# 3.

# Glitch Horror

## BEN Drowned and the Fallibility of Technology in Game Fan Fiction

**Emily E. Crawford**

## ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to define a burgeoning genre of transmedia narratives — "glitch horror" — using a popular "creepypasta" (a work of online horror fiction) entitled *BEN Drowned* as a primary source. The horror of *BEN Drowned* is rooted in the rhetoric of glitches, those infuriating moments when the failures of technology interrupt gameplay and otherwise distort the world

of a game. The emergence of the glitch horror genre and the popularity of narratives like *BEN Drowned* are manifestations of collective anxieties surrounding the fallibility and restrictions of digital technology; it is fiction about the fear of glitchy games, corrupted files, and bad coding. This paper explores glitch horror through the lenses of fan fiction and participatory culture, metafiction, the Freudian uncanny, the fallibility of technology, and fundamental rules of gaming and play.

## INTRODUCTION

*BEN Drowned* is a popular "creepypasta," an online horror story typically following the structure of an urban legend. One common source of these narratives, Creepypasta Wiki, describes its content as "essentially internet horror stories, passed around on forums and other sites to disturb and frighten readers." These tales are almost always told as though true, relying upon the reader's suspension of disbelief in order to frighten them. *BEN Drowned* is a creepypasta about a video game, *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* (Nintendo 2000).

This paper defines "glitch horror" as horror media that exploits anxieties surrounding the fallibility of technology. Examples can be found across media types, perhaps most commonly in film and digital games. The Japanese film, *Ringu* (1998), and its American adaptation, *The Ring* (2002), might be considered early glitch horror: in both films, a ghost possesses a videotape and many of the jump scares come from digital artifacts in the video or even televisions "glitching" and turning on by themselves. Many horror games incorporate self-referential moments of glitch horror; for example, in *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem*, crucial points

during gameplay are interrupted by fake "errors" such as TV static or even a "blue screen of death" (an error screen), making the horror hit close to home for the player (and potentially even tricking them into restarting their console and losing their place in the game) (Silicon Knights 2002).

Glitch horror is pervasive, but it has yet to be clearly defined as a genre in all of its nuance. There is, however, substantial scholarly work on the broader but closely-related topics of digital horror and media anxiety in horror. Linnie Blake and Xavier Aldana Reyes define digital horror in film as "any type of horror that actively purports to explore the dark side of contemporary life in a digital age governed by informational flows, rhizomatic public networks, virtual simulation and visual hyper-stimulation (2016, 3). Glitch Horror could be categorized as a sub-genre of this type of digital horror. Kristen Lacefield explores a similar type of media anxiety in the aforementioned *Ring* films, observing that they "rehearse many of the cultural anxieties of our time by means of a very simple tale of technology gone awry." (6) Lacefield connects the horror of technology in *The Ring* to cultural anxieties about new and evolving media technologies more generally, most notably citing Jeffrey Sconce's concept of "haunted media," or media to which we attribute a sense of presence and subjectivity (Lacefield 2010, 8; Sconce 2000). *BEN Drowned* is very much a story about haunted media, but its engagement specifically with the concept of glitch goes underexplored. *BEN Drowned* plays upon specific anxieties about not just technology, but the fallibility of technology, its inadequacies and limitations. The medium of a game as source of horror also introduces the factor of player agency as central to the intended function of the technology.

The emergence of the glitch horror genre and the popularity of narratives like *BEN Drowned* are manifestations of gamers' collective anxieties about the restrictions of digital game technology. The limitations inherent to the technology of games often produce unsettling simulations of people and behaviors that channel Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny (Brown and

Marklund 2015). The "horror" of *BEN Drowned* is further rooted in the rhetoric of glitches, those infuriating moments when the failures of technology interrupt gameplay, cause data loss, or otherwise distort the play experience, often exposing the uncanniness of virtual worlds in the process. The manipulations of the game that take place in *BEN Drowned* are eerie because they recall real glitches that plagued and still plague *Majora's Mask* players. The act of deleting a corrupted save file, which triggers the events of *BEN Drowned,* is all too familiar to many gamers and recalls negative lived experiences for many fans of the game. Readers of the story remember their own experiences negotiating the technological failings of a beloved game and bring those emotions into their reading.

For a story that began as a series of posts on 4chan.org, an online message and image board famous for weird, often controversial content, *BEN Drowned* has become immensely popular. Since it surfaced in 2010, the story of BEN has proliferated across the internet. Articles were written about it (Good 2010). Message boards were flooded with theories. Cosplays were even born. *BEN Drowned* has achieved such popularity and garnered such a large fan community in part because it expresses latent anxieties about the limitations and obscured inner workings of digital games, as well as gamers' uncanny, contradictory attraction to those frustrations.

In this paper, I first provide further context for *BEN Drowned* and summarize its plot. I then establish the story as a locus of participatory culture, as a work of fan fiction, and as a work of metafiction. Subsequently, I examine *BEN Drowned* through the theoretical lenses of accidental horror and the Freudian uncanny. I then explore the concept of media that express cultural anxieties, and specifically anxieties about the fallibility of technology. Next, I look at how the game in *BEN Drowned* breaks with Huizinga's concept of play, and examine the risks therein. Finally, I briefly reflect upon the cultural implications of glitch horror and the potential for future research.

## BEN DROWNED

*BEN Drowned* revolves around a haunted video game cartridge, specifically a copy of *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*. Like most creepypastas, it is written in the first person, presented as a true story of events that the original poster, who goes by the username "Jadusable," supposedly experienced. In September 2010, Jadusable posted the story to 4chan over the course of five posts (Good 2010). Over time, these posts became the popular and widely disseminated creepypasta, now typically found compiled into a single post. The posts are accompanied by YouTube videos that Jadusable recorded of his gameplay, making it a multimedia creepypasta.

In *BEN Drowned*, Jadusable is a college sophomore who has recently procured an old Nintendo 64 game console. In search of cartridges, he goes to a yard sale and stumbles upon an old copy of his favorite childhood game, *Majora's Mask*.

Upon playing the game, Jadusable notices there is an old save file titled "BEN." Jadusable begins his own game and soon starts noticing strange glitches. The non-player characters (NPCs) sometimes call him Ben instead of the name he has given his avatar, Link. Hoping to fix the problem, he deletes the save file named "BEN," to no avail. The dialogue in the game begins playing at the wrong time, "almost as if the game was trying to communicate with me." NPCs begin appearing in areas where they don't belong and events occur in areas where they were never meant to take place.

Attempting to exploit a known glitch in the game, Jadusable unlocks an altered version of the game's "Clock Town" area: it is completely empty of NPCs; textures are missing; the theme music plays backwards; laughter plays in the background when it shouldn't; and perhaps most eerily of all, Jadusable is unable to leave the area. When Jadusable tries to drown his avatar in hopes of spawning elsewhere, it triggers a flash of horrible images

and sounds constructed from real components of the game, all of which readers can experience for themselves through the attached gameplay video. The "Elegy of Emptiness" statue, an element from the game that looks like a simplified version of Link, appears and begins following Jadusable's avatar. The game glitches further, Link performing animations not from the game, the screen cutting to creepy images randomly, and the statue following the avatar all the while. Two other NPCs – the "Skull Kid" and the "Happy Mask Salesman" – begin to appear, behaving eerily and eventually attacking Jadusable's Link, killing him over and over again with death scenes that Jadusable doesn't recognize from the game. Jadusable is eventually returned to the title screen, where he sees that his save file has been renamed "YOUR TURN." The "BEN" save file also returns.

As the story unfolds, it becomes apparent that the game cartridge is possessed by the spirit of its previous owner, a boy named Ben. The cause of his death, a key part of the mystery, is revealed when a new save file named "DROWNED" appears after the save file "BEN." Jadusable writes: "The two save files told me his fate. As I suspected, Ben was dead. He had drowned. The game obviously isn't through with me – it taunts me with the new save files – it wants me to keep playing, it wants me to go further." The game, typically a source of comfort for him, has become a nightmare.

The penultimate post is supposedly written by Jadusable's roommate after Jadusable has dropped out of school due to psychological trauma, having spent all his time playing the game and obsessing over BEN. Then, in the final post, Jadusable returns, revealing that he lives in a single dorm room and that the previous post was written by BEN, who Jadusable claims has been possessing his computer, blocking his attempts to reveal the truth, "manipulating and changing the files." Jadusable has been sending hidden messages to the reader in the YouTube videos he uploaded by having Link equip specific items, creating a code, relying on the viewers' knowledge of the game. He is now finally able to

communicate freely because he is using a shared school computer, and writes that this is his last post and he is burning the cartridge.

With this final post, Jadusable attaches a text file of his notes, including conversations with BEN using a cleverbot, an online program that uses artificial intelligence algorithms to chat with users. These lengthy notes reveal the extent to which BEN was controlling Jadusable's communication with his readers, exposing the original poster as an unreliable narrator. They also introduce a number of subplots, including vague mentions of the "Moon Children," a cult somehow associated with BEN. He warns readers to download only the text file, and not to rip or capture the YouTube videos in any way for fear of spreading BEN.

After the final post, *BEN Drowned* morphed into an alternate reality game, expanding from the hidden codes in the YouTube videos. The threat of BEN became the greater threat of the "Moon Children," a mask-wearing suicide cult that seduces and then kills off its members. Although fascinating, the alternate reality game and the Moon Children fall outside of the scope of this paper; its focus is the popularly distributed creepypasta, consisting only of Jadusable's original five posts and their attachments.

## PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

*BEN Drowned*, as a work of fan fiction, is a part of the participatory culture surrounding *The Legend of Zelda*. In *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, Henry Jenkins outlines three trends in participatory online culture that help to explain the resonance of the creepypasta with *Zelda* fans:

1. New tools and technologies enable consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content;

2. a range of subcultures promote Do-It-Yourself (DIY) media production, a discourse that shapes how

consumers have deployed those technologies; and

3.  economic trends favoring the horizontally integrated
    media conglomerates encourage the flow of images,
    ideas, and narratives across multiple media channels
    and demand more active modes of spectatorship. (2006,
    135)

*BEN Drowned* is in itself appropriative media created and
disseminated exclusively via newer technologies or, more
specifically, democratized knowledge of technology. Alex Hall
(allegedly the man behind Jadusable and *BEN Drowned*) went
beyond being a mere consumer or fan of *Majora's Mask* by
manipulating the game and rewriting its code to create new media
content, an activity that is the epitome of DIY media production
and is only possible through the proliferation of amateur
knowledge of coding and game design (Hall 2014). Through the
inclusion of the YouTube videos, *BEN Drowned* capitalizes on the
technology and media available, encouraging active spectatorship
and diversifying the media through which the story is told. In these
ways, *BEN Drowned* has successfully engrossed and engaged
readers, making it one of the most well-known creepypastas about
games.

As T. L. Taylor demonstrates in *Play Between Worlds: Exploring
Online Game Culture*, fan activity outside of the game is an
essential part of its community-building. Taylor focuses
specifically on online fan communities, intent on revising
inadequate conceptions of internet culture, "the earlier
formulations that saw online life as simply always referring back
to the offline" (2006, 19). Taylor calls for online and offline
spheres to be viewed as interwoven and overlapping (2006, 19).
Fan fiction and creepypastas are part of extensive online
communities where people exchange stories and theories,
collaborate, and interact with texts. Their implications also extend
offline, as they express cultural anxieties that exist both online and
offline.

Shira Chess and Eric Newsom, in their examination of the "Slender Man" (a sort of urban legend who is the subject of many creepypastas), refer to this as the "open-sourcing" of horror conventions. This describes the participatory nature of these texts, the way in which online storytelling relies on voluntary participation and negotiation (Chess and Newsom 2015, 73-74). As prime examples of this, they cite the forums of the Something Awful community and the online lore surrounding the Slender Man. The online forums of Something Awful are where "The Slender Man was established, debugged, and negotiated through a complex set of generic, yet evolving, expectations" (Chess and Newsom 2015, 62). Although not composed by a collective author in the same way, *BEN Drowned* takes this "open-sourcing" of horror further still in that Alex Hall used open source software to modify the game as it appears in the associated YouTube videos (Hall 2014). *BEN Drowned* is therefore evidence of a larger open-sourcing of game fandom, in which individuals can modify their own favorite games, creating and sharing new experiences.

The fact that creepypastas are also collective narratives that are disseminated, annotated and commented upon by a large fan base is significant because it identifies *BEN Drowned* and narratives like it as complex, technology-aided negotiations of vast sums of information and influences. In *Uncreative Writing,* Kenneth Goldsmith looks at the ways in which technology, and particularly the internet, has become an integral part of the writing process. He describes a new poetics of appropriation in which "writers function more like programmers than traditional writers," gleaning ideas and text from across the internet, deconstructing and reassembling information by copying, pasting and otherwise recontextualizing it (Goldsmith 2011, 16-17). The sharing and reposting of *BEN Drowned* across internet forums is an essential part of the creepypasta medium, and broadens the cultural implications of the narrative. The anxieties about flawed technology expressed in the story are collective fears, validated and reinforced through repetition.

## FAN FICTION

*BEN Drowned* is a work of *Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* fan fiction at heart, in addition to being horror fiction. As Jana Rambusch, Tarja Susi, Stefan Ekman and Ulf Wilhelmsson have observed, narratives in fan fiction are cultural tools — they allow fans to learn about and participate in fan communities (2009). Understanding the creepypasta's role in stimulating community-building among *Legend of Zelda* fans is essential to understanding its popularity and influence over readers.

Although *BEN Drowned* is a multimedia work, it is built upon a framework of traditional text-based fiction, the written content of Jadusable's original posts. In "Fictional Worlds in the Digital Age," Marie-Laure Ryan discusses the creation of transfiction, or "producing and posting texts that complete, modify, or stretch in time the worlds of preexisting literary texts, or that transpose their plots and characters into new environments" (2008). Fan fiction falls squarely within this definition (Rambusch et al. 2009). Ryan observes that internet communities focused on transfiction can foster more participatory and imaginative interaction than video games themselves. Comment threads, YouTube videos, and the extended alternate reality game have all created an intensely participatory culture surrounding *BEN Drowned* that has taken on a life of its own under the umbrella of *Legend of Zelda* fan culture.

Fan fiction usually relies heavily on insider knowledge, and *BEN Drowned* is no exception (Rambusch et al. 2009). Jadusable's writing is steeped in game jargon and terminology that assumes the reader is intimately familiar with *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask*:

> Now, some of you more hardcore Majora's Mask players know about the "4th Day" glitch – for those who don't you can Google it but the gist of it is that right as the clock is about to hit 00:00:00 on the final day, you talk to the astronomer and look through the telescope. If you time it right the countdown disappears and you essentially have another day to finish whatever you were doing.

The story marks a distinction between established, recurring glitches that have become a part of the game for many fans, and unexpected, abnormal glitches. The 4th Day glitch is an "established" glitch, but those caused by BEN are not. This distinction is only possible through an intimate knowledge of preexisting glitches in *Majora's Mask,* which Jadusable possesses; by referring to "some of you more hardcore players," he at once invites the reader to share in his elite knowledge, and dismisses any potential readers who might be ignorant of such concepts (they "can Google it").

Rambusch, Susi, Ekman and Wilhelmsson observe that all game-based fan fiction shares the common factor of the game's environment. This typically means that "writers don't bother much with rich descriptions," but instead focus on "character development and player experiences." As they write, "The message to potential readers is, in other words, a very clear one: If you don't know the game, then don't read my stories; they won't make any sense to you" (2009, 5).

Fan fiction can illuminate the relationship between gameplay and narrative. It complicates dialogue between the two as it "moves the actual activity of playing a game back into the narrative space, and also hands back the narrative tool to the player (or fan fiction writer)" (Rambusch et al. 2009, 1). Fan fiction introduces a new type of interactivity to games and their communities in which players can interact with and manipulate the story itself, including pasts and futures not included in the original game.

Fan-crafted narratives also have the potential to facilitate the identification processes of players with their avatars. Reading extensive fan fiction and other media associated with a character from a game can "evoke underlying processes of identification and empathy with a character, something a game itself might not always fully provide" (Rambusch et al. 2009, 2). In *BEN Drowned*, this process of identification is twofold: readers identify with Jadusable, through the story's first-person narrative, and

Jadusable identifies with his avatar, Link, within the story, as Jadusable feels his fate and very safety is increasingly tied to him. He makes this explicit: "I had four hearts to my name and the Hero's Bow, but at this point I wasn't even considered [sic] for my avatar, I felt that I personally was in some kind of danger." Much of the horror of the story is rooted in this conflation of player and avatar identities, a common gaming experience with which the readers can then identify in turn.

## METAFICTION

It is crucial to note that *BEN Drowned* is not only a work of fan fiction, but of meta fan fiction, in that it is fiction about a fictional world (the game) that takes place within the real world. Meta fan fiction is a subset of metafiction, which James Cox defines as "Fiction that points out its own fictionality… fiction that is self-aware" (2014). He examines metafiction within games more broadly, but his classifications can be applied to game fan fiction as well.

The previously-mentioned game, *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem*, is a prime example of metafiction; it is what Cox terms "immersive metafiction," in that it includes "fakeouts" such as simulating that the player's save file is being deleted, incorporating the real world and the means of play into the fiction (Cox 2014). The cult popularity of this game endorses the idea that playing upon anxieties surrounding technological errors is compelling to gamers. The "Arsenal Gear" sequence in *Metal Gear Solid 2* (Konami 2001) is an example of Cox's "internal metafiction," in which the characters allude to a fourth wall but do not break it – suspicious but remaining ostensibly unaware that they are in a video game and thus keeping the metafiction self-contained (2014). In the sequence, an NPC begins to address the player, rather than their avatar, urging them to turn off the game console. The pervasiveness of metafiction in games is itself evidence that

game culture tends to be preoccupied with its underlying technologies.

According to Cox's rubric, *BEN Drowned* is a work of "external metafiction," in that within it, the developers (Alex Hall or BEN, depending on the level of fiction one examines) communicate directly and externally from the game with players, readers or viewers. Common examples of this in games are "Easter eggs": hidden messages or rewards left by developers for the most dedicated fans to find (Cox 2014). In the YouTube videos of *BEN Drowned*, Alex Hall hid secret codes meant to communicate with the viewers in a way not dissimilar from Easter eggs, although under fictional duress. This metafiction maintains externality because the creepypasta never reveals itself to be fiction.

Although *BEN Drowned* is an external metafiction at the broadest level, it contains elements of internal metafiction as well. In an example of this within the story, Jadusable notes that "Link turned to face my screen, standing upright mirroring the statue, looking at me along with his copy. Literally staring at me. Whatever was left of the 4th wall was completely shattered." The moment is unnerving because it disrupts the fictional game convention that a player "is" the avatar within the game world: the avatar itself is acknowledging the screen. The game within the story is behaving like metafiction as well in this moment.

## ACCIDENTAL HORROR

In "*Animal Crossing: New Leaf* and the Diversity of Horror in Video Games," Ashley Brown and Björn Berg Marklund investigate how non-horror games such as *Majora's Mask,* or in their example, *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (Nintendo 2013), can produce unsettling or scary experiences (2015). They find that these seemingly innocuous games can become eerie through clumsy simulations of reality and human behavior, limited player agency, and flawed systems of logic. Avatars and NPCs not behaving as they should, invisible walls, frustratingly constrained

choices, illogical circumstances: all of these frequent elements of games that betray that they are in fact games, and not reality, can "produce a type of horror that consists of a slowly creeping psychological dissonance" (Brown and Marklund, 2015, 2).

Brown and Marklund explore the accidental uncanny of their game via another creepypasta, *The Terrible Secret of Animal Crossing*, in which the author, Chewbot, exploits the illogical nature of the in-game world by explaining away its logical fallacies with sinister theories (2015, 2). Flawed logic, it seems, is a focal point for horror fan fiction about non-horror or kid-friendly games. In *BEN Drowned*, the strange logic of being "magically" transported to places becomes a part of the horror that BEN wreaks. In reality, there is little difference between how "fast travel" (teleportation that spares the player repetitive backtracking) works in *Majora's Mask* and many other games, and what happens to Jadusable's Link several times at the ghost's whim; but Jadusable marks these as aberrant, illogical events, because they don't follow "what's supposed to happen" in the game. One example is when he attempts to use the 4th Day glitch, and instead of traveling where he is "supposed to" (according to an established glitch, rather than the game developers' design), he is transported to the location of a difficult boss battle where BEN torments him.

The macabre themes of fan media about games such as *The Terrible Secret of Animal Crossing* and *BEN Drowned* reflect the powerful impact of uncanny or accidental horror in games (Brown and Marklund 2009). Brown and Marklund specifically analyzed player-NPC interactions based upon three themes prevalent in literature about traditional horror games: the loss of agency, the Freudian uncanny, and the Heideggerian uncanny; the first two are particularly relevant to *BEN Drowned*. "Loss of agency" usually entails fighting some sort of monster that is impeding agency, running and hiding, or both (Brown and Marklund 2015, Kirkland 2009). They also point out that "constrictions of agency and uncanny elements, which are central aspects in horror, are part of most games simply due to technology and interface restrictions."

However, in most horror games and in much of horror fan fiction, like *The Terrible Secret of Animal Crossing*, this loss of agency lies within the world of the game: one's avatar can't move freely because it doesn't have a weapon and there are monsters nearby, or because it is somehow trapped. In *BEN Drowned*, as a work of metafiction, the loss of agency also occurs at a level outside of the game, when Jadusable can no longer play his beloved game as intended.

## THE UNCANNY

In his influential 1919 essay "The Uncanny," Sigmund Freud defines that distinct fear of something that is familiar yet strange at the same time. He defines the uncanny as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (1976, 620). Uncanny horror requires a familiar element, like an old favorite video game (Brown and Marklund 2015, 4). As Brown and Marklund note, the Freudian uncanny is also both repetitive and pleasurable, eliciting a cycle of allure and repulsion:

> It is possible to recognize the dominance in the unconscious mind of a 'compulsion to repeat' proceeding from the instinctual impulses … a compulsion powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle, lending to certain aspects of the mind their daemonic character (Freud 1976, 632).

Games of all kinds, particularly challenging ones, inherently play upon this compulsion by motivating players to try difficult sequences over and over again, "punishing" themselves for pleasure. Difficulty settings such as "Nightmare Mode" in many contemporary games like *Doom* (id Software 2016) reflect this phenomenon by offering a torturous challenge for even the most experienced players. The familiarity of the game becomes a part of the horror as the repetition becomes tiring and frustrating, yet players will "die" over and over again to beat a level.

Jadusable actually makes the Freudian nature of his work explicit at one point. In the beginning of the story, he procures the *Majora's Mask* cartridge from a vaguely sinister old man at a yard sale. The man also has a pile of Rorschach test inkblots for sale, one of which reminds Jadusable strangely of Majora's mask in the game – before the man even shows him the cartridge: "I just thought that since I was secretly hoping to find that game at these garage sales, some Freudian bullshit was projecting itself into the inkblots, but given the events that happened afterward I'm not so sure now" (2010). The uncanny resemblance of the inkblots to the mask in the game is the first substantial hint in the story that a deeper conspiracy is afoot, foreshadowing the psychological horror to come.

The scariness of the Elegy of Emptiness statue, the main in-game aggressor in *BEN Drowned*, can be explained using the concept of the uncanny valley, as introduced by Masahiro Mori in 1970. The "uncanny valley" refers to the phenomenon in which human approximations that approach, but do not achieve, verisimilitude can be off-putting or even scary. If one graphs the relationship between affinity, or acceptance of a facsimile, and human likeness, the acceptance of an entity rises gradually as likeness increases, but plummets steeply before rising again towards total acceptance of perfect human likeness (Mori 1970). As discussed by Ewan Kirkland, many avatars can be considered uncanny representations of human beings, and intentional horror games often exploit this fact (2009). Brown and Marklund extend this to NPCs as well, with their "glassy, dead-eyed stare … combined with their programmed and zombie-like movement patterns" (2014, 5).

The Elegy of Emptiness statue, a statue that appears in the game when Link plays a specific song, looks like the character Link, but simplified, like a doll. Much of the horror within the story comes from this statue's interactions with Jadusable's avatar. Jadusable frequently refers to its "haunting facial expression," and at one point compares it to the "Weeping Angels" from *Dr. Who*, malicious statues that can only attack people when they are not

being watched, often appearing out of nowhere in jump scares (2007). In the YouTube videos, Jadusable makes use of similar jump scares with the Elegy of Emptiness statue. This uncanny resemblance to the avatar, and the inherent unnaturalness of a statue, an approximation of life behaving like a living entity, further contributes to the horror in *BEN Drowned*.

## THE HORROR OF FALLIBLE TECHNOLOGY

Brown and Marklund found that fear in games can often come not from monsters or jump scares, but from playing upon common, everyday anxieties (2009, 5). Subtle themes of debt, isolation, persecution or societal pressures can infuse even the most innocent-seeming of games with subtle (or not-so-subtle) horror. As a result, works of fan fiction about these games often serve as vessels for these types of anxiety, as in *The Terrible Secret of Animal Crossing* (Brown and Marklund, 2009). `

Chess and Newsom further explore the way that online horror fiction and the communities that create it explore cultural anxieties through the connotations they evoke, lending expression to shared concerns and common frustrations (2015, 21). Horror generally functions on metaphorical levels, evoking common fears and inner conflicts like those of the unknown, of the other, or of oneself (Chess and Newsom 2015, 51). Like the Slender Man, *BEN Drowned* is a product of digital spaces; perhaps more so in that the plot unfolds across them within the story as well. It plays upon broad, existential anxieties like most horror, but it also explores anxieties specific to technology and its failures, especially online and in games. These anxieties have roots in the technological fallibility of games — their vulnerability to glitches, bugs, pop-ins, and corrupted files.

The *Legend of Zelda* series, and *Majora's Mask* in particular, as an older, more obscure entry in the franchise, often connotes nostalgia for the days of older consoles like the Nintendo 64 that Jadusable has so proudly procured. There is a connection between video

game nostalgia and glitch culture: contemporary games that seek a retro feel will often simulate the glitches of older games and systems (Altice 2015, 4). In *I Am Error*, Nathan Altice observes that the glitches and technical flaws that plagued the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) and Nintendo Family Computer (Famicom) consoles became a part of gaming culture, embraced by players and game developers alike. Glitches can expand the experience of play, and even take on mythic roles, such as in the case of the "4th day glitch" that Jadusable references in *BEN Drowned* (Altice 2015, 4).

The net art community has been exploring the aesthetics of glitches for some time. One notable example is JODI's "Max Payne Cheats Only," a gameplay compilation of "cheats," or unlockable options hidden by developers that alter gameplay in some way, from the game *Max Payne* (JODI 2004; Remedy Entertainment 2001). As the player executes these cheats, the graphics in *Max Payne* glitch spastically in a variety of ways, the avatar stuck partially in a wall, or the camera peering inside of the avatar, revealing planes of texture where there should be flesh. Another example is Eva and Franco Mattes' "Synthetic Performances," in which the artists gave online performances in the virtual world *Second Life* (Linden Lab 2003); graphics distort and cut through one other as the artists' avatars writhe in midair or incessantly repeat animations as though stuck in a feedback loop (Mattes 2009-2010). The visual flaws and errors in these works become mesmerizing as the viewer watches uncannily realistic avatars behave contrary to the laws of physics and anatomy, evoking a fascinated unease in the viewer. The horror of the YouTube videos in *BEN Drowned* operates similarly to these works, as the avatar's strange animations disturb Jadusable and the viewer.

## WHEN THE GAME STOPS BEING FUN

*BEN Drowned* also plays upon fears and anxieties about games breaking the rules of play – becoming involuntary, addictive, even life-threatening. Part of the "horror" of the story comes from the game not behaving like a game should. As established by Johan Huizinga, play must be voluntary, able to be deferred or suspended, and never imposed by physical need or moral duty. Play cannot be a task, disinterested, or appetitive, but must be limited, confined (1955). When Jadusable begins to fear for his real safety, the game within the story breaks these rules; it does so further when BEN escapes the confines of the console and begins controlling Jadusable's computer.

Video games have the potential to break with Huizinga's definition of play when they become too addictive or take on a role in the player's life that is no longer playful, as is possible with any type of game. *BEN Drowned* exploits anxieties surrounding this as well. As the story progresses, Jadusable supposedly withdraws from society; in the final post, when thanking his fans, he writes: "This semester I really didn't have any friends, or rather, I stopped paying attention to them." By playing upon the trope of the addicted, antisocial gamer, the story triggers societally-induced anxieties in the reader about realizing this stereotype.

Ultimately, one of the risks inherent to creepypastas and certain other forms of horror fiction is that they can be interpreted as truth on a level not intended by the author. Chess and Newsom's book documents a case in which two young girls attacked another, claiming to act upon the directions of the Slender Man, about whom they had been reading creepypastas (2015). Luckily, there have been no major incidents involving *BEN Drowned*; however, even a cursory skimming of online forums about the story reveals that its readers occasionally fall victim to the same misunderstanding. One Reddit commenter begins:

> Okay, so in case you can't tell by the title, I don't believe the Ben
> Drowned Creepypasta. It could easily have been made using hacks,
> and I feel this is the most likely explanation. In fact, my friends
> and I generally make fun of it by naming our save files in Majora's
> Mask "Ben". However, of all these times, I did find something once.
> Something that made me think that maybe there's some truth to the
> Ben Drowned story… (GingahNinja47 2014)

It is unclear whether this commenter is genuinely suspicious that
BEN may be real, or simply composing his own creepypasta –
he goes on to claim he has been plagued by strange images from
the story while browsing the internet. Regardless, his story is
part of the ever-expanding fiction that is *BEN Drowned*, which
is presented as truth, debunked as fiction, then re-theorized to
be true in a different way. These activities ironically support the
very anxieties about the fallibility of technology that make *BEN
Drowned* scary – in short, readers, like the Reddit commenter
above, end up convincing themselves to be scared, constructing
new, supposedly "truthful" realities on top of fictional realities
that have been proven to be such. This is true of both genuinely
confused fans of creepypastas, and *knowingly* fictional
creepypastas about other creepypastas, as may be the case with the
aforementioned Reddit commenter. On the internet, there is rarely
a reliable way to tell the difference.

## CONCLUSION

By incorporating the hallmarks of technology-related frustrations
like glitches and other limitations inherent to digital games, *BEN
Drowned* uncannily plays upon the all-too-familiar feelings such
events can evoke in gamers. The story also evokes connotations,
both negative and positive, associated with the immersive nature
of videogames. At one point Jadusable writes: "Not even once
did the thought of turning off the console occur to me, I don't
know why, I was so wrapped up in it – the terror felt all so
real." This personal investment in the characters and events of a

game is familiar to almost any gamer, and its presence as a theme throughout the story further explains the creepypasta's popularity.

As T.L. Taylor asserts, "What happens in virtual worlds often is just as real, just as meaningful, to participants" as that which happens in reality (2006, 19). The stories told in and about these worlds have meaning as well, as manifestations of culturally dominant preoccupations and fears (Chess and Newsom 2015, 51). *BEN Drowned* is one of many stories that share themes related to the fallibility of technology; these stories make up an emerging transmedia genre, glitch horror. The increasing prevalence of glitch horror narratives is significant because they express cultural anxieties surrounding the restrictions of digital technology. These anxieties influence society and culture; consciously or not, they help shape our opinions and decisions, and are therefore worth recognizing, exploring, and understanding.

There is significant further research to be done on the genre of glitch horror, new *BEN Drowned*s and associated fan communities to be discovered and explored. Also ripe for further investigation is the relationship between the contradictory attraction and repulsion of the uncanny, and creepypasta fans' desires to scare themselves and to believe scary stories to be true.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Altice, N. *I Am Error: The Nintendo Family Computer/ Entertainment System Platform*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2015.

Blake, L. and Aldana Reyes, X. "Introduction: Horror in the Digital Age." In *Digital Horror: Haunted Technologies, Network Panic and the Found Footage Phenomenon*. Ed. L. Blake and X. Aldana Reyes. New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 2016. 1-13.

Brown, A. and Marklund, B. "Animal Crossing: New Leaf and the Diversity of Horror in Video Games." In *Proceedings of the*

*2015 DiGRA International Conference*. http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/160_BrownMarklund_Animal-Crossing.pdf.

Chess, S. and E.Newsom. *Folklore, Horror Stories, and the Slender Man: The Development of an Internet Mythology*. New York, NY: Palgrave Pivot, 2015.

Cox, J. "The Four Types of Metafiction in Videogames." *Gamasutra*. 6 October 2014. http://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/JamesCox/20141006/227006/The_Four_Types_of_Metafiction_in_Videogames.php.

"Creepypasta Wiki: What Is Creepypasta?" *Creepypasta Wiki*. http://creepypasta.wikia.com/wiki/Creepypasta_Wiki:What_Is_Creepypasta%3F.

*Dr. Who*. "Blink." Dir. Hettie Macdonald. Written by Steven Moffat. British Broadcasting Company (BBC). 9 June 2007.

Freud, S. "The "Uncanny." In *New Literary History,* vol. 7, no. 3 (1976): 619.

GingahNinja47. "Ben Drowned: The True Story." Posted to Reddit in 2014. https://www.reddit.com/r/creepypasta/comments/1y52w5/ben_drowned_the_true_story/.

Goldsmith, K. *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011.

Good, O. "The Haunting of a Majora's Mask Cartridge." *Kotaku*. 11 September 2010. http://kotaku.com/5635521/the-haunting-of-a-majoras-mask-cartridge.

Hall, A. "I am Jadusable, creator of the Haunted Majora's Mask Creepypasta, director/writer of Methods of Revolution, AMA." Posted to Reddit in 2012.https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/

comments/tphqf/
i_am_jadusable_creator_of_the_haunted_majoras/.

Huizinga, J. *Homo ludens: A study of the play-element in culture*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1955.

id Software. *Doom* [PlayStation 4, Xbox One, PC Computer]. Bethesda Softworks, 2016.

Jadusable. "BEN Drowned." Originally published September 7-10, 2010 at 4chan.org. http://creepypasta.wikia.com/wiki/BEN_Drowned.

Jenkins, H. *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*. London, U.K.: New York University Press, 2006.

JODI. "Max Payne Cheats Only." 2004. http://maxpaynecheatsonly.jodi.org/.

Kirkland, E. "Horror Videogames and the Uncanny." In *Proceedings of DiGRA 2009,* Brunel University, U.K. http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/09287.25453.pdf

Konami Computer Entertainment Japan. *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty* [PlayStation 3, PlayStation 2, Xbox, Xbox 360, PlayStation Vita, PC Computer]. Konami, 2001. Played March 2017.

Lacefield, K, ed.*The Scary Screen: Media Anxiety in the Ring*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010. 1-25.

Linden Lab. *Second Life* [PC, Mac, Linux, Online Game]. Linden Lab, 2003. Played March 2017.

Mattes, E. and F. *Synthetic Performances*. 2009-2010. http://0100101110101101.org/synthetic-performances/.

Mori, M. "The Uncanny Valley." in *Energy*, 7, no. 4 (1970): 33–35.

Nintendo Entertainment Analysis & Development. *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* [Nintendo 64, Wii, GameCube]. Nintendo, 2000. Played April 2017.

Nintendo Entertainment Analysis & Development. *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* [Nintendo 3DS]. Nintendo, 2013.

ProtonJon. "Let's Play Superman 64 – Stage 4." YouTube video, 26 minutes 29 seconds. Posted 2 January 2011.https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pirnxPT8ogA.

Rambusch, J., T. Susi, S. Ekman, and U. Wilhelmsson. "A Literary Excursion into the Hidden (Fan) Fictional Worlds of Tetris, Starcraft, and Dreamfall." In *Proceedings of DiGRA 2009*, Brunel University, U.K.http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/09287.39358.pdf

Remedy Entertainment. *Max Payne* [PC Computer, PS2, Xbox, Gameboy Advance]. Gathering of Developers, 2001. Played May 2017.

*The Ring*. Dir. Gore Verbinski. Dreamworks, 2002. DVD.

*Ringu*. Dir. Hideo Nakata. Basara Pictures, 1998. DVD.

Ryan, M. "Fictional Worlds in the Digital Age." In *A Companion to Digital Literary Studies*. Ed. Susan Schreibman and Ray Siemens. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008.http://digitalhumanities.org/companion/view?docId=blackwell/9781405148641/9781405148641.xml&chunk.id=ss1-5-7&toc.id=0&brand=9781405148641_brand.

Sconce, J. *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000.

Silicon Knights. *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* [GameCube, PC Computer] Nintendo, 2002. Played February 2017.

Taylor, T. L. *Play between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006.

Titus Interactive SA. *Superman* [Nintendo 64, PlayStation]. Titus Interactive SA, 1999.