

Creepypastas

The Evolution of Folklore in the Internet Age

[SAWYER KUZMA]

For millennia, stories of monsters lurking in the shadows have haunted the imaginations of people around the world. For as long as they have been around, monsters have acted as guides for cultural fears and anxieties, allowing a space for uncertainty about change to be expressed and validated. In the modern day, this phenomenon of creating beasts as an outlet for our cultural anxieties has not halted; rather, the internet has created a space that allows for rapid communication across wide distances, enabling stories of monsters to be created by and spread to millions of people. Creepypasta, a term for the genre of internet-based horror stories that have emerged in the past eighteen years, leads the charge of digital horror. The genre is defined by its audience participation, wherein large communities of people come together to express new cultural fears created by the rapid technological growth experienced from the 1990s to the present day. The emergence of creepypastas as an internet-based form of horror writing is a result of the increasing anxiety surrounding new technology and the dangers such technologies pose, especially to children. As outlets for the collective fears of their readers, creepypastas follow the trends of folklore in their conception and distribution. The stories “Candle Cove” and those about the character Slenderman are examples of creepypastas that not only relay cultural fears but represent the collaborative nature of creepypastas as a genre.

Elements of Creepypastas

As new horror stories are created and refined, so too is the terminology used to discuss them. The term “creepypasta” is coined from the word “copypas-

ta," a portmanteau, or combination, of the words "copy" and "paste."¹ Copypastas are memes that are, as the name suggests, copied and pasted across platforms. Similarly, creepypastas are short stories that are copied across the internet. However, creepypastas are differentiated from copypastas by their status as horror stories rather than inside jokes.

Folklore, a concept often applied to creepypastas by scholars, is a complex social mechanism that has garnered many different definitions and implications in the nearly two centuries since its conception. McMahon credits the creation of this phrase to William Thoms who first used the term in a letter to *The Athenaeum* in 1846.² Folklore is loosely defined by McMahon as, "an umbrella term for stories that are transmitted from one person to another. Examples include conspiracy theories, fairy tales and ghost stories."³ Today, the transmission of folk narratives throughout communities, which was traditionally done through oral communication, has become extraordinarily efficient as the internet allows for the anonymous and speedy sharing of ideas.⁴ Related to folklore, memorates, or personal narratives that relay one's firsthand experience of a "supernormal event," are the building blocks with which folk narratives and legends are built.⁵ These narratives then have the potential to be retold, built upon, and potentially become legends over time.⁶ Creepypastas imitate this process of legend-making as the horror stories undergo constant revision and reimagining by their audiences.

Collaboration is a necessary part of legend-making. As Boyer writes, legends must be a "communal event" where the audience has as much of a role as the narrator.⁷ In the case of creepypastas, their development is always communal as the genre is defined by "the traditional roles of the addresser and addressee [being] broken – the text becomes the object of collective creativity because [...] commenters contribute to the final story."⁸ Each different user's version of the story

1 Jessica Balanzategui, "Creepypasta, 'Candle Cove', and the Digital Gothic," *Journal of Visual Culture* 18, no. 2 (14 August 2019), 187–208, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412919841018>, 188.

2 James McMahon, "The Internet Myth That Nearly Led to Murder - and Changed Folklore Forever," *Prospect Magazine*, (18 July 2018), <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/culture/41479/the-internet-myth-that-nearly-led-to-murder-and-changed-folklore-forever>.

3 McMahon, "The Internet Myth."

4 Balanzategui, "Creepypastas," 187.

5 William J. Dewan, "A Saucerful of Secrets': An Interdisciplinary Analysis of UFO Experiences," *Journal of American Folklore* 119, no. 472 (2006), 184–202. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jaf.2006.0020>.

6 Dewan, "Saucerful," 187.

7 Tina M. Boyer, "The Anatomy of a Monster: The Case of Slender Man," *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural* 2, no. 2 (2013), 240–261. <https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/preternature.2.2.0240>, 244.

8 Anton Chornobyl'skyi, Oksana Kyrylova, Oleksandr Krup'skyi, and Liudmyla Khotiun. "Social Sharing of Emotions in Social Media System on the Example of Creepypasta on Reddit," *Information & Media* 96, (2023), 65–79. <https://doi.org/10.15388/Im.2023.96.66>, 72.

– memorates, perhaps – builds upon the base narrative, eventually amounting to a “legend” known by millions of internet users even years after its first creation.⁹ In an age of never-ending sharing and collaboration on the internet, creepypastas are a representation of the creative spirit that fuels the online world.

As for the origins of these internet-based tales, creepypastas are unique to many other forms of literature in that they are seldom published professionally and rely heavily on community interaction to be fully developed. Because of these traits, creepypastas are often born on forum websites such as Reddit, 4chan, or more obscure sites like the Something Awful forum and Creepypasta.org.¹⁰ Forum-based sites such as these allow readers to assume a much more active role in storytelling than other forms of media.

The presence of such an active audience spawns from the origins of the genre. Creepypastas first emerged on the internet in 2007 on the anonymous forum website 4chan.¹¹ The forums and chat boards of 4chan had a great influence on the collaborative nature of creepypastas as users were easily able to add to, comment on, or dispute details in a given story. As Balanzategui writes, “4chan’s ephemeral dynamics are well suited to the folkloric cycles of production that underpin Creepypasta, as a tale’s origins are anonymous and often quickly erased or obscured, extending the practices of oral folk culture into the digital age.”¹² Not only is the role of the audience important in creepypastas, but some argue that it is, in fact, a necessary element of the genre. As Boyer claims, the role of the audience in the creation of creepypastas is integral to which stories perform well and are spread to other sites, similar to the traditional process of folk narratives and the formation of legends, which require sharing amongst a community.¹³

Creepypastas have far surpassed the original stories written on forums in the 2000s due to the enormous audience surrounding the genre. Fan communities have spawned additional theories, narratives, and characters that expand past the confines of written works. Visual media, from YouTube videos to elaborate fan art, are largely responsible for this growth and are at the helm of much of the community-based narrative building that occurs within creepypastas. Through these mediums, communities are able to push forward the narrative themes and devices that they find the most compelling. In doing so, creepypasta fans have shaped the genre, proving the importance of the audience in digital horror.

Part of what makes creepypastas so captivating to their audiences is the way they play with the boundaries of reality. While creepypastas are fictional stories, the genre is noted for its loyalty to cultivating a sense of reality in its

9 Jay Bird, “A Look Back at Old CREEPYPASTAS (Retrospective)” [Video], *YouTube*, 30 April 2023, <https://youtu.be/hdudFFzCMOI?si=1BXbChFodxop9rFQ>, 21:52.

10 Chornobylskyi, “Social Sharing”.

11 Balanzategui, “Creepypastas,” 188.

12 Balanzategui, “Creepypastas,” 189.

13 Boyer, “Slender Man,” 244.

narratives. Stories are based in plausible events, only asking the reader to partially suspend belief in order for the tales to have an impact. Creepypastas are characterized by “attempts to depict the experiences they describe as plausible and are invested in establishing [...] an ‘atmosphere of belief’ – ‘a context in which tellers and audiences of supernatural narratives may be open to the possibility that a supernatural narrative is real.’”¹⁴ Because of this toying with reality and the first-person point of view that is often utilized in creepypastas, readers are more easily able to place themselves in the shoes of the character. The game of jump-rope with reality that creepypastas play is not meant to trick audiences, but rather invite them to engage with alternative ideas about the world. Henriksen writes about this trend: “Most creepypastas’ claims to authenticity, however, are tongue-in-cheek [...] This playful engagement with authenticity claims and hoaxes may be why creepypastas have become increasingly popular in the twenty-first century.”¹⁵ One of the core tenets of creepypastas, created by the Reddit forum r/nosleep, puts it best: “Everything is true here, even if it’s not.”¹⁶

Cultural Anxieties Portrayed by Creepypastas: Slenderman and Candle Cove

Creepypastas, just like any other form of horror content, are reflective of cultural anxieties and fears. The fears portrayed in many creepypastas are centered around the dangers of technology and the corruption of childhood innocence. As Izzzyzzzz (2023) writes of internet horror in the late 2000s and early 2010s, “In these early stages [the 2000s], internet horror was niche and hard to stumble upon [...] The fact that this content was difficult to find and not well known made it all the more scarier as one felt the sense that they had walked in on something they were not meant to see.”¹⁷ Combined with cultural anxieties about technology, this secretive nature made creepypastas uniquely horrifying, especially considering the semi-realism that the stories portray.

One story that captivated the masses and expressed cultural fears perhaps more than any other creepypasta was that of Slenderman, a character who served as the motivation in the attempted murder of a twelve-year-old girl. Slenderman originates from the Something Awful forum, which held a Photoshop contest on June 10, 2009 for the “scariest paranormal image.”¹⁸ The character,

14 Amy Pattee, “[A] story about a child is scarier than one about an adult roughly 80% of the time”: Creepypasta, Children’s Media, and the Child in Media Discourse,” *Childhood* 29, no. 2 (21 April 2022), 204–218. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09075682221093843>, 206.

15 Line Henriksen, “‘Spread the Word’: Creepypasta, Hauntology, and an Ethics of the Curse,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 87, no. 1 (2018), 266–280. <https://doi.org/10.3138/utq.87.1.266>, 267.

16 r/nosleep. Reddit. (n.d.). <https://www.reddit.com/r/nosleep/>.

17 Izzzyzzzz, “The Nostalgia Of Old YouTube Horror” [Video], *YouTube*, 28 April 2023, <https://youtu.be/sd6uB30WVv0?si=pj82WKPKJK3FYLy>, 2:35–4:50.

18 Boyer, “Slender Man,” 243.

created by user “Victor Surge” and submitted to the contest, appears as an abnormally tall and skinny man in a black suit, his face pure white and void of any defining features. Surge’s original images of Slenderman, which depicted the creature watching children play from afar, included captions that implied the monster had killed the children by luring them towards him.¹⁹ This portrayal of a paranormal monster that stalks its victims from the shadows and/or seeks to harm children is common in many creepypastas, including well-known stories such as “Jeff the Killer” and “Laughing Jack,” which feature monsters that specifically hunt children, especially at night.²⁰ Slenderman’s preference for stalking children is, due to his status as a monster, a reflection of the cultural anxieties of the time. Boyer writes of the themes that made Slenderman’s character so alluring to audiences, stating, “Slender Man’s physiognomy and uncanny behavior aside, the narratives that were inspired by his existence shared similar themes, predominantly amnesia, paranoia, insomnia, lack of control, and inability to make sense of the world.”²¹ These fears, as will be discussed later, were common in the world at the time, causing Slenderman to become a particularly horrifying and gripping narrative for many. The corruption of children via the expanding unknowns of the internet terrified many, and this is seen in countless creepypastas.

In the case of Slenderman, however, fears about the corruption of childhood innocence were not entirely unfounded. In 2014, then twelve-year-old Morgan Geyser and Anissa Weier attempted to murder their classmate Payton Leutner by repeatedly stabbing her as a sacrifice to Slenderman.²² As Pattee writes, “Geyser and Weier were convinced that Slender Man was not only real but also that he represented a threat to their friends and family,” and that the only way to appease him was to bring him an offering in the form of their friend.²³ Although Payton survived the attack and made a full recovery, the story sparked outrage across the United States as parents called for the forum to be “taken down or blocked [...] although the site itself has long urged parents to monitor how their children use the site.”²⁴ While many reacted to the contents of creepypastas with intrigue and excitement, the popular cultural response to Leutner’s attempted murder displays the anger that can result from these narratives. Such anger proves how deeply themes of childhood innocence and corruption resonate within our culture.

The social outrage that resulted from the Slenderman stabbing was not a surprising outcome for many. The “Subverted Kids Shows,” or SKS sub-genre

19 Boyer, “Slender Man,” 243.

20 Jay Bird, “A Look Back.”

21 Boyer, “Slender Man,” 256.

22 Pattee, “Children’s Media,” 204.

23 Pattee, “Children’s Media,” 205.

24 Farhad Manjoo, “Urban Legends Told Online,” *The New York Times*, (9 July 2014), <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/10/technology/personaltech/slender-man-story-and-the-new-urban-legends.html>.

of creepypastas has long played on this cultural fear of childhood corruption, as seen in “Candle Cove,” a creepypasta written in 2009 by Kris Straub.²⁵ This sub-genre, Pattee writes, portrays disturbing perversions of kids shows and resembles “‘media panic’ – ‘highly emotionally charged and morally polarized’ public debates about the effects of new media and technology on the populace in general and on young people more specifically.”²⁶ “Candle Cove” tells the story of internet users coming together on the fictional “Net Nostalgia Forum,” a parody of real-life websites that feature nostalgic content.²⁷ It is on this forum that a group of adults recount the events of *Candle Cove*, a television show that they recall watching as children. As the story progresses, the remembered details of the show grow darker and darker until it is eventually revealed via the mother of a forum member that the show had never existed; the children were simply watching static on their televisions and making up stories about a so-called “Candle Cove.”²⁸ The horror of this story is built in the shared hallucination between the users who were strangers until they encountered one another on the forum. This short story not only challenges the popular idea of nostalgia by warping supposedly happy memories into horrifying hallucinations but also opposes the notion that children are innocent and lacking in agency. As Pattee writes (in the aptly named article “A story about a child is scarier than one about an adult”), the SKS genre “affects a critique of the constructed and constructive child typically constituted in discussions of children and their engagement with mass media that both disputes and secures the figure of the innocent child implied by both discourses.”²⁹ Following the “stranger danger” panic of the 1990s, it is no wonder that society was so concerned with the safety of children, especially in the unfamiliar environment of the internet. However, “Candle Cove” takes this anxiety and turns it around, claiming that children are not nearly as vulnerable as many believe.

Pattee’s critique of “childhood innocence” can also easily be applied to the situation surrounding Slenderman and the subsequent 2014 stabbing as adults around the world called for the protection of children without acknowledging the fact that their children had been the ones to seek out these stories in the first place. The agency of children is a topic that is extremely controversial and has an impact on almost every political issue. Creepypastas are able to take this complex topic and incorporate it in stories that express these fears without placing blame on the internet as a medium. Rather, harm in these stories is caused by an unknown otherworldly entity that has invaded spaces believed to be safe. By incorporating fear in such a way, creepypastas not only express cultural anxieties and allow readers to work through them but also provide their audiences with an alternative viewpoint that challenges common beliefs about the internet

25 Pattee, “Children’s Media,” 207.

26 Pattee, “Children’s Media,” 211.

27 Balanzategui, “Creepypastas,” 197.

28 Kris Straub, “Candle Cove,” *Ichor Falls*, 2009, <http://ichorfalls.chainsawsuit.com/>.

29 Pattee, 207.

and children. In doing so, the genre fulfills its duty as an extension of folklore.

Popular Media: The Response to Internet Horror

As a result of their relevance to societal concerns and application to the real world, creepypastas have gained the attention of not only millions of readers but also movie studios and news outlets. A testament to the popularity of creepypastas and other internet horror stories, r/nosleep, which is home to many such stories, has gained 18 million members as of January 2025, up from the 15 million that Chornobylskyi et al. observed in 2023.³⁰ The genre's history has also gained the attention of multiple YouTubers, such as Izzzyzzz and Jay Bird, who have compiled multiple videos each about the origins and evolution of creepypastas. While Jay Bird discusses the various popular creepypastas and how they influence each other, Izzzyzzz speaks to the artistic side of the genre and its perception today, giving the example of the short horror video "Salad Fingers" to say:

"Salad Fingers' had started as more of a joke, creepy, weird, gross-out video to show friends at school, but over time it developed into so much more. Viewers went from brushing it off as a simple goofy animation to taking it seriously as a piece of art, weaving the tale together, connecting the dots, and spending hours collaborating with others to put the story together. Which is something that I really appreciate about the horror climate today. The genre is taken a lot more seriously."³¹

Izzzyzzz claims that the early days of YouTube horror, alongside written horror stories such as "Jeff the Killer," "Eyeless Jack," and "Laughing Jack," as described by Jay Bird, has had an enormous impact on current-day internet horror.³² Not only that, but creepypastas have slowly become a respected art genre on many sites as famous stories become classics, even achieving "legend" status for internet users.

Despite the acceptance of creepypastas by much of the online community, as described by Izzzyzzz, the genre, like many other internet phenomena, is often not taken seriously by the popular press. In an article about the genre, Roy highlights the "weird" nature of creepypastas and describes the evolution of the medium as such: "First they were called chain emails, and they were sent by people like your weird aunt who always wore a Big Dog t-shirt."³³ Roy also commented on the username of a Creepypasta.com admin, derpbutt, saying "Yep, that's the name he uses," after introducing the user as a source.³⁴ This attitude, coming from

30 Chornobylskyi, "Social Sharing," 71.

31 Izzzyzzz, "Nostalgia," 31:57.

32 Izzzyzzz, "Nostalgia."

33 Jessica Roy, "Behind Creepypasta, the Internet Community That Allegedly Spread a Killer Meme," *Time*, (3 June 2014), <https://time.com/2818192/creepypasta-copyypasta-slenderman/>.

34 Roy, "Internet Community."

an author of a prominent magazine such as *Time*, reveals the incredulousness with which general audiences viewed creepypastas at the height of their popularity. Similarly, in an article described by Roy as the point at which “creepypasta hit peak popularity,”³⁵ Considine describes creepypastas as “bite-sized bits of scariness that have joined the unending list of things-to-do-when-you’re-bored-at-work.”³⁶ While Considine’s article allows more credit to the genre than Roy’s and spends time considering what makes the stories so compelling, it still carries an air of criticism and implies that creepypastas are not a “serious” form of literature. This idea is contested by an admin of the Creepypasta Wiki who, when questioned about the potential negative impact of the stories on children, said “We are a literature site, not a crazy satanic cult.”³⁷ Clearly, in the eyes of creepypasta authors and readers, the genre is something they take seriously.

The Folkloric Nature of Creepypastas

As conduits for cultural anxieties and concerns, creepypastas are inherently social creations. Many scholars, such as Balanzategui, Boyer, Chornobylskyi et al., and Cooly and Milligan, believe that, because of this social nature, creepypastas are an evolved form of folklore that has been adapted for the internet era. Balanzategui writes that creepypastas are a “folkloric type of storytelling” that aligns with traditional ghost stories and urban legends.³⁸ The communal nature of the genre, as described above, also builds the argument that creepypastas are related to folklore and legends as a social pattern.

The process of folkloric categorization explained by Balanzategui falls in line with the rules of r/nosleep. Founded in 2010, r/nosleep played a fundamental role in the development of the creepypasta genre as the rules of the subreddit defined how stories were told; Chornobylskyi et al. describe this process: “The main stylistic feature of the creepypastas on NoSleep is that they should be positioned as personal experience of a narrator, and thus the story will be conducted from the first person [...] An important requirement of the stories is their plausibility.”³⁹ These rules have shaped the narrative style that creepypastas have become known for and the nearly realistic air that they utilize. Folklore is often told in the form of personal accounts, much like creepypastas. Additionally, the rules of r/nosleep, and therefore the stylistic traits of creepypastas, fall in line with the definition of folklore as many scholars have defined it. Boyer explains this link:

“In terms of legend making and oral tradition, social networks have become a focal point of sharing traditional folklore and myth patterns. The shift from

35 Roy, “Internet Community.”

36 Austin Considine, “Bored at Work? Try Creepypasta, or Web Scares,” *The New York Times*, (10 November 2010), https://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/14/fashion/14noticed.html?_r=0.

37 Manjoo, “Urban Legends.”

38 Balanzategui, “Creepypastas,” 187.

39 Chornobylskyi, “Social Sharing,” 68.

oral storytelling to the Internet forms of writing, blogging, and videotaping is intriguing because it shows no difference in dynamic. The creation of Slender Man demonstrates that legend making and telling – even without the direct oral link – obeys the same rules of performativity, critique, embellishment, and progression as it does in the oral telling of a story. The audience and the primary story creator share the legend as a performance to stage their ideas of reality and normative social expectations within a construct of bizarre and preternatural circumstances.”⁴⁰

It is only natural, Boyer claims, that folklore has adapted to the presence of the internet and online interactions. By viewing the development of folkloric narratives on the internet, in fact, we can better understand how this process works in real-time, as well as how individuals react to the process.

One notable example of the online community influencing the elements of a creepypasta in a manner similar to the folkloric process comes in the form of *Marble Hornets* (2009-2014). *Marble Hornets* was a YouTube web series created by Troy Wagner and Joseph DeLage that featured the antagonist “The Operator,” a character based heavily on Slenderman. The first episode of *Marble Hornets* was posted exactly ten days after user “Victor Surge” published the first images of Slenderman on the Something Awful forum.⁴¹ Elements of Slenderman’s iconic character that appear in multiple Slenderman-oriented games, movies, and online shows – such as the popular video game *Slender: The Eight Pages* (2012) and the movie *Slender Man* (2018) – originated in *Marble Hornets*. In a 2019 live stream, Joseph DeLage spoke about the impact of *Marble Hornets* on Slenderman’s lore, saying, “And by this time, other than ‘faceless guy with long arms that was tall,’ [if] you think of all the iconic things that are associated with Slenderman – teleportation, static, memory loss, things like that – it all comes from Marble Hornets. It was never part of the Something Awful thread.”⁴²

The impact of *Marble Hornets* on Slenderman’s lore is also emphasized by TikTok user IconicallyJules, who posted a video claiming that DeLage and Wagner were the true creators of Slenderman.⁴³ IconicallyJules’ point is backed up by multiple comments, such as that from user Jorden_does.stuff, who writes, “Many general concepts of slenderman came from marble hornets. Their first vid-

40 Boyer, “Slender Man,” 240.

41 Boyer, “Slender Man,” 251.

42 Joseph DeLage [@GeauxJoe], “We’re Back Baybeee Marble Hornets 10 Year Anniversary Stream,” [Livestream] *Twitch*, (2019), Accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C-6KFleUWak>, 36:17.

43 IconicallyJules [@iconicallyjules], “They did it best... I know that mh is the operator but slenderman probably wouldntve been as popular if it werent for them!! #marblehornets #joesphdelage #troywagner #creepypasta #slenderman” [Video], *TikTok*, (1 April 2024), https://www.tiktok.com/@iconicallyjules/photo/7353029123272494379?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc.

eo was made 8 days after slenderman was very first created.”⁴⁴ Additionally, user toasty_toby writes of *Marble Hornets*, “They literally set the concepts that would echo in pop culture forever.”⁴⁵ However, one commenter, Zuzumafoo, leaves room to give credit to the community effort behind Slenderman’s story, saying, “I love [Marble Hornets] but respect on Victor Surge for giving us Slenderman in the first place ☹ It takes a village.”⁴⁶ Zuzumafoo’s comment correctly emphasizes the folkloric nature of creepypasta narratives, which requires audience feedback and interaction to become established as a legend.

Counterarguments

Although the genre aligns with the tenets of folkloric storytelling, as seen in the formation of Slenderman by the online community, creepypastas differ from being truly classified as folklore due to their “level of self-reflexivity and a troubled relationship with authenticity,” meaning that they are less oriented around telling one’s experience in full truth and more focused on constructing a narrative that plays on cultural fears while toeing the line between reality and unreality.⁴⁷ Still, creepypastas do participate in many folkloric traditions as they utilize “communicative behaviour whose primary characteristics ... are that it doesn’t ‘belong’ to an individual or group [... and is] transmitted spontaneously, from one individual to another, frequently without regard for remuneration or return benefit.”⁴⁸ The lack of cultural boundaries in the sharing and creating of creepypastas, as well as the immediacy of the transfer between parties separates creepypastas from being true examples of folklore. Dewan describes the process of folklore and how legends are created, pointing out the importance of firsthand narratives in the creation of folklore.⁴⁹ Further, folkloric categorization includes the genre of “personal experience narratives defined as ‘a prose narrative relating a personal experience; it is usually told in the first person, and its content is non-traditional.’”⁵⁰ While creepypastas match this definition in practice, they are not technically representations of real, lived experiences, and, as such, do not fit the definition of folklore presented by Dewan and Balanzategui.

Some authors go beyond denying creepypastas a place among traditional folklore. For example, Fedina et al. claim that creepypastas create new fears rather than portray them, which contradicts the function of folklore in society as

44 IconicallyJules, “They did it.”

45 IconicallyJules, “They did it.”

46 IconicallyJules, “They did it.”

47 Balanzategui, “Creepypastas,” 187.

48 Balanzategui, “Creepypastas,” 191.

49 Dewan, “Saucerful,” 187.

50 Dewan, “Saucerful,” 187.

described by Balanzategui (2019).⁵¹ Therefore, by the standards of Fedina et al., creepypastas cannot be a “true” form of folklore in any way. The main argument put forth by Fedina et al. involves the format with which creepypastas are created and shared, stating that the genre’s departure from oral storytelling separates it from traditional folklore.⁵² Additionally, Fedina et al. state, “The technological factor is of fundamental importance, since any ‘creepypasta’ message would lose its potential for direct impact on a person if it were presented outside of a digital medium.”⁵³ While many scholars agree with the argument that creepypastas are not “true” folklore, Fedina et al. depart from the majority of academic articles in claiming that creepypastas lose their impact in the real world. Apart from the fact that creepypastas are frequently shared orally in an offline context, especially among elementary and middle school-aged children, and therefore must have some emotional impact on their audiences, the stories can and do have a very tangible impact in the “real world.” This impact is easily seen in the attempted murder of Payton Leutner, whose attackers feared the consequences they may face if they did not please Slenderman. While the digital environment is an integral part of creepypasta as a genre, this fact does not negate the impact that the stories have in the real world. Rather, creepypastas are adaptable enough to reach past the realm of their creation and into the lives of millions around the world.

Conclusion

While creepypastas may not be traditional examples of folklore, they nevertheless carry the key tenets of folkloric narratives in their sharing of cultural anxieties, communal storytelling, and the process of development. The nature of the websites on which creepypastas were first created, such as 4chan, Reddit, and other chat boards, has led to the massive community effort that goes into these stories today. Readers have since built a mutualistic relationship with authors as stories are passed between tellers and audiences in equal measure and narrative decisions are made as a community rather than by an individual. By viewing examples of specific creepypastas such as “Candle Cove” and stories about Slenderman, it is possible to examine the fears that are at the forefront of internet users in the current age of online interactions. By knowing these fears, we can better explain the concerns that trouble populations today and how these populations are dealing with such anxieties.

Today, internet horror has expanded into the territories of the uncanny valley, skinwalkers, and the “backrooms,” all of which display a fear of unreality and the unknown. These concerns may be tied to the recent rise of artificial in-

51 Olga V. Fedina, Sergey A. Malenko, and Andrey G. Nekita, “‘Creepypasta’: Images Of Waiting For Death And Danger In The Online Space,” *Perishable And Eternal: Mythologies and Social Technologies of Digital Civilization* 120, (2021), 667-673. <https://doi.org/10.15405/epsbs.2021.12.03.89>.

52 Fedina, “Waiting For Death.”

53 Fedina, “Waiting For Death,” 672.

telligence and political uncertainty that many are experiencing, continuing the trend of internet horror reflecting our real lives.

Horror is an integral part of society, and analyzing the phenomena we deem to be “horrific” can aid in understanding the issues that plague cultures. Creepypastas are just one example of internet-based horror stories, but they have caught the attention of countless users and challenge the ideals we hold dear. Folklore, a central part of human societies for thousands of years, has adapted to the digital age in the form of online horror content. This horror reflects fears involving technology and the innocence of children, which have become increasingly relevant in the real world. By analyzing the stories shared online via the creepypasta genre, it is possible to better understand the common anxieties of our time, as well as the popular reaction to them. Horror is at the center of our societies; as much as we fear it, horror defines who we are. Creepypastas and other forms of internet horror are the latest step in this millennia-long journey of expressing ourselves and our fears.