



Online Unease Affordances on Tumblr – Creating Compelling Internet Narratives

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ABSTRACT

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The age of the internet has spawned a unique platform for hosting various creative projects in a way that traditional methods cannot achieve. It has been especially popular as a medium for creations utilizing the themes of unease and horror, ranging from written content like creepypasta to extravagant alternate reality games. This has created a wide community of artists, writers, and editors dedicated to creating and analysing unfiction pieces, these being fictional media presented as real events, ranging from simple written stories to extravagant cinematic experiences.

As the realm of unfiction is sparsely documented and researched in professional settings, the objective of this thesis was to explore unfiction and the realm of online unease in a general sense and determine what makes them compelling forms of storytelling. Various pieces of unfiction were studied and analysed along with websites to pinpoint ways in which they created a sense of discomfort and even fear through a clever use of aesthetics, and the kinds of narrative elements they used to create compelling and captivating stories and unfiction experiences.

The results of these studies were used to create a blog and an accompanying website hosting a piece of unfiction for demonstration purposes. The project was initially published on the social media website Tumblr, which prompted further analysis to the site's suitability as a host for unfiction projects. The creation process, challenges, and results of this project were discussed.

Key words: unfiction, alternate reality games, online unease, webseries, compelling, horror stories, tumblr

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ABBREVIATIONS AND TERMS

analogue horror	an aesthetic used especially in visual horror media to artificially date it back to the era of analogue media, such as VHS tapes, cassette tapes, and CRT televisions
ARG	acronym for Alternate Reality Game; a narrative involving audience participation as a means to tell a story
creepypasta	typically short internet horror stories; coined from “creepy” and “copypasta”, copypasta referring to short stories of a few paragraphs which were passed around on forums by copying and pasting them
hermeneutic code	referring to plot elements that raise questions about the events of the story, such as who the murderer in a detective story is
SCP	acronym of Special Containment Procedures; referring to fictional anomalies which must be contained with specific requirements to ensure they are safely contained. Anomalous or supernatural items and entities that undermine the natural laws that the people of the world implicitly trust in, and are to be kept away from the eyes of the public.
unfiction	catch-all term for media which although fictional is presented as a real event that has taken or is currently taking place

1 INTRODUCTION

As many creative works and genres started to take advantage of the opportunities and connectivity the internet offers, so did works of horror. The history of horror, creepiness, and unease on the web has been sparsely documented, but the earliest archived works were often comparable to urban legends passed around through word-of-mouth. The evolution of online spaces, computer hardware, and technology in general presented new and unique ways of creating disturbing and scary works that could not exist in the same form outside of the internet, whether this involves heavy, world-wide audience participation or commercially available video-editing software. Widespread communities have gathered around various forms of online unease, and this community participation has further both splintered the genre into various subgenres such as Alternate Reality Games which thrive on audience participation (ARGNet n.d.), and analogue horror which is used to describe web projects drawing their aesthetic inspiration from various forms of analogue media, commonly VHS tapes and television broadcasts from the 1980s and 1990s (Maison 2022). There are even creations based on singular monsters, one of the best-known ones being Slender Man, a character that originated from the internet forum Something Awful and evolved into an internet urban legend as people kept elaborating on the creature's surrounding lore (Dewey 2016).

The aim of this thesis is to study the phenomenon of online unease in its various forms to determine aspects that make it a compelling form of storytelling and use the gained knowledge to create a website experience with a narrative that blends the lines between fiction and reality, similar to many works of unfiction.

2 ONLINE HORROR

2.1 Overview

Horror content has existed on the internet from very early on, though documentation of its origins tends to be sparse. One of the earliest well-documented examples of horror in online spaces is the promotional website of *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick, Sánchez), a found-footage styled film from 1999. The site featured additional lore, supplementary material, and other similar digital props that served to enhance the movie's insistence on being a documentary of real events. This insistence on reality is a common theme with all horror content in general, but it is especially amplified in the context of internet horror, where many projects play into the mantra of *This Is Not A Game*, amounting to their creators effectively playing play-pretend on the internet as a means to tell a story (Night Mind n.d). Especially in the case of Alternate Reality Games, a form of storytelling involving heavy audience participation, this form of storytelling is reminiscent of live action roleplaying, where participants are behaving in-character to play out the events of their chosen story (Andracor n.d).

2.2 Alternate Reality Games

Alternate reality games or ARGs for short are a genre of storytelling where the story unfolds over time and relies on audience participation. The participants are often required to solve puzzles and connect various clues to piece together a cohesive narrative. It's not uncommon for this participation to alter the course of the story as well, leaving the outcome and conclusion in the participants' hands. Alternate Reality Games utilize elements of mystery and horror to appear as real-life events, despite their subject materials tending to feature many fantastical and obviously fictional elements (ARGnet n.d.; TV Tropes n.d.).

The origins of ARGs can be alluded to the movie *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (Spielberg, 2001), which used the first modern instance of an ARG in its marketing. This ARG came to be known as *The Beast*, around which a community known as

“The Cloudmakers” was born. For a brief period of time the act of creating an ARG was known as “beasting,” though the term wouldn’t stand the test of time. These words and other terminology for ARGs were discussed and coined on the forums of a website known as UnFiction. Though the forums have since gone down the website still remains, and posts discussing the terminology are still hosted on it. (Night Mind n.d)

The term ARG has been used liberally for various unfiction projects over the years, whether the definition applied to them or not. This can be alluded to unfiction being a fairly recently adopted term that hasn’t had the time to spread to mainstream consciousness, and the form of storytelling being niche in on itself. Additionally, ARGs and other unfiction projects are often created by independent creators and hobbyists who aren’t seeking to profit off them, rather than huge media platforms or corporations. As such these projects are not marketed to large audiences, limiting the amount of people who know and are interested in them.

2.3 Unfiction

Cryptic and mysterious content on the internet often comes in various forms depending on the chosen medium and the creator’s goals with their storytelling. One of the best-known genres of this is creepypasta, a term coined for short internet horror stories from “creepy” and “copypasta”, alluding to its origins as texts that were originally passed around on websites and message boards due to their short length (Creepypasta n.d.). A newer entry to the scene of horror creations is analogue horror, which has become widely popular in recent years and typically features visuals dating the footage back to the era of analogue media, particularly that of analogue television. Especially video creations often share similarities with content from the found footage genre, but where the latter often features a distinct cast of characters analogue horror more often resembles television broadcasts, documentaries, or even educational video tapes. (TV Tropes n.d.)

Many of these storytelling forms have distinctly overlapping themes, the primary one being their insistence on not being merely games or stories, but actual events that have taken or are currently taking place. The coined catch-all term for these

web-based projects that insist on being real is unfiction, originating from the now-defunct forums and still-existing website of the same name. Night Mind (2020) describes unfiction as a form of convention-defying storytelling which relies heavily on "the element of insisting in the reality of what is clearly not real." Unfiction itself can be further separated into alternate reality games, where actively participating in the story is a requirement for fully understanding the narrative, and unfiction experiences where such participation is either not present (immersive narrative) or is not required (interactive project) for the narrative to make sense. Catastrophe Crow (2020), for example, was entirely an ARG, where the participants had to piece together clues telling a story of an unreleased video game and its creator mostly from individual videos posted on YouTube across various channels, and later by emailing the creator of the game directly. In order to understand the story, the viewer has to solve often rather cryptic puzzles spread across various gameplay videos, a task that became much easier when done together with a community of other players. Meanwhile a YouTube video series like Mandela Catalogue (2021) would be classified as an unfiction experience, and more precisely an immersive narrative. The story is presented through videos uploaded on YouTube, organised to playlists on the creator's channel, and no external material is needed for the viewer to understand the story. The narrative presents every relevant piece of information and involves no puzzle-solving or widespread community participation to be completed.

Unfiction sets itself apart from more traditional forms of storytelling by breaking common rules seen in narrative theory, most commonly the hermeneutic code. The hermeneutic code refers to plot elements that raise questions about the events of the story, such as who the murderer in a detective story is (Felluga 2011). While most narratives aim to answer the mysteries they present at some point in the story, it is not uncommon for works of unfiction to deliberately omit or obscure these pieces of information, leave the conclusion of the story open, or only vaguely hint at answers. This is often done in an effort to create mysteries and puzzles for the viewer to solve in the case of ARGs, or to otherwise create a sense of realism to the story, as perfectly sensible and flawless narratives more often than not only exist within the realm of fiction; reality has a tendency to be confusing, nonsensical, and messy. Diminish (2020) is an unfiction video series

about a particularly aggravating platformer game that was created by the uploader's deceased sister. The uploader is not good at the game and tends to get distracted easily, resulting in lengthy videos of them dying repeatedly and thus playing the same parts of the same levels in an effort to make progress. The series is known for being a drag to watch at times, but the long-windedness is a key element in building believability in the events of the story; if the uploader succeeded at everything on the first try, the series wouldn't be as convincing nor feel so rooted in reality.

Another unique and common feature in unfiction is a sense of nostalgia. Many projects play with the audience's sense of nostalgia in some way, often to awaken feelings of horror and to disturb the viewer. Decamarks (2022) discusses this in their Petscop analysis at length, and argues that especially creepypasta about haunted games relies on the reader's sense of nostalgia to then weaponize that feeling of familiarity against them, or to subvert or recontextualize their expectations of game mechanics and events. The horror rises from the idea that something safe, familiar, and comforting is not behaving in ways you expect it would, and that the past is not exactly what you remember it being. This can be seen outside of the realm of video game based unfiction as well, particularly with analogue horror's tape recorder and VHS cassette aesthetics, and projects based on or utilizing websites that often borrow web design elements from the early days of internet where personal websites were a much more common sight.

2.3.1 Web series

Most unfiction projects are published in the form of web series. The term covers a wide variety of different kinds of content from YouTube channels to social media accounts and long-running creepypasta stories. Unfiction web series can be summarized as online media pieces that tell a story over the course of several updates in their chosen storytelling medium. The most popular of these mediums are video series and social media accounts due to their ease of access on the surface web, as they're hosted on platforms that tend to already have active userbases. Video content is considerably more popular than other mediums; the Night Mind Index, which features links to many unfiction projects to expose them

to a wider audience, has YouTube links on a considerable number of its entries, and Night Mind's Trailhead research project also showed TikTok to be a particularly successful avenue for video projects due to the platform's algorithm (Night Mind 2021). Other explaining factors for the popularity of video as the chosen medium of many projects can be alluded to the accessibility of commercial video editing software and the plausibility filmed footage can give to a story otherwise detailing fantastical events.

2.3.2 Websites

Websites have often been featured as part of ARGs, either as supplementary material or a key game element, though they've also existed as stand-alone projects that tell stories in unique ways. The practice was more common before the advent of social media, but unfiction projects utilizing websites as forms of storytelling haven't gone anywhere, and many can be found especially on the website hosting platform Neocities.

Websites naturally come in many forms, but often feature many familiar tropes in the context of unfiction. Sprawling networks of pages that link to one another through pictures or unconventionally placed links are one of the most common features used to create a sense of mystery or discomfort around the website, often due to violating the visitor's expectations on what a website should look and behave like. Website templates are rarely used, with the most popular and well-known entries using creative or even confusing layouts for the sake of their aesthetic, narrative, or both. Many however take inspiration from the late 90s and early 2000s websites and web design to invoke a sense of nostalgia in the visitor.

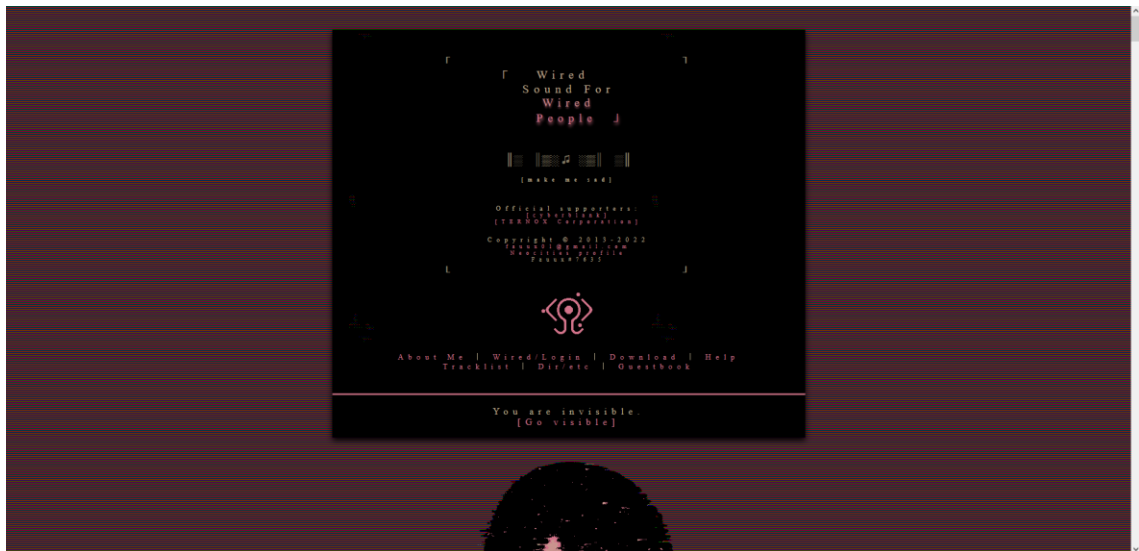
Terminal 00 (Picture 1) is a particularly well-known website that treads the line of an art project and an unfiction project. The site started as a hosting site and has since developed a strong aesthetic of pixelated graphics, animated backgrounds, and even music that plays on most of the over 300 pages that make up the site. A story is wrapped into the website that reveals itself in bits and pieces that need to be further string together to make sense of it, being in a way reminiscent of an ARG with how much it thrives on audience participation. The narrative is also

purposefully vague, with Angus Niceven, the creator of the site, having said that it is perfectly possible for the story to conclude without being complete (Sharma 2020). Clear statistics on the site are difficult to find, with Terminal 00 stating somewhat cryptically that the site has been viewed over 4 million times, though the actual number could be much higher.



PICTURE 1. Screenshot of the home page of Terminal 00.

Wired Sound for Wired People (Picture 2) is in appearance similar to Terminal 00 in its looks; the graphics are pixelated and often animated, the aesthetic takes occasional cues from old anime from the 90s, and music is a vital element on the site's pages. Whereas Terminal 00 is solely original work, Wired Sound for Wired People started as a fansite for the anime Serial Experiments Lain, and though this influence is still clearly visible on the site it has managed to gain attention outside of the source material and stands largely on its own. In a fashion common to unfiction websites many of the site's pages can be accessed by clicking on images. The pages they lead to tend to feature a single image, and by clicking it the visitor is lead to the next page. At the end of the series of pages a link to a Discord server is given to the visitor, prompting them to join the creator's community. At the time of writing Neocities states that the site has been visited nearly 41 million times.



PICTURE 2. Screenshot of the home page of Wired Sound for Wired People

GRAVEGORE (Picture 3) is in scope much smaller than the previous examples, featuring a more reasonable number of pages. It adopts a more dissonant aesthetic of reds, blacks, and whites with glitchy images and graphics of various cryptic shapes. As usual links are placed often in inconvenient locations that prompt the visitor to click around, and a narrative or a similar experience seems to be tied into the site. Some links additionally lead to embedded videos that make the site feel like a part of an ARG, though no concrete evidence seems to support this. GRAVEGORE's aesthetic is somewhat of a staple in unfiction projects that utilize websites in their storytelling, though it's hardly the only way of approaching this kind of web design. At the time of writing Neocities states that the site has been visited about 25 thousand times.



PICTURE 3. Screenshot of a page from the GRAVEGORE site.

3 CASE STUDIES

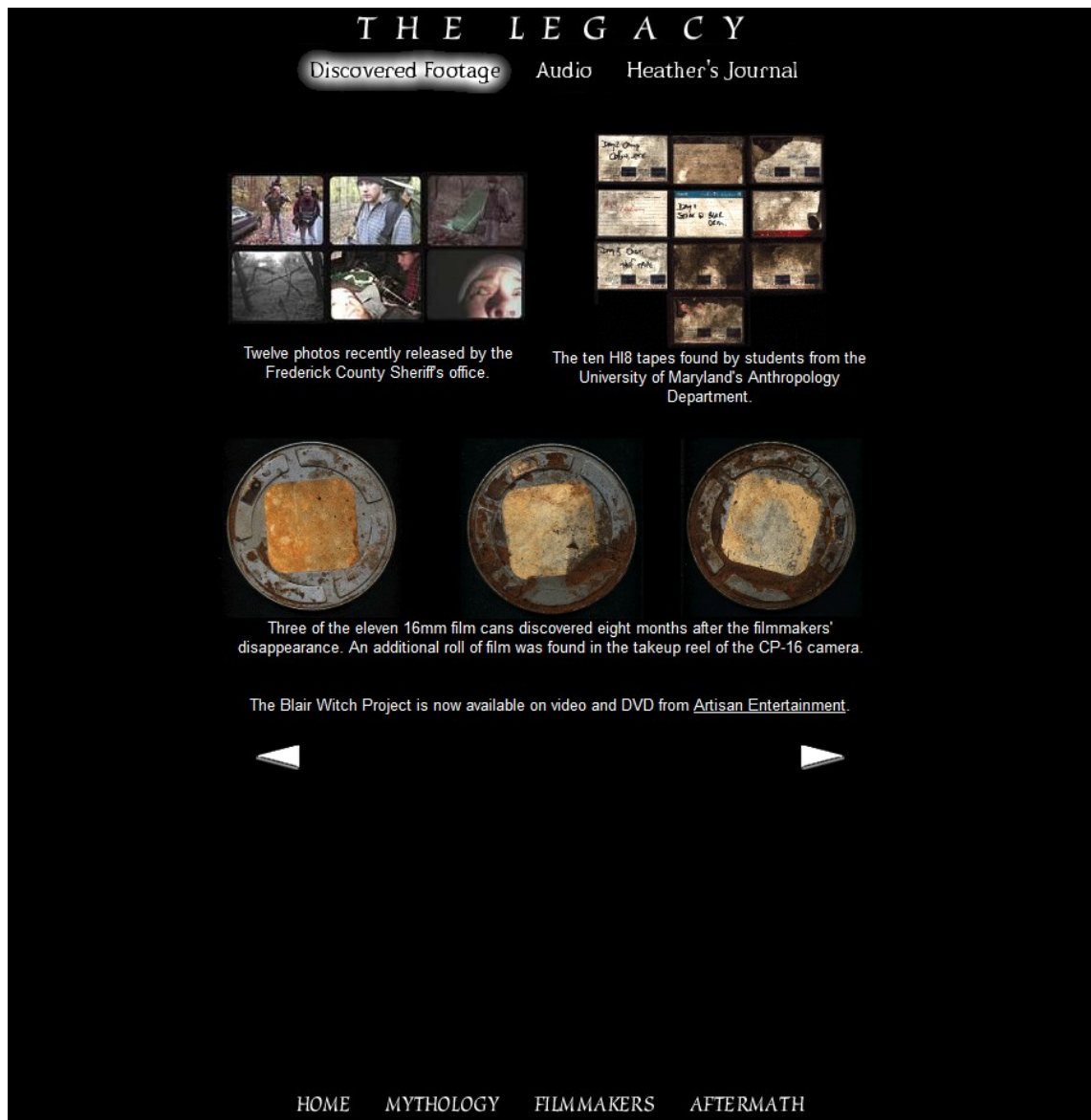
3.1 The Blair Witch Project

The Blair Witch Project was a found-footage styled film released in 1999, and serves as one of the first examples of unfiction on the internet. The movie details the events surrounding the mysterious disappearances of three film students, who were investigating a small town's local legend about a witch inhabiting the nearby woods. These events were portrayed as being real through many means, including heavy campaigning and the casting of at the time unknown actors who remained silent after the movie's release to imply they had truly deceased during the filming (Debczak 2022). A now defunct website used as a marketing gimmick was crafted as supplementary material to the movie, hosting a variety of material that expanded on the movie's lore and even features mock-up police reports and missing posters for the main cast (Picture 4). Though a relatively new concept at the time, this web-based marketing helped the movie reach huge popularity over the question whether its events were real or not (History.com 2021). This reached a point where the movie's total box office of 248,300,000 dollars wound up being 413.8 times the size of its budget, that being 600,000 dollars (The Numbers n.d).

Many similarities between The Blair Witch Project and modern unfiction entries can be found even at first glance: amateurish and shaky camerawork, grainy video that obscures many details, a notably low budget, and a reliance on practical effects. Though many of these can be attributed as elements in the found-footage genre as a whole, they have also been utilized in independent unfiction projects such as Marble Hornets (2009), a video web series that similarly to The Blair Witch Project involved film students in its story set in the Slenderman universe. In this sense The Blair Witch Project feels greatly ahead of its time, as it would fit right in with many unfiction series that exist particularly on YouTube today. It emphasizes the importance of psychological aspects in creating tension and a sense of horror, and the power of ambiguity as means of creating dread by never explicitly showing who or what is after the protagonists. Though the pacing of the film has certain bumps and oddities to it due to its found-footage nature, it helps give the film a sense of authenticity that comes from video clips taken by

someone more concerned with recording a moment or keeping a video diary than telling a carefully planned narrative. More plausibility comes from the interviews done by the protagonists in the beginning of the movie, where various civilians are asked about the legend of the Blair Witch. Though simple the plot element helps cementing the folktale as one that could be circulating in a small town in the middle of nowhere, instead of one made up for the sake of the film.

Though The Blair Witch Project doesn't necessarily excel as a movie due to its at times odd pacing and minimalistic footage, it manages to capture the feeling of independent unfiction projects way before the dawn of the earliest entries with its ties to the online world, strong marketing, and minimalistic presentation. It proved that convincing and compelling horror experiences could be created with a smaller budget and established the internet as a useful tool in creating more plausibility for stories revolving around mysteries that seemingly feature supernatural or improbable events.



PICTURE 4. Screenshot of The Blair Witch Project website as captured on the Internet Archive in 2006.

3.2 sexymax2019

sexymax2019 was an ARG that took place on the social media website Tumblr in 2018 over the course of 4 days. The site at the time had a problem with spam bots, which privately messaged various users with shady links accompanied with flirty or suggestive messages. Some users were messaged by a particular blog that initially appeared to be just another spam bot, but instead sent users strangely worded messages such as “hey pee-brain - can you teleport?”. A link posted on this blog, sexymax2019, lead to a website on Neocities that featured cryptic and religiously themed content mainly focusing on angels. As the story

unfolded the participants learned of a young girl named Anita, whose guardian angel, Max, was trapped in limbo, which in turn was making Anita sick. Over the course of the story the players helped Max escape the limbo, take down an angel hierarchy, and save Anita. Several users also came together to document the ARG, and over the course of the week the ARG became somewhat of a site-wide sensation, spawning tons of fanart and support from Tumblr users. (ARG Coverage 2018)

sexymax2019 was created by two teenagers without too much planning ahead, which arguably makes it stand out from many other popular ARGs. It also speaks of the power unfiction as a storytelling medium can have, where something made on effectively no budget can still appeal to many and spread rapidly across internet circles. Admittedly Tumblr's general unfamiliarity with ARGs at the time might very well have contributed to sexymax2019's popularity, as to many it was their first time following or participating in a project as interactive as an Alternate Reality Game.

A key element in the ARG was also the accompanying website on Neocities. The design features very basic HTML with no style elements whatsoever; the backgrounds are white, text is black in the Times New Roman font, all elements are aligned to the very left side of the screen (Picture 5). As is common a lot of pages are navigated to by clicking on pictures, with text occasionally linking the visitor to external sites such as Tumblr blogs. The simplicity plays a key part in giving the site an eerie quality while browsing through the images of angels that gradually corrupt with each click of a link and the often poetic or cryptic text that accompanies them. In a world of web design that aims to make people comfortable and welcome, a plain HTML file feels stark and out of place. It doesn't welcome visitors who are used to rounded corners and carefully planned layouts, instead causing feelings of discomfort.



PICTURE 5. Screenshot of a page on the max2019 Neocities site.

3.3 SCP Wiki

The SCP Wiki is a collaborative writing project focusing on the fictional SCP Foundation, an organization that contains various anomalous objects, creatures, and other entities whose existence should be kept hidden from the public. The current iteration of the site has existed since 2008 and has since gathered thousands of articles and stories written by different community members. These articles are formatted in a way reminiscent of scientific papers, research logs, and guidelines to further play into the idea that the foundation is a real organization working in secret to ensure the safety of the world as we know it. Despite this noble cause the foundation itself is not above committing various morally questionable acts, and they frequently place disposable people known as D-class personnel in life-threatening or otherwise dangerous situations, from exploring anomalous locations housing potentially hostile entities as is the case with SCP-087, a supposedly infinite staircase descending into unknown depths, to being sacrificed during experiments with anomalies such as with SCP-2128, a stone furnace that incinerates people inside of it when they make a false statement. (SCP Wiki n.d.)

3.3.1 Popularity of SCP articles

The SCP Wiki allows users to rate each SCP article with a simple like-dislike system, which helps moderate articles and keep them up to the site's standards. As seen in Table 1 and Figure 1, a trend can be observed where the articles from Series 1, the group containing the first 999 SCPs, tend to be rated the higher than those from later series. The original SCP article SCP-173 (Picture 6) from 2008 has gathered a rating of +8073, with SCP-2521 from series 3, a creature which cannot be described with written or spoken words, taking the second place with a rating of +5332.

TABLE 1. The distribution of featured SCP series in the 30 highest rated articles (excluding joke articles and propositions.)

SCP Series	%	Number
Series 1	50	15
Series 2	10	3
Series 3	20	6
Series 4	10	3
Series 5	7	2
Series 6	3	1

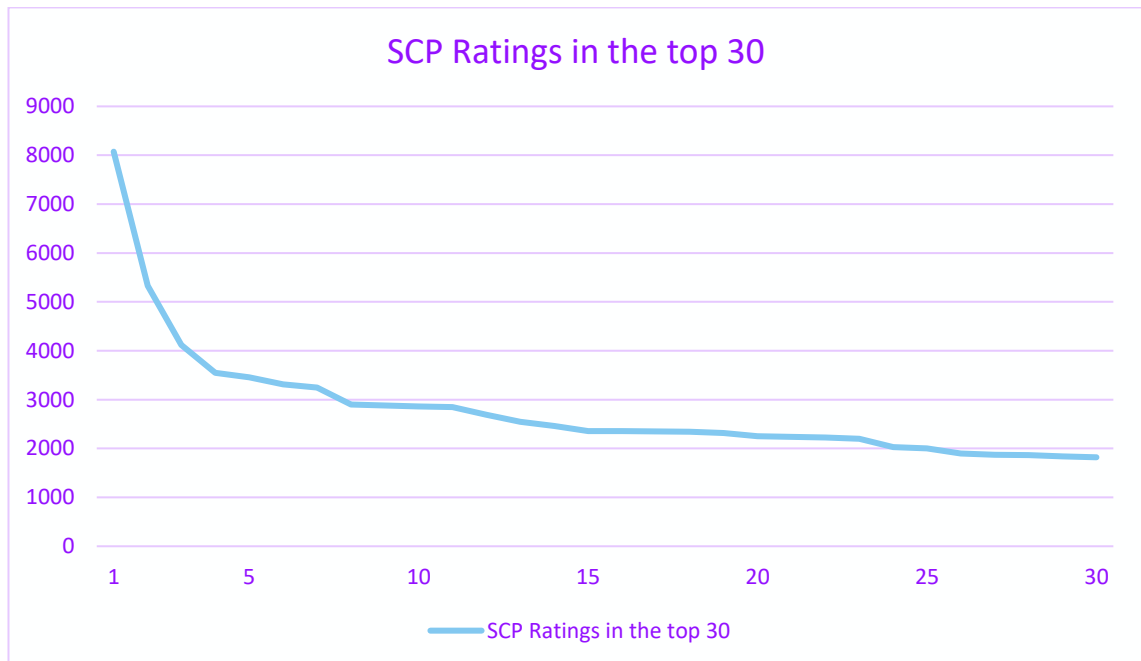


FIGURE 1. Graph made for the thesis showcasing the drastic difference in ratings among the 30 highest rated SCP articles (excluding joke articles and propositions.)

↑ Main

SCP Database

- ↳ **Series III** (2000-2999)
- ↳ **Series II** (1000-1999)
- ↳ **Series I** (001-999)

SCP Library

- ↳ **Tales**
- ↳ **Canons**

Site

- ◆ **Random SCP | Tale**
- ◆ **Top Rated Pages**
- ◆ **Lowest Rated Pages**
- ◆ **Recent Changes**
- ◆ **Most Recently Created**
- ◆ **Most Recently Edited**

Community

- ◆ **Guides**
- ◆ **Member Pages**
- ◆ **SCP Forum**
- ◆ **Recent Posts**
- ◆ **Contribute**
- ◆ **Chat**

SCP-173

Item #: SCP-173

Object Class: Euclid


Special Containment Procedures: Item SCP-173 is to be kept in a locked container at all times. When personnel must enter SCP-173's container, no fewer than 3 may enter at any time and the door is to be relocked behind them. At all times, two persons must maintain direct eye contact with SCP-173 until all personnel have vacated and relocked the container.

Description: Moved to Site-19 1993. Origin is as of yet unknown. It is constructed from concrete and rebar with traces of Krylon brand spray paint. SCP-173 is animate and extremely hostile. The object cannot move while within a direct line of sight. Line of sight must not be broken at any time with SCP-173. Personnel assigned to enter container are instructed to alert one another before blinking. Object is reported to attack by snapping the neck at the base of the skull, or by strangulation. In the event of an attack, personnel are to observe Class 4 hazardous object containment procedures.

Personnel report sounds of scraping stone originating from within the container when no one is present inside. This is considered normal, and any change in this behaviour should be reported to the acting HMCL supervisor on duty.

The reddish brown substance on the floor is a combination of feces and blood. Origin of these materials is unknown. The enclosure must be cleaned on a bi-weekly basis.

rating: +1457 + -



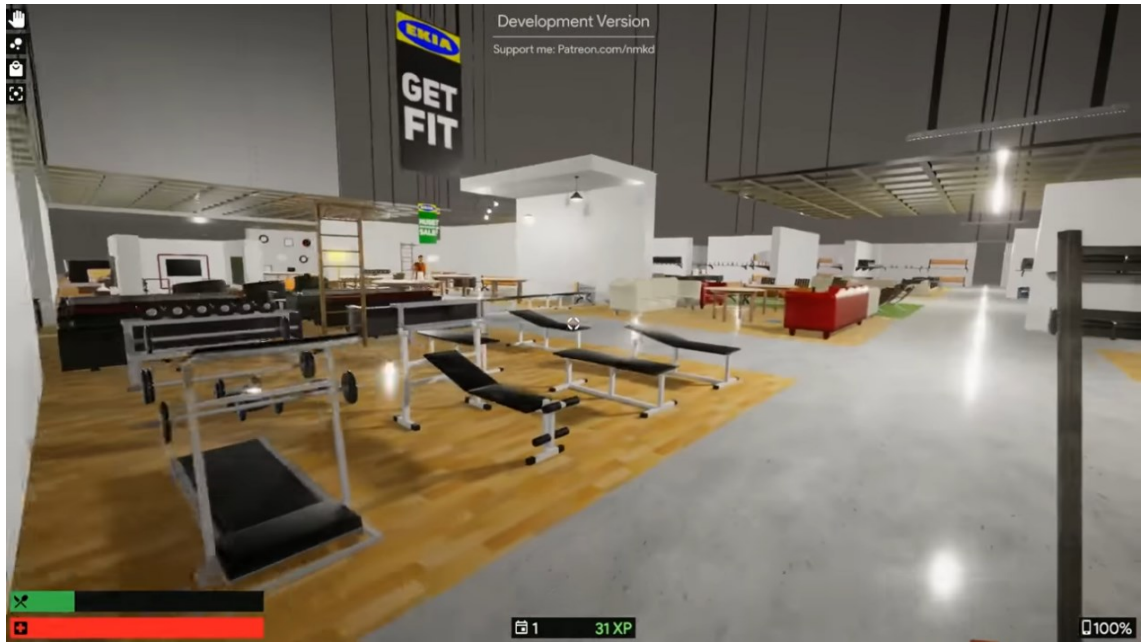
SCP-173 in containment

New Member Info

- ◆ **Site Rules**
- ◆ **Newbie Guide**
- ◆ **Join the Site!**
- ◆ **How to Write an SCP**
- ◆ **FAQ**

PICTURE 6. Article of SCP-173, the original SCP, as captured on the Internet Archive in February of 2015.

Although this data does give some direction to what kinds of articles people consider good SCPs, it doesn't necessarily indicate that the older articles are better, but rather that they've existed for far longer and have thus had more time to gather a higher rating over time. A popular example of this is SCP-076, a humanoid creature with tremendous strength and power also known as "Able", which is often criticized for being overpowered to the point of being boring and is used as an example of what not to do with articles, yet it still has a rating of +1557 as of writing (SCP Wiki n.d.). Meanwhile the article for SCP-3008, "A Perfectly Normal, Regular Old IKEA" which is seemingly infinite on the inside, is widely regarded as one of the better entries to the site and despite being published in 2017, 8 years after SCP-076, it has gathered a rating of +2885 at the time of writing (SCP Wiki n.d.) as well as a video game which was based on the article (Picture 7.).

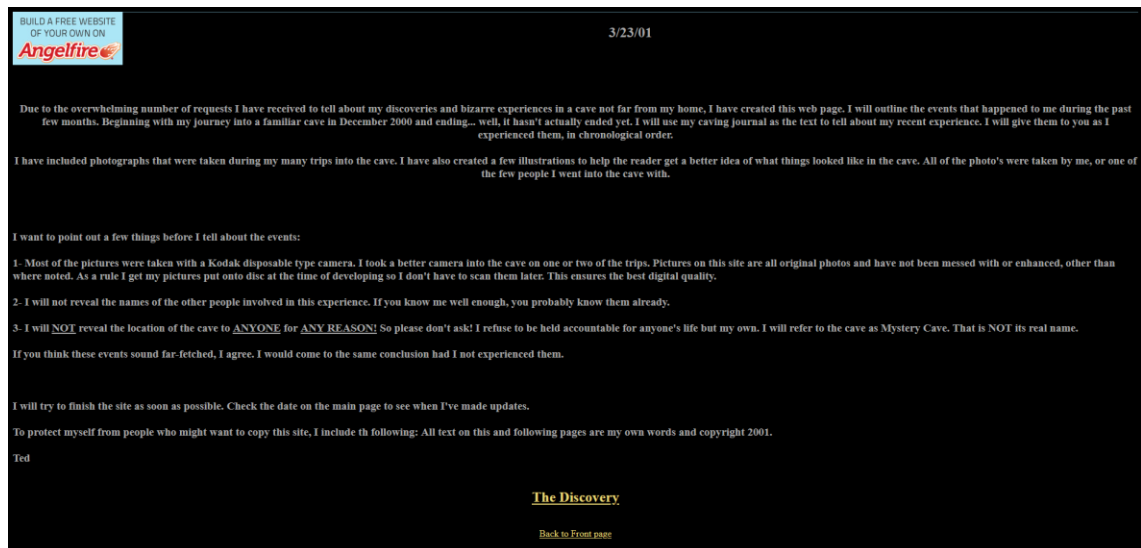


PICTURE 7. Screenshot of a development version of “SCP-3008 Lone Survivor”, a video game based on SCP-3008.

3.4 Ted’s Caving Page

Though Ted’s Caving Page is not creepypasta in the word’s traditional meaning, it would be considered one by today’s standards of the genre. The Angelfire page hosts a series of updates documenting the experiences of a man and his friend as they explore a strange cave at an undisclosed location. Upon finding a small opening at the depths of the cave they work to expand it over the course of several days, hearing concerning noises from deep inside during this progress. In addition to hinting at the existence of something cryptic or sinister living in the depths of the earth the story also uses claustrophobic descriptions of the caving experience to create discomfort in the reader. The story is told over the course of updates that have several days or weeks of real-time between them, painting a more realistic picture of the events of the caving project. The final update has the author announcing he’ll return to the cave one last time to discover what exactly is inhabiting its depths and find himself some closure. The site hasn’t been updated since May 2001, staying true to the ending and leaving it open and worryingly ambiguous.

Though the site's aesthetics aren't a key element in the storytelling, they still contribute to its feeling and atmosphere. All backgrounds are black with white, yellow, or blue text that is often centred or stuck to the left side of the screen, and every image opens on its own page and features photographs of real caves in admittedly poor quality due to the state of camera technology back when the story was created. The site gives off the impression that the creator didn't have all that much experience in web design and was more interested in sharing their story than anything. In an interesting way this contributes to the creepiness of the story on today's web, where majority of sites often feature style elements and follow design guidelines and best practices. Though this likely wasn't intentional at the time of creation, it serves as a unique example of how the age of a website can contribute to how it's perceived in the eyes of its visitors.



PICTURE 8. Screenshot of the first page of Ted's Caving Page.

3.5 Monument Mythos

Monument Mythos is an analogue horror web series created by Alex Casanas under the YouTube channel MISTER MANTICORE. The series starts by initially documenting strange occurrences at various US monuments, such as the Statue of Liberty, Mt Rushmore, and Alcatraz Island, and tells the story of an alternate timeline of events that occurred in the history and present day of the United

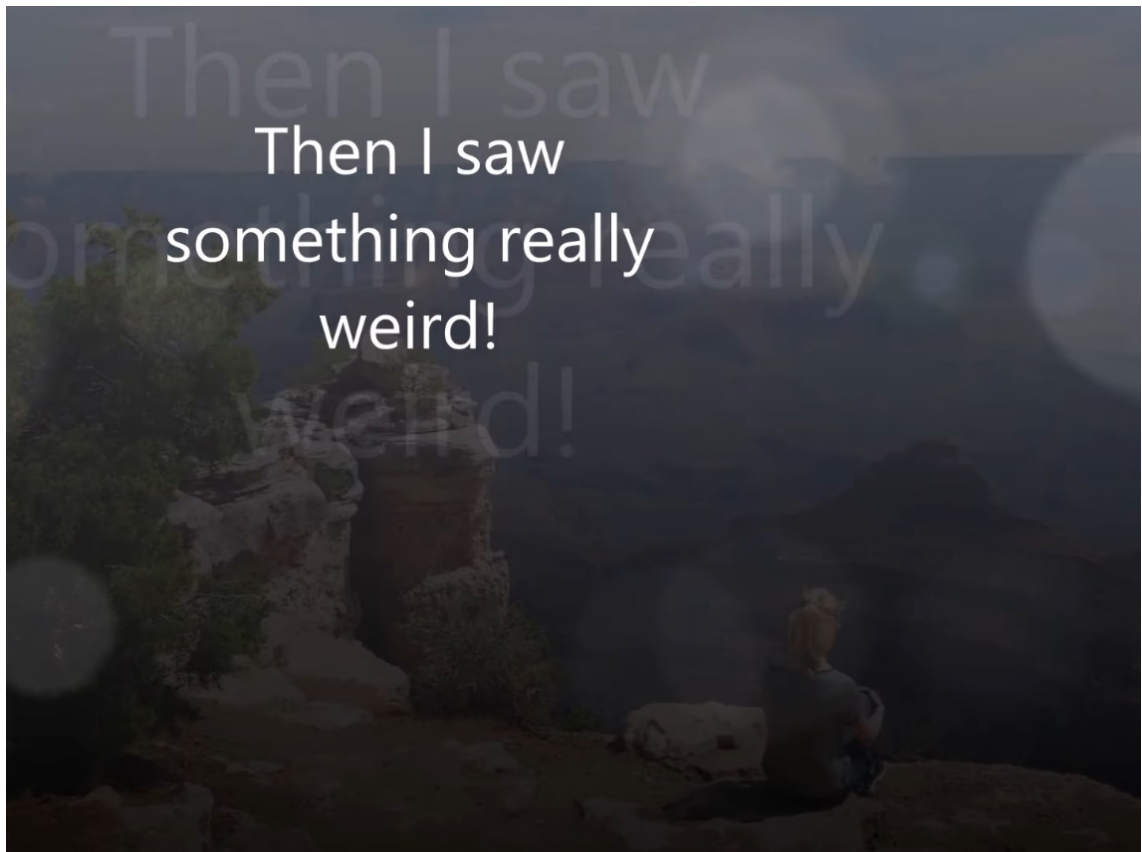
States. The story is sprawling and often presents the viewer with bits of information at a time, which can later be tied together to form a more coherent picture of the events.

In the universe of Monument Mythos exists a place known as Wonderland, which consists entirely of colourless, largely branchless, and tall tree-like structures referred to as special trees. They have a tendency to sing according to various characters in the mythos, and many of them are contained in national monuments, namely the Washington monument and the pyramids. Occasionally these trees can bend into arches and flash with lightning, which sends people in the trees' immediate vicinity into Wonderland, and possibly into an alternative timeline. Many of the odd events in Monument Mythos can be traced back to these special trees, though other oddities are known to exist as well: Giza glass, a mysterious glass which can be used to cut off parts of a person without killing them, though decapitation causes the head to swell into ridiculous proportions and float off; the rapid multiplication of Alcatraz island after radiation therapy was performed to it; the discovery of George Washington frozen in a Delaware river; and the Suez Canal Crab, which came to roam Egypt after the ship Ever Given was dislodged from the canal with a tactical nuclear missile. The lore and worldbuilding of Monument Mythos is often wild and difficult to grasp without experiencing the series for oneself, though it is crafted with meticulous care and attention to detail, all qualities which arguably play into the series' appeal.

Monument Mythos stands out from other analogue horror series in multiple ways, one of the key elements being its unique way of presenting disturbing and unnerving concepts with silly overtones or aesthetics (Picture 9). The series even manages to parody social media with the introduction of T-machines, handheld devices allowing their owners to access and use a Twitter-lookalike. This almost humorous approach to the horrors that inhabit the universe brings a special touch of humanity to the way the story is told; there are people living in this world, and to them a statue coming to life and causing mayhem in the Babylon forest is just another Wednesday. Though this isn't the only way Monument Mythos brings a sense of humanity to the series, it is one that is rarely seen in other analogue horror works, which often focus more on their own sources of terror rather than the victims of them.

The series additionally uses many real-life events as a basis for its story, some of the more notable instances being references to the storming of the US Capitol and the ship Ever Given's misadventures. These events obviously play out differently than in real life due to the existence of the supernatural and unbelievable in the universe of Monument Mythos, but their primary purpose is to further connect the viewer into this fictional world. The inclusion of something familiar like these infamous events gives the viewer expectations that the series can then subvert to create unexpected twists to the story and induce feelings of horror and discomfort in its audience.

As mentioned, Monument Mythos has many small details spread across its videos that can be easily overlooked when initially presented, but help build a coherent and alive narrative when observed as part of the bigger picture. A particular example the series itself draws attention to was a photograph seen in the first season, depicting a special tree. This photo was later shown again in the second season, pointing out a figure that had been present in the image the entire time. Other moments the viewer is mostly required to pick up on themselves, but they all contribute to an immersive narrative by keeping things consistent and not retconning elements as the series goes on. The attention to detail spreads all across Monument Mythos and keeps things historically in line with that of the real world. This dedication helps the series truly pass off as a somewhat plausible alternate timeline of events, with even the supernatural events being tied into the world rather seamlessly.



PICTURE 9. Screenshot from “CANYONCROWN | Monument Mythos”. The video utilizes many Windows Movie Maker transitions with goofy, light-hearted music in the background while going through vacation pictures from the Grand Canyon, interrupted twice by eerie videos of a head floating in the canyon.

3.6 Petscop

Petscop is a video series about a PlayStation game that doesn't exist. On surface it appears to be a colourful creature collecting adventure, but underneath this plane lies an endless field with gritty textures as realistic as a retro console can output, covered in a foreboding dark fog that limits the player's field of vision and obscures many details. In this field the player and protagonist, Paul, finds various points of interest that stick out from the emptiness: a windmill that disappears if you watch it for several hours of real time; a floating object resembling a kind of needle which can answer some questions it is asked; various buildings, such as a school and a house, which seem to resemble locations real in Petscop's universe; and even other players in a game that's meant to be a single-player experience. The game is also shown to have the ability to record the player's inputs to

then play them back in a demo mode, allowing access to locations that only exist in said demo mode should the player perform the correct inputs in the main game. These convoluted and cryptic features contribute to a narrative that never tells its audience all the details and leaves intentional gaps the viewer can't fill with concrete and confirmed information. Petscop provides enough to give its audience a blurry picture of the whole, but never stresses the details too much, which initially lead many to believe the series was supposed to be an ARG with puzzles to solve. To some this mystery and ambiguity is part of the series' appeal, where others find it frustrating and detrimental to an otherwise interesting narrative. A fascinating part about this omission of information is the unreleased website titled "Petscop Discovery Pages" which was originally created for the story. It was never released to the public and only exists as zoomed out, blurry textures in the videos that only show that such site existed and had a ton of text on it. This site would have gone over everything there was to know about Petscop and its surrounding meta-narrative, but the creator, Tony Domenico, ultimately decided to only hint at its existence in the end (Moyer 2020).

The story of Petscop revolves around the protagonist's and his family's past. No perfect and coherent picture of this exist, but themes of child-abuse are heavily present over the course of the series as well as the concept of rebirth. The exact nature of what rebirth is in the context of Petscop is unknown, with some assigning it a more symbolic meaning, while other theories liken it to attachment therapy, more commonly known as rebirthing therapy, a controversial practice of treating attachment disorders in children through physically restraining them with force (Bionity.com n.d). These themes together with the concrete information the series presents gives the viewers somewhat vague ideas of various story beats in the meta-narrative: Paul is the same person as Care, a girl whose father kidnapped her in her youth; Paul was recording videos of Petscop to show the game to his friend, Belle; Petscop was, at least partially, made for Paul, and contained mysteries for him to solve; Paul was recording videos of Petscop in a car; among other things. From the pieces forms a story about identity and the evolution of it, family and what constitutes as such, and trauma. Despite the lack of a straightforward narrative and at times rather convoluted presentation Petscop has a strange feeling of reality and plausibility to it precisely because of the gaps in the story. The audience are made to be onlookers to a private experience they were

never intended to be a part of, and thus could never fully understand the events because of this. As such many different interpretations and theories of the story of Petscop exist among the fans, from surface-level observations to deep analyses of the game's themes and the story's meaning. In a 2022 analysis post of the series, a user by the name of Decamarks said the following:

You initially think that Petscop is rooted somewhere in reality. You're wrong. You realize that Petscop is someone trying to tell a scary story. You're wrong again. You then realize that Petscop is both, and you're finally right. Am I talking about Petscop as a game, or Petscop as a series? I don't know.

This change of perception and evolution of ideas that ultimately still leads to uncertainty encapsulates the feeling of the series particularly well. From its initial presentation as a real game to the audience realizing it never existed, Petscop captures the very idea of unfiction in a particularly concrete way: the game doesn't exist and the story is a work of fiction, yet they both come across as tangible and real experiences that initially fooled many with their presentation. Petscop may not be a game that can be played, but it can be experienced through the videos, making at least a part of it that much more real.

A unique element in Petscop are its gameplay features that would be passed off as glitches in any other context, to the point where the protagonist himself tries to write off the game's strange behaviour as nothing but glitches. A scene in the series shows the player walking down a stairwell but turning right instead of proceeding to the next map. This causes them to clip back onto the grass, their graphic entirely black instead of having its usual texture (Picture 11). This initially seems like a bug, but it is quickly shown that in this shadow state some previously blocked areas become accessible, and cars which previously avoided the player can now hit them, making this property an actual and intentional element of the game's design. These unconventional features bring in to question every other oddity present in Petscop that may appear as glitches at first glance, giving all of them the potential to be intentional. Decamarks claims as much, arguing that if Petscop shows you something, it has intention and meaning behind it, even if the audience doesn't have the context to fully realize what that meaning is.

Petscop also succeeds in playing with the audience's nostalgia, despite the fact that no one had ever played it in the era of the original PlayStation. With typical video game creepypasta the fans of the game are often able to tell that the game in the story is not acting the way it was intended to, which can undermine the story in the eyes of some readers if it insists that its events are something real that the protagonist went through. With Petscop this doesn't have the opportunity to happen, and in a strange twist this makes the game feel much more real than it otherwise would have felt. If it was familiar to the viewer, their own subjective memories of Petscop would have been brought into focus in the series, but instead they're left with a vague sense of nostalgia that they can't tie to any experience they've previously had aside from any PlayStation games that might have shared visual characteristics with Petscop (Decamarks 2022).



PICTURE 10. Screenshot from "Petscop 2", showing a grave of a child.



PICTURE 11. Screenshot from “Petscop 9”. The protagonist has exited the stairwell to the right, giving the player character a shadow property.

4 CREATING THE STORY

Based on the research done on both unfiction in general as well as the case studies on notable unfiction pieces, I set out to create an unfiction project of my own to apply the learned information to. With time constraints in mind a fully original project could've been too large to complete within the given scope, and thus the idea from the beginning was to involve already-existing assets in the creation of this project. The early planning phases involved gathering ideas for the story, deciding on the mediums and platforms used for telling the story, and establishing a presence on these platforms beforehand to cement them into the hemisphere of the internet. The chosen platforms ended up being a Tumblr blog as well as an accompanying website which would be hosted on Neocities, and the topic for the story wound up being the GameBoy Color game Pokémon Crystal, as not only I owned a physical copy of the game which could be used as a prop in the story, but the game could be displayed on a television screen through the use of another game.

4.1 Building a narrative

While websites can take on a variety of forms with how flexible they are, I decided to settle for a rather straightforward narrative in this case as it is a concise and character-lead experience. Especially the latter point will help with giving the story more plausibility, as it is tied to what appears to be a real person running a personal website.

Taking into consideration any technical limitations that may result from staging various assets for the story, I settled on a character-lead storyline featuring a haunted video game, similar to early creepypasta entries. The story would follow a person journaling their experience as they replay a game from their childhood and discover odd and unusual qualities and events within it. The chosen game for this purpose, Pokémon Crystal, has simple graphics, making it easy to create fake screenshots of it, and additionally can be displayed on a television with the use of Pokémon Stadium 2 and Nintendo 64 hardware, though these are not

necessary for the assets and rather make displaying a handheld game on a large screen a more believable feat. In addition, as of writing it is not possible or at the very least easy to emulate either Pokémon Stadium game running a Gameboy game. This adds to the credibility of the story by excluding a typical way of faking events in video games through the means of cheating, the practice of altering the game's code and behavior through external means; emulation, a means of playing games on a computer through third-party software which often includes tools for altering the game in various ways; and romhacking, the practice of altering the game itself to permanently change parts of it to create a new or altered playing experience that can be anything from slightly edited graphics to overhauling the entire base game into something completely different.

4.1.1 Establishing “Mallard”

In order to create plausibility for the story it was necessary to establish the protagonist as a person who could reasonably exist on the internet. To accomplish this, I started running a blog on Tumblr in November of 2022 under a character known as “Mallard.” Though the blog isn't overly active it reblogs posts relatively often and makes original ones from time to time. These posts give insight to Mallard's life and living situation, her history with video games and her general interests from the supernatural to anime. Before the narrative was finalized, she discovered her old copy of Pokémon Crystal, which ideally contributes to a natural sense of progression to the strange events that would unfold in due time. She additionally remarks on the poor condition of her phone, receiving an old television from a relative, and an art “commission” she received from me as a means of spreading her blog around.

Mallard posts from a 3rd generation Moto G android phone (Picture 12). The phone is old enough to have a worse camera than current smart phones, while not being so old it would be impractical to use in the present day. The condition of the phone can also be used to explain why she prefers to take and upload photos as opposed to videos: she simply does not have enough storage space for longer videos, and struggles uploading larger files online directly from her phone.

Any story-relevant posts will wind up archived on Mallard's website which she uses for dream journaling. Posting the story initially on a social media platform can help spreading awareness of it, and any engagement the blog receives can ideally be used to measure the success of the project and how compelling people found the story.



PICTURE 12. Photograph of a 3rd Generation Moto G smartphone which is used to take photographs for Mallard's blog and website.

4.1.2 Outlining the story

The story and the posts relevant to it were planned beforehand to figure out how many posts would have to be made, how many pictures would be needed to accompany them, and to make sure the events happen in an order that would make sense. The core of the story became a haunted video game Mallard has owned

since childhood, inhabited by a ghost which would move on from the game cartridge onto Mallard's website as updates and a video would end up uploaded onto it. Most of the story focuses on Mallard conversing with this ghost and remembering events from her childhood related to the game, which in turn helps the ghost connect to the world outside of the cartridge. Though the story isn't conceptually anything never-before-seen especially in the realm of video game creepypasta, I felt it served the purpose of this project nicely while paying homage to the earlier entries in the realm of unfiction. By the end 16 key posts were written, with some additional material that will be published alongside them that doesn't directly contribute to the narrative.

4.2 Creating screenshots

Using pictures to accompany the story is a simple way of adding more plausibility to the events and makes the texts easier to digest for the reader. For this purpose I created screenshots of various scenes that would occur in the game over the course of the story. These faked screenshots would be later displayed on a television and photographed to create the illusion that they are from a game running on actual hardware. I studied various footage from Pokémon Stadium 2 running Pokémon Crystal through its emulation feature to get an idea for the typical resolution the Gameboy game ends up stretched on a television screen, as well as other video material from Nintendo 64 games running on real hardware to apply a similar look to my own images, making them look more authentic as a result. Using assets ripped from the original Pokémon Crystal game, found on the site The Spriter's Resource, various scenes were staged and edited into borders which accompany the Gameboy Pokémon games running in Pokémon Stadium and Pokémon Stadium 2. Additional layer effects were also applied to simulate the video output of the Nintendo 64. The main chunk of the image editing was done in Paint Tool SAI 2 due to its ease of usability in moving around the image layers. Additional pixel art was made with Aseprite, and GIMP 2 was used to finalize the images.

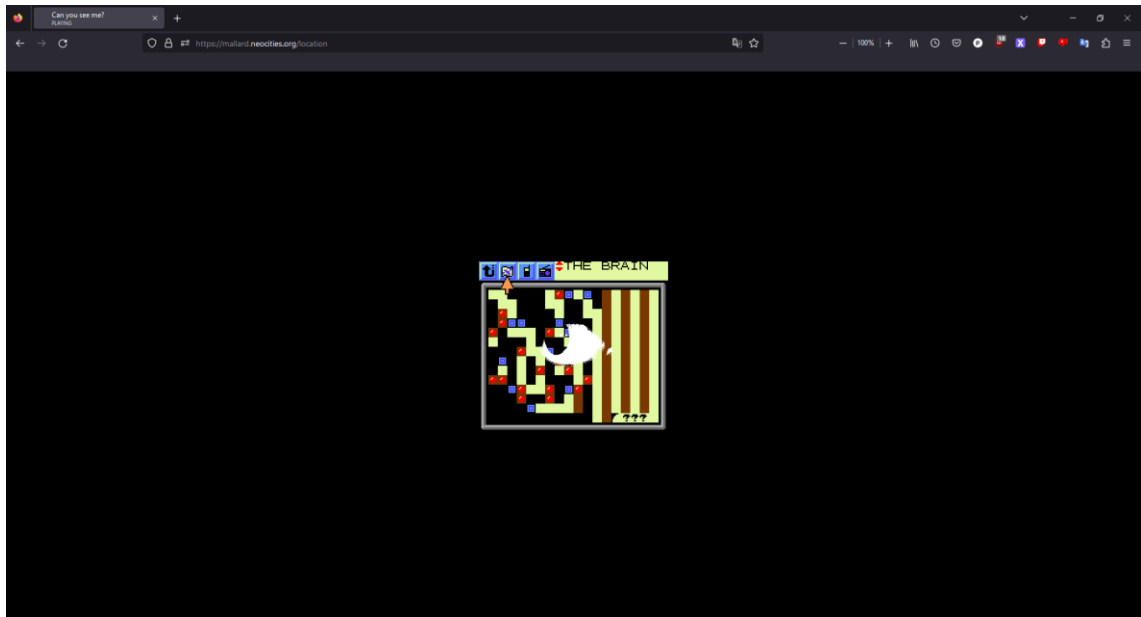


PICTURE 13. One of the screenshots which were created for the story, showcasing unusual behaviour in the game.

4.3 Mallard's Website

Mallard's personal website, Digital Dreams, is hosted on Neocities. Initially it featured a home page, a page for dream journal entries, and a page for various adoptables, virtual creatures which can be linked to websites and forum signatures, which Mallard had gathered from other sites she was active on. The design of the website is rather simple and not responsive, meaning phones and smaller screens do not display the site very well. The first update introduced a page for Mallard's experiences with her haunted game, featuring copies of the posts she had made on Tumblr about the subject. A small GIF image could be found on this page, leading the visitor to a pair of pages with black backgrounds and eerie music from Pokémon Crystal (Picture 14). The latter of these pages further linked to an article about the Mobile System GB, an add-on for the Gameboy Color only released in Japan which let people connect the handheld to their mobile phones, hinting at the ghost in the game connecting themselves onto the internet through photos taken on Mallard's phone. The second update added the rest of the story posts as well as more cryptic pages in the same vein. All these pages also had

comments hidden in their HTML files, rewarding those who would go out of their way to inspect the code with additional lore.



PICTURE 14. One of the eerie pages on the website.

4.4 Engagement on Mallard's Blog and Website

The story began on April 17th 2023 with a post on the mallardmonster blog detailing the strange occurrences Mallard had experienced in her game. After boosting the post on my art blog with an established audience this first post received a considerable amount of engagement, reaching 169 notes consisting of likes, re-blogs, and replies over the course of the first week. Mallard's website, which received an update later during this week, went from 425 views from before the update to 740 over the course of two days, and finally reached 1000 after the final update had been published and the story had concluded. Though the website host Neocities doesn't show statistics revealing where these visits originated from, it can be assumed most visitors were led to the site from the Tumblr blog, where it was mainly advertised.

4.4.1 Comments and Tags

The posts on Mallard's blog also received comments in the form of Tumblr's tag system from various users who reblogged the post on their own blogs. Tumblr's

tag culture has many users voice their thoughts in the tags of the posts they reblog, allowing a discreet way for them to comment on the topic without leaving a permanent mark on it, which has made the practice rather universal in the site's ecosystem. The most feedback landed on the first official story post, which received largely positive comments from intrigued users, many of whom caught on to the story being fictional from the start, with notes such as "creepypasta or no i really want to know what happens next" and "i do not think this is real but that does not change the fact that i wanna see where it goes." The general attitude expressed curiosity and excitement towards the project, which was somewhat unexpected as I had prepared beforehand for cases where people might have pointed out inconsistencies in the story and denounced it fake.

4.5 Tumblr as a Storytelling Platform

The project brought up interesting aspects about the unique nature of Tumblr as a social media platform and how it has surprising suitability for specifically unfiction projects and other similar endeavours. Compared to its competitors Tumblr has a relatively small userbase, with 135 million active users and 574.2 million blogs (Tumblr n.d). The site gains its edge from allowing its users more freedom over the presentation and formatting of their posts and blogs, with the posts supporting text, images, video, and audio, and allowing the users to customize the appearance of their blogs on the web with HTML. This has shaped the platform into a place for creative efforts over the years as many users have taken advantage of Tumblr's unique features, the ability to send questions to other users through messages being a particularly popular one as it inspired the creation of "ask blogs," where other users could ask questions from fictional characters, either fully original ones or ones from popular media pieces. A phenomenon of blogs containing what is often described as unreality has also found a footing on the platform; realpokemon is at the time of writing a currently active blog that posts while pretending Pokémon are real creatures inhabiting the world we live in (realpokemon n.d), and Whitewater Lumber was a rather absurd blog for a lumber company that despised trees, with their most popular post being a picture of a tree being cut down with the caption "Fuck Trees" (whitewater-lumber-blog 2017). The prevalence and popularity of these types of blogs that encourage a

kind of play-pretending could hint at Tumblr having an edge over other social media platforms in terms of growing an audience willing to participate in unfiction projects, though places like TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube have much larger userbases in comparison to Tumblr and audiences more welcoming to the likes of monetized projects, which is a considerable advantage they have over the blogging platform. At the same time these larger platforms may not have allowed for the same kind of discoverability as Tumblr did, as the site's tag system allows users to search for the specific kind of content they're interested in seeing as long as this content is tagged accordingly. The lifecycle of Tumblr posts also tends to surpass the ones on other social media platforms, with posts made several years ago still being in regular circulation if they achieved a resemblance of virality at some point. Overall, the importance of Tumblr as a host for narrative projects would need to be researched more for definitive conclusions.

5 DISCUSSION

The original idea behind the thesis was to find out what makes stories on the internet convincing, but over the course of the project this focus shifted more towards ways of creating an engaging story instead of one that would fool its audience. It was also discovered that for an unfiction project it is much more important to invite the audience along for the ride that is the narrative as opposed to trying to fool them into thinking the events of the story are actually taking place. Most people would not believe that there are video games haunted by ghosts, or that there exists an organization designed to contain supernatural threats, or that guardian angels are real, but in the context of unfiction it is entertaining to pretend the impossible is unfolding in front of our eyes. The audiences of horror films do not believe that the events of their favourite films are real, but this does not detract from their enjoyment of the story. Similarly, the fans of unfiction do not tend to be fooled by the projects they engage with save for some rare exceptions, but this does not make these projects any less entertaining to follow. Though believability can help with making the story more interesting for the audience and show the care that went into creating it, the appeal in unfiction seems to stem more from its novel use of the internet for storytelling purposes, the interactivity and audience participation present in many projects, as well as its ability to step outside of the common tropes and formulas present in mainstream media. Additionally, the chosen platform for the project can affect its success in great degrees. Mallard would not have been able to succeed in the same capacity on other social media platforms due to the heavy reliance on text and images present in the posts the story consisted of and the relatively short development time of the story, making Tumblr the ideal platform to present the project on. Even before the narrative elements kicked in the blog received some minor attention from miscellaneous users, likely due to Tumblr's tag system which helped with discoverability, though as other platforms have more infamous content algorithms it is possible that Mallard would have found an audience elsewhere as well. The natures of different social media platforms for storytelling purposes and their core audience's attitudes towards storytelling projects presents an opportunity for further research into the topic of unfiction and online storytelling.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. The mallardmonster blog

<https://mallardmonster.tumblr.com/>

Appendix 2. Digital Dreams website

<https://mallard.neocities.org/>