discussed in a later section of the same chapter, which concerns websites that act as online libraries or repositories for creepypasta stories. A study of these websites reveals a dynamic community which contributes reviews and catalogues user-submitted horror stories, creating a body of texts reflecting which conventions are considered important to the contemporary horror scene.

The third chapter deals less with specific communities and more with video game audience impact in general. I find that the mediating, and to a lesser extent, the creative agency I am discussing related to creepypasta apply to the video game scene as well. The concept of financial influence is considered through the technique of crowdfunding, a means
of funding often utilized by independent game development groups. Crowdfunding has offered a different form of creative agency through an option to contribute funder-made content to the final product, in exchange for a certain level of financial support. This form of agency is discussed in this paper largely due to the implications it carries for the emotional affect of horror games. Chapter III also discusses audience influence in the context of approval-based marketing. This concept, utilized by certain gaming platforms, gives users the chance to vote on which independent games, as presented by developers, should be released to the open market. As seen on the Steam platform (a software that markets and catalogues computer games), this approval process also allows users to make suggestions to the developers on what in-game features they would like to see altered for the final product. Sometimes, this feedback succeeds in making the developers rework their game before releasing it. Looking at a couple of independently developed horror games released through the Steam store, I found that suggested alterations to those games were intended to make them scarier. In this way, my discussion considers approval-based marketing to empower audiences with a kind of mediating agency similar to that which regulated the process of creating the Slender Man. The audience knows its own fears, and seeks to project them onto texts in order to enhance their own experience of it.

Theory

The theoretical background substantiating the arguments made in this paper is rather broad. The texts discussed are situated in three groups that are fairly distant from each other in the field of literary studies, given that they belong to three different types of media. For the sake of a tidier structure, I will therefore outline in brief which critics and theories feature in each chapter of this project. There is, however, a field of literary criticism which features fairly heavily throughout: Reader response-theory. As such, this field of theory must be elaborated on before we can move on to the considerably longer list of critics which only appear in individual chapters.

The thesis utilizes two important aspects of reader response theory. The first is the basic notion that any act of interpretation is a singular, non-replicable encounter between a reader and a text, in which both parties contribute meaning in equal measure. As a representative of this theory I use Louise Rosenblatt’s book The Reader, the Text, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work (1978). The second aspect of reader response-
theory that I frequently draw on is the concept of the interpretive community, which was presented two years later by critic Stanley Fish in his book *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (1980). Fish proposes that the singular interpretations created by readers eventually become part of a larger, communal body of interpretations. The community then collaborates on creating a shared interpretation or consensus of how a given text can be interpreted. Their consensus is fluid by nature, constantly mediated, re-evaluated and regulated by the community. This prevents interpretation of literature from being reduced to base subjectivism. I will elaborate a bit more on these two aspects before moving on, especially with regards to how they are being used in this thesis.

In *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, Rosenblatt explains the basics of reader response-theory, a field of literary criticism which puts the focus on the reader. The title of her book refers to the three components which together constitute any given interpretation of any given text. On their own, the reader has nothing to interpret, but when they read they supply their expectations, their history and the context in which the text is being interpreted. On its own, the text is merely a collection of symbols that hold no inherent meaning. When it is being read, however, it supplies a framework of meanings in which the reader can construct a unique experience. As such, it is the interaction between reader and text which creates meaning, and since the context in which the text is being read will be different every time, each interpretation must be considered a singular “event in time” (Rosenblatt 12). Rosenblatt dubs this interpretation a “poem”, a work of art that must be understood as an action rather than an artifact. Each interpretation of a text will be different, and no interpretation holds a greater intrinsic value than others; their merits will be determined by literary consensus. In this thesis, the use of the terms “poem” or “reading” in quotation marks denotes that I refer to Rosenblatt’s definition of the “poem”, that is to say, a singular reader interpretation. This definition is of particular interest to my thesis because it posits that the act of reading creates a new iteration of a given text, an iteration which is considered an object of art on its own. Even more interesting is Rosenblatt’s definition of the “aesthetic reading”: an act in which the reader incorporates their experience of that particular reading into their interpretation (27). The concept of an experience is what links Rosenblatt’s definition of interpretation to emotion and affect, which makes it much more relevant to our discussion of the audience of an affect-based genre. Building on this, my paper repeatedly questions the implications of recreating a text within oneself by reading it, especially related to a theme of spreading horror found within *House of Leaves* and the creepypasta genre. Thus, this aspect of reader response-theory
figures most prominently in the first two chapters, illustrating a form of agency that appears most applicable to written texts. Even so, watching a film or playing a game just as easily constitutes a reading according to our definition, and we must keep the idea with us to the very end.

This thesis puts heavy emphasis on community, so we must also bring with us a broader view of the reader response-interpretation and what it implies for a larger body of readers. Stanley Fish offers us this needed perspective in *Is There a Text in This Class?*. Here, he argues that literature and the merits of a given text are classified by interpretations that attribute such labels to it. The act of recognizing literature “proceeds from a collective decision as to what will count as literature, a decision that will be in force only so long as a community of readers or believers continues to abide by it.” This decision will, in turn, create preconceptions that will influence later readings of the texts it concerns (11). This collective decision is created and regulated by the interpretive community, which can be any collection of readers dedicated to interpreting the same text or collection of texts. The mediating power of this community, ruling out readings which appear too idiosyncratic, helps defend reader response-theory against accusations of subjectivity. Anyone can submit their interpretation, but this interpretation must in turn submit itself to a (fluid) set of rules so that it fits in with the whole. This is the interpretive agency of a reading community, which we will return to at several instances in this thesis. In the first chapter, its role in interpreting and mediating literature holds the most weight. In the second and third chapters, however, we apply Fish’s concept in a somewhat different fashion, speculating on how a community that can interpret texts can also collaboratively create them or mediate their creation. All of these possibilities originate with the emphasis which reader response-theory puts on the audience, the reader. This thesis will substantiate Rosenblatt’s and Fish’s claims by providing proof that individual opinions can hold tremendous weight in shaping the body of the contemporary horror text.

Even though this project frequently considers how horror conventions play into affect, I do not speculate at any length as to what the general appeal of horror is. This oft-discussed topic requires a degree of attention beyond the scope of this thesis in order to be considered properly, and although reader response is paramount to this paper, what leads readers to seek out experiences of horror in the first place is not. Within certain contexts, however, I find it prudent to briefly refer to this topic, as the appeal of horror will occasionally help illustrate the role of its communities. On these occasions, I refer to a book by Matt Hills called *The Pleasures of Horror* (2005). In this book, Hills references various scholars who have
speculated on the appeal of horror, and uses these accounts to make speculations of his own concerning the horror audience. I have used his book as a useful repository of audience accounts, particularly his fourth chapter, which discusses the concept of connoisseurship and the challenging of the horror experience as frightening by certain communities. It would, perhaps, have been better to trace these accounts back to their original sources, and I recognize the potential weakness of referring to Hills’ book alone. However, I found his contextualization of these accounts to be most useful, and his own perspectives on the aforementioned topics in his fourth chapter were often more relevant to my own discussion than the accounts he substantiated them with. Hills is mostly referred to in the first and second chapter, as they discuss specific reader/writer-communities, but like Rosenblatt and Fish he constitutes an influence throughout this project that I would rather acknowledge sooner than later.

With the general theoretical background explained in brief, I can outline more specifically which scholars, critics and other sources I draw on from chapter to chapter. The first chapter, which concerns *House of Leaves*, does not contain much theory, considering that the novel appears to be less than extensively discussed by literary scholars. The chapter refers to an article by critic Mark Hansen on a few occasions. Two of these are points where his analysis of the “digital topography” of the novel serves to point out instances where it uses cinematic technique in typography. He also establishes the reader of *House of Leaves* as a “figure of interpretation”, a definition which I build extensively upon using reader response-theory. In addition to Hansen, the typographical choices made by the novel are also elaborated on with the help of David Letzler and his article on meaningless text, or “word cruft”. I also make extensive use of an interview with Danielewski himself, conducted by Larry MacCaffery and Sinda Gregory, which provides a few key pieces of insight into the decisions that shaped the novel. The second half of the chapter concerns the *House of Leaves* message board, which means that most of the textual references used are actual forum posts. Rosenblatt and Fish provide the theoretical foundation of this section.

The second chapter discusses stories belonging to the creepypasta genre. Some of their overarching themes, recurring aesthetics and basic history are explained excellently by Line Henriksen of the University of Linköping, a scholar who has dedicated much work to understanding this genre. Of particular interest to us is her theory that creepypasta represents encounters with monsters mediated by technology, and her concept of the monster as an encounter, fluid and ever-changing, neither real or unreal, but always “becoming” real.
Henriksen uses these theories in her work on gender studies, however, which means that I must generally refer to only the sections of her articles most relevant to our own discussion. I use Henriksen to consider how the monster as an encounter can be understood in relation to reader response-theory, arguing that creating monsters within our minds by experiencing creepypasta can unfetter those creatures from the texts and make them appear real to us, heightening the sense of horror experienced. Two other critics contribute to the arguments presented by this section. Sarah Waters provides brief historical insight into how cyberspace can be compared to the unknown, and Daniel Dennet’s discussion on memes, loosely defined here as infectious units of culture, helps illustrate how monsters may replicate and spread through a network of technology and human minds.

The section dedicated to the creepypasta community once again owes much to the contributions of Fish. It also frequently references an article by Shira Chess, who, backed by definitions and terminology from a book by Christopher Kelty, analyzes the creation of a monster, the Slender Man, and how this process is comparable to the Open Source movement of software programming. Chess thoroughly describes how the Something Awful community collaborated to create this villain, and her insights in and use of Open Source theory allows me to add to my own considerations of a horror community that is creative in nature as well as mediating. Carolyn Miller’s consideration of genre as a social action, also referred to by Chess, contributes in part to my own discussion of how websites collecting creepypasta shape the genre they contribute to.

The final chapter depends heavily on multiple texts by video game scholars in order to explain how the games operate aesthetically, narratively and gameplay-wise, as well as how they are defined as horror games. I must first and foremost acknowledge the influence of Jane Murray, who provided the definition of video-game specific reader agency which this chapter relies on. As she explains in her book, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*: “Agency is the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices” (126). The question of genre definition is addressed with the help of short addendums to the *Video Game Reader 2* written by Thomas Apperley and Carl Therrien, who consider how video games can be understood from the perspective of genre and reception studies. For my extended discussion on horror game conventions and how they play into affect, I am aided by excellent articles written by a few notable scholars: Bernard Perron, Tanya Krzywinska and Therrien. I also reference a number of video game critics who apply the work of these three scholars to their own discussions on the same topics: Matthew Weise, Richard Rouse III, Laurie Taylor,
Habel Chad, Ben Kooyman, Ashley Brown and Björn Markl. A few of these should be highlighted here, as they contribute to more general parts of the discussions of Chapter III. Matthew Weise’s article, “The Rules of Horror”, is an important source for me, explaining how horror video games can be discussed as “procedural adaptations” of certain horror subgenres, seeking to recreate the experience of those genres in video game form. His theory is applied in my attempt to present Resident Evil HD as an adaptation of horror cinema, in contrast to Slender: The Arrival, which is seen as an adaptation of the creepypasta form. Brown and Marklund, for their part, establish a precedent for searching for horrific experiences in decidedly non-horror games. In the final part of the thesis, I consider how the idea of “hunting for horror” could be interpreted as dangerous reader agency, illustrating my point with an example of a hidden horror narrative in a non-horror game, Undertale. Chapter III also discusses the video game community, but this section makes few references to literary theory. Ethan Mollick and Nicholas Lampros are briefly referred to in order to explain the dynamics of crowdfunding and approval-based marketing, respectively, but most of the discussion based on these concepts consists of my own arguments.

To me, this thesis represents a tentative step towards a new perspective on horror. I take a broad view of horror texts and include instances of several very different media in order to argue that my perspective can be applied to horror fiction in general. Naturally, I must also acknowledge that the texts I consider do not necessarily represent the diversity of horror texts within their media as a whole. They can, however, suggest general themes and tropes for them. Likewise, I only look at specific reader communities and specific aspects of how larger communities operate, so I wider considerations based on my discussion of these communities will remain implications. Nevertheless, the themes that are discussed throughout this thesis are found in all of the texts we examine, in spite of the diversity of those texts when it comes to form, subject matter, medium and audience. This fact gives me hope that my concluding arguments will present a useful way of understanding many different horror texts in the years to come. For now, however, this thesis begins its proper examination of horror with turning to a novel published many years ago: House of Leaves.
1 House of Leaves: The Interactive Novel

“I’ve always wanted to create scenes and scenarios that verge on the edge of specificity without crossing into identification, leaving enough room, so to speak, for the reader to participate and supply her own fears, his own anxieties, their own history and future” Mark Z. Danielewski (McCaffery 119-120)

1.1 Introduction

The general aim of this chapter is to prove that the written novel holds a unique potential for creating horror through reader intimacy and agency, even when compared to media more immediately recognized for interactivity, such as games. After all, the critical field of reader-response studies has provided us with the concept of reading as an interactive experience, in which text and reader collaborate to produce interpretation through expectation and response. As such, I consider the idea of the interactive horror novel essential to a discussion on shortened narrative distance as a horror trope. It also ties into my argument that the genre has increasingly appealed to its audience by coercing them into answering questions posed by the text on their own, and finally into my argument that the audience plays an increasing role in shaping the wider horror genre.

A much more difficult issue is finding out exactly how a standalone, written text like a horror novel encourages interaction and agency on the part of its readers. This is much more obviously true of other media, such as horror films, horror games and to a certain degree open-source creepypasta projects: their capacity for intimacy and especially agency is fairly evident. Horror games give a players unparalleled agency in determining how their narratives unfold, and fosters uncomfortable intimacy with the player by making them the subject of a chain of uncanny or horrific experiences which they are frequently forced to trigger on their own. Similarly, the immense power of visualization allows horror films strict control over what the audience experiences, decreasing narrative distance by their complete control over the narrative, the sound, and the pace at which events unfold, leaving the audience with no “escape”. And finally, creepypasta originates and circulates on the Internet, invading the privacy of the readers by accessing their computers, as well as making frequent use of the urban legend-esque notion that the readers themselves are in danger from whatever horrific subjects the story describes. As we shall see in the next chapter, the nature of creepypasta
communities leaves the audience with unique opportunities to contribute to and propagate the body of online horror texts.

Compared to media such as these, the prospects of a horror novel accomplishing an acute sense of reader intimacy or agency may initially seem rather meagre. With linear narratives following strict progressions, most novels encourage little reader agency beyond reading them from cover to cover, or opting to leave them unfinished. Novels can only visualize through words crafted with the intention of creating mental images, meaning that they cannot achieve the effect of limited narrative distance achievable by audiovisual media by virtue of their ability to play to many different senses. And beyond the novelty of the “choose-your-own-adventure” dime novel, rock-solid examples of novels where the reader is the “main character” are very rare, meaning that games also supersede novels in terms of reader agency that can alter the narrative.

However, casual assumptions such as these are far from being absolutes. The horror novel is by no means a fixed, unchangeable medium, and it is just as capable of adapting to new trends within the genre (or making them) as any of the other media that we will discuss later. In order to back up this claim I will discuss a few features of the unconventional horror novel *House of Leaves*, written by Mark Z. Danielewski and published in 2000. This novel is part of a metafictional tradition which invites us to think of the role of the reader from new perspectives. After briefly presenting the text itself, I will discuss how this book exploits cinematic technique in its experiments with typography, which serves to increase the intimacy between the reader and the events of the text. For this part, I will mostly be referring to an interview with Danielewski conducted by literary critics McCaffery and Gregory as published in the *Winter* journal (2003), an interview which also serves as a critical discussion of this particular novel. I will then move on to discuss the multilayered narratives and how they illustrate reader agency in *House of Leaves*. My argument for this part will be that *House of Leaves* has an interesting ability to make readers conscious of their own agency in the reading experience. I will also draw on David Letzler’s discussion of end notes, “encyclopedic” novels, and “word cruft” (2012) to prove that Danielewski’s novel also makes us conscious of our limitations as readers by containing passages that resist, if not outright deny, being read. This notion will be discussed further in the concept of the “unknown” or “forbidden” as found in the horror novel. The idea that curiosity may drive readers to form communities in order to solve literary puzzles such as these will lead us to the next part of the chapter, which will discuss the reader impact of fan communities which have appeared in the wake of *House of*
Leaves. By the end of this chapter, I will hopefully have proved that as exemplified through House of Leaves, the horror novel has proven itself more than capable of encouraging intimacy, interaction and agency, those qualities which I propose are hallmarks of horror fiction from the 2000’s.

1.2 Cinematic Typography

House of Leaves is a novel with a frayed, layered narrative. It mostly consists of edited accounts by hedonist tattoo artist Johnny Truant, who discovers and reassembles a document called The Navidson Record, scattered through the ashes of the recently deceased Zampanò, a mysterious, blind old man. The document, a comprehensive (and fictional) piece of literary criticism concerning a collection of video documentaries, is the second narrative layer. It describes a nonfiction film in which award-winning photographer Will Navidson and his entourage of family and colleagues deal with an inexplicable, physics-defying maze that suddenly appears in his new home. The explorations of the maze form the third narrative layer, and are extensively commented upon by Zampanò, whose work is in turn commented upon by Johnny, whose work is in turn edited by the enigmatic publishers of the book. As the three narratives unfold, all of the three named storytellers and those close to them gradually fall prey to the corrupting influence of the labyrinth in some fashion, discovering that it evokes horrific experience no matter how it is being engaged with.

When House of Leaves was released, literary critics were quick to note how it radically changed the notions of what a novel was capable of expressing. McCaffery and Gregory called Danielewski’s book “a new kind of textual space” (100), claiming that it proved that storytellers still had a multitude of unexplored narrative options available to them (99). A year later, Mark Hansen of Contemporary Literature lauded House of Leaves as “a tour de force in typographic and media experimentation with the printed word” (597). As I proceed to discuss these “typographical experiments”, I will be referring to the novel’s unconventional uses of page and text layouts, which appear at several points in the narrative layer that The Navidson Record constitutes. As it describes the tense explorations of this dark and seemingly infinite space, The Navidson Record is prone to strange page and text layouts. A long tangent on domestic items not found within the maze is contained in a footnote within a small box, the text mirrored on every other page as if viewed through a window, from behind, while the narrative proceeds around the box (119-142). Pages are left blank except for
text ranging from a single paragraph to a single word. Text is printed upside-down, sideways, spiraling. Immediately we see how the text forces the reader to interact with it physically. In order to read certain passages of *House of Leaves*, one will have to turn and twist the book itself, an interesting use of interactivity that takes place between reader and medium rather than reader and text. Using relatively simple techniques, Danielewski has already taken reader interaction a step beyond turning pages. Of course, this notion alone will not make an argument for tighter proximity between reader and text, but it is worth noting, as it is only the most basic example of Danielewski’s unorthodox technique. I mentioned that audiovisual media generally have a visual advantage over novels in that they can, to a greater degree, control how their audience experiences the events they portray. Achieving this through text is, according to the author himself, a vital end of the typographical experiments he uses in *House of Leaves* (McCaffery 119). In McCaffery and Gregory’s interview, Danielewski confesses to a fascination with texts that “look different”, due to their “sense of textual life [and] participation” (119). More importantly, he explicitly names film and cinematic techniques as a hugely important influence on his work due to his upbringing, mentioning that his father was greatly skilled at evoking cinematic experiences through oral recounting of films he had seen (108). What we see in *House of Leaves* is the result of Danielewski’s attempts to “translate cinematic grammar to paper” (106). These efforts serve the same purpose as on film: They bring the reader closer to the experiences of the characters in the narrative.

There are many examples of creative typography in *House of Leaves*, but I want to focus on a few of the most important. The first technique I want to bring attention to is the use of textual “camera angles” to simulate space. As mentioned, the text-to-space ratio and the layout of the text in the sections of *The Navidson Record* that describe Navidson’s explorations of the labyrinth vary wildly. As these explorations are being documented on video, Zampanò is actually endeavoring to reconstruct the experience of a film (that the readers will never see) through the use of words, much like Danielewski’s father did. Johnny Truant notes at one point in his narrative that he could find no other evidence than the document proving that the film actually exists (xix-xx). As the inexplicable dimensions of the maze, ranging from enormous to claustrophobic, are arguably its most important aspect, it seems imperative that those dimensions are properly communicated to the reader. Presumably, authors will typically resort to evocative prose and pathos to achieve this effect. Zampanò, however, in striving to create a critical review of the film, prefers to maintain a minimalistic, matter-of-fact tone, mirroring the documentary he is following. When we
consider the fact that he is describing a film, his odd choices of text-to-space ratios suddenly seem natural: He is recreating the sense of space that a viewer of the film itself would experience. On a page from Expedition #2, which describes a photography taken of Navidson and his friend Reston standing in the vast Great Hall of the maze framed by darkness, the text is confined to a small rectangle which could be the photograph itself, leaving the remaining three-fourths of the page blank, suggesting the impenetrable emptiness surrounding the pair (Danielewski 155). As they push through corridor after corridor deep in the maze, they are allowed little text per page, possibly symbolizing the sequence of small spaces they pass through, while the crushing blackness lies above them (162-164, 182-192). And when Navidson at a much later point in time finds himself in a claustrophobic hallway, the text is confined to a square on the page that shrinks along with the hallway (443-460).

These few examples illustrate how Danielewski, and by extension Zampanò, attempts to stay faithful to what Navidson captures with his camera. It is a complex process of translation: Navidson reconstructs his experience through film, and Zampanò reconstructs Navidson’s film through text. The challenge of presenting a visual experience through text is further illustrated by Zampanò’s endeavor to simulate Navidson’s camera work directly by his use of page layouts. Wide-angle “long shots” with plenty of space emulate the hapless explorers surrounded by emptiness. By contrast, the claustrophobic hallway provides so little space that the words on the page have to be divided to fit into the space Zampanò allots for them. Rather than being told of the bizarre senses of space found within the maze, we are forced to experience them for ourselves. As readers, we explore the maze on its own terms, going through the translated experience of following Navidson’s film documentary. This further establishes a sense of intimacy with the text, a sense of shared participation which is also enhanced by the typography of certain passages which describe how Navidson moves within the maze - and how the maze itself moves. When he climbs up a ladder, the text must be read from bottom to top in a sequence of snippets resembling the rungs of that very same ladder (440-441). At one point the possibility of Navidson sinking down a stairwell arises, and the word “sinking” falls apart, progressively sinking along with him (289). The second time the vertical distance between him and a point of reference mysteriously increases, the text briefly becomes a single, vertical line to illustrate the drop (433). If we were to compare passages such as these to a specific cinematic technique, I would propose a comparison to the first-person point-of-view. We are experiencing a simulation of what Navidson sees, and we are tracing his navigation through the maze, taking part in the tension and horror of the
unknown by suffering through encounters presented as to be similar as to his own. And yet, we are not embodied within the text in a fashion that gives us any meaningful power. We are exploring the dark maze in a sense that approaches the interaction of the video game, but Danielewski does not allow us to affect the outcome. His experiments with layout give us ownership in his story, but he is keen to remind us that we are ultimately subject to his whims. Emulating film does not just manipulate our sense of space in *House of Leaves*. As Mark Hansen notes, Danielewski’s technique also occasionally provides us with a cinematic sense of time or pacing. As an example, he highlights a passage in which Navidson is hanging on to a rope which snaps, commenting on how the word “snaps” is divided and distributed over three pages (294-296) - in Hansen’s own words, “stretched out” (617). The typography of this passage clearly mimics a rope snapping, but dedicating two and a half pages to the word also has an impact on the pacing, giving longevity to a critical moment by giving it a lot of space to take place in. Cinematically, it can arguably be compared to slow motion, allowing the readers to immerse themselves properly in the moment, sharing with them that brief window of timelessness allowed to Navidson before he must suffer the consequences, and the reader with him. To understand how this sort of technique projects the reader onto the events in the story, it might help to bring up Matt Hills’ critical discussion of theories on the enjoyment of horror, *The Pleasures of Horror*. In discussing cognition and affect in the audience of horror films, he brings up Torben Grodal, who proposed that the appeal of horror could largely be found in “aligning audiences with characters experiencing (...) cognitive dissonance, and then resolving that dissonance” (20). His protagonist-focused theory could be applied to Navidson’s situation. The readers are projected onto him in order to face the massive dissonance of the maze along with him, allowing us to rejoice with him when he finds freedom. What we see is an affect-increasing sequence of tension and release that implicitly takes place for the reader as much as for the protagonist. This is facilitated by Danielewski’s film-inspired techniques, which also lends relevance to Hills’ discussion, given that it largely concerns horror film.

On a related note, I would also like to bring up Hansen’s mention of the confrontation with an explorer named Holloway, who has been driven to insanity by the maze and tries to murder his compatriots (617). Over the course of pages 214-238 of Danielewski’s novel, a very limited amount of text per page allows the reader to read and turn the pages very quickly, which can allow the sense of tension and urgency in the scene to transfer to the reader through increased reading speed rather than evocative descriptions. A notable section of this part of
the narrative describes a long line of doors rapidly closing in the corridor behind Holloway, finally trapping him (216-238). A reader rapidly reading this section would not only be subjected to the tension felt in the scene: He or she would, through the act of turning the pages, emulate the sequence of doors slamming shut. For a moment, the reader is projected onto the great unknown of the maze, closing the door on Holloway and saving the others. The reader is also morally implied to have responsibility within the story, giving a sense of empowerment that is unusual within written fiction. The potential horrific impact of this scene is speculative rather than suggestive: one could argue that the reader is meant to feel guilt for Holloway’s loss or horror at their role in it. Returning to Hills, however, I would like to refer to his brief recounting of the theories of Daniel Shaw, who takes a different view on horror appeal (20-21). Shaw proposes that horror is appealing because it projects the audience onto the deviance, or the monster, rather than the protagonist. This empowers the audience due to their privileged insight into the monster’s power of agency, the power it has to make a difference. In the brief confrontation with Holloway, I find this theory to be applicable in an intriguing fashion. Thus far into House of Leaves, the reader has been projected onto the protagonist, the explorer. The reader has been subjected to the inscrutable whims of the house, and has been made to share in the fear and suffering of the characters. When the doors close on Holloway, however, the reader is for a brief moment projected onto the house. Suddenly they have the power to condemn Holloway and save the other explorers. It is an episode that certainly can be experienced as empowering after such a long stretch of helplessness. Notably, it is also one of the subtler ways in which Danielewski allows the reader agency in his text. We will return to this a bit later in the chapter.

As a final argument on how Danielewski allows for surprising levels of reader intimacy and interaction in his novel through the way his text is written, I would like to make a short tangent for the purpose of examining a part of the book that has little to do with layout experiments or cinematic technique. As an appendix to the main text of the book, The Three Attic Whalstoe Institute Letters consist of a series of letters written to Johnny Truant by his hospitalized mother Pelafina, who is gradually slipping into madness. Feeling threatened by the management, she encodes a letter with a simple cryptogram and uses this letter to reveal that she is being raped (620-623). The cipher (taking the first letter of every word) is revealed in the letter that comes before (619). The reader has to decrypt her letter on their own, which has a number of powerful effects. For one, the reader must interact with the text even more thoroughly than in those instances when he or she has to keep up with rapidly changing
layouts. The investment required to decipher Pelafina’s message requires a vested interest in knowing her fate, which drastically shortens narrative distance. Additionally, with no way of knowing how Johnny responded to the letters, the reader is arguably an intruder on these correspondences, someone who reads them in retrospect. In decrypting the secret message, however, the reader must become the recipient of a very intimate letter. And as they become the addressee of this message, the reader is more than likely chillingly vulnerable to the unwholesome content of the letter.

Thus far I have hopefully proven that Danielewski has established a firm precedent for intimacy and interaction with horror novels that can rival those of audiovisual media, by creatively drawing on cinematic techniques and applying them through experiments with typography and page layouts. Agency, however, is a concept which has only been applicable in a scant few instances. To understand why House of Leaves has potential for reader agency, we have to look at different aspects of the novel: Its use of footnotes and its multilayered narrative.

1.3 The Narrative Labyrinth

At one point during his interview with McCaffery and Gregory, Danielewski remarks that “there are many ways to enter House of Leaves” (111). Assuming that he was referring to the process of reading his novel, his remark was no understatement. Thanks to a multitude of parallel narratives that intertwine with each other throughout the novel, there are many ways in which the novel could conceivably be read. We have Johnny Truant’s autobiographical, unreliable account of his own life, which frames The Navidson Record, the document he is reassembling, editing and commenting upon. This document, in turn, frames and discusses the narrative of Will Navidson’s documentary about the extradimensional maze his house contains. In addition, the appendices contain separate narratives such as the Pelican Poems and The Three Attic Whalestoe Institute Letters, which relate to the main narratives but are presented separately. All of these narratives are being collected, commented upon and framed by the enigmatic Editors of the book. Visualizing all of these stories contained within the same novel leads me to agree with the author as quoted above. The intertwining narratives are almost fighting for the space on the pages: Zampanò interrupts his recounting of Navidson’s story to go off on long tangents on the literary and philosophical theory that surrounds it, and Johnny Truant interrupts Zampanò to go off on long tangents about his own life. The reader
can, of course, try to read *House of Leaves* from cover to cover, opting to follow the many footnotes and narrative changes as the pages chronologically dictate. As the result would more than likely make for a rather confusing and frustrating reading experience, however, it would be hard to argue that this reading of *House of Leaves* is superior to any other, even though this is the standard formula for reading most novels. As such, the potential reader is left with a wealth of options. They could opt to focus on Truant’s story first, skipping ahead in the text to follow his narrative and then coming back to focus on *The Navidson Record*. They could choose to read *The Whalsestoe Letters* before or after the main text, a choice not only between texts, but between narrative voices (McCaffery 111). To put it briefly, the reader has a remarkable amount of control over his or her experience of *House of Leaves* after all. This is, naturally, where reader agency comes into play.

I believe that the reader’s significant amount of agency when it comes to deciding how to read *House of Leaves* raises some interesting arguments. For one, I would argue that the control given over the reading process makes the reader invest more in the text, since they have to make conscious choices on what to read and what not to read. While Danielewski presents the narratives on his own terms, the reader is free to make his or her experience of his work unique, by deciding how they approach and interpret the text. This form of agency is important to horror stories because immersion enhances emotional affect, but we must also note that it is a quality inherent to any novel. Every reader has the power to choose in which fashion they wish to read any given book. They can skip undesired parts, start out at whatever point in the text they wish, and choose which voice they want to give the closest attention, if there is more than one. Naturally, the majority of fiction novels do not lend themselves well to such experimental readings, as their narratives are constructed so as to be understood through a linear reading from cover to cover. A reader who deviates from a linear reading will naturally miss out on several important contexts and events that are essential to making sense of that text. It is perhaps in a gesture to this model of writing and reading that Danielewski wrote a novel where a linear reading risks being one of the least informative ways of approaching the text. *House of Leaves* may not offer any particularly original powers to the reader, but it serves to make readers conscious of the powers they have always possessed. In this sense, the novel can be read as an experiment in changing the reading process and empowering readers, which I again would argue is a trend within horror fiction that this novel helped shape, predating a subgenre (creepypasta) which has turned experiments with reader interaction into conventions.
Of the aforementioned forms of reader agency, *interpretive agency* is undoubtedly the most important to this discussion. For now I would like to quote Hansen, who, in paraphrasing Danielewski, states that “the true protagonist [of the novel] is the figure of interpretation, which is to say, the act of reading, or even, perhaps, the reader herself” (602). I believe that he refers here to the idea that a text is brought to life by the act of reading, a concept reader-response critics elaborated on when they defined the “poem”. Indeed, Danielewski himself alluded to a mysterious “originator” in his text, a dominant voice that creates all of the others, but refused to answer his own mystery in order to let the audience make their own interpretation (McCaffery 115). One way of reading this statement is that readers do in fact originate all of the voices in *House of Leaves* by virtue of their interpretive agency, projecting their subjective viewpoints and feelings onto the characters, taking part in all of their stories. I am proposing this interpretation of Danielewski’s allusion because it invites us to consider a level of reader agency that is mostly unheard of in novels: a fourth wall breach in which the story projects itself onto the world of the reader, rather than the other way around. This arguably happens to Johnny Truant in his narrative, as his obsession with the book destroys his life. Reading *House of Leaves* carries an implied risk of going down the same path as him, and in the context of the horror genre, this is a chilling innovation that predates creepypasta attempting to do the same thing on a less abstract level. In this context, interpretive agency is dangerous. The act of reading a book invokes horror in the world of the reader, and the slow onset of Johnny’s symptoms means that readers cannot immediately disprove the debilitating effects of engaging with a textual representation of the house in Ash Tree Lane. Indeed, Johnny warns readers from reading the book in his preface, stating that “a moment will come, maybe in a month, maybe in a year, maybe even in several years” where the reader will suddenly realize how the whole world has become uncanny and monstrous to them (xxii). Curiosity is discouraged, but as Johny notes, he cannot prevent readers from misusing their agency as he misused his own, making a conscious choice to engage with horror. The reader is the main character which invokes and perpetuates the monstrous text, and the text tries to make them feel guilty for doing so. This meta-textual technique for creating horror is one of the cornerstones of this thesis, and we shall return to it on multiple occasions.

I mentioned that *House of Leaves* experiments with reader empowerment. As a work of horror, however, it is difficult to envisage the novel as dedicated to this purpose. On the contrary, it also serves as a strong reminder of the limitation to the reader’s freedom,
emphasizing where our agency is stretched to the limit. It does so, interestingly enough, by resisting being read. The dedication page of the novel, which proclaims “This is not for you” (ix), immediately raises the suspicion that the book is not meant to be read, and in the literal sense, certain passages of the book are difficult or impossible to read. We can distinguish between two different ways in which this obstruction is presented. First, we have those parts of the book which, in the fictional world in which they were created, have been subjected to attempted omission, both successful and unsuccessful. A recurring instance of unsuccessful omission consists of passages of *The Navidson Record* which Zampanò attempted to destroy, but Johnny Truant more or less completely reassembled. Although these passages appear in the book, they are represented by the use of strikethrough text. This typographical tool arguably lends a sense of forbiddance to the text, reminding us that the crossed-out words were not intended to be read, and that we are intruding on Zampanò’s wishes, and on his failure to hide the parts of his psyche that the house corrupted. It also establishes a mood of uneasiness which serves its aspects of horror, further substantiated by the fact that many of the strikethrough sections of *The Navidson Record* concern the concept of the Minotaur, a possible metaphor for the monstrosity inhabiting the maze (see for example 313 and the chain of footnotes on pages 109-111). Some passages are completely removed, sometimes due to Zampanò having successfully rendered them illegible, sometimes due to the pages simply being missing (and noted as such). These gaps are probably left to be interpreted by the reader, a notably important technique used in horror fiction. Ideally, gaps such as these will leave the reader curious enough to attempt filling them on their own, which provides a space onto which the readers can “project their own fears” (McCaffery 119-120). They also add to the oddly dualistic antagonism between author and reader. We are left unsure of whether the obstructed text is intended to prevent reading of the book or to encourage interpretation. Considering the arguments we have examined thus far, these two interpretations are not mutually exclusive.

A second kind of “reader-resistant” text found in *House of Leaves* appears in passages which are legible, but can feel completely unnecessary or even tiresome. This mainly occurs in the multitude of footnotes Zampanò uses to cite the many, many sources he draws upon or to engage in long discussions on topics which are at best peripheral to his narrative. Perhaps the most notable instances of footnotes such as these appear on pages 119-144, which contain a boxed footnote listing all sorts of domestic items not found in the maze, a footnote in the page margins listing *hundreds* of structures which are listed for having *nothing* in common.
with Navidson’s house, a footnote running backwards and upside down in the other margin listing the hundreds of people behind those structures, and a few other lists which are, to put it in colloquial terms, all over the place. Reading any of these footnotes appears a tedious task that seemingly contributes little to the reader’s understanding of the text. David Letzler has published an article on this phenomenon, which appears in a few other books. He groups *House of Leaves* in the category of the “encyclopedic” novel, which he describes as “large, complex novels, particularly those that incorporate substantial specialized information from the sciences, the arts, and history” (304). After discussing the tendency of such novels to cram large quantities of information that are often less than relevant to the enjoyment of the text into their endnotes (or, as is the case with *House of Leaves*, footnotes), he proposes a term for this technique. Letzler names such content the “cruft” of fiction, a word which is used as slang for superfluous material. In fiction, this sort of cruft serves no particular meaning and explains too much, too little, or both (308). While he acknowledges that the aforementioned passages of *House of Leaves* contain cruft, Letzler notes that its use of footnotes mostly aids in the novel’s “narrative layering and metafictional events” (322). He is also of the opinion that the cruft that does occur in *House of Leaves* serves a certain function: “dazzling visual effect” (310).

Letzler’s cruft theory is clearly very applicable to Danielewski’s book. Despite the visual appeal they may have, the fact remains that the passages consisting of cruft are virtually unreadable. This is arguably yet another provocation from the author. Cruft can be interpreted as forbidding. If a given reader finds no purpose or enjoyment in reading Zampanò’s word cruft, finding that the footnotes do indeed explain too much or too little, they might find it hard to imagine themselves as the intended readers of the book. And this, as mentioned, is the message the book is trying to get across from the dedication page: “This is not for you”. It is a discouraging statement emphasized by the use of word cruft, but interestingly enough it can be read as provocative and encouraging at the same time. We argued that a lack of information would encourage readers to interpret using their own preconceptions and context. If we are to argue that the cruft is indeed only a visual effect, we must consider what it encourages as much as what it discourages. In reading *House of Leaves*, the reader is clearly intruding on forbidden territory, signified by visually intimidating information that reminds readers of their limitations. At the same time, however, it seems that the text, through the use of cruft, encourages readers to work around those limitations. A possible hypothesis is that the book, despite its forbidding nature, provokes readers into
persevering because it ultimately survives through being read. This interpretation is especially tempting when we consider the text as a horror novel. Johnny Truant predicts that the book will be read, allowing the house to infect new spaces. As readers, we contribute to this cycle. To understand the specific ways in which our interpretations of *House of Leaves* perpetuate it, however, we must look away from the novel itself for a while and focus on the fan community that grew around it.

1.4 Layers of Interpretation

My arguments thus far have all been proposed with the intention of cementing *House of Leaves* as a book which is written to emphasize a highly personal reading experience. Danielewski’s novel invites readers to project their own experiences onto it, encourages reader agency by presenting his narrative as a textual labyrinth, and fosters intimacy with the audience by subtly implying that they are taking part in the events of his narrative world. His overall argument appears to be that no matter how many people read *House of Leaves*, no two readings will be alike. In this part of my chapter, I will build on that proposition. If we look at reading this novel as an active process in which reader and novel exchange ideas and suppositions, it seems natural to call on the field of literary criticism known as reader-response theory. Reader-response critics argue that interpretation of literature is an action which chiefly takes place as a person reads a text, as opposed to taking place in the aftermath of the reading process. By extension, they present the reader as a key player in interpreting literature, taking into account the assumptions, the mindset and the expectations he or she brings to the text. The text itself is commonly thought of by such critics as little more than a collection of linguistic symbols, containing no all-important intrinsic meaning in the absence of an interpretive reader. Conversely, the readers are dependent on the text they read to produce meaning; their observations and opinions needs external material to be projected upon. Interpretation, as such, becomes the product of a transactional process between reader and text, a notion developed by critic Louise Rosenblatt.

What I will proceed to argue here is that looking at *House of Leaves* through a reader-response perspective provides us with interesting results: not only concerning the process of interpreting it, but also in relation to the narrative of the novel, which arguably constitutes several layers of reader response by itself. Having argued that subjective interpretation goes a long way in explaining how this particular novel works, I will move on to discuss how a
reader of Danielewski’s novel is encouraged to take part in a community of readers in order to establish common boundaries and strategies in interpreting the book. The “interpretative community” is a term within reader-response studies coined by Stanley Fish, and I will draw on his theories to explain how a body of readers come together to define a book which by its nature resists definition. Finally, I will briefly return to Hills, who devotes a part of his book on the pleasures of horror to summarizing what people who identify themselves as horror fans consider the appeal of the genre. His observations, especially those that concern reader connoisseurship, will provide some insights into the community that is the House subforum of the official “Mark Z. Danielewski” internet forum.

Since I will be referring to Rosenblatt’s theories on reader response in detail as I argue how they can be used to understand the many narrative layers contained by House, I feel it necessary to give a brief account of her presentation of the basics, which I mentioned in the introduction to this thesis. Her 1978 book *The Reader, The Text, The Poem* serves as my baseline for engaging with this field of literary theory. The purpose of Rosenblatt’s “transactional theory” is to restore the reader to a prominent role in literary criticism, as opposed to other fields of theory which place singular importance upon the author or the text as the medium to be interpreted in order to understand literature (ix-x). Thus, when she refers to a “text”, she refers to a standalone piece of media not being interacted with; a “set or series of signs interpretable as linguistic symbols” intended to provide readers with their meaning. When a reader engages with a text by reading it, the text is for the duration of the reading transformed into a “poem”, by which Rosenblatt means “a literary work of art” (12). This transformation is the result of the aforementioned transaction which is the keystone of her argument: reading is an act in which reader and text supply meaning to each other in equal measure. The reader has preconceptions, assumptions, contexts in which he reads the text, all of which allow him to frame the text he is reading within his own state of mind and understand it through projecting himself onto it. The text is equally important, providing a “blueprint” on which the reader can order his experiences and assumptions, guiding him and correcting his conclusions so that they make a coherent whole (11). To put it simply: Each time the act of reading takes place, reader and texts supply each other with meaning which they cannot achieve on their own, forming the “poem” which constitutes the reader’s interpretation of the text.

As such, interpretation is not only an event in time, but a unique event (12). The contexts, ideas and paradigms brought to the text will be different for every reader and every reading.
No two interpretations can be completely alike, and every interpretation must be acknowledged as a valid reading of the text, even though literary consensus will by necessity dictate which interpretations hold the greatest degree of merit (141-142). As far as Rosenblatt is concerned, every reader is a critic, and every critic is a reader (137). What they all draw on is their “aesthetic” readings of texts: readings in which they focus on what experiences they form while the transactions take place (27).

When Danielewski remarks that there are many different ways to enter his novel, discussing that statement on the basis of reader response theory becomes a tempting prospect. His innovations in narrative technique lend themselves favorably to our discussion. We shall look at _The Navidson Record_ document first, as I consider it the innermost narrative layer with an identifiable author. This proposal seems problematic at first. After all, Zampanò’s text appears to be a framework for Will Navidson’s own narrative, which is described to us in detail. We even learn that Zampanò dictates his retelling of the film to transcribers due to his blindness, utilizing a talent for reproducing film through words. Surely Navidson must be the “innermost author”, and his story the bottommost narrative layer of this complicated novel? The first insight Rosenblatt provides gives us reason to say otherwise. In her discussion of the constraints of texts, she states:

“*The paraphrase, it is generally agreed, does not equal the poem. “B” below can in no sense be considered equivalent to, or a substitute for, “A”*” (86)

In the context of this quote, “A” was a poem and “B” a paraphrasing of its contents. The implications of this statement for our discussion should be clear. What Zampanò produces is a reproduction of Navidson’s film, and as such, he has taken ownership of that particular narrative from Navidson. Obviously, his expansive work is much more than a retelling: it contains his own observations on the film, a literature review of fictional and actual theory and criticism applicable to the film, a wealth of sources to back up his claims as well as long musings on topics more or less related to the film and his opinions on them. The Navidson Record is essentially a “poem” as defined by Rosenblatt; it is Zampanò’s final reading of a film as he envisions it in his head. That reading becomes a text in itself as he dictates his reading to a person who can preserve it through writing. It is a reading long in the making, due to the wealth of background material he is able to draw on, and most likely the successor
of many previous readings, but those factors are what make his “poem” unique, along with factors like his blindness and the surroundings in which he lives.

Through Zampanò, we also get to experience the effect of another rule of reader-response theory: The first reading of any text is that of the author creating it. As he puts his text into linguistic symbols, the meaning he envisions for it is influenced by notions and decisions provided by the contexts in which he writes, and he constantly regulates and corrects himself (Rosenblatt 15). Producing The Navidson Record was rough on Zampanò, and there are clearly parts of its content which were not meant to reach potential readers, even before his manuscript is torn apart in an undisclosed manner. The partially erased passages concerning the Minotaur referred to earlier in this chapter should serve as ample proof. Before we move on to other considerations of reader-response theory, however, we should address Zampanò’s motivations for meddling with his interpretation later. In considering the horror themes of *House of Leaves*, we noted that a “reading” of a narrative concerning the monstrous labyrinth served to extend the reach of that monstrosity to new spaces, giving it new life, so to speak. What we could read from Zampanò’ attempt to challenge his own “poem” is a gradual realization that he is aiding an unknown and dangerous power by replicating it in his text. First, he attempts to remove the monster from the pages by erasing certain sections of it. We can also speculate that the eventual destruction of his “poem” comes from an understanding that the presence of the labyrinth is inherent to it. Is it an attempt to end a chain of “readings”? When in later chapters we consider other horror stories that feature “infectious” monsters that spread through “readings”, we will encounter other scenarios in which characters attempt to end the chain with themselves. All of those attempts end up in failure, as with Zampanò’s. This is another thematic link we can draw from *House of Leaves* to later horror stories. For now, however, we must keep to the narrative layers of Danielewski’s novel. The Navidson Record certainly proves to be an interesting topic of discussion, not only as a bizarre text, but as a fascinating “poem” that allows implicit insights into how this “reading” came to be.

Of course, Zampanò’s dissertation is just another narrative layer. As readers, we are presented with his text as reconstructed and commented upon by Johnny Truant. What we witness is his “poem”, his reading of The Navidson Record as colored by his own observations and digressions. Stressing this fact are his anecdotes and commentary, presented as interruptions rather than postscripts (although he largely confines them to footnotes). His narrative layer presents yet another interesting point, however. As the author of his interpretation, Johnny does in no way feel obliged to represent Zampanò’s or even his own
experiences faithfully, casually admitting both to having altered The Navidson Record where it suited him, and to having fabricated parts of his autobiographical “poem” (Danielewski 16 and 509). Furthermore, he makes the conscious decision to restore parts which Zampanò wanted unpublished, possibly the entire manuscript, if the original author himself was the one who destroyed it. One could argue that Johnny allows himself all of these liberties because he is unusually aware of his narrative position. Mark Hansen speculates that the experiences Johnny goes through make him increasingly aware of “the singularity of his own “reading” and every other act of reading that may concretize his text” (620). As he encounters the musicians which possess a published copy of his completed manuscript, Hansen elaborates, Johnny realizes that the (in-text) novel “House of Leaves”, the end result of the “poem” he created from The Navidson Record, is both complete and incomplete:

“There’s no question I cherished the substance of those pages, however imperfect, however incomplete. Though in that respect they were absolutely complete, every error and unfinished gesture and all that inaudible discourse, preserved and intact.” (514)

What dawns on Johnny at this point is arguably that the novel is actually his ‘reading’ of both Zampanò’s and Navidson’s accounts. The text is the “echo” of his experiences, rather than a frame narrative for other experiences. He then has to face the somewhat fourth wall-breaking realization that his story became yet another narrative layer in an increasingly complex novel. He discovers, as his readers knew from the start, that his own work has been collected and commented upon by the enigmatic “Editors”, who saw fit to edit his work as he edited Zampanò’s. However, this does not make his personal “poem” any less real or any less valid. In a way, he becomes the quintessential reader, serving to illustrate many points of Rosenblatt’s transaction theory. He engages with a text and unabashedly provides his own experiences and viewpoints while reading, in an attempt to fill the holes Zampanò left so as to construct a coherent whole. Through that process, he became the author of his own interpretation, which others took ownership of to process further. Johnny recognizes his ownership in the book and all it contains, but at the same time he acknowledges that this ownership is only one of many. Even this text will never become a narrative absolute, seeing that it will trigger new interpretive readings in other individuals. However, he completed his own reading, and its validity cannot be subject to debate, no matter how many facts he chose to misrepresent.
One of the main arguments of this chapter is that *House of Leaves* is an innovative horror novel because it deliberately establishes a complex relationship with its readers. The merits of discussing reader-response theory in relation to the novel may not be readily apparent, so before moving on I must draw a few key points from the material I have been referring to. I feel confident in stating that although *House of Leaves* is a fictional novel authored by Mark Z. Danielewski, it frequently blurs the line between reality and fiction within its own contained universe, where those who can be accredited as authors inevitably turn into a long chain of readers (or vice versa). The next step to this statement reveals an insidious trick: The layered readings do not stop with the Editors, who make up the final frame narration within the novel. Rather, any person who reads the novel turns him- or herself into the next link of the chain, supplying, as Danielewski intended, “her own fears, his own anxieties, their own histories and future” (MacCaffery 119-120). By becoming the next reader and restarting the process that Zampanò, Johnny and possibly the Editors went through, the reader has suddenly invited the novel into their own world. And as we know, the novel all but implies that everyone who takes part in this chain of narratives invites inexplicable events and mental breakdown into their lives, the resolutions of their stories coming at a high price. To give further credit to this disturbing idea, we need only remember one of Rosenblatt’s basic maxims. Without the reader, the text is nothing more than a sequence of linguistic symbols. And if you interpret the title *House of Leaves* as referring to the book itself, that titular house, with all its depths and horrors, does not exist- until a person calls them into existence by reading the book, of course. The idea that the audience helps perpetuate the evils that the texts they read contain is a trope which was to return in full force when the Internet became a platform for horror stories and meme theory entered the scene. For now, however, we shall turn to a slightly different question. When the reader of a horror text has completed the reading, and by extension, his ‘poem’, what does he proceed to do with it? Where does it fit into the larger picture of literary criticism? This is where we must turn to Stanley Fish and the idea of “interpretive communities”.

1.5 The Community that Owns the House

Interestingly enough, each of the readings contained within *House of Leaves* survived to become part of someone else’s reading. How is this applicable to readership in general? Criticism of any literary work is arguably built upon individual readings within certain
theoretical and sociopolitical contexts and frameworks. Where do these readings come from? Who decides what readings will constitute the baseline for interpreting a text? Certain schools of literary theory will deterministically attribute the “true meaning” of a text to certain features and values intrinsic to the text itself. As we have seen, however, reader-response critics rebuff any attempt to attribute intrinsic meaning to text, posing that meaning is the product of a reader-text transaction where both parties are considered equal, taking place during the reading process itself. I would argue that *House of Leaves* is a novel which comments upon this process of interpretation. For example, consider Zampanò’s numerous accounts of what critics have thought and said of Navidson’s film, coupled with the library of citations he provides in *The Navidson Record*. We could read this content as a tongue-in-cheek comment on the zeal of literary critics, which will use any and all details they find in texts in order to create the frameworks in which they want their interpretations to be accepted. Letzler’s notion of *House* as an “encyclopedic novel” that draws heavily on specialized information was mentioned earlier, and he also wondered whether texts such as this were intended as a literary parallel to non-fiction encyclopedic works or as satire criticizing the way in which they present information (306).

In addition, Zampanò’s literary review hints at the community which was necessary to create *The Navidson Record*, which contains multiple references to critics who develop their theories on Navidson’s film by responding to each other. My proposition here is that *House of Leaves* explicitly desires to be subjected to the same process, i.e. analyzed in minute detail by collaborating critics. To put it more simply, the novel itself contains intent to be shared with others. I chose this simpler rephrasing for a reason: I would like to argue that the novel intends would-be members of its general audience to subject it to debate and pondering, rather than the academic circle which is represented in *The Navidson Record*. By sharing their thoughts with others, more readers will inevitably serve to expand the audience of the book, which ties in neatly with my proposition that only the reader can call on and perpetuate the “evils” of the book. This idea of a “viral” novel is one of the strongest arguments I can make for *House of Leaves* as a horror novel.

However, I will stick to holding the text as the quintessential subject of reader-response for now. As evidenced by his interview with McCaffery and Gregory, Danielewski clearly enjoys how readers constantly come up with new ways to “figure out” his book. The fact that new interpretations have been proposed by non-academic readers with such frequency since the book’s publication is unsurprising. *House of Leaves* is, after all, a
convoluted novel, containing countless encryptions, seemingly meaningless details and inconclusive musings. Without an extensive set of skills and remarkable confidence in his interpretive abilities, any reader completing this novel will have produced a reading that will be filled not only with interpretations, but with multiple questions as well. Whether they concern text-related issues, such as the untranslated section written in Braille, or more abstract issues like the overall themes of the book, the reader will inevitably be left with several questions. As a result, they have a dual reason for seeking out an interpretive community of readers of the same text. They can present their reading(s) and have them evaluated by and absorbed by the community, and they can seek answers which will expand their own understanding of the book. In the case of *House of Leaves* there has been an official online discussion forum since the book was released, which we shall discuss below.

First, however, I feel it necessary to bring up the contributions of Stanley Fish, who established the “interpretive community” as an academic branch of reader-response theory. The purpose for such communities to exist as he presents it is fundamental to understanding how they work, from academic debate to internet message board. Fish proposed his theory in response to a major counterargument against reader-response theory (11, *Is There A Text*). If every interpretation of a given text was to be considered as having equal merit, opponents argued, it would become impossible to establish any sort of interpretive ‘common ground’. Readers, left with no baseline on which to build their interpretations, would reduce literary criticism to “a total and debilitating relativism”, fragmented by subjective opinionating (317). What Fish argues in response to this is that readers will never be able to produce an infinite variety of meaning. Every reading takes place in a context-providing situation, and even though these contexts vary, most of them come from pre-existing conditions, meaning that the individual reader contributes very little content which is truly individual (318). Moreover, if readers subscribed to absolute relativism when it came to their own interpretations, they would have no confidence in them, and would consequently not consider bringing them up for debate (321). Finally, Fish argues that the interpretive community is capable of regulating what are and what are not acceptable interpretive strategies for understanding texts. In order to expand our collection of strategies, he elaborates; we must get new input from a perceived “outside”, but at the same time we can only learn new strategies by association with those we already possess (314-315). Based on this, any new contribution to literary discussion must either build on, or oppose itself to, existing discussions (349). As a result, any new proposition which is so deviant that it fails to associate with existing reading strategies, even
in opposition to them, will be quickly dismissed as irrelevant (346). This is the purpose of the interpretive community. It creates and maintains the interpretive structures and boundaries that are used to understand texts, constantly evolving thanks to the contributions of active, questioning readers which make their own readings part of a whole, influencing future readings, readers and writers in a perpetual cycle.

The House of Leaves-forum which I looked at for this project is part of a Mark Z. Danielewski message board (http://forums.markzdanielewski.com/) containing sub-boards for discussing his various works. Presenting itself as “official” by virtue of being an extension of Danielewski’s website (http://markzdanielewski.com/), the forum has been running since 2001, when House of Leaves was first published, and has seen much activity since then, containing over 3500 “threads” as of December 2015. It has now largely fallen into disuse, with only ten new discussion topics started in 2015, none of which got more than five responses. Nevertheless, it serves as a useful repository of discussion, providing insight into the workings of a community discussing the novel. What made an immediate impact on me was the sheer size of the message board, and the breadth of the discussions it contained. The users have methodically discussed every aspect of the novel that struck them as interesting. This is made evident by a thread considered important enough to be stuck permanently on the top of the board: An index of threads and what topics they have discussed complete with hyperlinks to the threads, neatly sorted into subcategories (Stencil, 2003). Due to reformatting the links are unfortunately not functional, meaning that readers wanting to study these topics need to search for them manually. Still, the thread speaks volumes for the content of the site. The linked discussions dating back to 2001 seem to be concerned with fairly general, accessible topics, like a discussion on why the word “house” is printed in blue (Uberchief, 2001), a discussion on the meaning of the Minotaur (Lost_In_Crete, 2001), and a discussion on the purpose of the Yggdrasil poem (Felicia, 2001). All of these topics were subject to much debate, evidenced by the sizable number of posts which the threads contained. Additionally, users wanting to bring new evidence or angles to any of these discussions would simply revive the old threads instead of starting new ones, even if the old threads had been unused for years. Examining a few threads which considered much more specific topics revealed that discussion on small details and one-page events appeared soon after the more general discussions. Some of these topics were subject to more discussion than others, but I would still consider this a natural evolution. Readers coming together to discuss their
viewpoints and interpretations of a newly published novel started out with those topics which
seemed the most immediate to them, before delving further into smaller details.

The aforementioned thread discussing the coloring of the word “house” is even named
“The Obvious”, as the creator considers this topic “the most obvious question” (2001). Fish
reminds us that the “obvious” reading is a temporary social construct: it depends on the
speaker creating a context which only allows for a single interpretation of his statement (309-
310). Hazarding a guess, I therefore estimate that due to the thread being almost as old as the
forum, it simply represents the first asking of a question that presents itself after a first
reading of the novel. Even though it took weeks for someone to bring up the topic, it was still
very much in the infancy of this interpretive community, and as such it does not seem to be a
question which should have been asked before. I choose to highlight this “obvious”
interpretation of events myself in order to consider the message board as a single, massive
“reading” of House of Leaves, starting out by representing first impressions before getting
more invested with details. This is not an attempt to present the forums as some sort of hive
mind, as they are based purely in individual opinions and perspectives which become a
tenuous whole through peer evaluation. It is important, however, to remember that these
individual expressions constitute a community which experiences readings according to a
certain order and has the power to create systems to contain and structure these experiences.
They go through the same processes which the individual reader goes through, only on a
much larger scale.

Returning to the thread indexing discussions, Matt Hills considers message board
posts to be “a specific textual production of fan activity” (78). They are specifically targeted
at readers of the same novel, to be subjected to approval or disapproval. Considering this, the
highly visible index of discussed topics is not only a resource; it is a symbol of the message
board’s progress, distinguishing the users that contributed to them and helping the community
establish itself as an authoritative arena for understanding House of Leaves. This shared fan
identity among members becomes much more defined if we look at Stencil’s thread in light of
its stated purpose: to provide references for new members looking to contribute to the
community (2003). The thread’s encouragement of new readers to examine the discussions it
contains, in order to educate them on what has already been discussed, can also be read as an
order to be followed:
“...there is a lot to get through and a lot has been discussed. However, the good thing is that very little has been agreed upon, so your opinion, as long as it is new, counts just as much as the opinion of a veteran poster. We ask that you do as we once did, and read threads for a while without posting, so you know the general gist of what has been said (and, more importantly, what has not been said)”...” (Stencil, 2003, last ed. 2010)

We see that Stencil, on behalf of the membership at large, places as much value on a newcomer’s opinions as those of members with more experience, which is certainly encouraging. What we also see, however, is that the forum sets certain standards for its members. Uninterested in the reiteration of previously contributed views and opinions, the community asks new contributors to familiarize themselves with a staggering number of previous discussions before starting their own - a daunting task. It is also an expression of self-definition: this is something that every newcomer has done and must do, unless they want to be rejected by the community as tediously repetitive. The desire for continually moving forward in their discussions is a standard the community has set for itself. Furthermore, examining later posts in the same thread reveals not only that it was used as a means of introduction for new members, but also that the attitudes towards these new members were somewhat mixed. I mentioned that this thread is permanently stuck to the top of the forum, granting it excellent visibility. This was not done permanently until a few years after the thread’s creation, as the board administrator “ninh1sub” was initially only willing to “sticky” it temporarily, and only in order to avoid the “redundant questions etc.” (2004). In fact, the administrator appeared to be frustrated with the requests from members who identified themselves as newcomers to sticky the thread permanently, referring to them as “n00bs” (a derogatory term for a newcomer), a sentiment which was shared with other veteran users in similar posts (2005). Newcomers felt the need to excuse themselves for asking help, which seems counterproductive to the growth of any community. Fortunately, other experienced users remained a positive influence in the thread, encouraging new users to feel at home while discouraging users who flamed newcomers for their inexperience. The end result may be sort of a mixed experience. In a tongue-in-cheek welcoming post, user “sutrix” described what I consider to be the essence of the obstacles a newcomer to such a community might face:

“... A S M Zee, welcome to the forum. Use the search function first, read the list of useful threads second, read the guide to the HoL forum third (all three links are in my signature), and if you still can't find a suitable thread to ask your question in (that's supposing...
it hasn't been answered already), create a new thread. Please note that I won't be responsible (although I probably will willingly take part in) for the diplomatic, hyperlinked savagery which ensues just in case your new thread already has an old companion somewhere in all these fifty-plus pages. That's not very encouraging, is it? :?” (2005)

Why does the identification process of the message board require this heavily enforced boundary between “newcomers” and contributing members, a boundary which can only be bypassed after the reader has acquired a substantial degree of savviness concerning House and the community discussing it? We find a plausible explanation in the sources that Hills points to in his review of theories concerning horror fans. He states that a sense of “connoisseurship” contributes greatly to how horror fans identify themselves as a community. He paraphrases film critic Mark Kermode, who speculates that horror fans consider themselves different from “ordinary” readers in that they look deeper into the texts they encounter, reading them on a level closer to scholarly than merely affective. They derive pleasure from fitting them into the genre frameworks which their communities create in order to understand horror, their savviness entitling them to a special position in horror audiences (74-75). Online message boards are natural arenas for horror connoisseurs, who use them to “draw on, reinforce and activate” subcultural assumptions. This description gives further merit to the notion that such forums are very much the kind of interpretive community which Fish values as an authority on interpretive strategies. Through their discussions on the text, the users of the House-forums provide their interpretations and assumptions to the community at large, which the community then evaluates, shapes and criticize, sometimes creating opinions which are considered good enough to be preserved so that they become part of future interpretive strategy. Viewed in this light, we can understand more easily how the community will want to regulate itself and its membership: they present themselves as a distinguished community with worthwhile members who produce worthwhile contributions to the evolving criticism of the texts they engage with. To paraphrase Hills again: the shared “space” of online knowledge is collective and interactive, but also subject to collective constraints (79-80). In my opinion, this is the heart of the interpretive community. It proves of great value to our understanding of House of Leaves, as I have argued it as an endless sequence of readings: in the text, in the readers, in the reader community. In this way, it gains a certain kind of longevity. To read House of Leaves is to have ownership in it. To discuss it with others is defining that ownership.
To sum up, we have presented a strong argument for reading online fan communities as Fish’s interpretive communities. This distinction is of great importance to this thesis for several reasons. We noted that Kermode was right to a certain degree: some horror fans do in fact identify themselves based on connoisseurship. For the context of our discussion, however, we should redefine this term so that it refers to a perceived ability to make valuable contributions to interpretive discussions. This specific definition of the concept is what unites fan communities such as the MZD Forums, and it is also what grants the members of these communities authority over the *House of Leaves* text. We should consider authority as very close to our definition of agency in this chapter: ability to take meaningful action. The *House* subforum illustrates Fish’s idea of interpretive authority in that the community creates a shared understanding of the text and enforces a baseline for discussing it. Their collective “reading” is fluid, open to new interpretation, but at the same time it also establishes what one cannot say about the text. Understanding this authority will form a baseline for our own discussion as we proceed to consider what other powers fan communities can have in the next two chapters. Although these other forms of authority are based on different actions, such as financial contribution, circulation and evaluation of texts, and even creation of new texts, they all base themselves on the same principle: a community of fans collaborating to achieve a shared result. Fish’s theories have helped us understand how an engaging community contributes to interpreting horror, but he also opens the door for us to understand how those same communities can actually contribute to creating new forms of horror.

On a more genre-specific note, we have also established that horror narratives, understood from the perspective of reader-response theory, replicate themselves within the minds of their readers and extend their metaphorical reach through audiences experiencing them. “Poems” repeatedly invoke the monsters of horror texts in a chain of interpretations that within *House of Leaves* proved very difficult to break. The Internet and its inherent potential for communication made these “infectious” monsters even more viral. If we understand an interpretive community as a single, shared reading which users both contribute to and draw on, then we can consider it a “House of Leaves” in its own right, simultaneously invoking the labyrinth on its own and spreading it to new “victims”. Of course, any horror novel can be understood in this respect. What Danielewski’s novel does is establish a new precedent for using this idea as a horror trope and implying the role of communicative technology in it. The novel’s thought-provoking aesthetics and narrative ensure that it endures through its readers, whether or not they like it.
1.6 Conclusion

*House of Leaves* is a unique text. While it cannot really be considered a representative of horror novels in general, it displays an interesting capacity for emulating other media, experimenting with form as well as content, and challenging the kind of reader agency that is usually taken for granted. It invites us to consider reader intimacy and immersion in a different sense: rather than drawing the reader into its world, it projects its world onto that of the reader. All of these different techniques can be interpreted as increasing its emotional affect as a horror story. It endeavors to make readers question the boundary between text and reality. We can even say that the narrative takes place within Rosenblatt’s proposed liminal space created between text and reader through the act of reading. This interpretation invites us to consider a dualism of agency and non-agency. *House of Leaves* offers the reader great freedom both in reading and interpreting the novel. Through challenging them through forbidding aesthetics and blank thematic spaces left for the reader to figure out, the novel makes the reader aware of the powers inherent to them in engaging with texts. At the same time, however, there is an air of restriction and helplessness to the novel. The layered narratives warn us that whatever monstrous force inhabits the labyrinth has instigated a chain of horror that cannot be stopped. Even if one reader attempts to stop the cycle, there will always be other readers willing to share their interpretation of the events that have transpired before them. They may even take pride in their interpretations, forming communities to establish common understandings that can in turn help new readers into the “fold”. The text is spread through individuals, but the community sustains it. Earlier in this chapter we considered whether or not the strikethroughs, “word cruft” and missing pages of *House of Leaves* were what truly challenged reader agency. Bearing in mind all of the arguments we have brought to the discussion by this point, I would like to reconsider. What the novel really challenges is agency as the ability to take meaningful action. We are free to make a multitude of choices in reading Danielewski’s novel, but as soon as we start reading it, any further choice we make ultimately furthers the intent we proposed for the monster in the labyrinth: to survive through “infection”.

Even though the theme of ‘infectious’ writing in horror is not necessarily new, I have hopefully presented a case in this chapter for *House of Leaves* as a codifier of the trope. It establishes many horror conventions of engendering intimacy and challenging agency which we will see repeated many times over in the next two chapters. It is also rather telling that the book allowed us to consider the power of Internet users. This provides a link to the next
chapter, which will consider a form of horror that takes place exclusively on the World Wide Web: creepypasta.
2 Creepypasta: Horrors From Cyberspace

“...[Monsters] now roamed minds and screens, moving into the realms of the in-between rather than taking sides in the dualism of fact and fiction. They were neither fully in your mind, nor fully outside of it: they were what which was both a hoax and an actual encounter, that which was neither imagination nor reality.” Line Henriksen (Jenzen and Munt 407, 2013)

2.1 Introduction

The Internet is a massive, easily accessible platform for sharing information and media of all sorts. It should come as no surprise that it has turned out to be a fertile breeding ground and repository for horror fiction, a platform of sharing that has managed to spawn its very own subgenre of disturbing writing. One could propose that the Internet, by its very nature, encourages exploration of the strange and uncanny. This is because the web can and has been considered a new form of space: a world we have only recently been able to access. As a dimension that has rapidly become so vast that no human could hope to comprehend it in its entirety, cyberspace is, by extension, sure to evoke what Lovecraft once called chief among mankind’s inherent fears: the fear of the unknown. As early as 1997, Sarah Waters published an article named “Ghosting the Interface”, in which she compared exploring cyberspace to spiritualist practices. She argued that both forms of “explorations” were concerned with (and concerned about) opening doors to liminal spaces between the human world and the realm of some unknown “Other”, and quoted quite a few critics that discouraged such practices. After all, one could never be sure who would answer questions asked of the unknown, and one should be wary of attracting unknown attention to “our” space. On the spiritualist front, Waters quoted critics such as William Hayden and Dewey De l’Hoste Ranking, who worried about the possibility that “our friend’s telephone has been used by a stranger, perhaps an enemy, for his own purposes” (Ranking in Waters 433). How interesting it is that he chose a metaphor from communications technology to express his concerns about spiritualism. And eighty years later, as Waters notes, Mark Slouka sounds a warning against the dangers of cyberspace and the Net, which according to him is “monstrous: a hybrid world in which every virtue [becomes] its own dark double” (Slouka in Waters : 418). Like the ocean depths, cyberspace tends to represent an enigmatic abyss to mankind, and if one stares into the abyss for too long, its inhabitants are certain to stare back.
The idea of seeing surfing the Web as a figurative exploration of uncharted spaces, as well as the inherent dangers thereof, were brought back strongly quite recently by Swedish researcher Line Henriksen, who observed how curiosity and apprehension around these themes had helped create a new subgenre of horror fiction: creepypasta, short pieces of horror writing published and circulating on the Internet. The creepypasta genre is arguably of special importance to the evolution of contemporary horror fiction. As a subgenre, it is fairly young, which is why I consider it imperative to discuss in a thesis on such fiction. In the previous chapter, I argued that Mark Z. Danielewski’s novel, House of Leaves, was a forerunner for many innovations in the horror genre, especially on two counts. I discussed the ways in which his novel creates an intimate bond with the reader, giving them a personal stake in his story by projecting them onto a never-ending exploration of the unknown. Their readings of his novel became links in a chain of readings forever struggling to create tentative interpretations of the readings that came before them. Moreover, by challenging readers to seek answers from other sources than the novel itself, Danielewski fostered an interpretive community dedicated to adding new viewpoints to their general understanding of the book, while at the same time taking pride in their perceived superiority over other readers. This community highlighted the interpretive agency inherent to readers, and then brought to attention how this interpretive agency could be seen as a tool unwittingly used by readers to promulgate otherwise text-confined elements of horror.

There are two main arguments to this chapter. The first is that the creepypasta subgenre continues the traditions foreshadowed by House of Leaves, putting heavy emphasis on conventions of reader-text intimacy, confrontations with the uncanny and paranoia caused by the act of reading itself. After presenting an overview of the nature of creepypasta, drawing on Line Henriksen’s excellent writing on the subject, as well as a discussion of meme theory provided by Daniel Dennet, I will present two pieces of widespread online horror fiction that are regarded as creepypasta classics: “The Curious Case of Smile.dog”, a short story with an attached image file, and Marble Hornets, a web video series. I will argue that these two texts employ many of the same techniques, conventions, and overarching themes that we found in House of Leaves. Creepypasta illustrates how these components operate when applied to the Internet, a media platform with a different kind of potential. I will then discuss how creepypasta further develops the idea of dangerous reader agency. The texts frequently imply that the act of reading exposes one to “infection” by paranormal forces, and that the reader can unwittingly invite the horrors of the stories into their own lives and those of others.
Naturally, this first half of the chapter must again consider the ideas of reader-response theory, and to what degree they can be said to apply to this specific genre. Following this, the latter half of the chapter considers my second argument: that the online community that grew around the creepypasta phenomenon illustrates a development in reader agency from interpretive to mediating and creative, and that this new agency has allowed readers to project their own fears into new horror texts. This development arguably shows how writers of the horror genre draw to a much greater degree than before on their audiences in order to create stories that frighten. Indeed, many creepypasta creators are equal parts reader and writer. To substantiate this argument, I will look at a case of how Internet users sparked a paranormal tale that has grown to take on an almost folkloric nature: the concept of the Slender Man. In addition to Henriksen I will consider an article by Shira Chess, who uses the Slender Man to argue that horror, thanks to the Internet, is becoming increasingly “open-sourced”. The implications of this for the reader-writer relationship must naturally be considered, so I will also briefly look at the body of known creepypasta writers, and how an Internet phenomenon turned into an established subgenre of horror.

2.2 Creepypasta: the Horror Meme

As a burgeoning genre following only the loosest of traditions, it can be somewhat hard to pin down exactly where this branch of storytelling has its roots. The choice of the word “storytelling” is a conscious one, however, as creepypasta bears certain similarities to the story tradition known as “urban legends”, in which narratives taking place in nonspecific settings warn of strange, and yet purportedly real-world happenings that anyone could find themselves the victim of. In the most basic sense, creepypasta are short pieces of scary fiction created with the intention of being circulated on the Internet by a multitude of readers. As Line Henriksen explains in several of her papers, the term is derived from the word “copypasta”: some form of media, be it image, writing or film, that is published (often anonymously) on the Internet and then spreading rapidly by means of readers “copying and pasting” it, i.e. sharing it with other web users. The appellation “creepy-“, as can be surmised, stems from the content of this particular kind of copypasta, which tells disturbing tales of encounters with the paranormal (Henriksen 41, “Come, So that I may Chase You Away!”).

Creepypasta in general has a few defining traits which help define it as a derivative of folktale and urban legend. For one, the author is almost always completely disregarded as far
as intentions go, if the identity of the author is known at all. Today, given that creepypasta has
won recognition as an established genre, authors are more likely to be named and recognized.
Their stories are also more often submitted to online repositories and anthologies, meaning
that the process of circulation which would take the story farther away from its point of origin
is not as common. However, readers will chiefly acknowledge the author only by noting them
as a good creepypasta writer. The intentional fallacy is still in full effect concerning this
particular genre. As such, creepypasta still possess a kind of author anonymity which enforces
ownership on the part of the readers and promulgators, helping them establish a sense of
familiarity with the story. “Familiarity” is a key word in understanding this subgenre: story
progression in creepypasta commonly seeks to establish a setting at least somewhat familiar
to the reader, before introducing paranormal events which remove the comfort of that
familiarity. In creepypasta, forces of the unknown invade what feels closest and safest to us.
In order to facilitate the desired reader impact of this trope, most creepypasta take place in
rather bland, non-specific settings, implying that the supernatural happenings they describe
could take place anywhere. Henriksen is also keen to point out that creepypasta stories
frequently seeks to emphasize their air of “legitimacy” or “authenticity” by imitating real-
world aesthetics (42). One will often find creepypasta written in formats commonly used for
documenting nonfictional facts and events: scientific reports, “found footage” from amateur
documentaries, letters, diary entries, and sometimes even textbooks. The sum of all these
parts is a concerted effort to make the reader uncertain of where the line between fact and
fiction can be drawn. Like the urban legend, the creepypasta story will want to leave its
audience asking themselves whether or not such events as they describe could happen, and,
more importantly, whether they could happen to them as well.

Of course, creepypasta distinguishes itself as its own brand of storytelling by being
circulated almost exclusively on the Internet. A bit earlier, I briefly mentioned how the
Internet can be interpreted as a source of horror, in that it represents a liminal space between
the human world and other, unknown realms, the inhabitants of which could possibly pose a
threat to us if our actions bring us onto their territory. In an article that considers spectres as
projections, Henriksen illustrates for us how media technology can also be used as a tool for
creating horror. She mentions another possible ancestor for creepypasta: Phantasmagoria, a
form of entertainment popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century (40).
Phantasmagoria consisted of a visual display of ghostly apparitions, created by lighting,
smoke and primitive image projectors. Henriksen considers the Internet a spiritual successor
to phantasmagoria shows: through technology, it allows us to project into the real world that which is considered to exist only in our imaginations, such as ghosts and spectres. As she observes, this form of technology creates an interesting paradox. We cannot deny that spectres and phantoms appear before our eyes when we witness phantasmagoria, and yet, secure in the knowledge that they are artificially projected, we can state with conviction that ghosts are not real (40). These observations further support the idea that technology such as the Internet creates a tenuous, liminal space between imagination and reality, and this idea proves imperative to both Henriksen and this discussion.

Considering Henriksen’s views, I find it reasonable to present creepypasta as a modern-day variant of phantasmagoria. On the other hand, I also find reasons to apply the term a bit hesitantly. After all, technology has its limits. The ability to project visions of the supernatural into our world is only temporary. As long as we can convincingly reassure ourselves that the situations we are observing cannot be real, there is little room for lasting impact on the reader, no matter how familiar the creepypasta manages to make us with its mundane trappings. Our minds are in control. Or are they? At this point, it would be prudent to recall that the other primary goal of creepypasta is to be circulated. The term was, as mentioned, derived from the term “copypasta”, a piece of media that spreads rapidly through the Internet through readers copying and pasting it. I choose to reiterate this definition because it overlaps perfectly with the definition of another term: Internet meme. In my opinion, the concept of the Internet meme should not be omitted from any discussion on creepypasta, as it contributes greatly to our understanding on how these pieces of fiction spread. This is where I would like to bring Daniel Dennet into the discussion. In a 1990 article, well before it gained widespread use in Internet terminology, he utilizes Richard Dawkins’s definition of the term as a small, replicating unit of culture: a fashion statement, a song lyric (Dennet 128), an idea. Any cultural expression can be a meme. Dawkins compares the “meme” with the biological “gene”, in that the meme also seeks to survive through reproduction, or “replication”. Memes spread through human minds, which are inclined to share ideas and expressions we find favorable with other people. Years later, the term “Internet meme” refers to images, videos, websites and other expressions which spread extremely rapidly through users of the Internet: what Henriksen referred to as “copypasta”.

What Dennet, building on Dawkins, offers the discussion on memes, however, is a somewhat disturbing argument that would later end up as a major theme in creepypasta. He considers a theory stating that most memes survive and spread within the human mind
because we consider them beneficial to us. They replicate themselves by being desirable to spread, offering some form of positive impact on our lives. However, he proves this to be an insufficient explanation. There exist multiple memes that have an explicitly negative impact on us, ranging from annoying (a disliked song stuck in one’s head) to outright dangerous (anti-Semitism) (129). In spite of their negative qualities, these memes persist and manage to replicate. In order to explain this fallacy, Dennet begins questioning whether or not our minds have complete authority over the replication process. He posits that memes can spread between minds not because it benefits us, but because it benefits the meme. It does not need to be a “good” meme; it simply needs to be a good replicator (130). This assumption suggests an important question. Why are we not making conscious choices to prevent ‘bad’ memes from spreading? Chillingly, Dennet notes that certain memes which can be perceived as “bad ideas” seemingly inhibit the mental functions which prevent us from spreading them. Faith, for example, is conviction standing opposed to reason. And yet, those who carry this particular meme willingly suppress the rational functions which would debunk faith as illogical (Dennet 131). On a note more interesting to our discussion, Dennet also brings up chain letters, which are memes that also exist on the Internet. One can reasonably argue that the rational mind would easily dismiss a chain letter’s threat to cause misfortune if not forwarded to the specific number of people. This argument, however, has clearly not stopped these chain letters from replicating themselves through readers fearing supernatural retribution. By playing to the fear of their recipients, these memes manage to override their sense of reason, and as such, replicate themselves further. The concept that memes can take control of us sounds very much like a theme apt for horror.

As it takes place entirely on the Internet, no subgenre of horror is better posed to take advantage of meme theory than creepypasta. It questions the limits of media, creating the same liminal space between mind, reality and the unknown that phantasmagoria shows once did. Interacting with the web opens this space and allows us to project ourselves into this strange world. This allows readers to explore the unknown and encounter apparitions which would otherwise be confined to their imaginations. We can compare this to the interpretive agency argued by reader-response critics. The inert and meaningless text is given meaning when the reader interacts with it, and the text provides a backdrop for the mental input of the reader. In fact, I find it very tempting to compare the reading process itself to phantasmagoria: imagination (the reader) meets artefact (technology/the text), and together they conjure up spectres. Interpretive agency can itself be interpreted as the power to conjure up phantoms
within the real world. As a horror genre which plays with this theme, creepypasta wants to remind us of the dangers inherent to this agency. The creatures featured in these stories are manifestations of the unknown, forces that can invade the reader’s life if not handled with care. By looking at how various creepypasta work within their own contexts and the context of the Internet, we encounter Henriksen’s paradox again. These stories and creatures, although they invoke real-world aesthetics and appeal to both the familiar and the uncanny, are ultimately pieces of fiction. If that is so, however, how do they spread? How can we not be in charge of their replication? Ultimately, most creepypasta texts discuss how agency can lead us into loss of control, how the observer can turn into the observed, and how the victim of horror can become the propagator of horror. Dawkins and Dennet’s meme theories help explain how and why we might succumb to these imagined terrors once we have voluntarily opened our minds to them. At this point, having elaborated on what I consider to be important theoretical background for creepypasta, I will turn to two case studies which illustrate my arguments, chiefly because they concern meme theory and reader vulnerability, but also because they employ a few of the same techniques to establish intimacy which I discussed in the chapter on House of Leaves.

2.3 Smile.dog: The Meme as the Monster

Although the website KnowYourMeme.com should be used as a source of information with the same cautious judgement as any community-driven website, it remains the only solid repository of information on specific Internet memes, and provides facts that are generally very accurate. According to their page on creepypasta, the term originated in 2007 (Frketson, 2009). The first specific creepypasta I shall discuss is known as “The Curious Case of Smile.jpeg”. This story was written shortly after the genre was named: KnowYourMeme.com (speculatively) dates it to 2008 (Saboooom, 2010). As such, it represents a fairly early example of the genre. The exact origin of the story is unknown, as is its author. In “Smile.jpeg”, a college student, known only as Mr. L., recounts his attempts to learn more about the eponymous image file, an eerie photograph depicting a dark scene featuring a beckoning hand and a dog smiling with a set of human teeth. The image file is rumored to be haunted by the dog-like entity in the picture, known as Smile.dog. The student fails to arrange a meeting with Mary E., a well-known reputed victim of Smile.dog, but she later writes to him and confesses the truth about the image file. As it turns out, viewing the image file curses
the viewer, allowing Smile.dog to haunt and torment them in their dreams. The only way to end this torment, according to the monster itself, is by “spreading the word”, passing on the curse by showing the image to someone else. Mary E., having found the idea of exposing others to the curse morally reprehensible, has resisted the temptation to obey the creature for years. After explaining the situation to the narrator, however, she cracks under the pressure and commits suicide to escape the torment. Some time after these events take place, the narrator receives an email containing the image file from an unknown source, noting his interest in Smile.dog and expressing desire to “spread the word”. Unnerved by Mary E.’s fate but still skeptical, he opens the image file and possibly exposes himself to the curse (it is never confirmed). Wondering if he has been left with the same choice as Mary once faced, the narrator spends the rest of his narration considering whether or not he should spread the image file, seemingly not reaching a conclusion. Or so we are led to believe as readers. Scrolling down in order to read the end of the story, the reader is suddenly confronted with the eerie photography.

As expected, “Smile.jpg” does not go into much detail concerning the setting. It simply takes place in the United States, with events spread out over roughly four years (2005-2009). The narrator, who could be a stand-in for anyone with an interest in the paranormal, does not reveal much about himself or his personality, apart from an all-important character trait: curiosity. A closer reading of the text reveals the nature of his inquisitiveness:

“What caught my interest (other than the obvious macabre elements of the cyber-legend and my proclivity toward such things) was the sheer lack of information, usually to the point that people don’t believe it even exists other than as a rumor or hoax.” (2013)

Although his curiosity is piqued by rumors, the true fascination with Smile.dog does not kick in until he realizes how little information actually exists on the topic. He wants to explore the unknown, but fails to gain the knowledge he seeks from interaction between humans alone, because it does not exist entirely in the human world. To understand the nature of what he is pursuing, the narrator must enter the space between his own world and the unknown and encounter the creature on its own terms. Despite multiple warning signs, he exposes himself to the image file, and possibly the curse. Is this an inevitable outcome? Henriksen might once again be helpful to consider, as her paradox is reiterated in her discussion on hunting for spectres. If someone like the narrator of “Smile.jpg” desires to
prove that paranormal phenomena do not exist - as we must assume this particular narrator does, considering how he exposes himself to the photography in spite of Mary’s suicide- he first has to conjure it up in front of him, acknowledging that it has a presence outside of his mind (48). If he chooses not to confront the image file, he cannot prove that Smile.dog does not exist. On the other hand, a confrontation would mean acknowledging that the entity exists, not only as a projection of technology, but as a presence within his mind. Even if that mind dismisses all notions of the implied curse, the narrator is still entrapped by his curiosity. Of course, his unexplained inclusion of the image file in his story heavily implies that he falls victim to the curse and seeks to spread it to save himself. Nothing is confirmed, however.

The relative simplicity of the narrative and the non-specific setting of “Smile.jpg” also encourage the interpretation that this is only the latest link in a long chain. The vague rumors of Smile.dog, Mary E’s account of her story and the mysterious email from the “benefactor” that wishes to share the image with the narrator help create a pattern. Everyone involved with the Smile.jpg file can be read as victims to the same inescapable choices: whether or not to open the file, and then whether or not to share it. Ultimately unable to make a choice, Mary E. removes herself from equation entirely by committing suicide. Others, like the narrator and the sender of the email that brought him the file, chose to obey the entity and “spread the word”, painfully realizing that opening the space between them and the unknown meant being seen as well as seeing. They can be credited with no more agency than Mary E., because they are powerless to make a choice which will break the cycle of repetition the entity is perpetuating in its entirety. This, as Henriksen explains, is because the motions of creepypasta are repeating, not evolving (44). We see the same cycle in “Smile.jpg” as we saw in House of Leaves: individuals seeking to understand and analyze what seems impenetrable, only for them to fall into the same patterns of confusion and madness as their predecessors. As readers, we are left wondering if this cycle will ever end.

With this in mind, the question of our own participation returns. Are we, as readers, subservient to the unknown forces of the text? In my discussion of House of Leaves I argued that reader-response theory allowed us to consider the reader as the next layer of the reader-interpreter loop which that novel presented us with. The fact that we can imagine the reader as perpetuating the unknown horrors which Navidson, Zampanò, and Johnny Truant confronted by reading their stories added a layer of horror outside of the text itself, which was a prime reason for me to consider it as predicting a turn towards the more interactive horror experience. “Smile.jpg” allows us to see how this theme has been recognized by another
horror medium, roughly eight years later. What, exactly, takes place with the reading of this creepypasta? If we consider the process of reading as illustrated by Rosenblatt’s reader-response theory, where a reader and a text come together at a specific point in time and space in order to turn the text into a “poem” between themselves, we get an action intriguingly similar to that of chasing spectres on the web, where mind and technology create a space between themselves in which both human and unknown read each other. In other words, the hunt for the unknown is much like the reading of the text, in that the reader is an enabler, who allows the text and the monsters within it to take on life in the world of the reader. In this liminal space, we can approach Line Henriksen’s paradox again: spectres are incapable both of being fully real and of being fully unreal, as that would mean defining something which is only a “speculative counterpart” to the subjective, human rationality (43). Due to being constructed partially by the human mind, and partially by projections of the unknown, monsters cannot be fully explained by human rationality. And yet, due to their being conjured up partially by our own minds, we can describe them. We have reached a point where firm definition is impossible. In response to this, Henriksen argues that “nothing ever simply is but always becomes” (43). We mentioned that creepypasta is repetitive in nature, and this fact could very well be interpreted as the continuing struggle of the monsters they contain to become real. The notion of becoming, an action taking place within a liminal space between reader and text, ties strongly into reader-response theory. The reader makes the text real within their “reading”, and by extension, they make the monster real as well. This link to reader-response theory means taking Henriksen somewhat out of her context, but I consider it a valid contribution to that discussion, as it helps solve her paradox. Smile.dog, the monster of “Smile.jpg”, will neither be fully real nor fully unreal. However, through the process of reading, it becomes real in the “poem”, the space between the text and the reader. And as long as the creepypasta is read and the image file viewed, Smile.dog will perpetually become real, as befits a repeating narrative where imagining a beginning or an end is rather difficult.

With “Smile”, the kind of text-transcending horror found in House marks its presence in creepypasta. Within the story, Smile.dog is in an eternal process of becoming as long as his image is circulated, which is why it enforces its own replication on pain of tormenting the humans it is dependent on. Outside of the story, readers who consider their position will find that if they share the creepypasta with their friends and acquaintances, they, too, will contribute to the circulation process, allowing the attached image to keep “becoming” real. As such, “Smile.jpg” also serves as an unnerving illustration of Dennet’s discussion on the meme
theories of Dawkins. The eponymous image file of “Smile” is a distinctively ‘bad’ meme which brings nothing good to people “infected” with it. And yet, it manages to circulate itself. Why? Because it inhibits the conscience of its carriers, the factor which would prevent it from spreading, by playing to fear, famously coined the “oldest emotion of mankind” by horror writer H.P Lovecraft. Those who manage to defy their fear and stop the circulation with their lives, like Mary, are shown to be the exception rather than the rule. And considering the creepypasta itself, it has grown widely popular because readers deem it a good story and a good meme, keeping it in circulation. It is even possible that some real-world readers circulate the story due to fearing the consequences of being exposed to the gaze of Smile.dog. After all, as Line Henriksen so deftly illustrates, it can never be dismissed as completely unreal.

2.4 Marble Hornets: “Control is Being Taken Away”

“Smile.jpg” is considered by fans as a creepypasta classic. Among other well-known pastas are a few that concern a very popular monster within the folkloric mythos created by this melting pot of horror stories: the Slender Man. This particular bogeyman was formed as a collaborative effort between several Internet users attempting to create pictures of the paranormal, and grew from there into an extremely well-known phenomenon on the Internet. I will return to the process that created Slender Man and the implications it carries in the next half of the chapter. For now, it suffices to say that there are multiple creepypasta built around the concept of the Slender Man, and that each portrayal is somewhat different from the others. One of these narratives is known as Marble Hornets, which breaks from the textual format entirely by virtue of being a video series published on YouTube, by far the largest video sharing website on the Internet. The YouTube-channel “Clear Lakes 44 / Marble Hornets” (The channel was previously known as «Marble Hornets», but changed its name due to hosting a new series, Clear Lakes 44) was created on 19 June 2009, and the first entry in the series, “Introduction”, was published one day later. The creation of the channel was announced two years in advance, on the same forum thread which created the Slender Man (ce_gars, 2007). The series, presumably wanting to give the impression that it was following an actual series of events parallel to it being shared on YouTube, updated unevenly throughout its lifetime, sometimes taking long, unannounced breaks, usually followed by an explanation of what had transpired over that period of time. Marble Hornets ran for a total of
five years, ending abruptly with the posting of “Entry 87” on 20 June 2014. It is widely popular, the view counts totaling tens of millions.

From the very beginning, it is evident that Marble Hornets wants to appear as realistic as possible to the viewer. The narrative is mostly conveyed through a format very similar to home videos, and the framework of the narrative crosses from “found footage” film to an “amateur documentary/video journal” fairly quickly. I mentioned briefly that this is a common convention of creepypasta: the illusion of reality. The simplistic aesthetics, errant update schedule and nondescript locales of Marble Hornets encourage the viewers to think of themselves as witnesses to real-world events. This, of course, situates the horror in their world as well. Only the assertion of the fictional nature of the work (which was only stated explicitly by the filmmakers after the first season of the show) stands between the reader and the villains of the text. The protagonist of the series is Jay, a film student. Here, we could note that creepypasta protagonists are frequently college students. This could be due to their youth, technological savviness and natural desire to learn, or it could be due to the fact that most creepypasta are created (and largely enjoyed by) college students. After his friend, Alex, abruptly quits his filmmaking project, entitled “Marble Hornets”, Jay convinces him to give him the footage from the film shootings. Alex breaks off all contact after this, and so Jay is left to peruse the film rolls, uploading anything of interest he finds to the Marble Hornets YouTube channel in the format of short video entries. Jay is a fairly anonymous protagonist at the outset, merely offering a few lines of commentary on each entry he publishes. Gradually, he pieces together that Alex and his crew were being stalked by an enigmatic figure, the Slender Man (referred to as the ‘Operator’ in this particular series). At the same time, he realizes that he has attracted the attention of the same horror, and that its pawns are after him. As stated as early as in “Entry #18”, he soon regrets his curiosity, but by then it is too late. Jay is pulled into a nightmarish chain of events as he attempts to find out what happened to the people involved with “Marble Hornets”, all the while being stalked by the Operator and its minions. By the end of the series, Jay is dead, and everyone involved with the case have been killed, lost all memory of what happened or driven to insanity by the Operator.

The character of the Operator is central to the series. For most of the show, it remains a background character with unknowable motives, pulling the strings from behind the scenes. It takes the form of a tall man with impossibly long limbs and a white, completely featureless head. Its presence has a detrimental effect on both body and mind, and prolonged or repeated exposure to it afflicts people with incurable physical illness and increasingly volatile insanity.
Those who succumb to the Operator completely become its pawns, as happens to Tim and Brian, two of Jay’s. In addition to this, its presence can cause recording equipment to malfunction, leaving recorded video and audio with severe distortions (This appears to be an effect the Operator triggers at will, given that it appears in Entries such as #1, #7 and #17 without distorting the video). Finally, it can seemingly distort space, to teleport itself and others, as shown most prominently in Entry #63.

_Marble Hornets_ continues the theme of curiosity and dangerous agency. The motivations and origin of the Operator are never explained, but anyone seeking to find out more about it becomes a target. As in the case of Smile.dog, the “curse” of the bogeyman seems infectious: the monster invades the lives of anyone who willingly (though in some cases unwittingly) encounter him through exploration. The Operator, however, can also target anyone close to the “carrier” of his infection, meaning that explorers seeking knowledge of him are dooming others as well as themselves. In addition, this monster distinguishes itself from Smile.dog by being able to exist fully within the “real” world of _Marble Hornets_, and not as a projection. Interestingly enough, this corporeal presence does not divert attention from the role of invoking the monster through technology. Jay makes a victim of himself through viewing Alex’s footage and posting snippets from it on YouTube. This is his “reading” of the experiences Alex went through, and by extension, the space in which the monster is initially invoked. The “symptoms” of the infection are also highly visible on YouTube. The masked associates of the Operator send Jay cryptic threats by means of their own channel, “totheark”. Sometimes, they even hack the _Marble Hornets_ channel to post their own videos, illustrating Jay’s loss of control over his situation. Loss of control and inevitability seem to be a major theme in creepypasta on the whole. Upon initiating contact with the monster, both Jay and Mr. L find themselves deprived of their agency. There is no choice they could feasibly make that would improve their situation without condemning other people in addition to themselves. In fact, they have already condemned others to suffer their fate: Mr. L, because we know as readers that he eventually gives in to the demand of the monster, and Jay, because the nature of the monster he pursues makes victims of anyone with ties to them. They have both misused their power to make decisions by delving into the unknown, and they both suffer for it.

If the protagonists are very similar, the nature of the two monsters is somewhat different, in spite of their shared infectious nature. They represent two slightly different manifestations of the unknown that both punish intrusive curiosity. We discussed Smile.dog
as a meme: it appears to be dependent on spreading its infection, and as such it coerces its carries into “spreading the word”. Its hijacking of both mind and communication technology makes it appear more contemporary, a denizen of cyberspace advising caution in probing the Internet. The Operator, by contrast, does not appear to need human contact as such. He is more Lovecraftian in nature, representing the unknown as uncaring or malevolent toward mankind. He does not actively seek encounters with humans, but aggressively punishes those who trespass on his domain. His “curse” spreading through technology is arguably just another way of warning against how easily monsters can be invoked through the exploration of cyberspace. The unwitting explorers always regret encountering either of these monsters. And yet, their stories cannot really be read as cautionary tales. We, as readers, have also misused our agency by choosing to look into the unknown in search of answers. By experiencing creepypasta, we have invoked their monsters within our own readings, and they are now part of our world as well. The theme of hopelessness pervading this subgenre is confirmed by the reader, who is made to share in the guilt of the protagonists. In spite of our initial ability to turn away, we cannot stop the cycle of spreading evil on our own. Executed properly, stories utilizing this theme can leave a sense of lingering dread in the reader that will contribute to the survival of the horror genre.

In discussing this creepypasta as thematically inspired by *House of Leaves*, I want to draw special attention to the distortion of space that takes place within the stories, as one can build at least two important arguments from it. Firstly, perspective and “camera” play an important role in both works. By virtue of its epistolary narrative and video log format, *Marble Hornets* is arguably a first-person narrative. Jay provides exposition for the first few entries through text, and later on, he (and others) film the entries using a hand-held or chest-mounted camera. Due to constant motion and dimly lit surroundings, the footage is usually challenging to make out. It all adds to the “realism” of the narrative: it is simply a video log, not an edited presentation. The shoddy camera work also means that the viewers’ experience of the story is limited, leaving them constantly grasping to piece together what is going on. This serves to match the confusion of the main characters, who mostly stumble cluelessly around in dark locations, trying to figure out answers in spite of the ever-present threat of supernatural assault. Entering the *Marble Hornets* mystery is, arguably, much like entering the impossible labyrinth explored in *House of Leaves*. Navigation becomes difficult, and perception is hindered at every turn. Escape, madness or death are awarded entirely at the whims of a faceless, unknowable supernatural force pulling the strings. As Holloway in
*House of Leaves* and Brian in *Marble Hornets* prove, falling to the influence of the unknown can lead to homicidal insanity. Likewise, we find similarities between Will Navidson and Jay, who head recklessly into the unknown in search of answers and find themselves trapped and tormented in an unreal world. Incidentally, they are both photographers: they wish to explore forbidden spaces not only for their own “benefit”, but to satisfy the curiosity of others as well.

The greatest similarity, however, is in how our interface to the narrative, as represented by their senses, is distorted whenever the supernatural takes hold. In *House of Leaves* we saw how the impossible dimensions of the house were represented by walls of obstructing text, typographical experiments representing different kinds of movement towards the house, and how that same typography was used to picture slamming doors, snapping ropes and shrinking spaces when the house acted on its own will. In *Marble Hornets*, the arrival of the Operator and its associates is frequently marked by distortions in video and audio quality. The picture blurs, lags, freezes or is completely blocked out by distortion. The audio hisses, sparkles and is filled with a droning noise that blocks out all other sound. We are privy to precisely as much of the events that transpire as the supernatural forces allow us. This is a crucial technique which I believe is employed in order to maintain a keen sense of reader intimacy. As readers, we are very unlikely to experience the same kind of terror and disorientation as Jay and Navidson. The effects that the supernatural have on the mind cannot be directly translated, which would usually result in increased distance between reader and text. In creepypasta, however, there is no place for such a distance. Indulging in these explorations must have consequences; the reader must feel vulnerable. To achieve this effect, the text attacks the reader directly through the medium we use to experience the narrative: the printed word and the camera. Our view of the world is violently distorted, leaving us shocked, disoriented and confused. The monster breaks the fourth wall, encroaching upon our perception as well as that of the protagonists. The creative use of technology prevents breaks in tension and keeps us at the mercy of the unknown.

I will conclude this part of my argument with a discussion of the role which space has come to play within horror fiction. As we have seen, and as Henriksen has discussed, the horrors of cyberspace tend to be defined by terminology that is associated with ghosts, spectres and the concept of “hauntings”. The term “haunting” usually carries connotations to apparitions from other times. Sometimes, hauntings take the form of ghosts from the past, reminding us of what transpired before us and how it affects the present. On other occasions, hauntings are visions from the future, warning us of things that have not yet happened. What
most hauntings generally have in common is that they represent the transcendence of time. Spectres have the power to cross the barriers of time in order to communicate from the worlds of the past or the future. At least, that is what projections of the supernatural usually did. With the Internet, however, and all the allusions to exploring the unknown it comes with, the focus seems to have shifted. What I am proposing at is that the concept of being haunted by the supernatural has undergone a shift from being “time-centric” to being “space-centric”. The spectres that haunt us now have the power to transcend space.

In defense of this proposition, I would like to present three short arguments based on examples from the text. Firstly, spectres (and monsters) live in a world separate from our own. The entrance to the labyrinth in House of Leaves is found in our world, but it is clearly a world of its own. As for the Operator, one could argue that the toxic effect it has on humans and human technology marks it as completely alien to the human world. Secondly, both the Operator and the labyrinth are completely unbound by the laws of space and can distort it at will. The labyrinth changes dimensions freely, leading Navidson into its depths in a downward curve no matter what direction he tries to pedal his bike in. In “Entry #63” of Marble Hornets, Tim, a friend who has taken over the role of protagonist at that point in the series, pursues an associate of the Operator, all the while being transported instantly and involuntarily between several locations. And finally, the monsters have the power, enabled by readers, to cross from one layer of “reality” to the other. Zampanò, Johnny Truant and Jay all discover that encountering these monsters through the eyes of others is an invoking encounter within their own minds. I will also refer again to my discussion of liminal spaces, between readers and texts, and between imagination/technology and “reality”. Remembering the enabled “becoming” that readers provide, considered by Henriksen to allow spectres to gain something between life and unlife, I consider the shift to space-centered hauntings within horror fiction very relevant. Moreover, it helps highlight yet again how House of Leaves predicted the changes that would come to the genre.

2.5 Interpretation and Creation

The Internet is a unique platform for interaction between people with shared interests. Rapid, fluid discussions can be carried out between multiple users, regardless of the physical distance between them. As such, the Internet brims with all kinds of communities, all of which thrive on their accessibility to those who take an interest in their respective subject matter. The
horror community is no exception, providing a multitude of online forums in which all aspects of the genre are open for discussion. We have already seen how a sub-forum dedicated to a single horror novel, *House of Leaves*, can contain a staggering amount of discussions and interpretations, ever seeking new perspectives which the fan community can incorporate into their understanding of the book. Our current discussion, however, considers the community revolving around an entire subgenre. It must be considered on its own in order to understand what sort of powers it might possess.

In Chapter I, I used reader-response theory in general and Stanley Fish’s criticism in particular to examine the function of online communities as *interpretive*. I argued that the MZD Forums served to carry on the chain of “poems” that Danielewski began within the pages of his novel and passed on to the readers. I examined how the online community reviewed, commented upon and added to those readings, selecting which parts they would approve and carry on to become part of their general body of interpretations, with some of the more common interpretations being displayed more prominently. That community is arguably a single, collaborative “poem” of *House*, and as forum user Stencil is keen to remind new users, no opinions are unwelcome (12.05.2003). What the community also does, however, is to present new users with a harsh demand to only contribute fresh ideas to their discussions. Judging from the hints of Hill’s notion of “fan connoisseurship” displayed in certain forum posts, it would seem that the goal of the MZD Forums is to be in possession of the greatest, most nuanced interpretation of Danielewski’s book. One could argue that the forums want to preserve their reputation as an authority on interpreting his work. From this point of view, there is simply no room for rehash. Those whose “readings” of *House of Leaves* do not match the standards of the community can expect to be ridiculed by it, as user “satrix” pointed out in Stencil’s newcomer-addressing thread (18.12.2005).

The rest of this chapter will continue the discussion of the role of the online horror community. In discussing creepypasta and the role of technology in creating horror, I made several references to an argument made by Line Henriksen: that monsters are both real and not real at the same time. This paradox was resolvable by considering the monster as a figure that is always “becoming” real, both in our minds and through image-projecting technology. While I will not refer to this idea directly in the following section, I wanted to bring it up because fluidity remains a very important concept. The Internet, with its potential for infinite, rapid discussion, encourages fluidity. We have seen that interpretations of a horror work (exemplified by *House of Leaves*) are more than ready to change given the right stimulus. We
will now consider how the Internet allows for a large degree of fluidity concerning the
creation and mediating of horror conventions, shaping the genre itself. In the creepypasta
community, anyone can participate in the creation of new horror texts. Genre is a fluid means
of definition on its own, and we would do well to consider the horror genre “becoming”, as in
a continuing process of evolution, rather than a set of constants.

A “poem” is always a response to a text. And yet, to the reader-response critic, it is a
valuable unit on its own. As such, it would be unfair to label interpretations as reactions.
Rosenblatt promotes reading as an action in which the reader contributes meaning as well as
receiving it from the text (10). Fish, referring to the interpretation of texts, adeptly rephrases
this argument: “Interpreters do not decode poems; they make them” (327). Therefore, online
communities should be regarded as creative as well as interpretative. While we cannot know
with certainty if Danielewski’s novel was written with this intention, we do know that the
innumerable instances of lacking information found in House of Leaves contributed to leaving
many readers dissatisfied, causing them to fill in the blanks on their own and to compare their
interpretations with other readers. In order to contribute to their collective understanding of
the novel, they had to supply material that was not already there. By extension, interpretations
already supplied and discussed by the community were discouraged and rejected. While this
interpretive project started as a response, it was always a creative process that required active
participation and the addition of user-provided discussion material. The users of the MZD
Forums were interpreters, but their interpretation is also a creation in itself.

On the other hand, interpretive communities such as this have certain limits. Although
they produce collaboratively created interpretations, these are still responses. What they
contribute to the community is perspective and interpretive strategies. I would nevertheless
like to argue that the Internet has provided horror fans with the ability to influence the genre
itself on a different level than through interpretation. When one uses Internet discussion
groups to interpret novels, movies and other representations of a genre, one usually stands
little chance of directly influencing future iterations of it, barring the slim chance that writers
browsing the Web for ideas happen upon certain online genre debates. The creepypasta
subgenre, however, has changed this. The fact that it takes place entirely on the Internet
provides it with more than a rich potential for circulation. Creepypasta writers can and should
be considered as horror fans engaged in creating horror texts. They read horror stories written
by others, take part in discussing them, and write material of their own based on the
understanding of the genre that the community mediates. They spearhead a fan movement that
is constantly looking to refine writing techniques by taking part in discussions trying to bring new genre conventions and techniques to the table, as well as refining existing ones and removing those that become obsolete. In the creepypasta community, the line between writer, reader and critic is blurred. More often than not, one will come upon individuals striving to fulfill all three roles in equal measure. In short, the Internet has, over the last ten years, provided horror fans with the opportunity to shape their genre and create new iterations of it as well as interpreting it.

2.6 Horror as Open Source: Creating the Slender Man

Of course, the creepypasta subgenre didn’t spring into life as a synchronized, collaborative effort. I would hesitate to refer to it as such even today. It started out with horror stories posted online by authors who had little or no connection to each other and were often anonymous. The stories were spread thanks to readers who found them entertaining. As time passed, a culture grew around these online urban legends, and the creation, circulation and discussion of the stories became a more widespread phenomenon. This would eventually pave the way for community-created stories and conventions. Fortunately for our discussion, there exists a stellar example of such collaborative storytelling in the creation of a previously mentioned creepypasta villain, the Slender Man. “Open Sourcing-Horror”, a 2012 article by Shira Chess, discusses this process of creation from an interesting perspective. Chess examines a central question to my own discussion: how this cultural phenomenon gives us insight into the ways in which the Web allows for the fluid negotiation of genre conventions. She also brings up an intriguing comparison, examining how the horror genre, mediated in this fashion, resembles Open Source software. As a term, ‘Open Source’ is chiefly applied to a software movement that originated in the 1990s. Chess seeks to extend the application of this term, turning it into the verb ‘open-sourcing’, which can be used to describe any movement that bases itself on constant reuse and modification of certain units, whether those units are technological or cultural. We have elaborated on reuse and modification in the context of interpretive communities, which reuse and modify multiple individual interpretations in order to create communal interpretive strategies. As it turns out, the principles of the Open Source movement in general are highly applicable to communities both interpretive and creative. The concept of voluntary, collaborative effort draws a baseline which provides ample opportunities for comparison. Chess’s article will serve as a basis for
most of this section, although the emphasis here will still be mostly on horror texts. In particular, the process of creating the Slender Man invites us to consider new forms of intimacy (through ownership) and reader input (through collaboration). Additionally, by following Chess we can expand upon Fish’s concept of the interpretive community, examining how his theories can also be applied to creative processes.

For the purposes of our discussion, a basic knowledge of the fundamentals of the Open Source movement will suffice. An offshoot from the Free Software movement, it aims to produce software that “is cheap or free, is modifiable, involving distributed, voluntary labour” (Chess 382). Although any given original software under this movement is created by certain people for a certain purpose, anyone who wishes to modify it for a different purpose is free to do so, provided their version of the software is also available to and modifiable by anyone. This allows for endless iterations of the base programme to be created freely, in response to the needs of the users. To elaborate on the mind-set behind this movement, Chess provides a source for her discussion: Two Bits: The Cultural Significance of Free Software, a 2008 book by Christopher Kelty. Kelty explains that Open Source is built upon five core components. Movement refers to the unstable definition of what Free Software is. The parameters of this movement are always open to discussion and disagreement. Sharing source code is the “fundamentally routine practise” of distributing the building blocks of the software (Kelty 14). Openness builds on the sharing of source code, and Chess refers to it as “transparency” concerning the creation process of software/cultural units (385). This insight allows users of the units to emulate previous processes if they wish to modify the units. The fourth component, coordination and collaboration, refers to the network of coordinated users and creators who allow the movement to flourish (Kelty 15). Finally, there is the issue of copyright and licencing, which is rather unimportant to this discussion. These principles constitute the basics of the Open Source movement as Kelty describes it. We must also keep the concepts of reuse and modifiability in mind. Kelty warns, however, that these components do not constitute an absolute definition, reminding us that one is likely to find dozens of variations within each component (15). This brings us back to the concept of fluidity, especially in relation to genre, a loose label that can encompass great variation. The concept of mediating is therefore crucial to any process of creating, in that it makes sure only a select few components can define any given iteration the genre, in our case horror.

In her article, Chess extends these principles to the creation of horror stories. “Open-sourcing” may be a “naturalized way of mediating content” on the Internet, but her
application of the Free Software components to the creation of what would become a creepypasta villain merits further examination (382). What I would like to contribute to her findings is to compare reader-response theory to “open-sourcing”, and consider what implications this process has for horror. This will also allow me to argue that there is a close link between collaborative interpretation and collaborative creation, showing that the Internet has enabled a logical progression from response to creation for horror fans.

First, however, it is necessary to briefly explain exactly how the Slender Man was created. The character was conceived by the users of an online community known as the Something Awful forums. These forums do not usually constitute a horror community, dedicating themselves to discussing a wide variety of topics. They notably pride themselves on being “one of the most entertaining and troll-free forums on the Internet”, the latter part accomplished by a 10$ registration fee and a long list of offences that may lead to being banned from the forum (Kyanka, 2006). With over one hundred and ninety thousand registered users, it can safely be referred to as a prominent online community. As Chess explains, the forum has a tradition of organizing image manipulation contests known as “Photoshop Phriday”, where users submit photoshopped images they have created to fit a certain theme. The best contributions receive acclaim from the forum users, meaning that the creators garner recognition of their skills for their efforts (377). One of these contests, taking place in a forum thread called “Create Paranormal Image”, challenged users to create manipulated photos showcasing paranormal happenings, like those one would usually encounter as “supplements to bogus stories” in “book(s), documentar(ies) and web site(s)” (Gerogerigegege, 08.06.2009). One of these contributions, posted by a user known as “Victor Surge”, consisted of two images picturing children and adolescents, manipulated to contain an impossibly tall, vaguely humanoid figure in the background. The pictures were accompanied by two short pieces of fiction referring to the figure as “the Slender Man” (Victor Surge, 10.06.2009). In recognizable creepypasta fashion, these pieces of fiction emulated real-world aesthetics, here in the form of witness statements, which could be a factor in their ensuing popularity (Chess: 380). These two pictures garnered remarkable response from other users compared to other entries in the competition, and in response to this interest in his work, Victor Surge started posting more images featuring the Slender Man. Interest in and discussion concerning the character eventually came to become so prominent that they largely supplanted the original purpose of the thread. Other users were encouraged to post their own contributions featuring the creature, expanding upon its character.
Over the next few days, this communal storytelling built a mythos around the character. Through submitted images and fiction, as well as the response and discussion concerning these iterations of the character, the Slender Man grew, and the users worked out a set of characteristics for future contributions to draw upon. Multiple users suggested that the Slender Man would make a great villain for a more extensive piece of horror fiction, a suggestion which nine days later resulted in user “ce_gars” announcing that he would be posting video entries on YouTube concerning his friend’s mysterious decision to abandon his college film project (19.06.2009). This was the beginning of the first video series featuring the Slender Man as villain, *Marble Hornets*, considered by Chess to be the culmination of the collaborative effort which brought the Slender Man to life as a character (375). Concerning the characters “legacy”, however, it was only the beginning, seeing how as of 2016 he features in innumerable creepypasta, web series, even games. The Slender Man has grown into a horror phenomenon, and it is all due to the efforts of multiple users which “open-sourced” the character, distributing and modifying his characteristics to suit their particular needs.

The concepts of reuse and modification are what defined the process of creating the Slender Man. As explained, an ongoing Open Source-project is based on a cycle of need and response. By presenting the Something Awful users with a basic challenge, *Create Paranormal Images*, user Gerogerigegege provided a need. What he also provided was the “source code” component of “open-sourcing”. He presented the framework in which responses should be formed: photoshopped photos featuring paranormal content. Within this framework, users submitted responses. In doing this, as Chess points out, they also displayed the “openness” component which Kelty mentions. By sharing the original images and explaining how they were manipulated, they allowed other users insight into their own processes of modification. This meant that other users were able to modify their own responses in the same fashion if they so desired, which of course is also an extension of sharing source code (Chess 385). If every user responded to the thread’s original need in this fashion, the cycle might have stopped there. Victor Surge’s posts, however, provided no openness with regards to how they were created, just short pieces of fiction intending to deepen the mystery. We should recall Kelty’s warning of fluidity within the loose guidelines he sets: Surge’s response is recognizable as a valid response within an Open Source project as he adheres to the same basic “code” as his fellow users, even if he does not adhere to every component of it. What Surge provided was a response that other users took a particular
interest in. The difference merits some consideration. We have seen that creepypasta always strive to make readers question whether or not their contents are real. The creepy images posted in the Something Awful thread were always implicitly understood as fake, given that they were responses to a photomanipulation contest. Unlike other users, however, Surge did not explicitly acknowledge his contributions as unreal, adding a sense of ambiguity to his work. This choice may have been made in recognition of the horror trope mentioned earlier. His success could well be due to a deviation which he saw as necessary from the norms of a thread that was, for all intents and purposes, a medium for horror stories. If this speculation is correct, he could be viewed as a savvy horror fan that knew what conventions would create the most impact.

While his intentions are unclear, his success is not. The same day, user “beerdeer” posted “I want to see more of this” (10.06.2009). The response had sparked a new need. Users wanted contributions that based themselves upon the modifications newly introduced to the “source code”: more images featuring the Slender Man. Surge’s work had developed a need to see and know more about the character. No one claimed ownership of the character, paving the way for other users to submit their own pictures and stories. As more and more users remarked that they would like to see the character star in a book, responses changed to reflect a need to define the Slender Man. He had supplanted the original purpose of Gerogerigegege’s challenge, becoming the “star of the thread” (Nurse Fanny: 13.10.2009). The process became more recognizable as an “open-sourcing” project along the way, but it was arguably one from the start. As Chess highlights throughout her article, it was always about multiple users voluntarily contributing to a project, sharing their ideas and “source code” for others to reuse and modify, and always keeping the basics of the project open for anyone who wished to contribute their own iterations of the character. As we can see, what initiated the more expansive process of creating horror was the recognition of a need for a frightening product.

Considering the creation of the Slender Man as a series of responses naturally leads to the applying reader-response theory. My argument is that we can and should consider each response that contributed to this process a “poem”, a piece of literature in its own right. Reader-response critics believe that each interpretation is a singular action that takes place between the reader and the text, with each party supplying meaning modified by the context in which the text is read. Paraphrased to suit the purpose of this discussion, we can say that the reader reuses what meaning the text provides, and modifies it with the meaning they
supply on their own. This happens according to the current needs of the reader, which will vary depending on the context they find themselves in. The interpretive community is created when readers read each other’s “poems”. Upon reading different interpretations of a text, the community will reuse these readings to modify their own interpretation, evolving their shared consensus on how to interpret (and by extension write) such texts. This process is exactly what happened on the *Something Awful* forums. The only difference is that a character was interpreted rather than a text. Members of the community were still responding by contributing their own readings of the Slender Man, evolving the character by reusing and modifying characteristics and techniques which other users had contributed. The continuing cycle of reading and response meant that the community could discuss and criticize contributions until they agreed upon a certain set of strategies which allowed users to read and write recognizable iterations of the character.

The fact that the Slender Man discussion included the removal or diminishing of characteristics which were deemed not fitting by the community is of particular importance to our comparison. As Fish explains, the collaborative negotiation of various interpretations is what protects reader-response theory from being reduced to baseless subjectivity. An agreement on what “counts” as part of the whole “will be in force only so long as a community of readers or believers continues to abide by it” (11). This is one of the main reasons why the Internet proves such fertile ground for genre negotiation. Any provided readings are immediately subjected to the community. Hills emphasizes the role of the fan community splendidly. He argues that every message board post can be read as “a specific textual production of fan identity, one that is aimed at a readership assumed to be made up of other horror fans (…) that can rapidly indicate its approval or disapproval of any given posting by virtue of the message board’s status as asynchronous computer-mediated communication” (78). The possibility for extremely rapid discussion allowed by the *Something Awful* forums meant that the Slender Man could develop at an incredible pace. Over a short span of time, an established community of users only connected by the Internet managed to take the process of creation to the stage where they found themselves with the authority to define what characteristics did and did not fit in. In Open Source terms, this is known as “debugging”, which builds on the software term “bug”. A “bug” is an error within the code, and debugging is the process of removing them. Fish’s interpretive community removes “bugs” from the “source code” of their interpretive strategies, and the *Something Awful* forums took this a step further, implementing it into a creative process.
Of course, this creative process could have taken place within the parameters of more or less any genre. “Open Sourcing” might not be unique to horror, but the process has certain implications for horror, both when it comes to intimacy and to agency. Intimacy is, in this case, linked to ownership. Anyone who took part in the process of creating and delimiting the Slender Man owns a measure of the character. A sense of investment could theoretically be linked to a sense of immersion, a theory we shall discuss in more detail in the next chapter. Being able to immerse oneself in a horror story is a quality that links directly to intimacy: when part of a story was created or modified by a reader, there is something at stake for the reader within the text, which contributes to a greater level of tension, and by extension fear, in the reader. Also worth noting here is that the character changed in order to be frightening to as many readers as possible. In mediating the character, readers project their own fears onto its characteristics, meaning that the result will be an amalgam of commonly shared fears revealed only by collaborative effort. The shared character becomes in turn an example of what horror audiences consider an effective horror experience, inspiring future authors to write stories which more easily target their demographic. Reader input is manifested in the output of writers relying on the horror community to supply their own fears, leading to the potential effect of the horror genre as a whole growing substantially. And all of this is facilitated by readers choosing to employ their interpretive agency in a more creative fashion, turning their responses into new material in order to collaboratively create the horror experiences they want. All that’s needed is a simple catalyst, like Surge’s post.

Given that a large body of reader-writers created the Slender Man together, fluidity remains an important rule of thumb. Not all of the villains commonly recognized characteristics have to be employed in order for a text featuring him to be recognized as part of the whole. This is why Marble Hornets can be acknowledged as such a prominent example of the Slender Man mythos, even though the creators presented the character with no tentacle-like appendages, introduced the idea that he distorts recording equipment, and kept openness/transparency about their project to a minimum during the first season. This kind of fluidity also ties projects such as this with the ideas that I have been attempting to argue as part of contemporary horror fiction. Echoing Henriksen’s work, the Slender Man is always changing, always “becoming”. There is no need for fixed parameters when the boundaries of the characters are defined by the community as much as the individual contributor to the mythos. The need that drives the mediating process is the need for the character to remain frightening. Chess notes that from its infancy, the Slender Man was shaped based on the fears
of Something Awful users. Even though they were aware of its artificial nature, users admitted to being afraid of the creature they had created (398).

What does this imply for the horror community? As Hills recounts, a certain school of fan theorists, exemplified by Mark Kermode, were often keen on emphasizing that “proper” horror fans valued aesthetic pleasure and connoisseurship over affect, refusing to attribute any value to the experience of fear (74). Other communities (Hills specifies two message board threads as examples) link the pleasure taken in horror more closely to its affective power (81). This division between horror fans seems to have diminished: the Something Awful users found value in both the aesthetics and the affective power of the Slender Man. Why has this change taken place? If I were to guess, I would tie the question to the concepts of intimacy and ownership which I have been discussing so far. In an interview, Danielewski stated that he wanted to create “scenes and scenarios that verge on the edge of specificity (…), leaving enough room (…) for the reader to participate and supply her own fears, his own anxieties, their own history and future” with House of Leaves (McCaffery 119-120). Thanks to online communities and opportunities provided by forums like Something Awful, such “scenes and scenarios” now have a readily available space in which they can be negotiated. Thanks to the emergence of the creepypasta, the ease with which one can share amateur horror fiction and the collaborative effort behind villains such as the Slender Man, readers are now able to supply their own fears at an entirely different level than before. Through the community, they have ownership in the stories. No wonder they feel that horror hits closer to home than the audience of horror films. Ultimately, the kind of collaborative effort that the creation of the Slender Man exemplifies ties in rather well with reader-response theory, and allows us a few key pieces of insight into the creation of horror.

2.7 Negotiating Creepypasta as a Sub-Genre

While the creation of the Slender Man has provided us with a great opportunity to apply both Open Source-principles and reader-response theory to the online horror community, we must admit that it is a somewhat unique event that cannot be said to be representative of creepypasta in general. The vast majority of these stories are written by individual writers and submitted for circulation on the Internet, and although authors admit to reusing and modifying conventions and themes found in other pastas, the writing of individual stories cannot be said to be the result of collaborative storytelling. Finally, I also agree with Chess that the Open
Source concepts of “movement” and “copyright” cannot easily be applied to the Slender Man example. The final part of this chapter will be dedicated to some observations on what forces define and negotiate the creepypasta subgenre today. I will explain how the community still has the freedom to shape the genre, while noting how certain individuals have gained a greater degree of influence and authority over the process. This part of my thesis considers a few arguments that are not horror-specific as such. Mediating communities may well have shaped a multitude of other genres beyond the scope of my discussion here. Nevertheless, the creepypasta websites illustrate an important development within the larger horror genre, and I would feel amiss not to address them.

Fluidity is, naturally, still a cornerstone of the processes taking place. The creepypasta subgenre developed gradually, based on favorable audience response. It started out with simple horror stories that were circulated by readers who appreciated their aesthetics and emotional affect. The anonymous nature of the stories, coupled with the fact that a few of them grew to be very successful, undoubtedly encouraged more amateur writers to contribute their own horror stories to the Web. This, in turn, led to a community of horror storytellers taking shape. This community marked the arrival of a greater need for new online horror fiction, and their responses and negotiations of new stories that arrived helped established new conventions. Ultimately, these conventions formed a genre named after how its stories were distributed. Although the genre is more recognized today, it is still developing to suit the conventions that are currently perceived as essential to a story with the intent to scare. All of these facts are recognized by Chess, who quotes a 1984 essay by Carolyn Miller, “Genre as Social Action”. At a certain point in this essay, Miller considers the concept of genre to be a pragmatic one. “More than a formal entity”, genre is “a point of connection between intention and effect, an aspect of a social action” (153). Chess warns against misrepresenting Miller, pointing out that her theories are rarely applied to literary genres (388). What makes her research relevant to our discussion, however, is the interpretation of genre as something fluid, something that evolves and responds to the needs of its users. Chess also notes that Miller herself has applied her theories to writing within digital spaces. Historically, a genre’s dependency on social needs is easily proven: different subgenres of horror have continually gone in and out of fashion. What is more recognizable with the creepypasta subgenre is how acute an impact the reader has on how the genre is shaped. This is, again, accomplished through the unique opportunities for negotiation offered by the Internet. Creepypasta stories are completely dependent upon their online readership, which not only holds the power to
distribute them, but also to evaluate what aesthetic and affective techniques make them worthwhile reads. This is where I find that the “movement” component of the Open Source values comes into play. To Kelty, “movement” consists of those discussions and negotiations which attempt to define the parameters of the Free Software and Open Source concepts. Within the context of our discussion, this component cannot be applied to anything less than the negotiation of the creepypasta subgenre itself.

The idea that the creepypasta subgenre is negotiated online raises a certain issue, however. Online horror communities are numerous, and for the most part, they have little interaction with each other. Although they can collaboratively produce certain interpretive strategies, as when the Something Awful forums created the Slender Man, it seems unlikely that these independent communities have the power to define a genre which they only occasionally touch on in their discussions. Another issue is that of anonymity. Individual creepypasta writers, wishing to improve their work by serving the needs of the community, will have a very hard time tracking down responses while their story is (hopefully) being circulated across the web. Although this makes for little more than speculation, I would like to argue that these factors played into the development that resulted in a decline in the circulation aspect of creepypasta. Over time, people began to gather these online horror stories on certain websites that became repositories for them. On these websites, popular creepypasta were catalogued for easy access. What they also came to feature was the possibility for writers to submit their stories directly into their archives, where they would be accessible to a dedicated audience that would provide easily available feedback. As of 2016, a massive number of creepypasta stories are submitted to websites such as these rather than circulated widely on the web. This means that these websites are also dedicated creepypasta communities, more than apt to host the kind of negotiations that are prone to alter the genre itself. It is tempting to consider these communities as a response to a need for the sharing of interpretations.

Looking into the specifics of response and negotiation requires an example. The website simply known as Creepypasta.com was created in 2008, in the formative days of creepypasta, and it is run by a user known as “Derpbutt”. The website is home to over a thousand pieces of fiction, and Derpbutt claims his team receives “thousands” of entries every time the website accepts new submissions, a bi-annual event spanning about a month (Derpbutt: Unknown date). They also provide easy links to other major creepypasta sites. As such, I feel it safe to refer to this website as a prominent example of its kind. On this website,
users can rate published pastas on a scale from one to ten, allowing readers to quickly assess how popular a story is with the community. One can also search the website for pastas based on their rating, meaning that readers who wish to read recommended stories only will find looking them up a simple task. Newly published pastas reach their audience quickly: On 11 March 2016, a story named “The Road to Happiness” received 52 ratings in the first five hours after it was published (Taylorg). The admins publish the stories on the website, but the authors are given credit by their chosen username, meaning that they can be recognized for posting multiple works on the site. Discussion and response to these stories take place in individual comment sections below the texts, where other users are free to submit feedback. Naturally, the quality of this feedback varies from simple encouragement to detailed suggestions.

Returning to “The Road of Happiness”, I found that positive feedback often complimented Taylorg’s writing skills and the emotional affect of her story. User “Alyssa” said that she was unhappy with the ending because she connected with the protagonist and wanted her to be happy. “You are an excellent writer! (…) You should be proud that you can make your readers feel that sort of connection!” , she wrote (12.03.2016). Other users, like “J.Brown” and “hellomikie92” noted that the impact of the ending was undesirable, expressing a wish to see it changed (29.03.2016 and 16.03.2016). As we can see, Creepypasta.com is a way for aspiring horror writers to get easily accessible feedback. Thanks to the rating system, they will have a general idea of how good the community found their stories. As mentioned, the comment section rates stories both by aesthetics and affect, meaning that writers will get feedback on both the form and content of their pastas, if deemed interesting enough. Armed with knowledge of what the audience considers the strong aspects of their writing, authors can then improve their writing to suit the needs of the community. In this way, horror writing can “keep up” with sometimes rapidly changing demands, and it is ultimately the audience that shapes the genre. There are issues, however. Using creepypasta repositories such as this website means placing a lot of authority in the hands of administrators such as Derpbutt. The site admins subject submissions to a rigorous screening process during which most of the submitted stories are actually rejected. Derpbutt explains that stories are mostly rejected due to lacking form, but he also rejects stories on the grounds of content. As is explicitly stated in the FAQ section of the site, pastas that he finds to be boring reads are unlikely to be published (Unknown date). As such, Derpbutt and the other site admins hold a large amount of sway
over the boundaries of the genre, rating what conventions make for “good creepypasta” writing. This is made even more explicit by the fact that Creepypasta.com has a sister website, Crappypasta.com. On this website, as explained by the Creepypasta.com FAQ, Derpbutt publishes some of the submissions that do not make the cut for the former website. He emphasizes that these are stories which he found to have potential, but also in need of improvement, rather than the absolute worst. That being said, the stories found on Crappypasta.com are sorted into categories with fairly derogatory descriptions. Some of them feature errors in writing style or format, but a lot of pastas are also consigned to the website because they focus on elements that Derpbutt finds boring or overused: reuse of famous creepypasta characters, haunted video game cartridges, lost episodes of TV shows, self-inserts, even dolls. This is in spite of the existence of very successful creepypasta featuring these elements, such as “Candle Cove” for “lost episodes” and “BEN Drowned” for haunted video games. In other words, Derpbutt allows himself the authority to decide whether or not certain creepypasta conventions have merit; a power that according to Fish should lie solely with the community and not individuals.

Fortunately, closer scrutiny of the Crappypasta issue reveals that the picture is a bit more nuanced. For one thing, no submission to Creepypasta risks being kicked down to its sister website without the permission of the author. Contributors must explicitly allow their stories to be published on Crappypasta by checking a box in the submission form. This is because the intention of Crappypasta is for writers to get feedback they can use to improve their stories. While most of the feedback that authors receive consists of derisive comments, they will sometimes get helpful suggestions that can be used to rewrite and resubmit their pastas, in the hope that they will be allowed on the main website in their revised form. We could for example take user “Carol Starkey”’s response to the pasta “Under the Ever-Setting Sun” (E.M.W, 2016), where she comments that the story has “promise”, also adding a few suggested alterations to the plot, “if you want it [to] be creepy” (17.04.2016). Furthermore, a site rule states that any Crappypasta story that receives a high enough rating from readers will be allowed onto the main site. Pastas that make the transition one way or another are also relocated to a category named “ADMIN FAIL”, showing that Derpbutt is more than willing to admit mistakes made during his screening process. Finally, we must keep in mind that authority of this kind ultimately stems from the community. The fact that his website is used by a huge amount of readers and writers that willingly submit themselves to Derpbutt’s screening process proves that they trust him as an authority on creepypasta. The tolerated
existence of *Crappypasta* and the fact that this site has many more published stories than the main site also proves that writers earnestly expect good feedback for this site or take their rejection with a good sense of humor. What could be the case is that sites like *Creepypasta* represent a change in the interpretive community. With such a massive influx of contributions to the genre and the lack of limitations imposed by the Internet itself, the creepypasta community could feasibly have made a conscious decision to allow administrators like Derpbutt to heavily filter what iterations of the genre they are subjected to. The system admits to its own faults, and the community can easily disempower the administrators simply by going to other websites. I feel that ultimately, the negotiation of the creepypasta genre still lies with the masses of readers. They have the power to express needs, which is what triggers writers to respond in different ways. And as such, the boundaries of the horror genre remains fluid, ensuring that the genre will always adapt in order to survive, always *becoming*.

### 2.8 Conclusion

I find it interesting that the Internet implies a connection between individuals that is at the same time intimate and distant. Based on the arguments presented in this chapter, it seems that a great number of Internet users experience a sense of vulnerability and unease in using the platform. This is only natural, and ties in with the concept of phantasmagoria. If you can use technology to reach distant spaces, whatever inhabits those spaces can use the same technology to reach and invade your space. *House of Leaves* established the act of reading as an exploration of the unknown and alerted us to the dangers that accompany such ventures. Through creepypasta writers, this notion has come to dominate an entire subgenre of horror. The Internet has shown us that horror fans are discovering to what degree their interactions with each other can shape the genre they enjoy, not only by circulating a body of amateur writings, but also by mediating that body until it constitutes a recognized genre of horror on its own. This genre seems to be particularly effective because they can project their own fears onto it, creating horror stories with a greater potential for emotional affect. The next chapter will discuss even more ways in which fans can become writers, influencing texts in a fashion that makes them more frightening.

The world of creepypasta is a liminal space, recognizable as our own world, but seized by the supernatural forces which readers unwittingly invoked by delving into the forbidden. I choose to say forbidden here because we are always provided with several warnings from
those who have already lost their lives, figuratively or literally, to the monsters inhabiting the unknown. These warnings are never heeded though. The creepypasta subgenre uses the same overarching idea of helplessness and meaningless agency as Danielewski did. Is the genre telling us that curiosity dooms humanity to tragic fates? I consider that a reasonable conclusion; they are horror stories, after all. The success of these stories suggests that the pervasive elements of playing to intimacy and familiarity while challenging agency is a trend that defines a significant part of contemporary horror. *Marble Hornets* demonstrated that these themes are not restricted to the printed word. They can be translated to other media platforms as well, and I consider studying how this is done an interesting approach to understanding how the horror genre works today. In the third and final chapter of this thesis, we will move on to discuss a media platform that presents reader agency in a very different fashion: video games. As we shall see, media with a dimension beyond aesthetics and narrative (gameplay) can still convey the same themes of helplessness and dangerous agency as we have seen thus far. It is all in how the horror is translated.
3 Horror Video Games: Playing to Your Fears

“You're on your own. No one to come for you. No one to help you. No one to hear you scream.” Sales text for Slender: The Arrival on the Steam Store.

3.1 Introduction

Video games represent the peak of interaction between text and audience. In the previous two chapters, reader agency was presented as the power to interpret and project (House of Leaves) and the power to perpetuate by sharing (creepypasta). Video games provide a rather different and much more tangible form of agency: the power to fully interact with the world of the text, and to continually make choices that affect how the narrative proceeds. Considering this basic fact, my thesis on agency, intimacy and collaboration between text and readers in contemporary fiction would be incomplete without a chapter devoted to this medium.

Discussing video games as fiction, as a literary form, is an emerging field of study, and it keeps on growing. Like novels or films, games use aesthetical and narrative conventions to present a story; the major difference is the added element of gameplay. As such, we are free to consider horror games as part of a larger body of horror literature. Video game developer Richard Rouse III somewhat poetically labels the union between the horror genre and video games a “Match Made in Hell” (Perron (ed.), 2009). In this insider perspective, prefacing an anthology on horror video games, he claims that “The goals of video games and the goals of horror fiction directly overlap, making them ideal bedfellows” (15). Video game critics like Bernard Perron, Tanya Krzywinska, Matthew Weise and Carl Therrien seem to agree. Their work, which I will refer to repeatedly throughout this chapter, attests to the fact that the unique techniques, conventions and aesthetics of video games present new ways of understanding how intimacy and agency are evolving within horror fiction.

In this chapter, I will be discussing certain aspects of contemporary video games in general and horror games in particular. After briefly outlining how the horror genre is defined within the video game context, I will move on to discuss the video game community, and how the Internet has granted it a surprising amount of influence over the games that are published, particularly when it comes to the market of independently developed games. I will examine two relatively new concepts in the world of video game development and distribution:
crowdfunding and marketing based on user approval. The former will be exemplified by horror game funding campaigns hosted by the websites Kickstarter and IndieGogo, while the latter will be exemplified by horror games distributed through the Steam software platform, having passed through a user-approval based gateway known as Steam Greenlight. Based on my discussion of these games, I will argue that community-based funding and development tools give video game fans a surprising amount of authority over products in development, even if they cannot directly partake in the creative process. I also speculate on how these strategies can increase a sense of participation in the games themselves, arguing that a certain kind of crowdfunding reward could potentially enhance the horror aspect of experiencing a video game, by enhancing the sense of intimacy and alertness felt by the player.

Following my discussion on the community, I will turn to a couple of contemporary horror games. Illustrating Matthew Weise’s theory that horror games can be read as “procedural adaptations” of different subgenres of horror, I will discuss the aesthetics and gameplay of Resident Evil HD (CAPCOM Co., Ltd., 2015), a remastered edition of a horror game classic. I will refer to how it adapts cinematic horror into a game experience, and discuss in particular how it uses agency mechanics in the process of creating horror that resembles film horror. Horror games, in particular survival horror games, sometimes challenge a player’s expectations of their agency. Analyzing the aesthetic and gameplay conventions of an enduringly popular game helps establish a contrast to a newer, independently developed survival horror game: Slender: the Arrival (Blue Isle Studios, 2013). This game is an adaptation of Slender Man-based creepypasta, Marble Hornets in particular, and as such it presents us with very different aesthetics and gameplay tropes, adhering to the “rules” of the genre it is based on in order to provide an authentic experience. Its approach to establishing intimacy challenging agency, radically different from Resident Evil, offers us some key insights into how modern horror operates to scare audiences.

Given that the concept of interactivity plays such a large role in my overall thesis, I would finally like to argue that interactivity in itself can be a tool for scaring players; or rather, a tool that players can use to scare themselves. In this final section, I will be referring mostly to an article by Ashley Brown and Björn Marklund, who argue that even games that explicitly fall under the non-horror label can present players with horrific experiences. The game I will use to illustrate my discussion is Undertale (Toby Fox, 2015). This role-playing game contains horror elements hidden within the game’s assets, which players must manipulate externally in order to bring into the game. At the end of this chapter, I will
hopefully have proven that horror games reinforce and enhance my ideas of how reader interaction can play into creating an experience of horror.

### 3.1.1 Defining Horror Video Games as a Genre

Before we move on to the main body of this chapter, it is necessary to address the question of how genre is applied in the field of video games. During the late nineties and especially the first years of the new century, scholars began to study video games as literature, subjecting a new field of “texts” to various literary contexts. Over the last twenty years, the medium has been scrutinized from the perspectives of many existing fields of literary criticism. Although genre has always been a difficult label to apply when it comes to literary forms, video games have presented us with the need for a significant degree of adaptation when compared to other text forms. As Thomas Apperley explains in an appendix to *The Video Game Reader 2*, video games complicate both narrative and visual genres. For one thing, the iconography of video games represents a hybrid of narrative and visual content. Secondly, any two video games that one would classify under one genre are guaranteed to include a copious amount of non-shared components. There is simply too much variation between “texts” to draw easy lines. And finally, video game genres must also be understood by a set of medium-specific components: The non-representative, interactive dimension (354). Considering these complications, how do we apply such labels as “horror” to video games?

Apperley provides an explanation that is interesting in relation to our discussion. To him, genre in video games is an understanding mediated between the publishers, the marketers and the players. He brings in the question of profit, and presents genre as a marketing tool. Genre helps defining the demographic of a given game, allowing marketers to appeal to a known set of audience expectations (354). At this point, Carl Therrien, discussing the idea of video game reception within the same appendix as Apperley, provides us with a helpful insight. To him, the reception of a game is based on an experience, an encounter between player and game (380). This definition, strongly tied to reader-response criticism, leads to another important idea: Players define video games based on their experiences with them (Apperley, 354). When they seek out a video game within the same genre as a game they have played, they are seeking for the same kind of experience. Based on this assumption, as well as on the assumption that video games need genre labels in order to successfully market themselves to customers, we can make a strong case for video games being sorted into genres based on their intended affect.
For horror games, this intention is easily agreed upon: A horror game is a game designed to be a scary experience for the player. This can be taken as known from the start, as a player purchases a horror game with the expectation of being frightened by it. As explained in the introduction to this chapter, we will at a later point present an example that is arguably an exception to this rule. Recent research shows that even games that are clearly non-horror by genre can convey horrific experiences. Until that point, however, we will stick with the definition we have just discussed.

3.2 The Customer is Always Right: Crowdfunding and Approval-Based Marketing

In the previous two chapters, fairly substantial sections of my discussion were concerned with the horror community. I discussed how specific online communities could be said to exemplify Stanley Fish’s concept of the “interpretive community”, regulating text, interpretation and gender through a network of individual responses. Following that, I drew on Shira Chess and Christopher Kelty to interpret online communities as creative by nature, mediating genres and producing texts and conventions within them through a process similar to Open Sourcing software. At this point, however, I must acknowledge that my discussions on these communities were greatly facilitated by how available they are. The MZD Forums and their *House of Leaves* sub-forum could be considered a major fan authority on Danielewski’s work, due to their high member count, dedicated purpose and self-enforced authority to dismiss contributions as unnecessary. Shira Chess traced the creation of the Slender Man to a single forum thread. The creepypasta repositories which we discussed possess similar authority to the MDZ forums. In this case, it is based on an explicit desire for new creepypasta to “make the cut” onto the website and get access to immediate response from a large network of interested community members, and the fact that users invested the website owners with the power to judge submissions as sub-par iterations of a genre. All these cases attest to my discussions always having access to large, cohesive and authoritative Internet communities.

Within the field of video games, however, no such opportunity presents itself. The number of online communities dedicating themselves to the discussion of video games is staggering. In addition, a vast number of communities focusing on other topics have subsections reserved for discussing video games. Due to the sheer magnitude of online video
game communities, gaining an overview even of discussions focusing on extremely narrow selections of texts or conventions is a task I consider well beyond the boundaries of this thesis. This is not to say, however, that we cannot hope to discuss how video game audiences influence new additions to the field. In the first chapter, we considered how communities held interpretive power, and how this power also linked into the continuing chain of reading encouraged by the *House of Leaves* novel. In the creepypasta chapter, the horror of the Slender Man was enhanced by the cooperative creative power of the Something Awful community, who projected their own fears into a creative process. When it comes to the video game community, I would like to argue that fans hold the same kind of interpretive and mediating agency as we have discussed before. Moreover, I propose that the videogame community possesses a certain creative influence over video game development that might actually change how they experience certain games. And finally, I would like to prove that the process of readers becoming writers, as illustrated earlier by the creepypasta community, can also be applied to video game development, a process which is typically reserved for large companies.

To understand how all of this is possible, however, we have to add a different perspective: financing. Unlike the voluntary, non-profit effort that largely drives and shapes the creepypasta genre of writing, video game development still centers on profit. As gaming software rapidly develops, constantly changing the parameters within which games are made, the competition to produce bestsellers is harsher than ever. And still, among massive game companies like Nintendo, Electronic Arts and Konami, constantly trying to outdo each other, a smaller market thrives: independently developed games, colloquially known as ‘indie’ games. Indie games are developed by small teams of (usually) newcomers to the industry, and are frequently rather small in scope. This, however, has been no indicator of their ability to prosper: certain indie games have met with unprecedented success, released to overwhelmingly positive response both from audiences and critics. For example, *Undertale*, an indie game we will return to later in this chapter, was almost universally praised by critics in spite of its short playtime, simplistic gameplay mechanics and outdated graphics. The game won numerous accolades during the year of its release, including “Game of the Year”/”Best PC Game” -awards from websites that are recognized as authorities on video games, such as *The Escapist* and *IGN* (Zero Punctuation, 2016/ Davis, 2016). On the review aggregator website *Metacritic*, *Undertale* holds a 92/100 score as of April 2016. We can, for example, compare this to the computer release of the game *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*,
another critically acclaimed game released the same year (2015) by industry giant Konami. On Metacritic, this game holds a score of 91/100, one point lower than Undertale, in spite of being made on a budget approximating 80 million U.S dollars, and featuring groundbreaking graphics and gameplay.

This rather small insight into the critical response of recent video games is necessary to understand the influence which the video game community exerts over independent game development. On their own, indie game developers have little hope of success in a market glutted with new game releases. They are dependent on the community to produce ideas that will sell, and often rely on collaborative efforts for financing as well. With this in mind, we can look at how the online video game community influences the creation of new games. As my examples will show, the collaboration between developer and player benefits both sides, with the developers gaining the means to produce and sell their product, while gamers invest (sometimes literally) more in the resulting games. This, in turn, will allow us to consider the impact of independently made horror games. The first of two concepts I will consider is crowdfunding, exemplified by horror games funded in this fashion, such as DreadOut (Digital Happiness, 2014), Friday the 13th: The Game (Gun Media, 2015) and NightCry (Playism Games, 2016). I will then move on to talk a little about user approval and response, referring to the game-cataloguing platform software Steam: specifically, it’s “greenlighting” process.

Ethan Mollick defines crowdfunding as “the efforts by entrepreneurial individuals or groups (…) to fund their ventures by drawing on relatively small contributions from a relatively large number of individuals using the Internet, without standard financial intermediaries” (2). This form of fundraising is exclusive to the Internet, which facilitates simple monetary transactions from funder to developer. The crowdfunding culture is new, but has grown exponentially over a few years, with large websites like Kickstarter and IndieGogo created solely as service providers for hosting crowdfunding efforts. Through these websites, web users are asked to support projects-in-development of various kinds, including video games. Users offer money in return for special rewards from the developers, separated into reward tiers based on the amount of money being offered. Mollick notes that “reward-based crowdfunding” is the most prevalent kind of online fundraising. He also adds that the process frequently earns the developers an early customer base, by offering a copy of the finished product (for less than the predicted market value) as a funder reward (3). As such, crowdfunding can be used as a marketing tool as well as an option for raising funds.
The examples I will refer to in this section were funded through the websites Kickstarter (*Friday the 13th: The Game, NightCry*) and IndieGogo (*DreadOut*). I will refer frequently to the subpages promoting the specific funding campaigns (Green, 2015/Playism Games, 2015/Imron, 2013). The two hosting websites operate in roughly the same fashion. In exchange for a cut of the funds garnered, they host funding campaigns for anyone who wishes to promote a non-political, creative project meant for sharing with others. The project is given a single webpage on which the developers must explain their project as thoroughly as possible. Through video, images, and text, creators attempt to garner interest for their idea. They also outline rewards that contributing users (known as “backers”) will get in exchange for their donations. As a measure of protection for both sides, backers do not transfer their donations to the developers immediately. Rather, they “pledge” a certain amount of money to the project, which can be changed at any point until the campaign is over. If the campaign reaches a publicly announced funding goal at the end of the set period of time, all of the pledged money is transferred to the campaign owners. If the funding goal is not reached, all pledges are voided and no money is transferred. Creators who wish to fund their endeavors through webpages like these must therefore try their best to make their project as appealing as possible.

The financial aspect of crowdfunding invests audiences with a lot of power over game development. Initiating a crowdfunding campaign for a creative project implies that the developers do not have the financial means to complete the project on their own. The power to see the products through to the end has been placed with the audience. By extension, potential backers also have the power to stop these products in their tracks. We can compare this to the creation of the Slender Man as discussed in the previous chapter. Photomanipulated images depicting paranormal phenomena were submitted as entries for an informal competition. Some of the submissions included bits of accompanying fiction; some included the source material and explanations as to how this material had been manipulated. In a fashion, we could consider these submissions as product pitches. “Victor Surge”’s Slender Man pitch met with such positive response because he created an appealing presentation, one that resulted in a need for more material. Other users wanted to see more of the Slender Man, and were willing to contribute time and effort of their own in order to expand the mythos that grew around the character.

Although the ensuing process of collaboration and response has little to do with our current discussion, some of the concepts behind this event can be applied to the idea of
crowdfunding. In order to meet their funding goals through online, collaborative efforts, creators must provide a first impression with the kind of appeal that leads to a need for more. Indeed, as Mollick discovered in his exploratory study of crowdfunding dynamics, “project quality is important, and entrepreneurs should look for a ways to signal preparedness” (15). A creative pitch that displays both solid execution and potential for more will garner more response. This effect can only be achieved through an intimate knowledge of the community which the developers are playing to. While the funding campaign is running, members of this community will act as a network, sharing pitches they find interesting with family and friends and garnering more backers for the project. If the funding is subsequently successful, the newly established community of backers will form a baseline for the audience of the finished product. At this point, it seems somewhat redundant to repeat that crowdfunding is a collaborative effort. What ties the concept into our discussion on video games is that it also constitutes a mediating collaborative effort. This mediating function is enabled by a community that, on the independent development scene, has been granted the power to regulate which indie games make it onto the market and which do not. It is, I think, no coincidence that crowdfunding is so apt a channel for the transition from “reader” to “writer”. Amateur creators, armed with intimate knowledge of the expectations and conventions prevalent within their communities can present pitches that speak directly to their roots. Their communities will then decide on whether or not this iteration holds merit in the most basic way possible- by deciding whether or not it will actually exist. This, I believe, is proof that crowdfunding has provided the video game community with a limited, but still significant amount of sway over how the medium develops.

As mentioned above, the decision to apply the horror label to a game is based solely on its intended affect. As such, we should also consider how individual crowdfunding tactics could actually enhance the experience of a horror game. It stands to reason that horror video games follow the same logic as the other horror texts we have discussed: the more the readers project themselves onto, or invest in a game, the more intimate (and therefore acute) the experience. Now, as implied by the wording, the simple act of pledging to a Kickstarter video game project is an investment, expressing a commitment to seeing the game completed and a willingness to play it if it is. Whether or not pledging should be considered a more significant investment than buying a game in a store is debatable: although the act expresses willingness to pay for a game that does not yet exist, it is also (in most cases) considerably cheaper and arguably carries less risk of disappointment. In any case, a player investing in a game because
they find it interesting, and therefore entering the game world with a greater degree of immersion, is a case that is far too vague and non-specific for our discussion.

Looking at individual horror game crowdfunding projects and their approach to reward-based funding proves much more interesting. Several horror game developers have opted to offer backers a chance to be included in their games in some fashion. This is where the potential for increased intimacy and immersion comes into play. Now, all of the crowdfunded horror games I refer to here - *Friday the 13th: The Game*, *NightCry* and *DreadOut* - feature a copy of the finished games, sometimes before the official release, as a reward tier. What they also offer, however, are chances to be included in the game at various levels. The lowest-ranking reward of this kind is usually the inclusion of the backer’s name in a “special thanks”-section of the finished game credits. *DreadOut* offered this reward in the first tier; while *NightCry* rated it at a very high tier. *Friday the 13th: The Game* presented backers with the opportunity to distinguish themselves in the credits by pledging more money (by sorting them into backer categories in those credits). I find that rewards like these play to a sense of ownership for the backer. While backing a project is synonymous with investing in it, ownership should logically be enhanced with having one’s name in the credit. In the previous chapters we discussed ownership in *House of Leaves* and the creepypasta subgenre. In general, we speculated, a sense of ownership arguably contributes to reader immersion. More specific to horror is the notion that ownership in a text perpetuates it, and by extension, the horrors it contains. Through crowdfunding rewards, this is now achievable in video games as well. Having your name in the credits of a game is a testament to your responsibility in making the game real. The reader has, in a perceivable sense, contributed to something monstrous, and this contribution is plain to see. However, this is still a fairly abstract concept, and not as “hands-on” as most immersive techniques are likely to be. We must look a bit further up the reward tiers to hit the real “payoff”: rewards that incorporate the backer into the game world in some fashion.

A reward that offers to insert a potential player into a game world could prove to be one of the most immersive techniques seen in video game development so far. Sometimes, this reward allows the backer to design (or contribute to the design of) an in-game asset, like a character, a piece of text, a section of dialogue or the like. For example, the *Indiegogo* campaign funding the game *DreadOut* offered a limited number of backers the chance to design an in-game ghost and it’s backstory, in exchange for a 500$ pledge. Eight out of ten available slots for this reward were claimed before the campaign ended. *Friday the 13th: The
Game, in similar fashion, offered backers the opportunity to design a fashion in which Jason, the villain of the game, would be able to kill off his victim (it should be noted that this particular game promoted itself heavily with the promise of graphic murders). In this case, no backers claimed this reward, which could be related to the steep 5000$ pledge required. Nevertheless, the opportunity to help design a game would arguably give any player a much stronger sense of ownership in it than simply contributing money. Much more interesting, however, are those rewards that let the backer himself become an in-game asset - that is to say, a component of the game that is perceivable to players. The campaigns we are discussing made extensive use of rewards of this kind. DreadOut offered to hide the backer’s name (30$) or picture (150$) somewhere within the game assets for the would-be players to find. For a much higher contribution (300$), the backer’s picture would be used to design an in-game ghost, inserting the backer as an enemy for players to defeat. 145 backers out of a total of 535 opted for these specific rewards. Out of 15 open slots for the 300$ reward, 10 were claimed. NightCry offered a wider selection of more expensive rewards. Twenty-six backers pledged 300$ or $400 to have their name featured at specific points in-game, five backers pledged 500$ to have their recorded scream in the finished game, one backer pledged 1200$ to become an in-game corpse, and four backers pledged 2500$ to become living non-player characters. Finally, the Friday the 13th: The Game campaign promised to turn four backers into playable characters in their game, in exchange for the staggering sum of 10000$. All four slots were taken before the campaign ended.

I include these statistics because they prove that certain members of the horror game community, although not representative, are willing to invest heavily in prospective games simply for the opportunity to be a part of them. The chance to be “immortalized” in a cultural object that could potentially become a best-seller no doubt holds a certain appeal. Is it possible, however, that being personally represented within the game could make it more effective as a horror game? I would like to speculate that it does, and I base this claim on three factors. First of all, it fosters the sense of ownership as discussed earlier even further. Secondly, it plays to the intimacy factor. And finally, it serves to elevate the sense of alertness experienced by the player. Considering intimacy, Richard Rouse III speculates that “games provoke [fear] better than other media because there’s actually something at stake for the player” (20). The players immerse themselves in the narrative, and must suffer under the risk of failure that in other media only exist for the characters within the narrative. In this quote, Rouse discusses the consequences of projecting onto an in-game avatar. What happens,
however, when a player is confronted with a representation of themselves that is not their embodied avatar?

We may find answers within the work of Bernard Perron, who considers horror to be an “extended body” genre. Although players are unable to sense what is going on in the game world with more than sight and hearing, Perron argues, fear causes our other senses to react as if we were present through an extended body, “fleshing out or corporeal reactions”(123, “The Survival Horror”). With this argument, Perron extends Rouse’s theory the effectiveness of horror in games, stating that horror is an apt genre for the video game medium, in which the player is “urged to act and feel through its presence, agency and embodiment in the fictional world” (125). One of the observations he makes based on the three quoted factors is of particular interest to us: Horror is partially based on shock, which means that any repulsive act will elicit a fearful response from the player. This sense of horror is especially effective if gruesome acts are carried out against the player character, and as such, horror games will emphasize these events (132-133). To put Perron’s argument briefly, the player suffers vicariously through their avatar in the game world, as their own senses embody them within the game. Based on his work, I find it logical to assume that a literal embodiment of the player within the game would have a similar effect, even though that embodiment is not the player avatar. Note that almost all of the crowdfunding rewards incorporating backers into the game lead those embodiments to suffer within the game world. In DreadOut, backers can fight and defeat themselves, represented as anguished spirits. In NightCry, backers can listen for their own screams of fear, stumble upon themselves as corpses or watch themselves get murdered. And of course, the backers who become playable characters in Friday the 13th: The Game will find their avatars thrust into a slasher film simulation, struggling to survive against a maniac killer. If part of the affect and appeal of horror games is suffering vicariously through in-game embodiments, these crowdfunding campaigns have opened the possibility for a new form of this thrill, one that could conceivably elicit even greater horror for certain players. Too little user-response data pertaining to this idea exists to draw any firm conclusions at this point, however.

Returning to my third proposed factor, I would like to argue that a literal representation of a player within a game they helped create raises the level of alertness and anticipation that the player experiences in playing the game. This is, again, based on an assumption: the assumption that the player does not know exactly where or how they will be represented, meaning that they will actively be on the alert for the appearance of the
representation. If the player, by contrast, knows where their representation is found, they will most likely experience a sense of anticipation instead. Both alertness and anticipation are vital components in the horror game experience. Again I would like to refer to Perron, who discusses the concepts in relation to warning systems in horror games. He distinguishes the type of fear inherent to suspense/tension as “terror”, opposing it to the shock and repulsion of “horror” (2004, “Signs of a Threat”), a distinction that horror scholars have been using since Anne Radcliffe coined it in 1826. As he goes on to explain, anticipation is vital to tension because this particular emotion acts as a “searchlight” that highlights the elements that are meant to be frightening (3). In other words, anticipation makes readers more alert, which by extension enhances their experience of the eventual, horrific “payoff”. As we mentioned earlier, most representations of crowdfunding backers within horror games are apparently destined for suffering. Aware of this fact, the players represented will anticipate their own suffering and emotively seek it out, which in turns means that the sense of horror they experience when the suffering takes place will be more acute.

These three factors: enhanced immersion, enhanced embodied suffering and enhanced anticipation, constitute my speculation on how crowdfunding rewards inserting backers into a horror game may reinforce the horrific experience of playing the game. This tentative theory already faces a rather obvious point of contention: Even if this “enhanced” horror experience can be proven, would it not apply only to those select few players who paid to be represented themselves in the game, a small number of individuals that can in no way be said to represent players as a group? Unfortunately, all I can offer in response at this point is further speculation. In the first chapter of this thesis, I considered the idea from reader-response theory that multiple experiences of a text come together to form a communal experience. Although this “experiencing community” was mostly presented as interpretive, we saw in chapter two that it also assumes an evaluating, reviewing function. This precedent, combined with the immense capacity for sharing information characteristic of the Internet, allows us to consider the possibility of a shared experience as a result of player insertion. The video game community, like any other community based on voluntary communication, is built upon the sharing of experiences and opinions. A player being represented within a game, being a somewhat rare and exclusive occurrence, is an event which I consider it likely that this player would share. Friends or family, as crowdfunding campaigns illustrate, are only the first link in a potentially vast network with unlimited potential for sharing and promoting. In time, the video game community could come to consider the represented players representations of
itself. If this was the case, any player could conceivably partake in the vicarious thrill offered by one of “their own” suffering within a horror narrative, experiencing the same boost to immersion and alertness. This, however, is as far as I can take my speculation on the effects of crowdfunding on the horror experience. Due to a glaring lack of data to substantiate my claim with, I must stress that any actual impact of this phenomenon has yet to be proven. In this thesis, I choose to present it as a hypothesis, one that further research on the topic will be able to prove or disprove as games such as those I have mentioned are published, when we can analyze audience responses.

We would be amiss not to consider how crowdfunding gives players a mediating authority over what games are released onto the open market. As I have speculated, crowdfunding might also contribute to the experience of a horror game, with players embodied within the game experiencing a heightened sense of intimacy, alertness and immersion. We must also bear in mind that crowdfunding can be a hit-and-miss venture, however. A successfully funded game is by no means guaranteed to be a well-received one. NightCry, for example, received “mixed” user reviews upon being released to Steam, despite the successful crowdfunding campaign (Valve, 12.04.2016). Apparently, expectations raised through the extended campaign were not sufficiently met; reminding us that crowdfunding is simply a first stage when it comes to user response.

We must now consider the non-financial ways in which players can contribute to the creation and mediation of new video games. This power is largely based on the willingness of indie developers, many of whom originated as avid players, to work community feedback into the process of developing their games. Broadly speaking, reviewing a game has always been a task that anyone could attempt. Of course, lack of publishing channels in the 80’s or 90’s meant that opinions on games usually stayed between friends. This was yet another thing that changed with the Internet. With the opportunity to share their opinions with anyone interested in reading them, Internet users would review games to help members of a larger gaming community make the right purchases. With time, prominent websites such as IGN and GameSpot would hire users to write professional reviews, gradually becoming authorities on the market. This is not to say that emphasis has been taken away from the opinions of the “common” gamer. Distributors, possibly in response to the sheer mass of the online video game community, have started using user response and opinion as a marketing tool. We can find good examples of this in the computer software known as Steam, owned by the Valve Corporation. This software functions as a video game store/library, allowing users to purchase
video games and download them directly to their computers, meaning that they can be played through the *Steam* platform. This removes the need for a physical product like a disc, offering players a large variety of games that can be transferred to any computer with an Internet connection. As a result, *Steam* is an extremely popular software at the time of the writing of this thesis, with well over a hundred million all-time users worldwide and a huge share in the digital downloading market, a (somewhat dated) estimate rating it at 70% (Funk, 2009). Even if this statistic may have changed somewhat, *Steam* easily dominates the digital distribution game market as of 2016. What we should make an early note of is that the platform places heavy emphasis on its users forming a community, offering the use of chat rooms, reviewing opportunities, message boards and such (Valve, 2016).

Another noticeable aspect of the *Steam* platform is Valves policy of promoting and distributing independently developed video games. They offer prospective “indie games” the chance to be distributed to the massive *Steam* community in exchange for the typical fees and profit margins. The important decision as to which games will reach the market is placed in the hands of that same community. This is facilitated through a function of *Steam* known as *Steam Greenlight*, which is thoroughly explained on their website (Valve, 2016). On this platform, would-be developers pitch their games through the use of text, images and videos, much like the description of *Kickstarter* projects given earlier. There is no funding or reward involved in *Steam Greenlight*, however. Rather, it provides users with the opportunity to submit feedback, ask questions, and most importantly, “up-vote” games, an expression signifying that a user approves of a game idea and would like to see the product finished.

There is no specific voting goal involved: if *Steam* officials monitoring the process consider a game to have garnered sufficient interest, they will “greenlight” it, contacting the developers to make a distribution deal for the finished game.

As remarked by Nicholas Lampros, this process has many financial benefits. The distributor saves much time and effort that would be spent on the tough process of choosing what games to push, trusting the players to express their demands in a highly visible fashion. Meanwhile, developers save the significant amount of money that normally goes into distributing their games in physical form, and those games reach the market in a drastically reduced period of time (750). Of more interest, however, is the connection which the greenlighting process fosters between developer and player. Not only is the publishing of any submitted game based purely on community approval; users also have the freedom to give feedback to games in development, thus helping to shape the games they want to see. We
could, for example, look at the “indie” horror game *Black Rose*, developed by Sir Bedlam Productions and released on the *Steam* Store in March 2016, having been submitted to *Steam Greenlight* in December 2015. During its approval process, users looking at the presented material utilized the comment section to leave impressions, questions and suggestions. It should be noted that the comment section as it stands does not represent the entirety of user response to the project, as the developer opted to delete an unspecified amount of comments because (s)he was offended by their contents (05.12.2015). Some of the comments offered constructive criticism aimed towards making the game stand out amidst a perceived glut of indie horror games promoted through *Greenlight*. For example, user “Vuhran” found the visuals “too simplistic”, remarking that “some more horrific, original designs could really spice up the “scare factor” (…) that will cause people to remember exactly what they saw” (05.12.2012). In a later comment posted the same day, the same user also offered specific suggestions for improvement, such as “to drown out all the color (…) to create a dimmer but grimmer atmosphere”. A direct result of user feedback, as evidenced by an announcement from the developer on the page, was an alteration of the game’s flashlight mechanic (Sir Bedlam Productions, 03:12:2015). This serves to demonstrate that the developer was willing to incorporate the feedback he received into the final product, “due to the demand of several people”, even though a heated debate taking place in the comments section evidenced that a few users found the developer too sensitive to negative response. In addition, a couple of users that had the chance to play the game through a different channel commented that they liked *Black Rose*, emphasizing that they found it to be a scary game (NJ4K, 07.12.2015 and CookieMunsta, 07.12.2015). As we can see, both constructive criticism and positive feedback were to a certain degree angled towards the game’s potential affect. As it was labeled as a horror game, *Steam* users wanted *Black Rose* to be a frightening experience, and a requirement of that was seemingly innovation.

What does this tell us about the powers inherent to the horror game community, and the ways in which they hold sway over the development of horror fiction? Once again I would like to recall Matt Hills’ study of online communities dedicated to horror film. Some communities took pleasure in being scared, some in aesthetics, and some in their connoisseurship of horror conventions (73-85). We found all of these perspectives in feedback relating to a single horror game. What seems to be left out, however, is Mark Kermode’s notion that connoisseurship and the pleasures of being scared stand opposed to each other. Rather, it seems that horror video game fans utilize their connoisseurship to help
create games they would find scary. In the section of this thesis discussing the creation of the Slender Man, we saw how Internet users molded a horror villain based on their own fears. Video games, being created by a (frequently) small, closed team of developers, are obviously not available for that kind of “open-sourcing”. What we can prove, however, is that initiatives like Greenlight allows horror fans to influence and promote the games they wish to play in a different fashion: approval-based marketing and open communication between developer and user. In the case of the Black Rose game, this process seems to have been successful. The project was greenlighted and released to positive user reviews in the Steam store. I still feel the need to point out that the Greenlight process is not flawless. Dark Night (NighthoodGames, 2016), another indie horror game greenlighted by Steam, was allowed into the store despite being almost universally panned by commenters on the Greenlight page. User reviews are also largely negative as of three months after its release on the 11 January 2016. We must acknowledge that inherent issues with unmoderated online discussion and open game marketing prevent us from drawing anything but broad conclusions based on the limited display of contemporary (and unfinished) horror video games that I have been referring to. What I have hopefully proved, however, is that the video game community holds a significant amount of sway over the market. This is especially true when it comes to the “indie” scene, where those who wish to succeed must be intimately familiar with and willing to adapt the expectations of the community. Whether it is through donations, voluntary promotion of a product or a simple sign of approval, we simply must give horror fans their proper due as co-creators of the modern horror game scene. With the role of the community established, we can move on to the actual texts of this video game genre.

3.3 Who Survives the Survival Horror?

In order to make a comparison of how different techniques of establishing player agency and intimacy are utilized in older and newer horror games, we must narrow our scope a bit. As scholars such as Apperley have noted, even comparing games within the same genre can be difficult, given how much room for variation the multitude of components constituting a game offer. For example, the two games Resident Evil HD and Slender: The Arrival are both categorized as belonging to a widely known subgenre of video game horror: survival horror. Even this baseline for comparison is a tough sell, as these two games have completely different premises, aesthetics and gameplay mechanics. As Laurie Taylor notes, we should
consider the genre label a descriptive tool rather than a defining one, and look for a “kinship” between the games rather than actual similarities (47). In the case of these two games, this kinship is found in the principle they are built upon: the player’s in-game avatar must survive an extended encounter with horror elements, usually with limited resources. The focus is on survival, not on thriving or advancement as in most video games (46). I find survival horror a good context in which to discuss the role of agency within horror games. This claim is supported by several horror game critics. Tanya Krzywinska considers the survival horror experience to be built upon a binary structure of agency/lack of agency, a balance between being in control and then losing control upon confronting the supernatural (13). Chad Habel and Ben Kooyman agree, adding that the puzzle-heavy, suspense-dependent gameplay mechanics of many survival horror games “immediately set up a control/autonomy oscillation” (3). The mechanics of how this effect is achieved, however, can vary greatly from game to game. What I will discuss in this section is how Resident Evil HD and Slender: The Arrival present the agency/lack of agency oscillation in different ways. My argument will be based on the assumption that the mechanics used are so different because the two games are adaptations of different media and strive to provide an experience that is true to the original medium. More to the point, they are “procedural adaptations”, designed with the intent of letting the player insert themselves into a story codified by the rules of a certain horror subgenre from a different media platform (Weise 239). Resident Evil HD, a HD remastering of the game that pioneered the survival horror genre, borrows heavily from the aesthetics of horror cinema with its use of camera and cut-scenes, and represents the “procedural adaptation” of a horror film. Slender: The Arrival, on the other hand, adapts the aesthetics and conventions of certain creepypasta, Marble Hornets in particular, preferring to subvert the expectations of agency by the use of different mechanics. The conclusion of my argument will be that although classic, cinema-based horror games are far from dated and remain popular to this day, the independent scene has opened for games based on the more fan-driven aspects of the horror community, games whose mechanics reflect the new conventions of intimacy and agency which we have reflected upon in relation to texts from other media platforms.

For Weise, the procedure of adapting a genre from film to game is centered on adapting the rules. Simply put, this process centers around translating specific sub-genre conventions from one medium to the other. If one were to adapt a slasher film to a video game, for example, one would have to ensure that the added gameplay dimension of the latter
medium stayed faithful to the experience a typical slasher film protagonist suffers. As Weise explains, the rule systems of the game are “intended to replicate the behaviors one finds in (...) the source system” (241). The end result of this process is a simulation intended to evoke an experience that allows players to discover how they would act if they were placed within the familiar trappings of a well-known horror subgenre. This immersive concept can be found within most horror video games. The division that we will be considering here is how different horror games bring agency and intimacy into their game. In my opinions, the techniques used are largely determined by the genre which a given game wants to emulate. Let us consider Resident Evil HD. The original game, published in 1996, is considered by game scholars to be a seminal horror game which created the label “survival horror”. While I could just as well discuss the original game, I chose to consider the 2015 edition to illustrate a specific point. While the remastered game is presented with greatly superior software and high definition graphics, the premise itself and the gameplay aspects remain almost completely unchanged. New technology could have eliminated gameplay issues caused by the technical limitations of old gaming consoles, but these issues were deemed so intrinsic to the horror experience presented by the game that they were left in. Rather than flaws, they are rules vital to preserving a horror film experience. These aspects: the camera and the controls, as well as the game’s use of cut-scenes (unrelated to any technical issue), also form an important part of how Resident Evil HD plays with agency, and as such they will central to our discussion.

The original Resident Evil game is very well known for its visual effects, especially its camerawork. The protagonists of the game, Special Forces operatives Chris Redfield and Jill Valentine, are seen through a third-person point of view as they explore the dangerous mansion in which they are trapped. However, camera angles are fixed. Unless a cut-scene is playing, the game world is only visible from a certain, immovable angle. Moving out of the field of vision of this camera angle, for instance by walking to a different section of a room or a corridor, causes the point of view to shift to another fixed angle, changing the field of vision to the new surroundings. Originally, this technique was employed as a workaround for technical limitations. The developers did not have the technology to render a fully three-dimensional game world, so they created a series of two-dimensional images instead. Characters, enemies and objects that could be interacted with were inserted as three-dimensional models which could move among these images. The rigidity of the camera, as well as an illusion of depth created by angles and lighting, caused this mostly two-
dimensional game world to appear three-dimensional. By the time the game was remade (2002) and further remastered (2015), gaming software was perfectly capable of rendering fully three-dimensional worlds with free camera controls. Although the Resident Evil remake recreated its world in three dimensions, the fixed camera remained. The reason for this is suggested by several game scholars, who attribute the camera rules to several factors contributing to an experience of horror similar to the one derived from a film.

For one thing, the fixed camera creates a sense of restriction and confinement. Krzywinska notes that being subjected to a limited view of the game world impedes the player’s ability to orient themselves, fostering tension and a sense of claustrophobia (15). She also remarks on how it impacts the sense of agency, “reminding players that control is limited and that the gameplay is highly predetermined”. I find this a highly important part of the Resident Evil experience. Although the player is free to control their avatar, the game firmly establishes that they are not in control of the world and its horrors. The buildup of tension and the payoff of shock are being tightly regulated. For example, a certain part of the game puts the protagonist in a narrow basement corridor populated by giant spiders. The player, having encountered this type of enemy before, will likely be alerted by the telltale scuttling sound the monstrous arachnids make. Thanks to the fixed camera, however, the player is unable to see the enemy. In order to enter into combat with it, they must “brave the unknown” by proceeding to the next section (Figure I). This scenario heavily limits their agency. Based on the audio cues, they can prepare for combat, but they cannot subvert the trappings of the game by engaging the monster from a safe distance. In order to proceed, they must follow the path laid out by the game. When they enter the next section, the camera reveals that the giant spider is right in front of them, likely creating a reaction of shock and disgust. Krzywinska argues that this sense of predetermination is similar to what viewers of film experience, giving such games a cinematic feel (15). Limited perception is as such not a game-exclusive horror technique. We have seen it being employed in other media. In the novel House of Leaves, the dizzying experience of exploring the labyrinth was often translated into text by means of nonsensical, confusing page

Figure I: Camera angles hide and reveal monsters.
layouts. Similarly, the appearances of the Slender Man in *Marble Hornets* caused the recording equipment to malfunction, leading to image and audio distortion. Krzywinska observes that techniques such as these are representative of a common horror theme: supernatural forces threatening “the sphere of human agency” (13). As evidenced, this theme is visually represented across a surprising width of modern horror texts. We will see a somewhat different representation of it in Slender: The Arrival, but I will return to *Resident Evil HD* for now.

The rules of the *Resident Evil* camera have been discussed as a means for overcoming technical limitations and for enhancing a horror experience based on lack of agency. I would also like to argue that they have a different effect on how the player experiences the game. Whether or not this was intentional on the part of the developers, the fixed camera angles give an impression of watching the story unfold on surveillance cameras. The player, despite being embodied in the protagonist, is an observer, privileged with motor control over the protagonist and information about their physical health. They are not privileged, however, to partake in their expressions, emotions and desires. The player’s lack of control over the protagonist is further enforced by the game’s use of cut-scenes. The cut-scene is perhaps the most film-like tool found in video games, consisting of a scripted, animated piece of video footage in which characters (usually) act completely independently of player input. Put more simply, a cut-scene is a snippet of film within the game. Kryziwinska posits that the cut-scene plays a central role in her proposed oscillation between agency and lack of agency. When cut-scenes occur, she reasons, they take control away from the player completely, enforcing a sense that an external authority is influencing and shaping the narrative. The player is rendered helpless in the face of “an inexorable predetermined force” (16). This function is particular to horror games, an addition to the typical narrative function which a cut-scene serves. In *Resident Evil HD*, cut-scenes serve to illustrate both the shift from agency to lack of agency and the aforementioned distance between player and avatar.

I find that the agency aspect of cut-scenes comes strongly into play when the game introduces new monsters. When the player reaches certain points in the game, they will encounter new forms of enemies. This encounter is always played out in a cut-scene. Sometimes, this cut-scene is eased into the gameplay, for instance by being initiated when the player enters a room. For the most part, however, these cut-scenes clearly aim to startle the player, a technique Perron describes as common to survival horror games (2, “Signs of a Threat”). From a cinematic perspective, they achieve this by sudden camera cuts revealing a
monster, often enhanced by a sudden sting of music. What is important to note is that the player is also startled on the gameplay level. We can, for instance, refer to the first appearance of Yawn (a monstrous snake) in *Resident Evil HD*. Having solved a lengthy set of puzzles, battling zombies and mutated dogs along the way, the protagonist has obtained the key to what appears to be a nondescript, empty attic. When the player attempts to have their avatar cross this room to claim a key item resting in a corner, a cut-scene suddenly occurs. The camera cuts behind the protagonist, and Yawn abruptly bursts into view, covering most of the screen, accompanied by a startling musical stinger (Figure II). The shock experienced by the player is followed by an acute sense of lack of agency. The protagonist is, by virtue of the cut-scene, momentarily unable to take action as the monster closes in. Audiences familiar with horror films will immediately recognize the trope of a character being temporarily dazed with fear, in spite of the logical possibility of immediately running away. This is where I reach the keystone of my current argument. The savvy player, safely distanced from the game world and familiar with its premises, is unlikely to freeze in fear upon seeing a monster on the screen. Given the chance to react, they would attempt to establish a more immediately advantageous position for themselves. Thanks to the cut-scene, however, they are unable to do so. The sense that monstrous presences can rob humans of agency must be enforced by the game mechanics. The game that intends to simulate the typical horror film must ensure that the player does not subvert horror film rules. As such, the game momentarily removes the agency that would allow the players to assume any other role than that of the typical horror protagonist, portraying them as stunned by revulsion at the appearance of the monstrous and merely inviting the player to sympathize. This is a prime example of the agency/lack of agency oscillation that makes *Resident Evil HD* a horror game. When the player regains control again, Yawn is in position to strike, and the player must scramble to fight or evade the beast in order to progress.

While *Resident Evil HD* plays with agency, it arguably makes very little use of intimacy. The use of cut-scenes, taking control away from the player, also increases the sense of distance enforced by the fixed, third-person camera. The cut-scenes that further the...
narrative remind us that we have no influence over the protagonist’s emotions, motivations and dialogue. Some of these aspects, like the protagonist’s subdued emotional states, are easier to explain than others. After all, as Perron remarks, survival horror games are meant to scare the player, not the avatar (7). The fact remains, however, that the clearly defined, constantly observable protagonists offer little room for players to project upon. The game in no way fosters a sense that the player is being bodily involved with the game world. This is natural, given that it is largely based on the rules of horror film, a media that does not generally concern itself with audience participation. As Perron reminds us, horror games like Resident Evil HD are vicarious experiences. Someone else is always doing the suffering, and we can suffer vicariously along with them by considering them as extended bodies (7). We only merge with our avatar on the action level (8). The perceptive and emotive levels are kept separate. At least, this is the case in the typical survival horror game. For the purposes of this discussion, I will now proceed to compare and contrast Resident Evil HD with a newer horror game model. What I will hopefully be able to show is that this other type of horror games presents us with game experiences that experiment with fear through intimacy. They play with agency in a different manner, and are designed to establish a much shorter narrative distance between player and protagonist. In order to do so, horror games like Slender: The Arrival must draw on a newer subgenre of horror that places greater emphasis on player intimacy: creepypasta.

Before we look at Slender in detail, I would like to briefly reiterate a few of the basic conventions of creepypasta, as we discussed them. As mentioned, a horror game that can be defined as a procedural adaptation seeks to give players an experience akin to that of a protagonist typical of a certain subgenre. Resident Evil HD based itself on horror films, and as such this simulation makes use of many classic techniques found in horror cinema: detailed environments, recognizable protagonists, strictly defined camera rules, jump scares and cut-scenes which give the narrative a deterministic feel. All of these base themselves on basic horror film appeals: the vicarious thrill, and to a lesser extent, the power fantasy. Agency is firmly restricted, and intimacy is usually not an important factor. Creepypasta, by contrast, is specifically written to create intimacy. The protagonists are nondescript and easily projected upon. The settings are undefined, yet recognizable locations, created to engender a sense of familiarity in the reader. Narratives are typically short, and frequently involve the use of “real world”-aesthetics (diaries, journals, news broadcasts, video logs etc.), unfolding on familiar premises until the supernatural is invoked. All of these rules are incorporated for the purpose
of shortening the distance between reader and text. The reader should feel as if what transpires within the story could happen to anyone, even themselves. We should also note that creepypasta frequently calls the idea of agency into question. Slender Man-focused narratives in particular stress the risks of curiosity; the inherent danger of delving into the unknown. In creepypasta, protagonists are usually free to act until they use that freedom to invoke powers beyond their understanding. Typically, the protagonists will lose their agency in the face of the supernatural and express regret at the decisions they made. Meanwhile, readers are left pondering whether or not they may have invoked supernatural powers themselves, by participating in the story.

This set of rules leaves us with certain expectations to a game designed to evoke a typical creepypasta experience. We expect minimal setup, acute intimacy, recognizable aesthetics, and most importantly, supernatural happenings that transpire due to our own agency. *Slender: The Arrival* proved itself to be a prime example of the kind of adaptation I envisioned based on my previous creepypasta research. The protagonist, Lauren, is undefined beyond her name, her gender, and her general motivation to find her friend Kate. Given that the entire game is presented from a first-person point of view, Lauren is never seen. Beyond the noise of her nervous or exhausted breathing, she never utters a single sound throughout the game. In fact, she only expresses herself on a few occasions, when text prompts representing her thoughts provide minor exposition. For the purposes of gameplay, Lauren is a blank slate meant for the player to project themselves onto. Perron remarked on the effectiveness of an extended body viewed from the third person: compared with first-person games, players would experience a heightened sense of horror upon actually seeing their avatar get maimed and slaughtered (132-133, “The Survival Horror”). His theory supports movie-adapted horror games like *Resident Evil* and *NightCry*. *Slender*, as an adaptation of creepypasta, seems to embrace a different approach. In order to make the sense of player intimacy as acute as possible, the game attempts to remove the mediating link between player and text. Players are meant to imagine themselves as embodied by the nondescript protagonist, linking the suffering she undergoes directly to them. This is most likely why Lauren’s responses to the horrors she encounters are practically nonexistent; it is the player who is supposed to respond. We noted Perron considering non-responsive protagonists an affect-enhancing technique when we discussed *Resident Evil*. He refers to it, however, in the context of video games as vicarious experiences that appeal to sympathy (7, “Signs of a Threat”). I consider *Slender* an example that can be used to take this theory a bit further. A
non-responsive protagonist provides a vicarious experience, making us suffer through sympathy. What, then, does Lauren, a protagonist with virtually no expression within the game world, provide? She provides an opportunity for the player to insert themselves much more firmly into the narrative. Horror games have always implicitly targeted their scares at the player. *Slender* belongs to a newer genre of games that fairly explicitly target their scares at the player. The illusion of distance is being meticulously worn down. With the proper suspension of disbelief, the player will feel vulnerable, and games are being developed with this specific intent. Considering that the process of creating the Slender Man involved Internet users building the character on what scared them, I find this appeal a logical part of *Slender*. The success of the game could herald a certain prominence for intimacy-focused horror games.

The sense of intimacy fostered by *Slender* also owes much to its aesthetics. As mentioned, the entirety of the game is presented from a first-person point of view. Clearly inspired by *Marble Hornets*, it mimics the aesthetics of being presented through recording technology. We mostly see the narrative unfold through the display of Lauren’s video camera (Figure III). There are two sequences that are presented as the contents of two found VHS tapes, but the only “real” exception is a flashback sequence. Other pieces of the narrative are mostly contained in small chunks of text that represent the past: notes, emails, journal entries and so on. The forms should be easily recognizable to players, and are, as explained by Taylor, an integral component found in survival horror games (53). The trappings of the game are generic, and similar to those found in Mable Hornets: abandoned buildings and dark woods figure heavily. The concept of the camera, however, is perhaps the most important aesthetic element for our discussion. As the player’s avatar is almost always in possession of this camera, the game utilizes free camera control, allowing them to explore the world on their own terms. This is an important factor when it comes to both agency and intimacy, as full control over a first person-viewpoint will enhance the experience of being embodied as the protagonist of the game. Krzywinska remarks that this camera technique marks a departure
from how horror films used to create tension through picture editing (15). Indeed, she states that it creates a greater sense of proximity to the horrors of the game, “heightening the sense of contact” (16). She ties it to the horror game Undying (EA: 2001), explaining how the free camera encourages curiosity, emphasizing the investigative nature of the game. This argument can easily be applied to Slender as well. The first-person point of view seems optimal for horror games in which you must actively search for clues in the darkness, all the while looking over your shoulder.

However, this does not mean that Slender eschews the horror technique of restricted perception. Vision is as continually impeded as in Resident Evil, but befitting the medium Slender bases itself on, the techniques used to achieve this effect are different. Of course, darkness and restricted space feature prominently. The flashlight, with its small cone of light and limited batteries, is a constant reminder of your limited ability to perceive within the game world, and heightens alertness and tension. Habel and Kooyman also refer to lighting as a powerful agency mechanism, reminding us that restricted vision “severely curtails” the player’s sense of control over the gameworld (9). The presence of the Slender Man, however, is felt through the debilitating influence he has over recording equipment, a convention codified by Marble Hornets. Static noise drowns out all other sound, and the video camera picture becomes discolored, distorted and unclear (Figure IV). Running away from the Slender Man restores the picture; failure to do so results in a “game over”. This in-game warning system also serves to heighten tension, and provides a contrast to games like Resident Evil, which place less emphasis on warnings and only sometimes provide subtle, audible clues to a monster’s presence. It is an interesting fact that these warnings only impact the player’s perception of the world. In contrast to Marble Hornets, this iteration of Slender Man does not cause humans to experience notable physical discomfort by virtue of his presence. He does cause fear, recognizable by Lauren’s suddenly audible breathing, but no symptoms of physical illness. It is the recording equipment, the medium through which the player experiences the game world, which “breaks down” in the face of the supernatural. When the

Figure IV: Visual distortion on camera (left) and in flashback (right).
Slender Man makes his presence known in the aforementioned flashback scenes (which is not portrayed through the use of recording equipment), the world grows dark and misty, but the vision of the avatar is not notably disturbed. The dark ribbons that weave out of the forest to claim the protagonist of the flashback may be hallucinations, but otherwise his response is only marked by his screams of fear. The video and audio distortions that take place during the bulk of the game are only a technique for creating anticipation, and a signal for the player to flee. They do not play heavily into intimacy or agency.

Once again, the role of player agency within the game is best explained by the game’s use of cut-scenes, or in this instance, complete lack of cut-scenes. In fact, the game only takes control away from the player when it halts completely in order to load new areas of the game world. The player is always free to react in the face of danger, and as mentioned, succeeding at the goals set by the game sometimes depends on their ability to act on their instinct to flee. Slender chooses to challenge agency in a different way. Rather than taking agency away from the player, it chooses to make that agency inconsequential. This sense of meaningless agency is experienced on two levels: the gameplay level and the narrative level. On the gameplay level, agency appears limited rather than nonexistent. When the Slender Man is present in-game, he does restrict a certain action: the ability to pause the game. Similarly to the camera distortions, this particular ability of his only affects the player. Under the guidance of the player, Lauren can run away and escape the monster for the time being. The player, however, is temporarily trapped within the narrative. They lose the power to “opt out” inherent to almost all fiction: The ability to close the book, or stop the film, or simply to turn away. The Slender Man breaks the fourth wall in order to restrict what the player can do on a meta-textual level. They must play or fail. In addition to the immersive power of this technique, we also see how it echoes the concept of player responsibility. The player is ultimately the person making the choice to experience the game, and the game explicitly punishes the player for this “mistake”. We can draw parallels to creepypasta like “Smile.jpg” here, which also play with the idea of danger associated with reading a text. This, I would argue, is an interesting take on intimacy as well as agency. This unorthodox tactic for making the audiences feel vulnerable might see more use in the future, if the premise of creepypasta-based games remains viable on the independent market.

Another instance of limited player agency in-game that feels more like a case of meaningless agency appears at the end of the second “chapter” of the game. Having collected sheets of paper that trace Kate’s spiral into madness, Lauren is suddenly chased down by the
Slender Man. This time, he allows no escape. No matter where the player directs Lauren, she will find herself rapidly teleported between different locations; much like the fate Tim suffers in “Entry #83” of Marble Hornets. At this point, the player begins to realize that they cannot really influence the outcome of the game. This plays into the narrative level of Slender, where predetermination rules from the start. We can refer to several creepypasta stories where agency, or “free will”, boils down to a single choice: whether or not to investigate. As is to be expected in narratives falling into this genre, curiosity usually goads protagonists into making the “wrong” choice: they always elect to investigate the unknown, sometimes out of pure curiosity, sometimes because something is at stake for them. In doing so, they fall prey to supernatural forces which take control of their lives. At this point, agency has disappeared. When Jay starts looking into the mystery of the Slender Man in Marble Hornets, he invites the villain into his own life and becomes trapped in a sequence of events he cannot really escape from. As soon as the player of Slender guides Lauren into the woods to search for her friend Kate, she cannot turn back. Players familiar with the rules of creepypasta will know this, and they will also know that the choice to investigate was necessary in order to proceed with the narrative of the game. We see that players of Slender have no influence over the narrative at all. The sense of agency is an illusion that is gradually unraveled as the game reveals that Lauren is the last in a chain of people whose curiosity led them down the same path as she is treading. This fosters a sense of helplessness; that the events transpiring are predetermined. We should recall Murray’s definition of agency: “the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions” (126). Having full control of an in-game avatar does not constitute a great degree of player agency when no choice the player makes can alter the outcome of the game in any way. Lauren will fall prey to the Slender Man and his accomplices. Whether this happens sooner or later only really affects the player’s experience of the game.

Having discussed both of the games, I am left with the impression that while games such as Slender offer a greater degree of agency gameplay-wise, Resident Evil offers a greater degree of control over the narrative. In the latter game, something is at stake for the player. The set goal is to survive and ultimately defeat the horror. Dying is synonymous with the failure to complete the game and must be avoided. Moreover, the player can make choices which impact the game’s ending. Jill (or Chris) can save up to two of their colleagues from the horrors of the Spencer Mansion, provided that they make the correct choices. In completing the game, they defeat the villain’s biological superweapon and blow his research
facility sky-high. The player can rest easy, satisfied that they have overcome unfair odds and led their avatar to victory, which Rouse refers to as a meaningful experience which no other media can provide (20). *Slender*, however, seemingly turns its back on this video game convention. The player can use their agency to experience the game to its end, but it makes no difference. If Lauren fails along the way, she succumbs to the Slender Man. If she makes it to the end and finds Kate as well as a missing child, now associates to the bogeyman, she still ultimately succumbs to the villain. Within the context of the game, agency exists, but it has no value. In the context of the creepypasta genre, however, *Slender* is a simulation of the dangers of agency. By electing to play the game, the player willingly invokes supernatural forces and surrenders their agency to them. The narrative of *Slender* is cluttered with notes written by people who regret how they used their own agency to delve into the forbidden. Each of them is determined to end the cycle with their own death. However, as proved by our discussions on *House of Leaves* and on the subgenre which *Slender* is based on, the cycle of repetition is doomed to continue as long as new audience members immerse themselves in and spread the text. The horror theme in which readers use their agency to perpetuate evil has displayed a surprisingly widespread use, across several works and several media platforms. As we shall now move on to discuss, it has even spread to non-horror games.

### 3.4 The Hunt for Horror and Dangerous Agency

Based on everything we have discussed so far, I would argue that a fairly common theme in horror fiction over the last fifteen years has been that horrific experiences usually arise from the efforts of readers to find them. Horror texts knowingly include many blank spaces onto which the reader can project themselves and their own fears. As such, it should come as no surprise that writers frequently opt to apply horrific elements to texts that typically contain little or no horror. This “hunt for horror” can take place within the texts themselves, or from a more academic point of view. The former of these two cases can be observed in creepypasta stories. Tales of usually innocent video game disks or cartridges being manipulated by evil forces has been used to the point of it becoming a cliché. Take, for instance, “BEN Drowned”, a story in which the protagonist buys a used cartridge of the family-friendly adventure game *The Legend of Zelda: Majoras Mask*, only to discover that the cartridge is haunted by the tormented spirit of a murdered child. From an academic point of view, scholars have also begun to consider how themes of horror can be applied to non-horror games. In a 2015
conference paper, Ashley Brown and Björn Marklund discuss the multiple ways in which horror can be conveyed by applying the Freudian and Heideggerian notions of the uncanny to the children’s game Animal Crossing: New Leaf (Nintendo, 2012). While they mostly discuss horrific situations that inadvertently arise from the inherent technical limitations of video games, rather than horrific situations explicitly placed in non-horror games, these two scholars make a valid point: horror can appear in many forms, and it largely shows based on how we choose to interact with games (2). As we shall now discuss, it seems that certain game developers have used this ‘hunt for horror’ to their advantage. This hypothesis finds proof in the 2015 game Undertale.

Undertale, developed by a small group of people led by Toby Fox and funded through a successful Kickstarter campaign, was released on Steam 15 September 2015. By genre it is a role-playing game. The relatively simple plot follows the journey of a human child that falls into an underworld populated by exiled monsters, and the colorful characters it encounters along the way back to the surface. The game garnered wide acclaim for how the narrative and characters were written, and how it challenged typical gameplay mechanics as well as player agency. Undertale is not a horror game. It contains elements of horror within the narrative, but these are few and far between, not significantly impacting the overall feel of the game. I will therefore not discuss the ways in which it challenges agency and player investment, although these elements are similar to some we have found in other games. There is a far-more horror oriented aspect of Undertale, and it is of much greater interest to us because it was discovered solely due to the player’s ability to interact with the game outside of the game world. This aspect takes the shape of a hidden game character known as Dr. W.D Gaster. Exactly who was the first to discover the existence of this character is unknown, but information about him spread rapidly through the Internet, and today it is common knowledge among players.

If the player does not tamper with the game as described below, Gaster is only referred to once within the game, by means of a cryptic warning urging the player to “beware of the man that speaks in hands”. No other character acknowledges his existence. The player has to unearth the mystery on their own, perhaps inadvertently. One of the features of Steam is that the data files of games downloaded through it are stored on the user’s computer rather than on a disk. Users can as such gain access to many of the system files and game assets, which they sometimes do to create hacks and fan material based on the original game. In the case of Undertale, audiences discovered assets within the game files that had not been used in the
game itself: character sprites, rooms, pieces of music and so on. It was eventually discovered that these elements could be re-inserted into the game by opening the data file containing a player’s saved game and changing a certain value within it. Doing this, and subsequently encountering the missing elements within the game, gradually pieces together a micror-narrative. Strange creatures that can be reinserted explain that W.D Gaster was a brilliant scientist, until a failed experiment scattered his essence far and wide (Figure V). This apparently caused the rest of the game world to forget that he ever existed, with a few exceptions. The game assets that can be programmed back in are apparently fragments of Gaster, hidden “across time and space” (metaphorically, within the game files). These assets convey a theme of horror, with deformed characters, eerie pieces of music and coded journal entries that tell the story of a character who succumbed to darkness due to his curiosity.

What does the hidden story of Gaster tell us? It certainly proves that Toby Fox, like Danielewski before him, knew his audience well when it came to how it would respond to his work. Brown and Marklund observe that fan communities will often create fan fiction based on unintentional horror factors in otherwise horror-free games (2). For example, much of the horror in the “BEN Drowned” creepypasta is conveyed through an object in the Majoras Mask game world which players found to be surprisingly disturbing. There is also an established subculture for modifying the content of Steam games, with unofficial mods even being available through the Steam Store. Fox most likely knew that players would hunt through the files of his game, searching for material which could be modified or used in fan works. He may also have been aware of the propensity for creating horror fan fiction on the basis non-horror games, and inserted a horror narrative for them to find as a result. In addition, we could note that one of the re-inserted characters remarks that it is “rude to speak about someone who’s listening”, implying that Gaster is omnipresent within the game world, always capable of listening. This could also be read as a remark from Fox directed towards fans, reiterating that horror elements will always appear to those who hunt for them. In any case, the inclusion of Gaster speaks volumes for the remarkable interaction between writers and the community of readers which they come from.

Figure V: Re-introduced characters speak of Gaster.
that takes place in contemporary fiction. Fox was able to add a layer of narrative to his game that could only be accessed by modifying game files, which is not an activity gamers typically indulge in. After all, it carries a certain risk of making the game unplayable. The fact that Fox was aware that people would find Gaster proves his intimate familiarity with the gaming community. No other game has yet included such an unorthodox, interactivity-dependent narrative, but *Undertale* might well inspire other, independently developed games to do likewise. We can be fairly certain that this convention, if it grows in popularity, will stay with the community-driven indie scene. Larger game developers need to protect their programming more thoroughly and rarely allow for such easy tampering with their game files. As for our discussion, we have found yet more proof that the dynamics of fan communities, where the line between reader and writer blurs significantly, can produce uniquely interactive experiences that may set new trends that are facilitated only by the rich possibilities for sharing information that the Internet provides.

Finally, the process of discovering Gaster within *Undertale* allows us to consider how reader agency applies to horror games outside of the game. In the chapters concerning *House of Leaves* and the creepypasta subgenre, we discussed how readers had the power to extend the monstrous elements contained by the narrative to other people by means of the community, creating a self-perpetuating vicious cycle that constitutes a new layer of horror in fiction. On this basis, it could be argued that reader agency as a potentially dangerous power. While *Undertale* adds to this horror theme in general, it does so in a slightly different fashion. It takes the creepypasta-based notion of dangerous curiosity and applies it on a more meta-textual level. Re-introducing the horrific fragments that tell Gaster’s story into the game is, to put it simply, an action which can in no way be attributed to any other force than player agency. One could argue that to the inhabitants of the game world, the player has become the unseen force which invades their world. This plays nicely into an overarching theme of responsibility which makes up a large part of *Undertale*: the ability to save the game, for example, is presented in-game as a god-like power to reset time and rewrite reality, causing characters to reflect on what constitutes responsible use of such a power. Thanks to a 2016 patch of the game, the fragments of Gaster can now be encountered randomly in-game without tampering with the files, which could be interpreted as the character re-establishing a presence within the game thanks to the continuing efforts of players to restore him. Is horror fiction really reaching the point where the texts themselves ask the readers whether or not reading them is a responsible use of reader agency? Many pieces of horror fiction certainly
stress the dangers of exploring the unknown, and they always emphasize that other people will suffer for each reader’s inquisitiveness. Brown and Marklund make a fair point in their conclusion: some readings of horror themes, such as their reading of a children’s game, must be read with “a certain sobriety” (15). Rather than a collection of educational guilt-trips, I consider the ways that new horror texts have challenged reader agency a new tactic for frightening the audience. The idea of monstrous elements passing through the fourth wall thanks to reader interaction is certainly fascinating, and an idea that I consider an effective tool for creating scares on a horror scene where the community has grown so vitally important.

3.5 Conclusion

We have seen that fans and critics alike (roles that are not mutually exclusive in the context of this thesis) search for horror even where there is no evident horror to be found, both in the interpretive and the literal sense. Even more interestingly, game developers have responded to this demand by including hidden elements of horror, as we saw in Undertale. After three chapters examining various media that are used as platforms for horror texts and the audiences that partake in them in many different ways, I will conclude that the reader and the reader community are singularly important characters on the contemporary horror scene, at least when it comes to independently produced and fan-made horror. Creepypasta, indie games and an unorthodox novel tell the same tale. A certain body of horror texts appeals directly to these readers in order to create a frightening experience for them. They imply that the world of the narrative invades the world of the reader through the liminal space which the reader creates in engaging with them. They also challenge reader agency, making readers question what power they really possess in engaging with the text, as well as whether or not that agency really matters. We have also seen what the readers contribute to the texts in return, interpretation, feedback, circulation, monetary support, and even components to be used in the text or forming a text, as in the case of the Slender Man. Horror fans assume the role of reader, writer and critic at the same time, all in the pursuit of making horror stories that will provide them with frightening experiences in the future.

When writing this chapter, I discovered that the process of adapting horror texts between media allows for a surprising degree of creativity, producing different texts which can still provide a remarkably similar experience. I further discovered that the shortened
distance between reader and writer also takes the shape of writers being more open for reader input in order to produce more effective texts in the future, whether that input is feedback, money or game components. The inclusion of Gaster in *Undertale* appears to me as a testament to the role of communication technology within genre negotiations today. I find it inconceivable that Toby Fox would include such an idea without knowing that the game community would discover it. With all of this in mind, there is really only one major question left for this thesis to ask: Can we use the observations we have made so far to guess at how the horror genre might develop in the near future?
4 The End?

Considering this thesis as a whole, I have noticed that the texts I have discussed frequently lack a “happy” ending. There are a plenty of notable horror texts in which the monstrous elements are defeated at the end, restoring order to society, even in relatively more recent trends such as the slasher film school. The contemporary horror texts which this paper has examined, however, frequently resist such tidy endings. In fact, considered from the perspective of reader response-theory, these stories do not “end” at all. Of course, narratives may end. Navidson is rescued from the labyrinth and reconciles with his family. Zampanò dies. Johnny Truant finds a measure of peace in the completion of his “reading”, Tim of Marble Hornets tries to start a new life; the human child in Undertale reaches the surface, and so on. For the reader, the viewer, the player, however, the story does not end.

The labyrinth of House of Leaves, the monstrous meme called Smile.dog, and the Slender Man were created to inhabit different media and possess very different characteristics. They do, however, have two things in common which I have argued as important throughout this thesis: a sense of thought-provoking mystery and the ability to ‘infect’ those who engage with them, taking control of their lives. All of them can be interpreted as the horrors we face in the age of communication. Gothic monsters and Victorian ghosts warned against transgressing the laws set by Nature, God, society and the past. “Weird” and psychological horror feared that the human mind could collapse or even become monstrous itself with the proper stimulation. What we see in certain spheres of contemporary horror, however, is a fear of vulnerability, a fear that lurks in the shadow of our drive to explore and understand. Horror stories are born from the voice in our heads that asks us to ponder the consequences of exploring the unknown. Reader-response theory, as well as the contributions of scholars like Line Henriksen, offers us a perspective from which we can understand this apprehension. What makes contemporary readers afraid when they read horror texts could well be the very encounter that takes place through the act of engaging with them.

The encounter between reader and text, user and technology, reader and writer, man and monster, has been the centerpiece of this paper, along with a consideration of the liminal spaces in which all of these encounters take place. All of the horror texts which we have discussed make distinct efforts to use these encounters for two purposes: fostering intimacy and challenging agency. Through conventions of aesthetics, narrative, and gameplay, they
endeavor to pull the reader into their world, or, in a more chilling twist, to project their world onto the world of the reader. They empower readers by enabling them to make choices within their narratives, provoking them into questioning an exploring, before challenging their agency by taking back control of the narrative, rendering choice-making meaningless and reminding readers that they are as vulnerable as the protagonists they project themselves upon or embody themselves in. Revealing that the reader recreates their monsters within themselves, they taunt and dare them to share their monstrous “readings” with others, all too happy to prove that not doing so makes no difference—there will always be other readers. If the texts succeed in creating their intended experiences, readers will be left feeling possessed, invaded, horrified by the implication that their encounter has invited the creatures into their own world.

Of course, the stories are still ultimately fictional, no matter how well they emulate the real world and toy with the fourth wall. All of the horror conventions and themes which I have repeatedly addressed throughout this thesis are only tools for creating a specific kind of emotional affect. When the individual reading experience ends, the community enters the scene, aided at every turn by the possibilities offered by the Internet. Fans who question texts come together to collectively interpret them, creating a shared “reading” that sets guidelines for further engagement with the texts. Fans who approve of texts voice their approval, sometimes directly to the authors. Fans who wish to see the authors improve their texts in some way can also address them directly in many cases. Discussions like this shape the genre by mediating what should and should not be done to create an effective horror text. In some cases, like with the Slender Man, they can even create new iterations of horror. On a broader scale, they can directly influence the creation of new horror texts through critical and financial contributions. Writers who take part in reader communities use their understanding of these communities to create texts that appeal more directly to them. In all of these interactions, reader, writer and critic perpetuate horror beyond the texts, ensuring that the genre will evolve through constantly engaging with it. This is why I propose that in order to understand how contemporary horror operates, we must understand how fans operate as much as how texts operate. My proposed answer lies in understanding the continuing encounter between all of these factors. I will once again use Henriksen’s definition to underline the fluid nature of what this thesis has discussed. Horror stories do not end. The contemporary horror genre is not definable by a single, rigid understanding. Its lines will always be blurring, ensuring that it always becomes, and will likely continue to do so in the future.
4.1 Questions for Further Research

A few questions and research topics occurred to me in the process of writing this thesis that were beyond the scope of this project. As a final note, I will outline them in brief, perhaps inspiring future researchers of horror to consider them.

Examining horror fan communities more thoroughly and more directly, perhaps by means of quantitative case studies, will of course be the most effective way of understanding whether the claims put forth by this thesis holds good in practice. Do readers of creepypasta and *House of Leaves* experience a sense of their world being threatened? Do gamers who paid to have themselves inserted into crowdfunded games in some fashion report that it changed their experience of the game? To what degree are writers of online horror influenced by the feedback their fans provide? A more in-depth overview of actual reader responses will provide a much greater understanding of the dynamics of fan communities than the rather brief discussion this paper has offered. We must also keep considering what the dynamics of these communities imply for different aspects of horror. For example, considering a more recent development, does the archiving and acknowledging of creepypasta stories and authors detract from the potential horror of the genre by robbing it of its elements of circulation and anonymity?

Finally, there is the question of new technology and how it will influence horror texts. Horror games have already begun experimenting with virtual-reality technology such as the Oculus Rift, a pair of goggles which allow players to embody themselves fully in the first person view by connecting head movement with camera movement within the game. How will these new aesthetics change the experience of horror, and will the themes discussed by this thesis be translatable into these new innovations within media? We should always be wary of innovations in other media as well. *House of Leaves* and creepypasta stories prove that even purely textual forms can still find new ways to present their content. Will future innovations in horror aesthetics be translations of existing media, and if so, how will our understanding of adaptation and translation need to change? And finally, do the constant innovations within communications technology make us more or less vulnerable to encounters with monsters?

Only further scholarly encounters with horror, like this thesis has strived to be, will answer these questions.
Works Cited


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Endnotes

1 Only 200 of these are readily available, however. Researching the full expanse of the message board requires intuitive and extensive use of the forum’s search function.

2 I could mention threads such as one discussing Kevin Carter and the mention of “buttons” (KevinCarter_Nomdeguerre, 2002), one concerning the strange quotation of Diane Cook at page 526 (Nackelbend and Zips, 2002) and one wondering why Pelafina referenced Sibyl of Cumae (Jessica Schuler: 2002).

3 Ocean metaphors (as well as references to outer space, another representation of unexplored frontiers) are very common in discussions on cyberspace, as mentioned by Jeffery Sconce in his book, Haunted Media (Sconce 2000, 64). Line Henriksen later notes how many web-related terms share names with water-related terms: “streaming’, ‘surfing’, ‘pirating’” etc. (Henriksen 415, “Here be Monsters”)

4 On repeated playthroughs of the game, players who remember the position of the spider can kill it off-screen by aiming properly. Although some of the scare element is lost by doing this, it is replaced by a sense satisfaction or pride, emotions that Rouse has described as paramount to the experience of the typical video game (20). Compare this to Hill’s concept of connoisseurship.