Lost Innocence and Corrupted Children:
An Analysis of the Theme of Childhood in Contemporary Western Horror Games

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Abstract

Recent trends and movements in horror video games have emphasized childhood and children in their imagery and setting, and because horror can be used as an indication of social fears, inferences can be made from these trends regarding anxieties within the current cultural time and place. This thesis examines the ways in which contemporary Western horror games use the theme of childhood, and how those uses reflect adult anxieties for and about children. By analyzing a selection of contemporary horror games, I found that adult fears for and about children concern the child's safety and wellbeing, the risk of the child being lost or corrupted, and the child's inability to identify and protect themselves from threats in a (seemingly) increasingly dangerous world. In addition to this, adults also have fears regarding the sanctity of their own childhoods and the potential of their own failure to protect children that influences the ways in which horror portrays both childhood, and the way in which adults within those games respond to it.

Keywords: childhood, genre, horror, video games, culture

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed: Jessica Milford

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Research Question

How do depictions of childhood in Western contemporary horror games reflect adult anxieties about and for children?

Introduction

From the anxiety of a new parent to the well-trodden worries of experienced parents to the general anxious awkwardness people display holding a baby or child for the first time, being placed in charge of a child can be intimidating. Being responsible for ensuring the safety and happiness of a young human being inspires at least a little bit of nervousness in most people, even if merely in passing. These anxieties are normal and well-documented, but they do betray a deeper anxiety that runs parallel to the progress of human evolution. Being responsible for children is nerve-wracking, the preservation of the next generation is crucial for our species and that has driven an evolved imperative to do well for and take care of children that results in a cultural protective instinct that leaves one fretting. This is, perhaps, why childhood is such a pervasive and powerful theme in the horror genre.

Whether it is because a child in danger makes for an easy escalation of stakes, a quiet, pale, staring child is unsettling to look at, or because they represent a softer, safer time that is no longer accessible to an adult, children and childhood are perennial subjects of horror, perhaps more so now than ever. A changing cultural and political landscape creates anxiety and tension regarding the safety of our most vulnerable members of society, and horror shifts its focus to capture and resonate with the anxieties of a particular cultural moment. Recent additions to the corpus of horror narratives have focused quite intently on children and childhood as a concept, especially in the realm of video games, a less studied and codified narrative medium on account of it being newer to traditional forms of scholarly analysis. In this thesis, I will attempt to identify and analyze how depictions of the theme of childhood in Western contemporary horror video games reflect adult anxieties about and for children.

Literature Review

Genre

Defining Genre and Intertextuality

Generally speaking, a genre refers to a grouping of items or rhetorical action that shares "…structure, style, content, and intended audience" (Swales, 1990, p. 79), but it is best known as a cultural category used to define and order texts. Colloquial genre (hereafter

simply ‘genre’) is used to conceptualize groups made up of texts with similar forms, origins, and conventions (Birks, 2020; Mittell, 2001; Sobchack, 1975).

Despite being a cultural category, genre and the study of it can be invaluable to scholars in order to “provide a historically grounded method of establishing ‘family resemblances’ between [media] produced and released under widely differing circumstance, and of mediating the relationship between the mythologies of popular culture and social, political, and economic contexts” (Langford, 2019, p. 1). Features that indicate genre can be anything from stylistic trappings, technical execution, and stock tropes and phrases that can be reorganized, reused, and combined to create works that resemble familiar story frameworks in a slightly different way. It is often heavily debated what features define a genre, not least of which because what defines a genre is a sliding scale dependent on time, place, and culture (Tudor, 1976). Finding a single element to reliably indicate a text’s genre is notoriously difficult. Stam (2017) proposed that subject matter is the weakest argument for genre categorization, instead claiming that the way in which a story is told and the techniques contained within are the most influential elements of a story’s genre. However, some genres are so totally defined by their subject, place, and time that they are difficult to untangle from certain structures. Schatz (1981) proposed genre to be a celebration of the ideological sameness shared by a text’s creator and audience, in addition to a form of artistic expression. Zhou et al. (2010) proposed a method of categorizing movie genres by analyzing keyframes extracted from their trailers, implying that genre can simply be inferred from the construction and technical execution of a collection of notable scenes. Attempts to codify the categorization of genre continue to this day, but ultimately, in the words of Tudor (1976): arbitrary definitions aside, we know a genre “when we see it” due to a culturally formed understanding of what that genre is supposed to look like (p. 139). They “are not critics’ classifications made for special purposes; they are a set of cultural conventions. Genre is what we collectively believe it to be” (p. 139).

Recurring patterns, trends, and story beats build a scaffolding upon which texts are built that allow an audience to understand what a text is communicating due to familiarity with pre-established texts that do something similar. Frow (2014) explained how a text assumes its audience’s familiarity with a genre of a given type and presents information that they are already familiar with “in a compressed form”, sparing the text’s creator from explaining every detail while still communicating meaning (p. 7). The idea of what a genre involves and what is pivotal to one is a generalized culmination of every previous text noted under that

banner, which often leads to texts falling into more than one category. Stam (2017) discussed how genre in modern films have grown complex over time, and explored how, in comparison to older movies, modern films tend to utilize the attributes of many genres, creating increasing overlap between them. This overlap has led to genre categorization becoming increasingly flexible and exponentially complex as new features are introduced or fall out of fashion (Stam, 2017; Tudor, 2012).

Such an idea is inherently interwoven with the concept of 'intertextuality', a theory coined and discussed by Julia Kristeva, inspired by the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, and thereafter incorporated into the methodology of several schools of literature analysis (Orr, 2010). Kristeva (1980) found that Bakhtin's approaches to literary analysis did not consider the text in isolation but considered its relation to other existing structures. She stated that texts are "a dialogue among several writings, that of the writer, the addressee (or the character), and the contemporary or earlier cultural context" (Kristeva, 1980, pp. 64-65). To put it simply, a text is influenced by texts and histories that came before it, and knowledge of those texts and histories is necessary to understand a single text (Frow, 2014). A logical progression to this thought process is that all texts -both from and peripheral to a particular culture- are in some way intertextually connected. Much in the same way that every object in the universe has some gravitational influence over every other object, all texts within a culture have some connection to each other. Not necessarily so closely as to be relevant to most forms of analysis, but connected, nonetheless. Allen (2011) said that all texts are "-built from systems, codes and traditions established by previous works of literature" and explained that "whether they be literary or non-literary, [texts] are viewed by modern theorists as lacking in any kind of independent meaning" (p. 1). He explained that modern theories of literary analysis exist within an interconnected network of texts, and that to explore meaning within a text is to examine those relationships between them.

Briggs and Bauman (1992) noted the strong connection between generic structures and the notion of intertextuality, and highlighted (as previously discussed) both that genre creates an audience expectation of a text's form and functions, and that it provides "indexical connections" to places, times, and social groups, due to the audience's familiarity with texts of the same grouping (p. 147). Familiarity with other texts in prior and present production is integral to the social function that genre serves.

Defining Horror

Defining the horror genre itself is difficult. Bloom (2012) described the task to be "…as complex and problematic theoretically as it seems simple and uncomplicated practically. Moreover, the question is not helped by the multiplicity of apparently substitutable terms to cover the same thing: gothic tale, ghost tale, terror romance, gothic horror. All these titles seem to cover virtually identical literary productions with the definition of one acting almost as a catch-all for the others" (p. 211). The stylistic gradients of fear as noted by Stephen King (King, 1981), gothic horror's misdirection and obfuscation of objects of fear, and Lovecraft's entangling of the limits of human understanding and perception all present only a few of the starkly different images of what horror can be (Bloom, 2012), so defining commonality between them all proves difficult. Colloquially, the way we use the term horror is serviceable, and largely met with consensus (Carroll, 2003); however, in the realms of scholarship where a more precise definition is needed, difficulty arises in creating parameters that are both concise and don't bracket out large portions of the viable population. The complexity of the genre's history, as well as the many forms it has taken over time, has created movements and offshoots of the genre with questionable genetic validity (for lack of a better term). Scholars on the topic are in disagreement as to whether some, or any, of these stray branches of the family tree belong.

The works of Noel Carroll have ruminated on the definition of horror several times, to varying degrees of agreement within the scholarly community. Carroll (2003) said that "…monsters are a mark of horror" (p. 14), which was well received, but Carroll defined this as horror necessitating an antagonist "-any being not believed to exist now according to contemporary science" (Carroll, 2003, p. 27). This notion, he acknowledges, excludes what is considered by many to be seminal horror movies including Saw (2004), Psycho (1960), and Halloween (1979) and dismisses them as "borderline cases" that classify under tales of terror and thrillers (p. 39). Gaut (1993) criticized Carroll's definition, claiming that it dismissed "paradigm examples of the modern horror film" (p. 334).

I agree with Carroll's critics with the notion that for a horror antagonist to be in some way fantastical or inhuman is too closed a definition. However, while his definition in its entirety met a great deal of backlash, his observations regarding what he calls art-horror are of interest to me (Carroll, 1987, 1999, 2003). Carroll interpreted the horror genre, as a piece of art, to be "denominated horrific in respect of their intended capacity to raise a certain affect" (2003, p. 14), and elicit 'art-horror' in an audience. He defines 'art-horror' as a horror reaction elicited

in an audience experiencing a piece of media that is intended to inspire fear, horror, revulsion, or anxiety (Carroll, 1987). It is distinguished in being a reaction to fictional stimuli rather than real-life horrors such as terrorism or a natural disaster, and it is also distinguished from just any horror reaction to fiction. Carroll also distinguished the emotion from that elicited merely from fictional depravity, murder, or sexual degradation; it is specifically the emotional response to "…reading what are commonly called 'horror novels' […] and viewing horror movies. To be more accurate […] the sort of horror associated with one particular genre of mass art" (Carroll, 1999, p. 147).

Such a definition places the horror genre in a privileged position of adaptability in terms of setting, characters, and time. Horror is a "discrete" genre that fits within the parameters of most others (Carroll, 1987, p. 51) and thus has many subgenres and is often folded into other genres that are more correlated to setting or characterization. There are very few things that cannot be made horrifying or unnerving with adequate framing and technique, meaning that in matters of codes and conventions, horror under this definition bears very few constraints. A monster can be almost anything, chase scenes can happen anywhere, death and corruption and danger lurk anywhere a human can be. This freedom is reflected by the wide variety of subject matter horror covers and the vast amounts of genre-hybrids in which horror partakes.

Horror: Culture, Time, and Place

While there are some 'universal anxieties' that make up the foundation of horror as a genre, it has an immaculate connection to the culture of its making. Horror is a snapshot of the fears and desires of a place and time, what it places importance on preserving, and fears the deconstruction of. Wells (2019) identified the 'grand narratives' of horror as "social alienation, the collapse of moral and spiritual order, a deep crisis of evolutionary identity, the overt articulation of humankind's innermost imperatives, [and] a need to express the implications of human existence" (p. 6-7). However, while these narratives hold true to this day, on a more localized level, horror often discusses one of, or some combination of, fears regarding attributes of change and controversy within a specific cultural time and place, such as technology, identities and difference between individuals and cultures, politics and control, and violence and torture (Cherry, 2009). These elements are often presented in such a way that indicate a culture's position on social controversy and taboo subjects. The *what* and the *who* that is considered ejected from the social norms, and thus an 'other' to the common people.

Kristeva (1982) considers, in her ruminations of abjection, how "by way of abjection, primitive societies […] marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder" (p. 12-13), and how that divorce between an 'us' and 'them' as imposed by a societal quota can be built between any number of groups of people on the basis of a perceived difference. Cherry (2009) and Wood (1986, 2004) both said one can glean political and psychological insights into a culture through the analysis of its horror films, and Worland (2024) explored the horror film as a challenge of "traditional conceptions of morality and/or the social good" (p. 1), whatever that may be at the time of development.

Cherry (2009) drew clear lines between the way conventions in genre cinema develop over time and changing cultural mores. These social mores may be cultural taboos, such as sexuality or feelings towards minorities, or cultural anxieties weighing on the populus. Jancovich (1996) also examined the connection between horror and the culture of its creation changing over time, exploring how remakes of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956)* exemplified how the monster can have different meanings depending on the specifics of the culture at the time of the remake's creation. Jancovich (1996) noted how the monsters embodied critiques of both capitalism and communism (in the original), criticism of mindless consumerism culture (in 1978), commentary on the privatization of the American military and impending ecological disaster (in 1993), and exemplified a post-9-11 line of thinking that the only way to solve humanitarian disasters and social injustice is for humans to cease acting like humans (in 2007). These vast differences in meaning applied to the same monster are exemplary of the way a culture imposes its specific values upon a horror narrative. American culture changed over time between the remakes, and thus the monster was associated with different issues. Even when a film is emulating a specific time and place, it will be just as (if not more so) reflective of the time and place of which it was made as the one it is projecting.

The Uncanny: Perversion of the Familiar

In a similar vein, what is considered unnerving is also highly affected by one's cultural mores in defining what is familiar to them. In Freud's 1919 essay, *The Uncanny*, he identified a subset of aesthetics with a psychological intersection from which emerges a specific emotional and instinctual reaction of unease. He attributed this to the feeling's relation to the "known and familiar" (Freud, 1919, p. 2), that is, what is of the home and comfortable, and its subversion which inspires unsettlement, as well as secrets that should not have come to light and things that should not be possible with one's current understanding of the world.

Freud's work is far from universally lauded and accredited, but it acted as the starting ground for a deeper and more robust field of horror study. Royle (2003) said that "the uncanny is ghostly. It is concerned with the strange and mysterious, with a flickering sense (but not conviction) of something supernatural" (p. 1). It concerns the meeting of the familiar and unfamiliar, and often the making of the familiar *into* the unfamiliar. It is the calling into question of everything that one takes as a given, personality, name, and body; the defiance of nature, both one's own and the 'rules' of nature, whatever one perceives that to be (Royle, 2003; Spadoni, 2007). The uncanny finds its power in the defiance to be categorized and easily sorted like the familiarity it evokes.

> "[The uncanny] can take the form of something familiar unexpectedly arising in a strange and unfamiliar context, or of something strange and unfamiliar unexpectedly arising in a familiar context. It can consist in a sense of homeliness uprooted, the revelation of something unhomely at the heart of the hearth and home. It might arise from the seemingly mechanical repetition of a word, such as 'it'. [...] It comes above all, perhaps, in the uncertainties of silence, solitude and darkness." (Royle, 2003, pp. 1-2)

The uncanny can also occur when observing things that evoke human form and movement but slightly altered. Dolls, automatons, and clowns famously inspire a sense of unease in many people due to their ever so slightly 'off' facial and body proportions. Body horror also sometimes falls into this category, as the familiar sanctity of the whole and healthy human form is violated beyond what is familiar (Baker, 2000; Cruz, 2012; McCann, 2013) and becomes warped into the unfamiliar. This meeting of the familiar and unfamiliar to create unease is what allowed the uncanny to become a staple of the modern horror genre, as it is colloquially understood (Spadoni, 2007).

Somewhat related is the observance of the 'uncanny valley' in the field of robotics, as first observed by Masahiro Mori in 1970. Mori et al. (2012) observed that a robot's similarity to a human in form and mannerisms drastically increased the empathetic connection test subjects had to it until a certain level of similarity is reached and a strong revulsion reaction occurs in most people. As the robot's 'humanness' approaches the levels of a regular person, this strong dislike fades and empathy levels rise again. From the earliest instances in the 'horror cycle', such as *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* with their violation of the human form (Spadoni, 2007), to more modern understandings of the uncanny, horror has taken advantage of this phenomenon since it found its way to visual media. Tinwell et al. (2010) explored how video game character designs evoke a feeling of uncanniness via a combination of motion and

sound, with a "strong correlation" between the 'strangeness' of character and elements like inhuman voices, vocal patterns, and facial expressions (p. 3).

Monsters in a Time and Place

Inexorably tied to this idea is the monster or antagonist taking their place as the 'other', a force or creature in opposition to society as it is familiar now (Cherry, 2009). Skal (1993) painstakingly traces the line connecting carnival 'freaks' put on display for the combined horror and entertainment of the masses to the creation and development of monsters either horrifying or pitiful (or both) in media meant to exemplify and exhibit the reviled existence beyond what is 'normal' to the average viewer. In this way, the monster too is a reflection of a culture's anxieties, fears, and desires. In his Seven Theses, Cohen (2007) examined how the monster's body is also reflective of a culture. It is a time and place and event, caught between the upheaval of the events that would require society to make a monster, and the time that it is received. Cohen made connections between the monster and the metaphorical crossroads in a culture's history in an associated place, feeling, and time. The monster is given life through the desires, anxieties, fears, and fantasies of that time and if the monster is revived in a different time (and it often is) it is composed of different fears, anxieties, and desires. This relationship between the monster and the culture that made it creates one of the pillars of horror's relationship to its culture. Abbott (2016) explored vampires as manifestations of corporate greed that inspire discomfort and dread in a world under late-stage capitalism, and hordes of zombies embodying the armies of those who represent the mindless hordes that consume meaningless entertainment or social media feeds. The monster will always have a relationship with the modern populous of a time and place.

Crane (1994) noted the relatively recent move towards monsters that are simply human in some form or another, either as "omnipotent serial killer[s], ravenous zombie hordes, and bodies in sustained visceral revolution invading middle-class havens […] our monsters have returned to human dimensions […] We know the world is peopled with monsters whose faces come from a random assortment of high-school yearbooks, driver's licences, and bathroom mirrors" (p. 8-9). He notes that special effects now lean towards evisceration rather than mutation, few (if any) characters are spared violence no matter their moral disposition, and social fabric such as marital ties and parental bonds will not withhold the strain of the plot's events (Crane, 1994). Crane identifies these as deliberate inversions of older horror tropes, but perhaps they are also reflections of the growing modern fear of societal collapse and anarchy, noted by Cherry (2009) as an emerging trend.

Video Games

Video Games and Genre

The way in which a video game connects with, and allows the participation of, its audience is fairly unique in terms of storytelling media. This is because while video games do act as a storytelling medium, they are not solely this and the way that genres are grouped inherently divide differently depending on what element of the game experience on which one is focusing. Căşvean (2018) states that the field has evolved beyond the proposals made by Miller (2004) and leans toward the more comprehensive guide detailed by Wolf (2002). Arsenault (2009) identifies the foremost dividing attribute to be whether to address gameplay or story elements within a game. It seems to be a fairly popular opinion among scholars that no game is without genre, but, by the same metric, few are of only one genre. Wolf (2002) considered Schatz's (1981) opinions on film genre in the context of video games, acknowledging the use of iconography and themes in identifying a genre for a video game, but also highlighted the importance of considering gameplay and interactivity. Carr (2006), similarly, pointed out that not only does gameplay require consideration when defining a video game genre, but also the medium or 'console' that it can be played on, as it significantly changes the experience of aforementioned gameplay. There are a substantial number of video games in which the gameplay is the *only* element that matters in terms of categorization on account of the game not having much in the way of plotline. The likes of *Tetris*, *Pong*, and *Pacman* have little plot to their name, and games like *The Sims* and *Sid Myer's Civilization* have a story only insofar as the player reads into the events played out on screen. This is to say, that a story is not a prerequisite for a video game the way it is in most other media, and while it is essential to describe any story elements that may be there, it is not the only factor of relevance when assigning a genre to a game.

As previously discussed, genre's purpose is largely social, a colloquial way of identifying and discussing a piece of media that acts in a certain way in accordance with viewer expectations. Neale (2012) identified genre as the "systems of expectations and hypothesis" of an audience member given form through their medium (p. 158). The point of assigning a genre to anything is so people can know what it is and what it will do. This reliability has, in recent decades, made genre a highly effective marketing tool (Berry-Flint, 2003) as it removes the uncertainty in audiences regarding form, function, and theme, and provides a safe structure for creators and studios to follow (Kapsis, 1991). This context is relevant because what genre a game advertises itself as is both reflective of and a definition of the current genre trends. A

consumer may be looking for any number of attributes in a game, including but not limited to: gameplay style, console, story themes, difficulty levels, and time dedication (often but not always indicated by the 'size' of the explorable world). All of these elements serve to inform the ways that games are described both to and by audiences, fostering the creation of new genre categorizations.

Video games, Immersion, and Horror

The medium of video games brought a new and interesting dimension to the horror sphere, in giving the audience a degree of interactivity with the horror setting of the story. Films and books are typically limited to only one or two perspectives, crafted by and entirely dictated in direction and duration, by the creator of the text. Video games, however, are able to place a player in many different perspectives, scenarios, and experiences, and there is not one singular avatar-to-player relationship (Carr, 2006). This allows players to interact with both the horrific and monstrous creatures, and the haunting settings of the horror genre on a more personal level and allows the audience a place within the setting. They can react within the world of the story (in as many ways as the game's mechanics will allow them), resulting in a highly lauded feature of games, immersion.

In the way that the protagonist of a book or film gives the audience a perspective to view the world of the story, video games give the player a sense of presence and perspective within the gamespace through avatars and/or interface (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006). Unlike in earlier media, the game is responsive to player input, and the player must respond to the game's prompts. No interface allows for infinite freedom, but even limited options like the choice of when to run and when to hide, or to go left rather than right creates a certain immersion for the player. Nae (2021) discussed how immersion, as defined by both scholars and game developers, fluctuates between "the technological affordance of the medium that allows players to control entities in other worlds" and "the psychological impression of being absorbed into a different world" (p. 11-12). Ultimately, Nae (2021) grounded several theories of immersion under a commonality of three attributes: immediacy, interactivity, and narrativity. Rouse III (2009) explained this immersion to be a result of the empowerment a player feels from being able to make decisions within the world of the game, and discussed how the horror genre specifically benefits hugely from this sense of immersion and the "feeling of potential threat" (p. 24). Kirkland (2009) also examined how survival horror games create a sense of fear by evoking a certain uncanny appearance in an avatar that moves independently to the player's avatar and creating environments with confusing senses of

space for the player to navigate through, expanding upon the ways in which the player's interaction with the world enhances and differentiates the horror gaming experience from the traditional one.

Horror and Childhood

The Perception of the Child

I believe it fair to say that adults consider children to need protection, that they require supervision both because they are not capable of taking care of themselves to an adequate degree, and because they do not know how to do so even if they were. Personal correspondence with Seel, a child psychologist and PhD student at Trier University regarding adolescent stress, afforded some insights to how adults often struggle to "acknowledge or understand the cognitive development that children go through", and thus often vastly underestimate their mental and physical capabilities, holding them to a benchmark that they may have held previously but had long surpassed (S. Seel, personal communication, January 24, 2024). A study by Cordovil and Barreiros (2010) showed that over 50 percent of adults underestimated the height of children of varying age demographics, and adults often underestimated children's ability to understand complex topics like race (Sullivan et al., 2021) and gender (Martin, 1993). Academic and common debate often sparks over the extent of understanding to which children are capable. Children are capable of absorbing social information from an early age (Fagot & Leinbach, 1993) and are, broadly, more capable than most assume. Even adults in the field of psychology who work with children are systematically inclined to underestimate their cognitive abilities (Spencer & Darvizeh, 1981) and how experiments performed under these assumptions carry that bias forward in the field (Nobes et al., 2009). The criticism of Piaget's (as cited by Sanghvi (2020)) foundational theory of cognitive development notes that his assumptions vastly overestimate children's competency in some stages of life, and vastly underestimates them in others, completely throwing off the most common metric of measuring childhood development and how they understand the world around them (Babakr et al., 2019; Nobes et al., 2009; Spencer & Darvizeh, 1981; Sutton-Smith, 1966). This underestimation is relevant because it contributes to the anxiety adults feel in regard to children being able to identify and avoid threats to their safety.

Fears for Children

Most adults, whether they have children or not, feel a sense of obligation to care for a child that they see that is lost or in danger. It is both a social and biological response to attend to a

child in distress, and this standing code of conduct can be incredibly stressful for adults. A child in one's care coming to harm can have such devastating emotional, social, and even physical consequences that the mere thought of it can cause a sense of unease (S. Seel, personal communication, January 24, 2024). This is augmented by the way that children of a certain age demographic (toddler to approximately 10 years old) often do not concern themselves with fears of physical pain, instead tending to have fears that are perceived by adults as illogical such as the supernatural, the dark, or thunder and other loud noises (Meltzer et al., 2009). While children tend to begin to fear for their personal safety when they get older (9-10 years old) (Bauer, 1976; Muris et al., 2000; Muris et al., 2001), younger children "would seem a prime example of irrational and dysfunctional cognition, as they in most cases target non-existent dangers or unlikely outcomes" (Boyer & Bergstrom, 2011, p. 1034). This phenomenon leads to adults believing children are unable to identify threats for themselves, and do not exercise enough caution in relation to their (perceived) danger. The idea that children are unable to detect threats to themselves at all does not appear to be true, as they are able to identify obvious threats such as snakes and spiders (Boyer & Bergstrom, 2011; L. E. Miller, 2015). However, in more socially-driven scenarios such as identifying threatening expressions on people, "adults located the targets significantly faster than […] children" (LoBue, 2009, p. 309), so there is some merit in the idea that children cannot identify threats as well and as quickly as adults.

While this is not a new issue, it seems that recently more attention is being paid to children and the threat of harm to them, in the form of increased anxiety in adults towards children's safety, even in forms that might have been accepted as safe in another time. Valentine and McKendrck (1997) noted that a decline in children's outdoor play corroborated with parent's anxieties about children's safety and examined the way in which "popular concerns about children's safety and the changing nature of childhood" was changing the opportunities provided to children for playing outdoors and other previously expected childhood activities. Boufous et al. (2004) and Telford et al. (2012) found that parents were increasingly discouraging their children from playing sports such as soccer, rollerblading, and rugby. In a study, Freed et al. (2010) found that 11.5 percent of parents refused to administer at least one government-recommended vaccine to their child out of safety concerns, several citing anxieties about autism or other psychological effects on the child's health. Bianco et al. (2019) found that number to have increased within their own study to over 24 percent seven years later. After the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in New York in 2001, a

general increased anxiety towards external threats to the home and safety impacted the American people (Garfin et al., 2018; Marcuse, 2006; Marshall et al., 2007; Woods, 2011).

The Western perception of the world at large has changed into a more paranoid, less community-based, and less trusting one and "…increasingly, parents are afraid to let their children go out for fear that they will not be safe, especially in urban areas" (Herring, 2008, p. 77). This cultural shift has not gone unnoticed. When asked if they believed that attitudes regarding children's safety have shifted over time, Seel suggested that adults have grown increasingly more restrictive towards children since their own childhood, citing patients' parents' concerns both with how large and uncontrollable the modern world feels, and how often news media makes the world out to be threatening (S. Seel, personal communication, January 24, 2024).

Horror, Innocence, and Sin: The Role of the Child in Horror Media

Horror has always concerned itself with the taboo and associated consequences in order to speak to the audience's fears and desires (Cherry, 2009; Grant, 2010; Phillips, 2005; Tudor, 1997). It addresses "what we are allowed to do, not allowed to do, and why. They may also warn us of the social consequences should we step out of line of these expectations". They reiterate the traditional scripts of the culture they came from, and therefore "...contribute to the power of these cultural messages" (Ménard et al., 2019, p.627). This is often evident in horror's relationship with women; women who do not display 'appropriate behaviors' for their gender roles tended to die before the end of the narrative, while 'appropriately feminine' women tended to make it out alive (Ménard et al., 2019). Excepting the 'final girl' trope, which comes with its own set of gender-based complications, the virginal innocence of feminine women is treated as almost the 'dipole' of a monster's cruelty (Harrington, 2017). This relationship between horror and the idealized values of types of people also applies to the depiction of children in horror.

Broadly speaking, children tend to take two roles in horror stories. They are either a thing that requires protection, or the thing from which one needs to be protected. Children in horror often appear as ways in which for adults to reassure themselves of their role as protectors of an 'innocent' child's virtue. Lennard (2014) examined adult anxieties towards the development or inherent existence of 'bad behavior' generated both by youth culture and children being reared while being subjected to various taboo associations or 'unseemly behavior'.

“Despite their absence as viewers, children turn up a great deal in horror films. [...] As mainstay villains of a type of film produced and consumed largely behind their backs, children are often oblivious to the true weight and hyperbole of their representation on film, to the fantastical expressions of unease they inspire. With unquestioning zeal, adults reiterate and reinscribe their role as custodians of the child's proper knowledge, often with a resolution that sees childhood besieged with sex and violence everywhere. Children are unaware of what a burden they present because we are of a mind to plead ignorance ourselves; forever reconstructing a child to be, above all, protected. As in an obsessive ritual, we assure and reassure ourselves with visions of the innocent child" (Lennard, 2014, p. 1)

This reaffirmation of the social power structure between children and adults serves to reassure adults of their own power. The child’s safety becomes a sort of driving motivation for the adults in the narrative, their vulnerability and innocence regarding the sinister and horrific an easily exploitable emotional underbelly to maintain high stakes. Leslie-McCarthy (2012) said that "child characters in horror narratives are often objectified as victims, precious objects, bargaining chips, or things to be protected and/or rescued" (p. 1). This follows an observation made by Thompson (2012), who proposed that the threat to the child represented a larger threat to the family and the home in the ‘post-*Psycho’* era of horror, in which horror made villain figures of “threats to social and institutional normalcy figured through the state, church, and family” (Thompson, 2012, p. 14). When a child begins the narrative as a figure or symbol of innocence, the film usually frames them as in danger of being corrupted or harmed by malevolent forces beyond the comprehension of a child’s perceived innocence.

Children are also often viewed with a mystic, ethereal sort of lens through which they are depicted as able to sense the movements and changes of that which is beyond the sight of the ‘sensible’ adults, such as in *Sixth Sense (1999)* and *The Shining (1980).* This tradition of ghostly and spiritual children follows from a proud gothic legacy going back as far as the Victorian era (Georgieva, 2013). This is possibly because this sensitivity to the forces beyond adult understanding allows the narrative to place them in the path of whatever horrors provide a narrative threat and additional narrative stakes.

The Role of Childhood

While the place of the child in horror has been explored thoroughly, the theme of childhood and how it is used in horror is less explored. Naturally, where there are children, there is a

depiction of childhood (even when the usual staples of childhood are deliberately conspicuously absent), but to my knowledge, scholarship that focuses on this theme of childhood separate from the child is severely lacking. This is relevant because, as discussed, a great deal can be gleaned from horror's relationship with children. This does not cease to be true simply because the child is not there. For a horror franchise to evoke childhood imagery is a deliberate choice.

Sometimes, horror places focus on artifacts or (more recently) settings of childhood. The idea that these artifacts, which are supposed to have a profound relationship with innocence, can be an object of horror is a ground for the perpetuation and exploitation of uncanny feelings in an audience. Sometimes the artifacts themselves contribute to the horror, "films like *Child's Play* (1988) and *Dolly Dearest* (1992), both of which centre on children's toys, illustrate the terror of childish imaginations unbound by the prescriptions of adult authority" (Lennard, 2014, p. 2) The thriller genre often returns to childhood to explain (and sometimes justify) adult criminality, drawing connections between a corrupted childhood and the manifestation of immoral adults, such as in *Psycho (1960), Black Christmas (1974),* and *Friday the 13th (1980)* to name a few (Madden, 2020). Other times, childhood is invoked in order to justify or explain a character's motives, their main character trait being traced back to a defining childhood moment or connection to a person, idea, item, or place. Dumas (2014) draws a connection between the evocation of the supernatural and the evocation of childhood, allowing horror to bring elements of children inhabiting a world of the unseen.

The Bad Seed

A large part of the scholarship regarding children in horror focuses on the phenomenon of the 'bad seed' in horror media. An extrapolation of the classic idea of a child being 'born under a bad sign', this trope describes monsters that "[play] upon the juxtaposition of the 'innocence' of childhood' with the horrific, malicious, and demonic in a way that has since become a staple of horror media" (Leslie-McCarthy, 2012, p. 1). Lennard (2014) described these child villains as commonly portrayed as insolent, drawing their malevolence and manipulation from adult attempts at making them 'inferiors'. This can manifest in many ways, from reproachfully silent watchfulness to unrepentant smugness and snide implication of their own superiority or advantage. "Monstrousness, devilry, and dominion [...] have all been attributed to the child in the horror film as a flipside of the meanings Western culture imagines childhood to embody" (Lennard, 2014, p. 2). Scahill (2010a, 2010b, 2015) proposed an alternate definition, the concept of the 'revolting child, which is described as a varied kind of

monster, but generally encompasses a childish body belayed by features and mannerisms that are "seen as incompatible" (p. 5) with the common image of childhood and children. This speaks to the characterization of children possessed or warped or perverted or inhabited by a soul that does not match the age and sensibilities of the body. This is often, but not always, facilitated by supernatural means, with the implication that the revolting child's existence is in defiance of the 'natural order'. Scahill (2015) also notes that the term 'revolting' applies twofold, as it not only implies repugnance, but also evokes the rebellion found in children that adults so often find discomforting.

Pioneering films in this genre such as *The Bad Seed* (1956) and its remake in 1985, *The Exorcist* (1973), *The Omen* (1976*)*, and other such classic and influential horror presences came at the turn of the 20th century, where concerns were being paid to ‘troubled children’ (Jackson, 2000). Jackson (2000) stated that the earliest horror films to feature child villains focuses on an evil "within the body as an inherited, natural force that neither the child, nor society can escape" (p. 66). Jackson (2000) claimed that this focus came in tandem with an increased focus on the violent and antisocial habits of the youth. The attributing of evil to an inherent image of innocence in (usually white, wealthy to middle-class) children challenges the conception of the 'innocent and pure' iconography of 'white childhood'. Only later, did a renewed and shifted focus onto other, corruptive beings possessing children and the evil corrupting children after coming from elsewhere come into play.

There are other examinations of the subgenre that suggests the intention is to provide an environment in which is acceptable to express anger and hatred for children while dodging the cultural distaste for child abuse (Paul, 1994; Sinyard, 1992)- a place to consider the child's difference from adults in a way that is separate from the social perception of a child's "ignorance, innocence, and dependance" (Scahill, 2015, p. 2). However, Scahill (2015) examined the possibility that "in the cinema of revolting childhood, a child is being beaten, and the spectator is encouraged to take up the role of the righteous abuser" but that it is possible to take angles in sympathy with the child as an object of rejection and abuse for something innate to them (p. 2), contributing to the genre’s popularity for queer readings (Scahill, 2010a, 2015).

Research Methods

Parameters

This study concerns itself with the fears of adults towards and about children, not the fears of children. As horror aims to reflect the fears of its target audience, horror designed for children and teenagers will not be represented in the selection of games identified. While an acknowledgement must be made that not all children's media is purely for children and recently there has been a surge of popularity of children's media among adults (Maier, 2019) I am looking at representations of childhood, including children as representations of childhood. While that might include troping children's media, I am focusing on texts intended for an adult audience. The target audience of a media strongly impacts how certain issues and demographics are presented (Coltrane & Adams, 1997). Therefore, games with a clear primary demographic other than adults will not be included, as the depiction of the themes of childhood will not be indicative of adult fears.

For the purposes of this study, I am defining the 'theme' of childhood to include visual and diegetic allusions to common childhood experiences in the Western world as they would be recognized by adults. As I am depicting the theme of childhood, rather than the depiction of *children,* child characters do not necessarily have to exist within the game in order for the theme of childhood to be evoked. However, that is not to say that I will not be examining the depictions of children within these texts as children themselves are symbols of childhood, especially from the perspective of adults.

Methodology

This thesis will be a work of qualitative research using secondary analysis of scholarly sources and a selected pool of horror games that I believe to be pertinent to the research question. I will be approaching this through a paradigm of media studies specifically through the established theory in genre studies, and social constructivism. I will be using content analysis as an analysis method, which I will define in more detail in the next section, to examine video games within the selection and related media. This method should identify socially relevant themes within the texts and apply my findings to secondary sources. That will allow me to draw on existing scholarship in order to frame a specific trajectory of the relationship between the themes of childhood and horror. In order to illustrate this methodology in practice, I will be including a close reading of *Amanda the Adventurer* (2022). I believe this to be a pertinent example of the phenomenon of 'the looming threat'

and the ways in which it relates to real-life adult fears, which I will expand upon in the 'discussion' section of the thesis.

Methods

Content analysis is a research method used to analyze and confirm the existence of themes, words, and meanings in a text. It involves drawing inferences from a given text by isolating characteristics within it, in order for a researcher to construct meaning (Holsti, 1968). Inferences can be gained via both explicit and 'coded' messages and symbols (Holsti, 1968; Krippendorff, 2019). Hsieh and Shannon (2005) and Krippendorff (2019) defined codes as sections or moments of a text that had meaning beyond what was explicitly on the page and was instead given meaning through interpretation and analysis. It is a framework through which an analyst can theoretically interpret meaningful, valid, and replicable insights and meanings from a text or group of texts. Krippendorff's (2019) method is done by holding texts against both a research question and a theoretical framework, from which an analyst may make inferences with the addition of the context the analyst provides, connecting the research question and the text with 'stable correlations' in order to produce analytical constructs attempt to answer said research question.

The uses of content analysis are varied and many, but several scholars note uses that are relevant to my purposes. Bell (2012) discusses at length the ways in which content analysis can be applied to visual representations of a thing or concept in order to glean narrative and metatextual meaning from it. Leites and Pool (1942; cited in Berelson & Lazarsfeld, 1948) said content analysis can be used to examine symbols in texts and test hypotheses regarding their meanings and relevance, and Berelson (1952) noted it can be used both to compare pieces of media and examine the cultural patterns of population groups, including but not limited to the attitudes and values of a cultural place and time.

Video games, as a relatively new narrative medium, are heavily influenced by other visual narrative media available to the relevant culture's texts such as film, comics, and shortform video content found and distributed on the internet. In order to examine the cultural context of trends appearing in horror games, it became prudent to examine which trends were also appearing in other popular horror narrative media. Cultural context is a necessary element of a content analyst's examination of a text and requires an element of intertextual comparison and examination. This is especially true in genre studies where the codes and conventions of a genre are largely dependent on the cultural understanding of that genre, which is largely

influenced by the culture's previous *experiences* with that genre. Through mutual exposure, a variety of media are affecting this cultural conception of the horror genre at large at a given point in time. Due to the importance of this relationship between works, I will also occasionally be examining works from visual narrative media other than video games in order to examine an element of horror that is present in video games, but more comprehensively codified in other media.

Teleological Aspect

Regardless of whether one agrees with H.P. Lovecraft that "[t]he oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear" (Lovecraft, 1927, p. 1), it indubitably has been a major driver of human behavior, past and present. As a genre, horror is built on both real fears and the pleasure of being scared while also being safe and thus is an invaluable insight into what weighs on the mind of a given population. While it is entirely possible, and even necessary, to consider works in hindsight in order to fully understand the arcs of a culture with a clarity that is only afforded to those looking back, the present perspective holds equal value. Trends in genre come and go, and the media we consume now is more ephemeral and prone to simply vanishing than any before it. The delicate nature of electronics and the sheer volume of media that exists now all but guarantees that even texts with massive cultural footprints could be irrecoverably lost before the end of the century. People's memories of a time fade and cultures move on, and what seems obvious now could require intense levels of research to uncover not long down the road.

The conservation of the memory of cultural movements and fears is necessary for understanding and analysis in the future. Fear influences how we act, the decisions we make, and how we navigate our life circumstances. Having an understanding of what a culture was afraid of and how that influenced their art, lives, and actions can be crucial to examining a people once the cultural moment they lived in has passed. It is incredibly likely that not every point, if any at all, I make here in this thesis will be relevant even so much as a decade from now, but the importance of documenting these cultural movements and gradual shifts as they are observed in the present is not lost on me. It is through the documentation and analysis of our present day that scholars are able to reach back from the past and influence the understanding of the future.

Discussion

A Foreword: The ~~Elephant~~ Bear in the ~~Room~~ Pizzeria

The *Five Nights at Freddy's* (or *FNAF*) (2014-Present) franchise's rocket to fame and subsequent influence on the indie horror game genre at large was, perhaps unsurprisingly, a large part of the inspiration for this thesis. All three of my major discussion points are played with on some level by at least one instalment in the franchise and I did consider them as part of my selection to use as evidence as a part of the genre collective. The *FNAF* series has changed the shape of both the YouTube 'let's play' community and gaming sphere, the relationship between independent developers and fan labor (Brey, 2020), moved billions of dollars, and set the precedent for spooky, murder-filled, distinctly childhood-adjacent locations in horror games to come for the following decade. Its impact on the gaming, social media, and horror sphere truly cannot be overstated. All of this is to say, initially I planned to use the *FNAF* games as the focal franchise for this thesis and eventually decided against it. On the surface it stands as a well-known horror game that is a shining example of the phenomenon that I have observed through my research and will go on to detail in the following discussion section. However, there are some elements specific to its circumstances that led me to believe that it would not make a suitable candidate for deeper analysis despite the widespread influence it had.

The internet has changed many things about the way that media is produced and interacted with, by both critics and audiences, and while the 'discussion' in the back and forth between serialized productions and critics publicizing responses has always been a factor of a series' fame, the internet has brought the realm of fan theorization and the creators of a work closer together. There is perhaps no clearer example of this than the entanglement between FANF and the YouTube channel *The Game Theorists.* This channel, dedicated to making 'theories' about the lore and science of video games, examined the lore within and surrounding the games by untangling increasingly enigmatic clues and working with a wider fandom community to interpret the famously convoluted and cunningly hidden lore. Game Theory's host (at the time) Mathew Patrick (internet handle Matpat) mentioned within his analysis on several occasions that, as the games progressed, the clues in regards to the lore of the game became increasingly obfuscated and difficult to find (*The Game Theorists* 2015a), likely in response to the sheer number of people and teams dedicated to dissecting the game in order to find said secrets. The places in which these secrets were hidden escalated from hidden minigames and cryptic messages to sonographs, messages buried in game code, hints hidden

in children's activity books, and small snippets of relevant lore across the twenty-four books released in the series. *The Game Theorists* have, to date, dedicated seventy-two videos over the span of a decade to this single franchise (of the 730 videos total on the channel, meaning that it accommodates for almost 10% of the channel's video content). The clues became so numerous and so well hidden that compiling them all for meaningful analysis in a timely manner was a gargantuan task, meaning that most of the online community's understanding of the lore and story is informed strongly by the most prominent compilation and analysis of them, namely *The Game Theorists'* videos. Over time the relationship between *FNAF* and *The Game Theorists'* videos became more and more of a dialogue. Beginning with the games' creator, Scott Cawthon updating hidden messages four times in real-time on his website, scottgames.com, while *The Game Theorists* were live on YouTube and speculating on *FNAF* theories (*The Game Theorists* 2015b), and culminating in the final theory video before MatPat's retirement depicting them meeting at Cawthon's house saying that they have "much to discuss" with the caption of the clip designating him the 'lore-keeper' (*The Game Theorists* 2024).

MatPat also stated in many videos that the videos regarding FNAF theories performed very well and that the audience demand for them was great (*The Game Theorists* 2015c), and the videos performing well increased the *FNAF* games' popularity considerably, likely increasing the demand for more. Bishop (2020) examined how the way in which MatPat's videos were presented appealed to YouTube's algorithmic distribution processes and therefore contributed to his videos' successes, generating a yet larger audience for the games. It is impossible to know in what ways this fame and attention via scrutiny to small, enigmatic details changed any plans that Cawthon had for the development and direction of the series, but it seems impossible to imagine that it did not have at least partial influence on the way the later games developed. I will still be using *FNAF* games as evidence where appropriate, I think it would be an oversight not to, but this specific set of conditions lead me to believe that it may not be the best candidate for close analysis. I believe this to be the case both because a majority of the games seem to have been designed to retain an air of marketable mystique while under the expected intense scrutiny of literal millions, and because the cultural understanding of the lore as it stands is so heavily informed by (and built upon the findings of) a single team, making it extremely difficult to make unbiased inferences.

Part 1: Nostalgia and Internet Horror

A point of interest to me upon examining these games was how many of them embrace aesthetics and attributes of a certain time period. Childhood is not something inherently tied to a time period, but with the relics, locations, and cultural landscapes of certain time periods in accordance with the generation in question. Whether it is the grainy, unstable footage of tape recorders or the inclusion of discount Furbys, many of the games in my selection ended up in some way 'retro', with varying degrees of subtlety. Few of the games explicitly dated themselves to a year or era, but many of them diegetically established themselves in a time and place culturally associated with approximately thirty to forty years ago, sometime within the 1980s-90s. This is an interesting era to focus on in concurrence with a theme of childhood-centric horror, and I believe that it warrants further investigation.

Internet Horror: The Creepypasta Legacy and Analog Horror

As discussed in the literature review and methodology sections, a key tool in the examination of genre, especially in the modern connected world, is an understanding of intertextuality and the ways in which works and media influence each other I argue that there are clear influences on horror games from horror in other media, from the cultural mainstream of horror cinema to the less well-known but more digitally-native world of creepypasta. Creepypasta specifically is highly intertextual, often assuming knowledge both of general video game tropes, and of specific intellectual properties, creating a reciprocal relationship between the two for audiences and, much of the time, creators as well. I believe that the recent trend of analogue horror in video games is related to creepypasta's stylistic influence on the horror genre.

The internet has a longstanding tradition of spreading and retelling horror stories. Creepypasta, derived from the term 'copypasta', refers to horror and gothic "…content with viral potential that is copied and pasted across numerous websites", usually starting on 'anon community' (anonymous community) boards and spreading outwards, their origins usually quickly obscured (Balanzategui, 2019, p. 189). While not the first iteration of internet horror, it is perhaps the most influential, spawning a lasting legacy in individual fandoms under its conglomerate umbrella, such as the SCP community, the avid followings of individual characters such as *Jeff the Killer*, and a thriving artistic presence. Creepypasta as a genre was versatile by nature, but many of the best-known ones have an extremely specific relationship to both time and childhood. Many of the more well known creepypastas involving media or technology were written in or around the early 2010s with a focus on media aimed at children

ranging from the 80s to the very early 2000s, such as *Sonic.exe* (2013) and *Tails Doll* (many stories ranging from 2005 to 2013) featuring *Sonic the Hedgehog (1991)*, *Ben Drowned* (2010) featuring *Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask (2000)*, *Lavender Town Syndrome (2011)* featuring *Pokémon: Red and Blue (1996),* and *Squidward's Suicide* (2010) featuring *SpongeBob SquarePants (1999)*. Some creepypastas attack artifacts of childhood from far earlier, such as *Suicide Mouse (2010)* which features black and white-era Mickey Mouse, and some more modern staples of childhood. *Smile HD (2011), Rainbow Factory (2011),* and *Cupcakes (2011),* as well as many more, are all derivative of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic (2010)* which had an unprecedented hold on the creepypasta community.

Many academics propose that creepypasta strongly resembles, if not actively serves as, 'modern folklore' (Balanzategui, 2019; Ondrak, 2018; Velocci, 2018; Williams, 2015) so despite being digitized, there are uncountable variations on each story, each with miniscule changes that evolve with each iteration and retelling. The widespread nature of these stories and anonymous nature of forum posting make the ages and lifestyles of most creepypasta authors difficult to ascertain, but it is not an unreasonable assumption that the teenagers and young adults interested in writing amateur horror on the internet at that time would have interacted with some, if not all, of those media properties at a formative time in their lives. This distortion of childhood artifacts could be an expression of a change in perspective, as childhood gives way to adulthood and its greater contextual burdens and stresses. The perversion of familiar, 'safe' childhood artifacts achieves the uncanny in a targeted way that can unify a group of people with little else in common than a staple childhood method of entertainment. Cooley and Milligan (2018) discussed this trend in creepypasta, concluding that in "alienating mythologized childhood artifacts (i.e., television shows, video games), these networked narratives depict not how properties can be made strange, but more accurately, are revealed as having always been strange" (p. 193). This is an idea that will become more profound in part 3 of the discussion of this thesis, but for now acts as an effective doorway to discuss how the element of nostalgia is weaponized within creepypasta to generate horror using artifacts of the childhood of an expected 2010 reader.

As creepypasta became a cultural hallmark, and in itself became an influential piece of horror media in the adolescence of others, it laid the foundation for the establishment of a particular aesthetic that could be easily removed from context. The aesthetic of creepypastas of this kind, with a fixation on the past and relics and aesthetics of one's childhood, established a generic framework that was iterated upon within games, not to pervert the childhoods of the

presumed audience, but in homage to previous successful influence in horror. The creepypasta community is still alive and well, if diminished from the size of its peak, and has a clear iterative influence on horror media to this day. Several creepypastas were made into real video games that could be played through in short experiences. The fictional in-game events of *Sonic.exe* famously received this treatment, and iterations on famous creepypastas such as *Rake (2015), Pokémon: Lost Silver (2010), 'the (2016)* (also known as *Coronation Day),* and many others made their transition from a written to a playable format. Slenderman, the starring monster in a particularly popular creepypasta, famously broke out into gaming early, and is still starring in games to this day, the most recent one coming out in 2021. Itch.io contains over two hundred games with the 'creepypasta' tag, the most recent of which being from this year (2024). There are also instances where the codes and conventions commonly associated with creepypastas are clearly present within otherwise unrelated video games. For example, *Inscription* (2021) features a protagonist who is a 'YouTuber' reviewing playing cards (a distinctly modern profession) that finds a cursed game stored on a floppy disk, an obsolete form of computer storage with logs of a developer who was killed after discovering the game's 'dark secret'. *98xx* (2023) This plotline holds many of a video game-based creepypasta's genre conventions. This serves as testament to the fact that creepypastas influenced and inspired generations of horror creators who are now making art, inspired by the formative horror media of their youth.

The age of creepypasta has now passed, though the communities it left behind still thrive. However, people never stop telling horror stories, and plenty of other formats for the internet to play with have filled the gaps. Just as fashion and cultures experience trends, as discussed above, certain codes and conventions can gain popularity and create a 'trend' within a genre. Often these trends, if they become prolific enough, become sub-genres of their own with their own cult followings and enthusiasts. One such semi-recent emergence has been the "analog horror" movement, largely pioneered by independent creators on the internet (later on YouTube), and making its way to both the big screen and games later in its life. Early instances of this particular set of genre conventions may have been somewhat more genuine in their aesthetics, both because very early instances of analogue horror such as *No Through Road* (2009) were made at a time when camcorders were both cheap and still widely available, and as a deliberate homage to recent cultural hallmark films making use of the 'found footage' genre conventions such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and *The Ring* (1998). Modern YouTube series such as *Local 58* (2015-Present), *The Mandela Catalogue*

(2021-Present), *The Walten Files* (2020-Present) and *The Backrooms* (2022-Present) wholeheartedly embrace this aesthetic, most of which contain hearty helpings of childhood themes and imagery of their own. The modern interpretation of analog horror adapts the eldritch vagueness of gothic horror by embracing the fallibility of film, with glitchy film and audio cutting together often fragmented events that do not tell clear stories on their own. This subgenre very quickly became popular in horror games, embracing TV fuzz, old technology, parodies of older intellectual properties aimed at children, and even the aesthetics of outdated game systems. Examples of such games include *Iron Lung* (2022), *Home Safety Hotline* (2024), and several works developed by the studio Puppet Combo, such as *Murder House* (2020), *Stay Out of the House* (2023) and *The Glass Staircase* (2019).

Personal observation leads me to believe that analog horror has its roots in the same internet horror spaces as creepypasta, or at the very least occupies similar spaces and is interacted with by similar communities. Speaking from experience, it is an easy pipeline to follow reading creepypasta as a child and teenager and turning to other similar sources of internet-based horror as an adult. It is accessible, as its 'unpolished' aesthetic mitigates the need for much more than a phone to record on and video editing software. It also speaks to a similar era of reflection on childhood aesthetics as creepypastas, with a different focus; analog horror appears to focus more on the aesthetics and stylistic elements of the past depicting disturbing content, where creepypasta concerned itself more with the corruption of the relics of childhood itself, however, they seem to overlap in matters of evoking and distorting objects of nostalgia. There are cases where one is able to see the influence of one in the other. For example, *Marble Hornets* (2009-2014) is a YouTube analog horror ARG (alternate reality game) inspired by the Slenderman mythos and the games that followed the creepypasta's raucous success, bringing the indistinct and somewhat disjointed aesthetic of modern analog horror to a distinctly 'creepypasta' monster. Another example is the *Petscop (2017)* series, a YouTube series made in the style of a 'let's play' series around the fictional lost PlayStation game 'Petscop'. *Petscop* videos has distinctly 'old-school' graphics, reminiscent of PlayStation graphics, but follows the format of a creepypasta centralized on a piece of 'haunted' or corrupted lost media. In the case of both creepypastas and analog horror, it is difficult to say if the integration of childhood themes specifically is foundational to the *development* of the genres, or if the two things 'came into vogue' at similar times and it was a matter of due course for them to intertwine and combine. Neither creepypasta nor analog horror deal exclusively with childhood themes, but it is recurrent enough of a theme, and

novel enough a connection, to warrant discussion. The co-habitation of these genres in internet spaces may lead to further interplay between them in the future. Already the way in which they interact with one another has drawn attention to internet horror's relationship with technology and how it uses depictions of it to anchor a piece in a time and place.

Technology as an Anchor to the Past

These two facets of internet horror, while not in their entirety dedicated to the theme of childhood, fixate on the past in meaningful and recurring ways. We have already discussed the ways in which creepypasta invokes media in order to play upon and corrupt feelings of nostalgia. In the case of analog horror, this effect is achieved when the now mostly unused but still not unfamiliar technology of the past provides a sense of nostalgia made uncanny by the presence of horror. I believe this fixation on the past and the way it can be distorted with horror makes the fact that these two subgenres frequently *do* turn to themes of childhood relevant, especially because there seems to be some corroboration between analogue horror games that depict childhood themes and corrupted relics or locations of childhood.

Many of the games I observed used technological elements present within either the story, setting, or non-diagetic presentation in order to date themselves. Games that incorporate analog aesthetics, or simply make a deliberate effort to demonstrate a place and time, use technology as a grounding point to both establish that aesthetic and establish a setting in time. The *mise en scene* in any piece of media is a crucial element to establish the setting, and the rapid growth of technology in the past century has made technology within a setting a reliable indicator of time and place. For example, if a game's information is relayed through a series of VHS tapes, such as in *Amanda the Adventurer (2022)* or *Poppy Playtime (2021-present)* , or security cameras with poor quality footage and bulky monitors such as in the first *Five Nights at Freddy's (2014)*, the audience gets the impression that the game is taking place sometime between the '80s and '90s. Similarly, *Tattletail (2016)* features animatronic toys incredibly similar to Furbies that align themselves with a larger Tattletail that plays tapes from its stomach in such a way that may be a nod to Teddy Ruxbin, another popular toy at around the same time as the game's setting.

Even if the time of the story is not diagetically acknowledged, the aesthetic of the available technology during a time period can also 'date' a piece. Several instances of 'analogue horror' are easily identifiable simply because they have a visual and auditory softness associated with VHS tapes or old televisions. *Murder House* (2020) purposefully uses 'low-

poly' graphics reminiscent of early PlayStation games, *98xx* (2023) emulates the appearance of an early Windows desktop with only a few basic games on it, and *Buddy Simulator 1984* (2020) deliberately evokes a variety of early game styles like RPG adventure games and text-based games. This, in contrast with other recent games that have used more modern interfaces, such as *Simulacra* (2017) and the *Welcome to the Game* franchise (2016-2018) which mock up the interface of modern mobile phones and desktops respectively. It is often a relevant, or at least intentional, maneuver on the part of the creator to set a story in a time that is not the era in which they wrote the story. These creative decisions work in tandem with the current influx of both analogue horror style and childhood centralized games. The deliberate choice to use or invoke old technology anchors the horror to an older time or concept by association, invoking nostalgia on two fronts, in both aesthetic and through the use of corrupted artifacts of childhood in a similar way to the creepypastas.

Despite both of these subgenres of horror not centralizing on childhood specifically, I believe that it represents fertile ground to plant a seed. The emphasis on the theme of childhood in horror developing at the same time as these two subgenres that focus to such a degree on the past and what lurks there could potentially be, at the very least, an appeal to similar sensibilities in the same audience. It is impossible to know if the artifacts within these games are deliberate homages to the specific childhood of the game's creators, if they are intended for an audience that has nostalgic feelings for a specific time period, or if they are simply derivative of that which came before it enough to codify the aesthetic. It could be supposed that the people most likely to be making horror games professionally, even small scale productions with very few or singular developers, are likely to be approximately 30-45 years of age and thus experienced the '80s and '90s as a child, however this presumes much. This aesthetic could be influenced by any number of factors. The '80s-'90s may simply be the predominant idea of what a standard, stereotypical childhood looks like to the people within this age range to be making this particular style of indie horror game. Such is the nature of genre convention, as the aesthetic becomes established, more and more people will use it without the subliminal connection of its predecessors' creators, whatever it may have been integral to the creator's understanding of the genre or not. Broadly speaking, an individual's relationship with a time period cannot be accounted for. This emphasis on corrupted relics of the past is relevant because it may indicate anxieties and insecurities about one's own childhood, and calls into question the safety of childhood in general. If one's childhood was not as safe as they remembered, perhaps it was never safe at all, then the same could be true

for children now. What seemed to be innocent was not and was a danger to the children of the time, which could in turn imply that there are hidden dangers now that also endanger children that one must stay constantly alert for.

Part 2: Childhood and Insanity

From the twisted world of *Alice: Madness Returns (2011)* and the distorted imagery of *Happy Game (2021)*, from cartoonish, tantrum throwing villains with mommy issues to grown men who giggle and dance in the face of artillery fire, the Western world's idea of childishness and madness are tightly interwoven. This discussion will concern itself, for the most part, with the depictions of madness in media, distinguished for the most part with modern understanding of mental health and how it presents itself in the real world.

Regression and Childish Behavior in Relation to Mental Health

The fear and rejection of what is atypical to the dominant social group is a well-documented phenomenon. Fear as an emotion is not inherently political but the links made between lawlessness, civil collapse, and violence and an object of political fear can be encouraged, weaponized, and take on a life of their own within communities (Robin, 2004). Bivins (2008) ruminates on how political fear causes civilizations of order to segregate and reject objects of difference by pushing them to the margins of civilization. This is done in order to maintain the illusion of safety, order, and hegemony within a culture. Standards of morality, behavior, and practice are created and strictly enforced in order to maintain the plausibility of culturally constructed order and meaning. This is perhaps the root of the historical and egregious segregation and discrimination efforts behind those who are meaningfully different from the established social norm in matters of body and mind and the forcible institutionalization of those such 'undesirables' as the disabled and 'insane' in order to remove examples of difference from sight and society (Smith, 2012). This concept, of course, is inextricably linked to the height of the eugenics movement but continues to have extensive influence well into the modern day. The attribute of relevance in this instance is a deep and ingrained cultural anxiety around adults who struggle to process and identify reality.

There is some genuine truth to the stereotyping that people who are mentally ill or traumatized may seek comfort in childlike habits and behaviors. "Insecurity, fear, and anger can cause an adult to regress. In essence, individuals revert to a point in their development when they felt safer and when stress was nonexistent, or when an all-powerful parent or another adult would have rescued them" (Lokko & Stern, 2015, paragraph 5-6). This

behavior is often harmless, and some scholars even suggest that it can even be productive or important for reclaiming childlike security and trust (Balint, 2013; Jung, 2014). Age regression and childlike behaviors are common changes in people who have undergone strokes (Fukatsu et al., 1997) or regressive diseases such as dementia (Aitken et al., 1999; Mychack et al., 2001). That said, the connection between childish behavior in adults and 'madness' goes beyond the overt phenomenon of regression. Despite the grounded truth of mental illnesses and other forms of neurodivergence causing what might be considered atypical behavior, there are particular behaviors that, while neither unimitatable or impossible to occur in real people naturally, are used as visual and behavioral shorthand for an unstable mind in media.

A Cultural Connection

The Western world has a pre-established cultural connection between childish imagery and behavior and mental illness or instability. Notable examples include John Kramer speaking to his victims through a puppet on a tricycle in the *Saw (2004)* franchise, to Norman Bates 'playing dress-up' in his mother's clothes and the fixation on his relationship to his mother in *Psycho (1960)*. Childhood connotations can range from overt connections with imagery such as toys, clowns, and locations, or more behavioral cues such as inappropriate giggling, various depictions of fantastical beliefs or 'make-believe', and a tendency to throw 'tantrums' over things that most would consider small or inconsequential. Media culture has drawn a connection between these states of being, utilizing childish traits as visual and behavioral shorthand for mental instability in adults. Expectations dictate that we gain a sense of 'perspective' for what is and is not 'important' and be reasonable in matters of what distresses us with criteria grounded in logic. All of these things are, of course, purely subjective. That which the average adult deems 'irrelevant' or what sort of reaction warrants the label 'tantrum' will vary by culture, time, place, and personal experience, but wherever the cultural benchmark lies, it can be used as the boundary between human and monster. This is especially true if the adult in question is male, as the presence and expression of excessive emotion is a well-documented expression of masculine madness in media (Goodman, 2015; Kromm, 1994; Wahl, 1995).

It is worth noting, wholesale, that madness in Western media is often attached to a threat. This can be the threat of the protagonist going mad or a character who poses a threat due to their unhinged nature; the cultural unease in response to something that lies outside of the defined cultural norm begins right at the door of the trope. In his seven theses, Cohen (2007)

said that “the monster is the harbinger of the category crisis” (p. 6) and “dwells at the gates of difference” (p. 7), and madness in media often is, at its core, an emphasizing of difference. This may offer an explanation as to why childish behavior in adults so handily acts as shorthand both for madness and for villains, as to act in defiance of cultural norm is inherently unsettling to others as it represents the threat of societal collapse. The ‘mad’ have a certain disrespect for cultural ‘norms and social shorthand that is also common in children because they do not have a frame of reference for ‘proper behavior’. An adult, however, should theoretically know better and the fact that they are ‘choosing’ not to act in ‘appropriate ways’ feels threatening. If they are able to disregard the most basic tenet of social order, what else might they be able to disregard? These people who walk the line between child and adult behaviors, between sensibility and nonsense, are difficult to meaningfully categorize in matters of behavior. Modern culture handily segregates infant, child, tween’, teenager, and adult with a series of guideline behaviors that (supposedly) indicate someone’s social development and function. The childish madman disassembles that organizational system and creates something unpredictable in its ability to be categorized.

Distinct from the ways in which Western media associates madness with childishness and yet similarly informative is the ways in which subcultures form and create associations within their smaller communities. Menhera is a cultural movement that has existed for quite some time, with a popularity spike in 2014, that centralizes on mentally ill women. The original Japanese movement contains not a small amount of cultural nuance, following on from the ‘kawaii’ movement as a form of almost, (albeit gory and shocking), form of female empowerment against the stigmatization of Japan’s “long-standing undesirability of sick/detracted female bodies” (Seko & Kikuchi, 2022, p. Abstract). Despite this, the menhera aesthetic has found its place in English speaking online communities too, with thriving communities on social media sites such as Tumblr and Reddit with thousands of posts and dedicated accounts or blogs demonstrating at the very least a fascination with the intersection between the cutesy and childish, violence against the self, and self-destructive mental illness. I kept my investigation of these communities to English-speaking, easily accessible sites and sectors as the Japanese subculture is less relevant to my purposes. The childish influence on the aesthetic is overt, with common symbols being large bows, *Sanrio: My Melody (aka Hello Kitty)*, pastel pinks and blues, oversized clothing, and frills and lace, all often contrasted by being covered in blood, and the characters littered with self-harm wounds. As mentioned, this aesthetic is distinctly Japanese in origin and is influenced by Japanese

cultural shifts and movements, but the shared social spaces that the internet has created provide a platform for the cultural aesthetic connection between childishness and disturbing content as well as madness to be connected in more than one way. The existence of this subculture and other related ones also shows the ways that countercultures can form and influence the conglomerate cultural ideas that find their way into genre media.

The Western Aesthetic of Madness

In all forms of media, similar to how genre uses codes and conventions to communicate tone and phenomena throughout and regarding to the narrative, a storyteller can communicate details about a character by giving them traits or behaviors that are culturally associated with certain tropes. In this way, media influences cultural perception, which in turn feeds back into media. The codes and conventions that make up characters can solidify into archetypes that an audience can easily recognize, using their cultural knowledge to navigate the text. These archetypes work in tandem with a genre's codes and conventions in order to demonstrate the role a character plays in the narrative. This can range from the blatantly obvious to the more complex and subtle, but broadly speaking this foundation is a crucial element of character design (Tillman, 2019), as it allows the audience to quickly comprehend key points of the character. Depictions of madness are no different, and across genres, madness is depicted in several different ways, but the concept often tends to return to a series of childish behaviors. These guidelines are not infallible, nor are they always relevant, as a character can be mad but not childish and vice versa.

Soap operas often depict 'madness' or mental illness in the form of conditions that alter or impact the character's sense of reality, such as schizophrenia, amnesia, 'hysterical blindness', and manic episodes followed by depression. Prime time television is more likely to depict psychopathology, and police and detective dramas prefer an obsessive form of psychopathology, as well as multiple personality disorders (Wahl, 1995). But even these more serious depictions of madness tend to occasionally turn to Lewis Carroll and his legacy's depictions and aesthetic of madness providing rambling, bright colors, patchwork costumes, and a cheery, bright demeanor, as well as a tendency for 'nonsense words' and arbitrary rules in defiance of the 'sensible' or logic. Wonderland madness is very particularly somebody working on a completely different set of presumptions and internal logic. This line of madness is popular in cartoons and horror in equal measure, and the blatant and deliberate defiance of the ordinary appeals to the codes and conventions of both. Horror enjoys fixative and obsessive madness that warps the perceptions and morals of the afflicted character,

enhancing the heinousness of their actions with a genuine and fierce conviction in their moral justification, or ignorance to the severity of their actions. This can manifest as a character's childish ignorance of the concept of death and how much damage they could do, to gleefully laughing through horrifying event, to being so completely out of touch with reality that they do not realize they are doing anything at all. All genres have ways to express to an audience that a character is 'mad' without having to do too much demonstrative work.

Character art and animation showcases this phenomenon very well, as animation as an art form is very deliberate in its character design and movements due to the fact that everything has to be drawn or rendered manually. Animation must communicate as much character as possible in the simplest way, through the means of demonstrating behavior, aesthetic, the way the character holds themselves, the way they move, and many more factors (Maestri, 2006). Animation and character art is a useful tool to identify character traits that are often correlated, as at least one of them will usually be exaggerated in order to make the character's attributes clear. The villainous madmen and women of cartoons and comics are usually prone to, at the very least, over-the-top tantrums upon failure, hysterical and inappropriate laughter, and loud demands that everybody else in the room at the very least indulge their unorthodox (and often nonsensical or inappropriate) lines of thinking. They also often incorporate silly or exaggerated ways of speaking (a distinctive voice, heavy accent, particular speech pattern) or an element of visual and behavioral difference usually associated with social ridicule such as flamboyance or being overweight that contrasts the threat they narratively pose.

A sizable portion of Batman's animated rogue gallery can be examined this way, as the Caped Crusader's generally intelligent and grim demeanor makes an effective point of contrast to the likes of The Joker, Babydoll, The Mad Hatter, and The Riddler. While modern sensibilities around mental health would struggle to identify Batman as a 'bastion of sanity', the Dark Knight's stony and unflappable air of seriousness in most of his programming makes for a mature 'adult' figure at whom it is easy to throw various villains with an edge of childish insanity, dressed in bright, costume colors and producing threats based on gimmicks rather than adult practicality. Other animated villains prone to this over-the-top behavior are Dr Robotnik (or Dr Eggman) from the Sonic franchise, Nathan Diskin from *Sandman (1989-1996)*, and Him from *The Powerpuff Girls* (1998-2005). On occasion, live action media will use these exaggerated traits outside of their intended genre on purpose, as if to emphasize the ridiculousness of their character, and their disconnect with the 'reality' of the genre that they are in. The Toymaker's recent reappearance in the 60th anniversary special of *Dr Who* is an

excellent example, taking the overly theatrical, cartoonish logic atypical of live action productions, with him doing a musical number as a firing squad opens their ammunitions on him. His complete disregard for the dangerous situation in favor of bright colors and loud noises, his absolute devotion to the rules of games with horrifying consequences, his costumey and exaggerated outfit, all of these things suggest a disconnect between the severity of the character's actions and the weight the character gives them to the point of coming across as uncanny.

A potential reason that this occurs, and the connection between childishness and madness continues to be reenforced and culturally connected, is because these two groups overlap specifically in the sense that they defy and act in spite of social convention, breaking established social norms through either ignorance or lack of ability to comply. Neither group defines themselves the way that is expected by society, or interacts with adults in the predictable, socially scripted ways that feel comfortable when one is navigating everyday life, and in response they and their perspective is rejected by the layman. Wahl (1995) noted that mentally ill characters in media tended to lack "[families] and jobs that establish their identities as participating members of society" (p. 42), citing that mentally ill characters are significantly less likely than regular characters to have or be successful at identifiable jobs, have a marital status, or have any sort of real social identity. We are expected to grow out of childish behavior patterns as we socialize and gain 'more adult' priorities. Failure to do this puts a character in a place that is difficult to socially define, inspiring rejection from a culture.

Through the Looking Glass: The Surreal and the Childish

It is difficult to say if dream logic summons childhood, or if the very concept of childhood summons dream logic through the ever-afflicting lens of hindsight and nostalgia. The idea of a world full of inherent strangeness and magic is only possible through the eyes of a child, who could believe such things once one is immersed in adulthood? There seems to be a cultural precedent that children live in a different, more magical, world where absurdity is not questioned the way it might be by an adult. I believe that a great deal of this president can be attributed to the cultural monolith of *Alice in Wonderland*, which sets a wonderful precedent to associate surreal imagery and 'nonsense' with childishness. As is so crucially proclaimed by the Cheshire Cat, Wonderland and its denizens identify strongly with madness. Alice is mad, the Cat, the March Hare and the Hatter and the Queen of Hearts are mad. Wonderland itself is mad. That is the explanation given for why Wonderland is the way it is, and despite being later revealed to be a dream, that repeated emphasis of madness is the cornerstone

reasoning for all of Wonderland's contradictory and vibrant imagery and non-logic. The association with Wonderland and insanity is there on the page in black and white, as explicit as it could possibly be. The vividly painted world of Lewis Carroll's work has been an inspiration to writers for generations and has touched the horror genre in a particular and unique way. Horror games alone have several instalments taking heavy inspiration from either the stylistic or story elements from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and the sequel *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871), and many of them ruminate on the slipping sanity of the player character as the game progresses. *Alice Is Dead (2009) and Alice Madness Returns (2011),* and the upcoming but highly anticipated *Habromania (to be released)* are more overt, but there are also more subtle homages such as *Fran Bow (2015).*

While *Alice in Wonderland*'s cultural ubiquity makes for a solid starting point to explain this phenomenon, it is a point of interest to trace the way in which it has evolved, and how horror now uses surreal and nonsensical gameplay and graphics in association with childhood. There is now a particular subsection of horror games that use dreamlike imagery and pacing while depicting children wandering nightmarish and nonsensical environments that may or may not be grounded in any form of clear real-world parallel. Games such as *Limbo (2010)* and *Inside (2016)* with a particular stylistic feel that feels liminal and dreamlike. *Happy Game (2021)* depicts a young boy wandering through surreal, nightmarish imagery with strong symbolism relating to the theme of childhood throughout. Bloody smiley faces, grotesque balloons, gory stuffed animals, and memories of a childhood dog gone missing intersperse scenes of a young boy in his bedroom who appears to be dreaming. The nonsensical imagery and the off-putting inclusion of violence and gore at odds with creepy, widely smiling characters and the threat of the world turning hostile at every turn makes for the epitome of the convention I have identified, which is the 'horrification' of the child's dreamlike state.

Whether or not the child (or adult navigating this childish place) is or is not hallucinating them is rarely made clear. *Happy Game*'s ending is quite ambiguous, seeing the same boy (now with hair) lying on the ground as some demonic thing bursts out of him. *Fran Bow* and *Little Misfortune* (2017) both lean into the disconnect a child has between sanity and reality, with *Fran Bow* explicitly posing the question of Fran's sanity from the beginning, as she starts the game in a mental hospital. *Little Misfortune* (2017) is less overt, but the protagonist's reasoning is constantly called into question by her narrator, with constant implications that she does not understand the gravity or the surrealness of any situation that

she is in. Neither game explicitly confirms nor denies the supernatural elements of their plot (although it is revealed that Miss Fortune did die somewhere near the beginning of the game). Ultimately, a confirmation of the surreal elements of the games are not needed, specifically *because* of the childhood connotation. The connection to childhood acts as an explanation enough for the integration of the fantastical into the world around them. In these games, the child protagonist rarely, if ever, questions their surroundings. The lack of acknowledgement of the strangeness of the situation, in combination with the cultural acceptance of children having a unique connection to the supernatural, creates a setting that prompts less scrutiny from audiences.

There's No Such Thing as Monsters (Until they Find You)

Children in media are, by and large, more willing to believe in the fantastical without much questioning. Magic, mystical creatures, and monsters are more in line with what adults perceive as a child's imagined reality than an adult's supposedly more grounded one. Perhaps this is why the horror allows the child to witness the terror before any adult gets the chance. Classic examples such as Danny in *The Shining (1980)* and Andy in *Child's Play (1988)* demonstrate not only that monsters act differently around children, but also the ways in which adults' refusal to engage with the world on their level can cause the adults in the child's life to fail to protect them. The child is often in tune with the monstrous in some instinctual or innate way. This legacy has persevered to the modern day, with instalments such as *M3gan (2022)* and *It Comes at Night (2017).* This particular convention allows for the child's experience to be discarded by adults as imaginary or fantasy and is thus often dismissed.

Similarly, people also tend to dismiss the things that the 'mad' concern themselves with as not being rational and thus not being worth the emotional reaction they are eliciting. Adults also tend to disregard the fears of children as irrational or juvenile, thus the danger that the child is perceiving is not a real danger to them (Muris et al., 2000), so it is not worth acting beyond placating them. The resonance of this treatment may inform or be a result of the cultural relationship between that which is childlike and madness, in that the things they perceive and react to are not considered worthwhile by those in authority positions. The fact that it so often occurs in horror and is used to generate dramatic irony and tension highlights that to see something and not be believed is an inherently powerless position. As prominently displayed in *Smile (2022)*, a character exhibiting traits of 'madness' allows adults to be accused of imagining things the way one would expect from a child. The protagonist's fear

that something is profoundly wrong with her is brushed aside by her loved ones in favor of accusations of mental instability in a way that offers her no support or comfort. She too has concerns for her own safety and sanity, but the people around her do not seem to be willing to work with her from her position, rather telling her what she should and should not focus on in trying to address and fix the problem. The dismissal of the possibility of the monster creates a narrative opening to keep its victims isolated, but this particular trope highlights a tendency to put children and madness in the same box in order to justify the same treatment being done to two different social groups.

Occasionally, the childishness of the madness is more intentional and targeted, by the virtue of that character's childhood being touched by the monster in such a way that they were not able to escape into the maturity of adulthood. Schönfelder (2013) explored the ways in which childhood trauma can haunt a character into adulthood, and this occasionally takes the form of characters being literally haunted by their pasts, making them more susceptible to believe in what lurks in the dark because of a dreamlike, childhood experience. Schneider (1999) posited that "paradigmatic horror narratives work by *reconfirming* for audiences' infantile beliefs that were abandoned long ago, such as the belief in the ability of the dead to return to life" (p. 168). Perhaps the perception that adults are above belief in such impossibilities encourages a relationship between childhood and a divorce from reality that horror cultivates. The horror genre creates a world in which the 'infantile' hopes and fears of childhood are true, but adults like to believe that they live in the 'real world' with eyes unshaded by ignorance or folly and so to perceive those childhood beliefs once again must imply a level of infantilism.

There is also room for discussion around the role of parenthood in this trope, which is far enough from topic for me to refrain from delving deeply, but close enough to be worth consideration. The relationship between mental illness and parentage issues goes back to Freud, but there is a particular way in which the meaningful wants (or the presumed wants) of family members impacts those who are depictions of madness under grief or stress. Jason's mother in the first *Friday the 13th (1980)* 'speaks' to her drowned son Jason when she hallucinates him, saying that she is 'helping' him by killing the camp counselor upon whom she has projected the neglectful councilor who allowed her son to die. In *Dr. Giggles (1992)*, Evan Rendell Jr. fixates on his father's final deranged wish to resurrect his mother from when he was a teenager, and in *Psycho (1960)* Norman Bates' obsession with his mother is revealed to be equally as central to the character's psychological profile. The idea that

madness can be tied to a profound loss between parent and child (usually mother and child) could potentially imply the underlying relationship between the fear of loss and the fear of loss of control of oneself. All of this is to say there are connections between childhood and madness that go beyond even childhood itself into the themes of parenthood, and especially motherhood, another oft-discussed trope in horror (Arnold, 2016; Creed, 2013; Miller et al., 1991).

Part 3: Innocence and Oblivion

In aspects of story, aesthetics, and visual and cultural language, games align themselves with the theme of childhood and use it in order to examine attitudes on the innocence, oblivion, and nature of children in our society. It reflects what we believe are antagonistic forces in our lives, no matter how real or imagined, our wants for our children, and discusses whether we believe ourselves capable of doing anything about it.

*Innocence **is** Oblivion*

Childhood plays a profound role in the life of every human being. For better or worse, every adult had a childhood. How well that childhood went, how fondly they look back on it, and what that adult would do differently if they relived it notwithstanding, everybody's conceptualization and opinions on childhood are informed by both cultural and individual experiences. That said, as we grow and our childhood becomes distant, our relationship with children and childhood in our adult lives become more grounded in our current state of priorities, and we examine children, and childhood with a more 'adult' view, our memories and understanding of childhood heavily informed by both hindsight and an adult's definition of what is and is not important and worth worrying over.

The cultural perception that children do not know what is good for them is so culturally ubiquitous that it can be genuinely difficult to remember that children are far from stupid. While there is absolutely truth in the fact that children do not have 'life experience' to fall back on when trying to assess a threat or the relative merits of a good or bad thing, their ability to process information and make something of it is on par with if not greater than an adult's. There is a certain association between intelligence and worldliness that takes some time to deconstruct. Children's cognitive abilities are fascinating and immense, often only hindered by their limited life experience. It is this limited life experience that adults tend to focus on, and attempt to compensate for in their endeavor to both control and protect (and protect by controlling) the child. Here lies (among other things) the anxiety of being

insufficient to protect and provide for the child, because the child is not able to do so themselves. Social expectations are such that every adult should attempt to protect a child if they have the ability, and to attempt to do so even if they do not, because the child is unable to identify or act upon threats to themselves. Not to do so runs the risk of severe social alienation and scorn, so it stands to reason that horror explores and aggravates that fear as well as the fears of loss. Where horror indulges desire and anxiety in equal measure, the action genre indulges power fantasies. In an action movie, the protagonist will always be able to save the child in danger, no matter how pressing the circumstances or stressed the hero. The latent cultural anxiety about being *equipped* to take care of a child and protect them from harm will not be addressed. But horror exploits both the repressed temptation to abandon a difficult task, and the repressed fear that an adult will not be enough to defend the helpless child from the cruel world outside. This repeated emphasis on the helplessness and cluelessness of the child highlights a fundamental presumption of this cultural fear, that the culturally idolized trait of innocence in the white Western world is also, in fact, a cause of great anxiety in adults.

The duality between innocence and oblivion within the cultural idea of childhood becomes clearer the longer one examines it. Innocence is a 'good' and endearing trait in a child, but oblivion is the catalyst for threats to infiltrate the child's life. Children have a fundamentally different method of interacting with the world, by nature of not being a part of it for very long. While adults go to great lengths to care for the children in their lives (and even not in their lives), this point of difference still causes contention that drives adults to encourage assimilation to adult habits. Wood (2002) explored this when he included children in his concept of 'The Other', as an oppressed class of people within whom adults see elements of themselves that can be "projected outwards in order to be hated and disowned" (p. 27). He stated that what adults see in children is what lies within the adult, repressed but not destroyed by the older generation, which adults then seek to repress in turn, its existence and expression offensive in the face of our own tightly regulated emotions. The repressed qualities in question here are, I propose, the cornerstones of the Western conceptualization of childhood: innocence, vulnerability, and honesty. Values which are somewhat innate to childhood but increasingly frowned upon as one approaches adulthood. It is no longer excusably impolite to tell a lady her hairless cat looks ugly, or to state one's emotions openly and easily without fear of manipulation or being accused of manipulation in turn when one passes the arbitrary line between childhood and adulthood. Innocence, openness, and a

trusting countenance come with a certain set of dangers that, usually through a series of harsh lessons, adulthood makes one privy to. Easily lost and quick to bruise, the repressed 'inner child' in adults is simultaneously recognized as precious and a weakness for exploiting. Things that remind one of that inner child's existence summons to heed feelings of affection, concern, and aggression all at once when identified in real children. This is perhaps why innocence and oblivion exist so closely in the adult mind.

Oblivion holds inside it the implication of the frustration of others. Of naivety. Still a somewhat lauded concept in the context of childhood, but with fewer connotations of virtue. Innocence has a certain association of purity that one struggles to marry with the annoyance of a child asking their sleep-deprived parent why they can't skip school to go to the fair on the grounds that school is boring. Yet, these concepts exist in unity, in the contradictory way of emotional responses and tightly locked-away crevasses of the psyche. A child not understanding money and trying to pay a shopkeeper in leaves is cute, a child who smashes five iPads in a year because they don't understand the concept of value and money as a finite resource is aggravating. A child who thinks cotton candy comes from clouds and cheese comes from the moon is charmingly innocent to the ways of the real world; a child who goes to stick metal knives in power outlets is worryingly oblivious to the many frightening realities that caused the initial repression in their parents. I believe this frustration comes from a place of fundamental concern for the child, and an impulse to try and model them with appropriate behavior without the harsh lessons with which the adult learned. The world beyond their oblivion contains death and harm and ill-intentioned people. We simultaneously want them to understand, and to never have to. The resulting assimilation efforts enact iron-clad control over children's lives, for fear of a mere moment of lapse being the catalyst for loss.

The Importance of Location

I observed through examining the various games that location, area, and the ways in which various settings are dressed with both props and enemies are frequently essential elements in regards to the game's relationship with the theme of childhood. Childhood, being an experience, is closely tied to memories of activities, artifacts, and places, and like many such concepts, can be evoked through the use of certain aesthetic and iconographical choices that one can make in order to make a point about the setting and underlying themes. Through my examination of the selected games, I noticed much natural variation (as is expected) but broadly I was able to identify three ways in which most games incorporated the theme of childhood into their settings in order to establish a relationship with that theme. These

categories are, as is often the case in both horror and genre studies, not concrete. Many games have multiple locations, some of which may contain elements of several of these categories, or even squarely apply to more than one or none of them, but the three broad categories seem consistent enough to be notable. The expression of the location often changes the relationship with which childhood has to the story and the themes of the game, but the setting usually establishes at least one of these three relationships with childhood.

The first is games in which an adult has returned to or entered a childhood location. This is a place not made for them. Everything is slightly too small, just a little below eye level. A feeling ill-fitting feeling that no object or furniture in this space is meant for them. Occasionally the location and the objects in it are still somewhat functional, but they are often decrepit and dusty – a little broken and tarnished, reflecting how childhood seals itself away from adults, on the other side of the one-way mirror of nostalgia and memory. A few games in the selection that used props and location to this effect were *Slenderman: The Eight Pages* (2012), *My Friendly Neighborhood* (2023), and *Poppy Playtime* (2021-present), among others. When the adult protagonists return to a place of childhood, either their own or someone else's, these games rarely make the location *itself* hostile. Instead, preferring to present the threat in the form of a specific antagonist independent (although often not unconnected) to the environment. By creating an environment filled with childhood relics that are both dilapidated and empty of children (or anyone at all), an impression is given of that associated childhood being a thing of the past. It is not hostile; it is simply over. It makes childhood a thing that can only exist in warped memories, manifested by dusty relics and broken artifacts, much in the same way that looking back on a real childhood toy might stir a memory of being a child in a bittersweet way. It is a memory of a more innocent time to which one cannot return.

This is a point of contrast to the second way games incorporate childhood into their locations. Other games instead embrace the way in which childhood makes the world feel large and dangerous. For example, games such as *Inside* (2016), *The Binding of Issac* (2011), *House* (2020), *and Happy Game* (2021) create an environment in which the child is present, but the world is warped and dangerous and monstrous, presenting physical, emotional, and ideological threats to the concept of the child as manifested by the player avatar. Locations in these game types present familiar childhood locations warped beyond belief by unreasonably commonplace and gruesome danger and are a far cry from the intentionally abandoned locations of the previous category. They are filled with creatures and people, all of them

either victims, dangerous, or a combination of the two. Where the previous location type was a manifestation of the fear of losing children and childhood to unknown and unseen threats and corruptions by presenting the aftermath of a child already lost, this location type puts the child in active danger by perverting familiar environments that should have been safe. I believe this to be a manifestation of the fear of the looming threat.

A prime example of this style of location work is the *Little Nightmares* series (2017-2021), especially the second game, in which all locations, and main enemies therein, represent common childhood locations and associated fears. These games are divided into sections, each location being defined by a particular aesthetic and sometimes mechanical element, with one large 'mini-boss' monster and at least one secondary threat such as traps or smaller enemies. These enemies are, for the purpose of this analysis, central enough to the idea that the location is trying to convey (and zoned into them so they are both innate to their native location and unable to be found elsewhere) that they can be considered elements of the location; they are, after all, elements you would expect to find there. The school section features a strict teacher with a grotesquely long neck that doles out violent punishments and sees all, ruling over a mob of wild and violent doll-like children who mercilessly 'prank' and bully the protagonists. Another location features a rainy street filled with vacant mobs with distorted faces, placid and vacant while watching TV static, but becoming swiftly aggressive to the two small children wandering lost on the street once disturbed. Another is a hospital filled with grasping hands in the walls, sealed and padded cells implying the presence of unstable and violent patients, and a surgeon performing frightening and mutilating surgeries. When a culture's idea of childhood is inextricable from the idea that they are too innocent to understand true danger, but are also prone to being easily frightened due to not being logical, the intersection of those lines of thought, taken to the logical extreme, is to merge the adult fear of threats to the child with the fantastical horror of childlike nightmare logic. An adult might worry about their child getting lost and hurt in the woods, a child might worry about a nightmarish giant tracking them down through the trees, and from that union comes 'The Hunter', a figure with a shotgun and a burlap sack covering his head, chasing the protagonist through woods littered with beartraps and confusing, winding paths through the trees. *Little Nightmares II* (2021) takes common childhood anxieties and adult concerns about places children often go, and extrapolate horrifying visions of danger and violence that pay homage to both the child's perceived innocent fears and an adult's 'reasonable concerns' about the dangers to be found in the world beyond the safe home.

The third kind of location I notice occupies a sort of middle ground between these two extremes but still stands out to me as analytically significant. This is when the location is very explicitly a childhood location, and is more dangerous and violent than it is deserted, but the player character is an adult, or rather not explicitly a child. In these cases, the childhood connotations of the location is usually emphasized more. I believe this is to enhance the absurdity of the idea that, whatever the object of horror is, it able to cause mental distress when by virtue of its childhood associations, it should be a product of innocence. A man in a chipmunk suit or a mall Easter bunny might be unsettling to a child, but adults know better, right? The game seems to almost make a point of questioning the validity of the player's senses and sanity. I believe that this, in large part, connects with the discussion in part 3, but I think also has roots in trauma. As is perhaps fitting for a location between a childhood that the player is experiencing, and a childhood that the player cannot return to, is a childhood that the player cannot escape. It is a twisted and aggressive childhood that the adult player is trapped in until whatever is keeping them there, be it a bad memory, a twisted being, or simply a locked door, elects to let them leave. Games such as *The Park* (2015), and several of the *Five Nights at Freddys* instalments such as *Five Nights at Freddy's 4* (2015) fall into this category. These games tend to focus on some great tragedy that occurred either to the protagonist or in the location of the game, but usually the player character is at least partially involved in.

The Deception of the Safe Home

Location often also dictates what areas are not hostile. Several games (although notably not all of them) made the childhood bedroom a safe site, excluding it from the horror mechanics either as a tutorial area or simply a refuge. *Happy Game* (2021), *Mr. Hopp's Playhouse* (2019), *Bramble: The Mountain King* (2023), and many more establish the childhood bedroom as places of safety, where horror cannot interact with the player or protagonist. *Little Misfortune* (2017) goes a step further and establishes the bedroom as a place in which the monster cannot physically reach the child. I suspect this feeling of safety might be reinforced by aspects similar to those that make the modern day feel so unsafe. If a person is receiving constant news of crime and murder due to social media and the 24/7 news cycle, but do not experience or see that level of danger in or around their own homes, they might come to think that to be a feature of their home and familiar circle, rather than them not being able to comprehend the largeness of the world being reported on and how the scale of the

reported world might make isolated incidents with great swathes of space between them feel far more common than they are.

However, the home is not *always* a safe place. *Duck Season* (2017) takes place in two locations: the world of the game 'Duck Season" and the living room in which the POV character is playing. The latter is always 'safe' even as the game becomes more disturbing, until the point where it is suddenly not and the threat from the outside has been let in via the protagonist's interaction with a relic from outside the safe home. *Amanda the Adventurer* (2022) also has gameplay in 'two locations', the world of the VHS tapes on which the show plays, and the attic in which the character is residing. Even as the world of the show becomes increasingly disturbing, the attic, while strange and not unchanged by the goings on in the tape world, does not present an element of danger until suddenly it does. I propose that this trend stems from the aforementioned cultural fear of the world outside the home being dangerous and corruptive, reflecting a fear of danger and 'evil' attempting to infiltrate the home from the outside. This may stem from fears of being 'infiltrated' physically (being physically at risk), ideologically (having one's morals and intellectual sanctity warped or attacked), emotionally (being exposed to things that are frightening or anger-inducing), or a combination of all of these. This logic could also apply to games such as *Mr. Hopp's Playhouse* (2019), *Welcome to the Game* (2016), *Tattletail* (2016), *Inscryption* (2021). *98xx* (2023) and several others where the home is not so established as a safe space beforehand, but the implied danger comes almost exclusively from a 'haunted artifact' (often disguised as a childhood relic) that has been brought into the home from the outside. Lennard (2014) discussed briefly how the invocation of children's toys in media represents a fear of children's imaginations untampered by adult monitorization. However, I believe that this mindset has changed over time. Cooley and Milligan (2018) discussed the way that the "perversion of the nostalgic text" perpetuates the idea not just that a childhood relic is now unsafe, but that it was never safe to begin with (p. 193). A key differential in many of the modern games I identified is one of control. In the real world, children play with dolls and as such bring life to inanimate scraps of plastic and fabric. They are, for the most part, inoffensive on their own, without will or ability to corrupt if the child is not enthused with its presence. The implication within the games in this study, however, is that the artifacts and settings that hold them are incidentally dangerous and children are being exposed to them accidentally. The threat rarely lies within the child imbuing a toy with life through exposure

and transference of energy, rather the threat does not require active participation on the child's part and often hunts them down regardless of the victim's enthusiasm or lack thereof.

The Cycle of Corruption

As a whole, my selected games provided crucial insights into the fears of adults for and towards children and how they appear in modern horror media. Several key elements appeared consistently enough for me to interpret a pattern between the relevant pieces of media that I found. This pattern takes the form of an almost cyclical process in which a potent combination of fears interlock, creating a template that exemplifies the adult fears towards and for children. I will describe this cycle here and then endeavor to explain it more in depth in later sections.

The first steps of the cycle lie in a general fear of the world and the dangers therein. An awareness of threats to oneself and their loved ones is arguably a defining feature of being an adult. If, as is so in the Western world, innocence and ignorance is a hallmark of childhood, then the cultural concept of adulthood must in turn come with a certain understanding of the world's many dangers and cruelties. This can, as discussed in the literature review, result in a sort of paranoia, or at least general anxiety in adults regarding the presence of dangers in their world and immediate vicinity; the modern perception of the world outside the home being a dangerous place filled with those who wish harm to an individual's way of life. In the real world, this is often the perceived threat of the socio–political other, or environmental threats. From that anxiety is borne a conviction of a threat to aspects in one's life that are precious, and in the case of most adults, children *do* qualify as precious things that one has a prerogative, desire, or duty to protect. For as long as humans have been instinctually driven to protect their offspring, there has been a conviction of some large, looming threat to them. This most ancient and powerful instinct is one that has been wielded by many to devastating effects. The threat itself can be anything distrusted at the time and often can be entirely interchangeable for any given culture and even individual, as it is the sense of unease and unsafety that houses the fear, rather than any one scapegoat. The pervasive sense is that *something* is out to get the most fragile members of our social group and that we must rally against that something to protect them, as they are unable to do so themselves. This fear is augmented with the cultural belief that children are not able to identify threats to their safety and are innocent enough to take things that seem positive at face value.

A pervasive fear in the current cultural climate appears to be a combination of these two concepts. News and social media whisperings of kidnappings and children who vanish into the cold night with nary a chance to say goodbye or call for help, of white vans giving out free candy and razorblades in Halloween sweets, an overhanging unease in the cultural West of school violence and terrorism threats, the modern world paints itself as full of threats out to harm one's children for any manner of unknowable, insidious reasons. The somewhat jaded worldview of adults comes through strongly in the adage 'if something seems too good to be true, it probably is', but adults do not seem to trust children to be able to come to this conclusion themselves with a lack of worldly knowledge to inform and combat their innocence. This overhanging anxiety in the real world often takes the form of things that seem innocent on the surface but are malicious in nature. This imaginary threat occupies a frightening space akin to that of doppelgangers and shapeshifters in traditional horror narratives, infiltrating safe spaces and incorporating itself into safe society until they see fit to strike. A threat that goes unnoticed not only by the children the threat hopes to harm, but also the guardians that seek to protect them. The victim of the threat at the time of the game does not necessarily always have to be a child, but the existence of the threat is often closely connected to or directly a result of the pursuit of the harm of a child.

The second step of the cycle manifests a fear of failure in both social obligation and duty in the adult failing to identify the threat to the child. This can be portrayed in a multitude of ways, from negligence to oblivion to active malice. Those who are intended to care for and protect the child fail to do so. It is often the case, in the instance that the protagonist is a child, that the threat takes the form of the adults who should have been protecting them, be that a caregiver figure or simply random adults who should know better than to hurt a child, but naturally not all games in this avenue of thought have child protagonists. In these instances, the adult often occupies both sides of a dichotomy, in which they simultaneously (either through ignorance or neglect) are unaware of the threat to the child and are also helpless to stop the threat from having their way with the child despite their best efforts. In this way, the adult's incompetence is the threat to the child as much as the threat itself.

Often in the games I studied, the narrative returned to places that the adults chose to take the child, places that they should have been safe but were not. I believe the emphasis placed on the child's ignorance not only emphasizes their innocence but also reminds players that adults should have known better, that they were equally fooled and lost their child as a result of whatever neglect, foolishness, or oblivion they follied under. I believe that this fear often

comes back to the adult's fear of their own inability to protect the child, a fear of lacking control over the environment in which their child is left, and the resulting protectiveness being all for naught in the brief time that tight control is surrendered. This theme is present in older horror, "[…] like *Child's Play* (1988) and *Dolly Dearest* (1992), both of which center on children's toys, illustrate the terror of childish imaginations unbound by the prescriptions of adult authority" (Lennard, 2014, p. 2), but I believe this has evolved further, having gone from a trepidation regarding lack of control over the child's imagination to a more comprehensive anxiety around children being targeted and manipulated.

The third step in the cycle is borne of a fear of loss. This loss does not necessarily mean death, but rather simply refers to the child no longer being available to those they came from, in whatever form that takes. It often refers instead to a state in which the child is irrecoverably changed in such a way that they no longer register as childlike or the person or thing that was lost. This is not always overt but often at the very least displayed in the child's actions, which can vary from simply uncannily unchildlike to disturbing on every conceivable level no matter the age of the enactor. I believe this reflects the relationship between parental control and the retention of the presence of the child. That is to say, the modern reflex in parents to exercise control over what a child consumes, where they go, and what they do there is perhaps demonstrated in the fear that failing to do that will result in the loss of the child. This could manifest in the real world in any number of ways, from ideological or lifestyle differences leading to a lack of availability or willingness to interact between child and parent, death and kidnapping as sensationalized in modern news, to mental or physical disability acting as a barrier between the two parties and communication and connection between them.

The Looming Threat

The nature of the proposed fear, which I believe binds itself tightly simply to a fear of the unknown and expands outwards to the conclusion that any creature or concept shouldering that fear is also a danger to that which is most precious (the child), means that the nature of the fear itself can apply to many things. In monster studies 'the monster' occupies many forms through various narratives and yet many monsters can still inhabit the same space of fear, simply from different perspectives. In the same way that vampires in horror can represent anything from the haunting desire and fear of free sexuality (Latham, 2007) to disease and contamination (Fink, 2010) to conservativism (Click et al., 2010) depending on the background radiation of its setting and concerns of its creator, the fear of hidden danger

towards one's self and their family can be occupied by just about anything. This theoretical threat (henceforth referred to as 'the looming threat') seems to be a role that any theoretically hidden or disguised danger can occupy. From taking the form of toys and puppets, to occupying a visual language more associated with children's media than typical 'horror' fare, the threat associates itself with not only children, but propriety for children. *Spooky's Jumpscare Mansion* (2014) and *Binding of Isaac* (2011) occupy spaces of morbidly cute and simplistic art that is reminiscent of childish drawings and cartoons for toddlers, *Five Nights at Freddy's* (2014-present), *Tattletail* (2016), and *Mr. Hopp's Playhouse* (2019) all incorporate elements of toys or puppets into the designs of their characters so as to make the connection to both children and child–appeal overt. The games imply through their design not only proximity, but harmlessness in order to be allowed closer to the precious child without guardian intervention. The threat itself is not always actively malicious, but they always pose a threat to the player's wellbeing in some way. This may be a byproduct of the genre's relationship with its medium, as most games' primary format is 'game overs' hindering the player avatar in some way by making them start over. The looming threat almost always originates outside of the safe home, and either the player leaves the safety of the home to come to them, or they attempt to infiltrate the home in some way.

Within this overarching theme, I noticed a series of different outcomes that the infiltration of the monster can lead to and found them intriguing enough to warrant further examination. As the monster infiltrates the safety of one's life, be it their home or the sanctity of their family or the innocence of their children, it brings with it a threat to one's wellbeing. This threat, perhaps naturally, takes many forms but largely seems to take the form of a few distinct categories. These categories are not mutually exclusive, but rather were often distinct enough to be picked out of the game's narrative. While the monster is a manifestation of what the audience fears, the monster's actions or consequences often manifest what the audience is afraid it will lead to. This can often be as simple as gratuitous violence or off-screen insinuations of death, which are usually sufficient, but rarely the only element of relevance.

The Physical Threat

Perhaps the most blatant of the categories, and by far the most obvious on the surface. When we consider a threat to ourselves and others, more often than not the mind is immediately drawn to the threat of physical violence. However, while violence for violence's sake is usually sufficient in getting a fright out of people, it is often a vessel that carries with it other cultural fears that feed into the fear of violence in a gore-filled feedback loop of terror.

Violence and torture are common fears to have on their own, and are very natural fears to have, as they represent the most fundamental threat possible to one's survival and wellbeing. But the neutrality of that fear is what makes it a good vessel for the representation of other kinds of anxieties. Many horror media associate it with the subversion or decline of a culture's moral values or controversial political movements (Cherry, 2009) because it implies that something 'uncivilized' or otherwise separate from the 'normal and safe' cultural space has been allowed to run amuck; as such the violence becomes a statement in its association that indicates cultural fear. Depictions of violence are often intentionally used to stimulate a fear and thrill response in an audience (Hoffner & Levine, 2005; Sparks & Sparks, 2000), but that is rarely all a piece of horror media is, because the existence of violence always begs other questions, such as who or what is enacting it, and why. It almost acts as a way in which to stimulate the audience's fear of a different concept, by associating that concept with violence. For example, if a culture has a social anxiety about mentally ill and neurodivergent people, that fear may manifest in horror media depicting neurodivergent people engaging in violence towards examples of the 'cultural everyman', and if enough media like this is made, people of that culture begin to associate mentally ill and neurodivergent people with unsolicited violence and thus become even more weary of them, thus completing the aforementioned 'gore–filled feedback loop of terror'. The ostracization this weariness causes, perpetuates them as a socio–political other and discourages communication and humanization on both sides, which continues to make them prime material upon which to project these anxieties, which only worsens them.

So, it stands to reason that a physical threat to children, when children are culturally recognized as precious and worth protecting, is the first thing that comes to mind. This can take many forms, from threats inherent to the environment or (more often) people or forces with bad intentions looking to capitalize on a vulnerable child.

The Ideological Threat

The ideological threat is more nuanced in some ways, and far simpler in others. In both horror and the real world there is little that feels more threatening to a social group than opposition to the dominant ideological stance, which makes it prime material for the horror genre (Cherry, 2009). The ideological threat often stems from the same place as the fear of the socio-political other. An unfamiliarity with a grouping of people distinct from one's own, no matter how granular the difference, allows for the propagation of fear of those differences. The postmodern era has a cultural emphasis on constructed identity, rather than inherited

traditional identity (Gauntlett, 2008), which creates more splintered divisions of difference, but this concept is as old as human social groups. The only determining factor is an element that can be integrated into one's identity and can be perceived as difference by someone with a different identity. This can cover class, sexuality, race, religion, gender, disabilities, and many more granular social categories. All that is required is someone willing to take that thing into their identity, and someone to take issue with it.

In the face of similarity, often humanity sees only differences, and extrapolates from those differences a fundamental lack of kinship. Wood (2002) declared that the dominant social group will accept only assimilation or subjugation and annellation for 'the other', and that which goes untamed or unmanaged poses a threat to all civil and social order. If one cannot trust somebody to act in ways that are culturally deemed acceptable by the dominant social group, then their influence on the vulnerable may be harmful. The very exposure of children to that which challenges the social order is a threat, and this manifests itself in media as extremes such as devil worship or some manner of ritualistic sacrifice. The fear is that somebody's ideals are in conflict with that of 'normal' values to the point that they will not protect the child as any 'normal' person would in favor of those warped ideals.

The Emotional Threat

The emotional threat is less often manifested as a monster, and more often in the slowly warping behaviors of characters in response to distress or the threat of distress. This can appear as threats to beloved objects or even loved ones. The emotional threat is effective because it is relatable. For people close to us or treasured objects, most people will step outside of their comfort zones and even overstep their personal moral and physical limits. Because the Western world believes children are both unable to assess their own danger levels, and ignorant to pragmatic decisions, horror shows children as very susceptible to respond blindly to emotional threats and run in without considering their physical or ideological safety.

This is distinct from ideological threats and corruption in that this is not a character's concept of right and wrong or 'what is and is not okay' being infiltrated or warped, it is specifically a character put under immense amounts of strain and their behaviors threatening to change from what is deemed acceptable or sensible to what is not. The emotional threat rarely exists on its own, and rather often exists in tandem with other threats as a throughline to corruption. Increased understanding of PTSD and mental illness have planted the idea that extreme loss

or emotional distress can cause a profound change in character, which is where the throughline from emotional threat to emotional corruption can be drawn.

All of these threats have the potential within the game's narrative to progress from a threat to a source or avenue of corruption to the child. If the child cannot be kept from the threat, then it must now be *saved* from the threat before it is too late.

Loss and Corruption

The narrative next step after the establishment of a threat is the impending fear of corruption and eventual loss of the child. This is distinct from the priorly discussed threat, as it often occurs after the establishment of the threat within the narrative, but not necessarily chronologically after it. Corruption and loss of the child and the effects on the relics of childhood thereafter are often presented significantly after the establishment of the main narrative threat, often (although not always) to explain it. This corruption is often capable of self-perpetuating and extends outwards to 'contaminate' the environment or relics associated with the child, even when neither the initial child nor the source of the corruption is no longer present. For example, in *98xx* (2023) the subliminal messages causing child suicides within his computer programs continued killing children long after his own death, the factory setting of *Poppy Playtime* (2021-present) remains a violent and disturbed place long after the cessation of the experiments conducted there and (presumed) deaths of those that worked there, and the animatronics in the *FNAF* series remained aggressive to both adults and children long after the death of William Afton, whom they were initially trying to hunt and kill. All of these games identify a source of the corruption that acts as the explanation for the horrors occurring, and make a point of showing the corruption persisting beyond the destruction of its source.

As previously discussed, the white Western world holds the image of the child to be a paragon of innocence, a gentle and harmless being. To invert that expectation in order to create a creature of horror is to imply an inherent change has occurred in the childish body to create a creature of fear. This corruption creates a creature that now presents a physical, emotional, and environmental threat of its own. This is the point at which the child is lost. At the point after the child has been unknowingly exposed to harm, they are often first influenced and then lost. This loss can be either metaphorical or literal, as long as the child has been placed beyond the point of recovery. This has a correlation, I suspect, to the friction that can occur between adult and child when the child begins forming opinions of their own

in their older years that may differ from that of their parents. The fear that the corruptive force's harmful influence will change or manipulate the child on a moral, physical, or psychological level until they are 'corrupted' and exemplify the inversion of the image of innocence associated with children is pervasive in the white Western world. The narrative creates a cyclical chain of the corrupted vulnerable seeking to become a threat to the vulnerable and seems to culminate to represent the fear adults have for and about children is both a fear of lack of control, and a fear of loss. This occurs in some form in many of the games I analyzed, but I have gathered a collection of the most notable below.

This cycle is illustrated well in *9 Childs Street* (2023). *9 Childs Street* (2023) depicts a child (named Armin) sneaking out of the house to break into the house next door, convinced that their missing neighbor still lives inside. As it turns out, the neighbor has been watching them with binoculars through the boarded-up windows and killing and dismembering children in order to create a doll. The neighbor had designs to kidnap and disembowel Armin for their heart, but the doll clearly tormented him to the point of suicide before he could. The doll, without a child's heart, is anathema to the cultural idea of a child, violent and mad and maliciously playful. This Frankensteinian abomination of assembled children's parts is an obvious relic of corruption, the neighbor's evil is a force that created a 'child' that is corrupted and driven to lash out, but the game also exhibits the way this corruption spreads. One of the neighbor's victims, Max, whom the player briefly controls for his ill–fated escape attempt after his first mutilation (when you play as him, he is only missing one hand which you can find in a box nearby alongside a pair of hedge clippers; when you meet him as Armin, both are missing) reveals that he and the other victims are conspiring to trap Armin in the house so that the doll can take his heart and "[become] kind" so it will release them from their torment. This on its own may illustrate the way corruption is passed on, but I believe the reason the player is able to play as Max before the main events of the game is perhaps to emphasize that theme in particular. This opportunity allows the game to present Max as a scared and confused child, who is not violent or in any way strange or disturbed. Through the doll, which is a relic of the corruption imparted by the neighbor, the souls of these children have also become corrupted and comfortable with enabling violence in a way that strikes Westerners as very unchildlike and uncanny.

This corruption represents the fear of the consequences of the looming threat; fear of the child being lost for good. This may manifest as simple death but often manifests as something far more horrifying. Rather than threatening death, the perpetuation of the corruption through

the narrative often seems to hold the corrupted child in a state of painful stasis. Seel imparted to me that "…dead is [sometimes] better than lost" because if the child is lost then it is suffering, but there is still theoretically something that you can do, and every moment that you aren't, or you are and it isn't working, is a failure on your part. "At least when they're dead, they are no longer suffering" (Personal communication, January 24, 2024). Death would perhaps be kinder than whatever holds them in this perverted and unnatural state. Death is, after all, a videogame staple. Especially in the cases of games where the player character is themselves a child, death is rarely a vessel of narrative progression because, on a gameplay level, death represents failure to progress the narrative. The player must succeed and survive in order to press onwards, and so the player character's death is rarely given the weight and gravity one might expect of the death of a child. But that works in favor of the narrative's creation of fear. Whether through corruption, displacement, or some combination of the two, the narrative creates a situation in which the child cannot be helped, while still presumably suffering immense and unknown pains.

For example, the end of *Little Nightmares II* (2021) shows both the prequel's protagonist Six and protagonist Mono falling victim to the corruption that appears to have warped everything else in the game's world. Six's transformation has a bent, twisted back and upper arms, as if The Tall Man's grip has crushed them. Her legs seem to be snapped at the shins, and the lower half of them flop limply. Her whole body seems to be broken. She curls around the music box, her object of comfort, and lashes out at anything that moves. She moves quickly, but awkwardly, as one might expect from such a mangled form. Her strange movement succeeds in being uncanny and intimidating, but also, one can only imagine the amount of pain she is in. Thus, we can assume that her corruption was due to the presence of a physical threat. Mono is able to bring her back to herself by destroying her music box, and they try to escape together. It initially seems that Six has escaped her corruption, but it does not appear to be so. As the environment collapses around the two children, Six drops Mono into a chasm rather than helping him up from the edge, a distinctly unchildlike action in its ruthless coldness. It's unclear if Six was corrupted by the world before this point, as she is shown through the game to be quite comfortable with violence, or if she wouldn't have betrayed Mono before this point, but either way this demonstration of her own corruption directly correlates with Mono becoming corrupted himself. Mono's corruption seems to be emotional in nature. The game shows him abandoned, sitting in a chair, marinating on that betrayal for an indeterminate amount of time to grow into The Tall Man. His corrupted form is the least

physically distorted of any in the games; Six's corrupted actions created a cold and violent adult.

The Park (2015) depicts corruption slightly differently. The game's story occurs twofold, a single mother named Lorraine who has had a hard life looks for her missing son in a twisted, dilapidated theme park, whilst reading notes from the park's builder who wished to harness a dark power that seemed to be tied to the geography. This dark power is supposedly a corruptive influence, orchestrating accidents, suicides, and even coaxing murders out of employees. As the game progresses, it is revealed that her abusive father seems to have taken her to stop her mother from gaining custody, her unmarried partner died, leaving her three months pregnant, and she suffered from depression and (strongly suggested) psychotic disorders over the course of raising him. The game is deliberately disorienting and confusing, especially near the end, but in my opinion, it is reasonably clear that she 'lost' or killed and perhaps even cannibalized her son during a psychotic or extreme depressive episode. It specifically invokes the story of *Hansel and Gretel*, which is not only a story with connections to childhood, being a fairytale, but specifically presents children being fooled by a scenario that seems ideal and friendly, only to be lured in by someone that wished them harm. The story follows the standard telling until the very last line, in which Hansel and Gretel cannibalize the witch. The player character compares herself to Gretel in that moment and compares herself to the witch near the end of the game. Through the game, emphasis is repeatedly put on her declining financial state and how hungry she and her son became. As the park is turning into a twisted, nightmarish facsimile of a home, the shopping list contains several normal foods, but all that lies in the fridge is a plate of grotesque meat, while a baby doll burns in the oven and a childish drawing sits atop the stove in flames. Throughout the game, it becomes clear that Lorraine did not enjoy motherhood, especially after her time institutionalized, during which she received electroshock therapy. She grows steadily more paranoid and angrier regarding her son and having to raise him, despite the fact her son seems to love her with the typical childlike innocence one might expect. Eventually in the final few scenes of the game, the twisted carnie overseeing her time in the park gives her a bloodstained icepick (supposedly used by the park mascot to kill three teenagers while the park was open) and compels her to stab her son with it, which she seems to do (offscreen).

Lorraine's denial of her irritation and festering resentment for her child makes a picturesque example of the duality of the forces at play when we engage with media that pertains to violence to children. Frustration towards children and ill-preparedness to deal with them in

one's life, either in passing or during dramatic life changes, goes to war with the knowledge that resentment towards and harming children's innocence is a grave and grotesque thing to do. In a picturesque exhibit of Wood's (2002) examination of horror's representation of the repressed, *The Park* examines another key facet of adults' fears for and about children, being simultaneously destructive towards them whilst your (socially obligated) best efforts to protect them destroy both their and your life. Both are a devastating mark of failure, and media can provide a catharsis in allowing the expression of an oft repressed frustration. As discussed in part two, the connection between the fear of loss, and the loss of control of oneself, can manifest as madness in media after a profound personal loss of something precious, such as a child. It is unclear if the supernatural element of *The Park*'s (2015) plot is simply a product of Lorraine's delusions or not, but in the end it does not matter. Whether the corrupting force is her own mental illness or a dark goddess does not detract from the game's theme of a dark force infiltrating a sick young mother's mind and coaxing her to kill (and quite possibly eat) her child. King (2000) observes how the West has used cannibalism as a borderline of difference in the literary tradition as early as Herodotos and Shakespeare, calling it a "useful symbolic nexus of distinction" (p. 108). To be literarily associated with (willing) cannibalism is to be marked as separate from human, at best uncivilized to be brought to heed and at worst divorced of all of one's sense and in the grips of madness. It is in this case that the corruption occurred through a bad childhood and worse life, not to the child but the mother, who then became the threat to her own child. This is in keeping both with the theme of cyclical corruption leading to the affected lashing out at innocents, and the exploration of the fear of children being in danger from people whom they do not know to be afraid of.

Case study: Amanda The Adventurer

A particularly neat example of this structure and how it utilizes the themes of childhood is *Amanda the Adventurer (2022),* a horror adventure RPG puzzle game designed to emulate the appearance and stylistic elements of the classic children's program Dora the Explorer. It features the (potentially murderous) little girl, Amanda, and her sheep companion Wooly who star in a television show while the game's player tries to piece together a series of unusual occurrences related to her Aunt's death. Over the course of the game the player is faced with further questions, such as the existence of a distorted monster version of Amanda, a series of missing children, and the fate of the young girl who voiced Amanda in the show. *Amanda the*

Adventurer perfectly illustrates the structure that I have identified in regard to the ways in which children and their guardians are depicted and the cultural fears that they imply.

Plot Summary

If one is to play the game purely as instructed, with no additional searching for secret or hidden items or interfaces, the story of *Amanda the Adventurer* is both simplistic and ambiguous. The player is prompted to solve puzzles involving a series of classic children's toys in order to acquire cassette tapes containing episodes of Amanda the Adventurer, an in-universe television show starring protagonist Amanda and her sheep companion, Wooly.

The basic plot seems to be that a woman named Riley Park, having recently inherited her aunt's house, is prompted by a note from her Aunt Kate to go into the attic and discover a secret that will permanently alter the trajectory of her life. There she finds a series of tapes containing old episodes of *Amanda the Adventurer* that grow progressively more warped and unsettling as the protagonist grows increasingly aggressive and confused. As Amanda grows more frustrated, a monster with some resemblance to her avatar appears and attacks the player at the peak of her emotional bursts. The player can be attacked a few ways, each during an emotional outburst from Amanda, leading to a 'bad end'. Amanda does not seem to be able to control the world within the tapes, but does seem to know what she is supposed to be doing in them, as if she knows the script. As Riley watches the tapes, she finds a few alternate versions of a few of them that prompts the Amanda inside the TV to become aggressive. Ultimately, she destroys the TV, and she is allowed to leave the attic. This is the story as it is presented if the player does no additional searching for lore.

Secret Tapes and User Interface

Despite the surface level simplicity, many horror games hide clues or snippets of lore that help contextualize a more ambiguous base plot. These hidden clues (henceforth referred to as 'secrets') provide enough context for a player or analyst to make a more informed reading and piece together a coherent sequence of events leading up to and during the events of the game. In addition to the main tapes, a series of secret tapes and hidden letters or articles can be acquired over the course of the game in order to shed some light on the true nature of Amanda and why and how she is able to act as she is.

The game's interface occurs on two levels. In the world outside of the tapes, the user can control the player–character and have them interact with the environment. This is the level of interaction that facilitates the puzzle-solving and exploration section of the game. When the

tapes are playing, however, the player is occasionally prompted to select items on screen or type in responses when prompted by Amanda. This freedom to act when prompted by the tapes both creates a way in which the user can engage with this element of the gameplay rather than watching a long cutscene, and an in–universe indication that the beings within the tapes are sapient, aware of and able to react to what happens outside of the prerecorded realm of the tape. Each tape corresponds to a puzzle, taking the form of a children's toy. These toys are always placed on a central table in the environment, but when they are not 'in use' they are still scattered around the setting. Interacting with them in ways that are indicated by subtle clues in the main tapes allows a player to obtain secret tapes.

A*manda the Adventurer*'s secret tapes show us snapshots of what is occurring behind the scenes of the show's creation and distribution. While finding the tapes creates an additional layer of user interaction with the interface (thus rewarding the player for exploring the environment), the secret tapes being hidden also serves the in–universe impression that the tapes have been deliberately concealed or made difficult to find by someone or something. These tapes are a series of clips from the 'real world' and are filmed 'live action' to differentiate them from the world of the cartoon. From these clips we can infer more of the plot by considering the moments that the tapes show us in the context of Riley's situation and the information that the player is given about what her Aunt Kate was doing before she died. The tapes do not necessarily *need* to be found in the following order, but this is the most likely one on the grounds that this is the order that the tapes become available to the player and the order that they are given the hints they need to complete the task and get the tapes.

The secret tapes are as follows:

- A home-video style film being made by two parents trying to coerce their daughter downstairs on her birthday. Despite tempting her with cake and surprises, she does not acknowledge them at all as she watches an episode of Amanda the Adventurer. The camera turns away from the child while the adults speak about how she did not respond to her mother with exasperation. The mother mentions she is with her "best friend" and the father asks if the show is "on 24/7", implying this is not new behavior. The father tries to coax her with mint chocolate chip ice cream before suggesting that it is time to enact some restrictions on her TV consumption. The video reveals that in the time that the camera was off her and her parents were distracted the child has disappeared and the door to the house is open to the street. The parents panic and put

the camera down to search for her while Amanda on the TV says that she "[loves] mint chocolate chip".

- A talk show hosting an interview with Sam Colton, "the creator of the hit kids show, Amanda the Adventurer". He attributes the success to the support of their local librarian, Miss Kate, for bringing it up at every story time. He reveals that his inspiration for the show was his adopted daughter Rebecca. Sam claims that her optimism and enthusiasm, despite coming from a rough home, helped him get past the death of his wife and he wanted to share that joy with the rest of the world. He also says that a third party has reached out about making Amanda the Adventurer into a cartoon.
- A camera films the outside of a recording studio with the recording light on and voices coming from within. A director (identified such by the game's inbuilt subtitles) encourages Rebecca to repeatedly say some phrases (recorded here as written within the game's subtitles) "bye yell", "pie man" and "baa lamb". Sam questions why she is being asked to say them, and the director says it is "a few simple words" to calibrate "the technology's dynamic voice reaction". Sam demands the exercise stop and the director attempts to get him to leave so they can finish but they are cut off by Rebecca exclaiming that she does not want to do something. When questioned who she is talking to, she says "the man in the headphones". Sam says that "there's no man" and then "this has to stop". The director says they will take a break and the clip ends.
- A news broadcast announces that Sam Colten has been missing for three weeks. It details that a year has passed since Hameln Entertainment purchased the show and that they made a statement regarding Sam 'abandoning' both the project and his daughter. Hameln assures of their intention to continue making Amanda the Adventurer, but they will be taking Rebecca out of the limelight for a while. The broadcast also mentions that the subject matter in recent episodes of the show has concerned and unnerved parents, to the point of them unplugging the TV and pretending the cable disconnected in order to stop their children from watching.
- Black and white security footage with no audio shows Rebecca sit down with a man in a business suit while a woman with a clipboard in a white coat watches. He hands her some paperwork in a folder with the Hameln logo on it, which she signs. She is then escorted out of the room and into another, unmarked room with a bouncer outside of it.

- The final tape requires the player to adjust the source code of the game, changing the value of ‘SecretTapesUnlocked’ from ‘5’ to ‘6’ after they have unlocked the previous 5 secret tapes. This tape simply shows Wooley sitting alone in a grey room in silence. This is the only secret tape in the cartoon style.

In addition, in the corner of the room there is a corkboard that occasionally has notes on them. It seems this was the place Kate kept track of her clues. Letters to her and occasional news articles are pinned to it between tapes. It is through these letters that the player can discover Kate worked at the Kensdale Public Library and did so for long enough that children who attended her reading sessions are adults now. We learn that Sam and Kate were friends and that she recommended the show to the people who attended her reading sessions, to help get the word out and bolster its popularity. One of these letters was from someone whose little brother went missing. The letter indicates that Kate did “the kind [of research] that ‘normal people’ don’t do” and that she knows something about “that show” the writer’s brother used to watch, so one can extrapolate that Kate knew something sinister was going on regarding Amanda the Adventurer and was likely investigating a series of disappearing children that Kate clearly believed was connected to the show.

It is often the case, especially in indie horror, that story is portrayed through a series of hints that requires some analysis and connections to be made on the part of the audiences. These hints do not provide a coherent narrative on their own. I have arranged the events of the tapes and considered the content of the hints in order to extrapolate the following storyline:

Sam Colten created a live-action show starring his adopted daughter to “celebrate children’s imagination”. After an unexpected boost in fame, attributed in large part to Kate’s support, a company called Hameln reached out to develop the show into a cartoon. Initially Sam is thrilled but Hameln treats Rebecca in a way that makes Sam uncomfortable and is perhaps sinister. The words Rebecca reads in the third tape do not have any immediate meaning, but bear resemblance to the names of three Goetic demons, Bael, Balam, and Paimon. The demonic influence is already a corrupting force as the tape displays that Rebecca is hearing and being urged by forces that the others in the room cannot sense. Sometime after this, Sam goes missing, and Hameln has more freedom as to what they put in the show. It is currently unclear if Hameln removed Sam themselves or he ran away from the rapidly devolving situation in order to find help. Either way, without Sam to protect her, Rebecca is convinced to sign a piece of paperwork by a high-ranking official and sequestered away into a guarded

room. Regardless of what the agreement was in universe, when a deal is struck in a horror media with demonic themes already established, only one assumption can be made on an analysis level, that being that Rebecca has been tricked into selling her soul or some other fundamental element of herself by signing her care over to Hameln. The Hameln corporation seems to have used Rebecca as the focus for some form of demonic ritual, the demon involved in which has possessed the body and spirit of Rebecca as Amanda. The show is the way in which the demonic entity seems able to sense things in the 'real world', and the warped and corrupted consciousness of 'Rebecca' seems to be trapped in the show with varying degrees of lucidity. It is reasonable to assume that the show's purpose is to entrap more children for Hameln's purposes.

Less than a month after Sam goes missing, a news report details how parents have concerns over the way Amanda the Adventurer changed as a show, the 'subject matter' making them uncomfortable. Shortly after these events, children begin to go missing. The show begins to affect children's behavior when they watch it, enrapturing them and causing them to ignore their caregivers until they can be (presumably) taken or manipulated into running away. Kate was presumably investigating these disappearances, and due to the way her 'research' is referred to in the note, it seems likely that she was aware of the arcane or demonic nature of the show.

The Theme of Childhood

The theme of childhood in *Amanda the Adventurer* is strong and makes a point to emulate children's media stylistically in order to emphasize the elements that are meant to disguise its sinister nature. From the setting design to the player interface, childhood is heavily emphasized, both as a fleeting concept that has been destroyed by corruptive forces, and to remain hidden behind the child–appealing aesthetic that acts as its disguise in universe with the intention of luring in children.

Childhood as a Theme in Location

From the start, the setting places the player in an abandoned attic filled with childhood paraphernalia such as a robotic numbers toy for toddlers, an imitation easy–bake oven, and a wheel that plays weather sounds. The environment is intentionally reminiscent of an attic in which one's childhood toys have been stored away past the point of needing them. However, the toys in the attic do not seem to be well used. The 'Blabbot' toy, the easy–bake oven, and 'Gret–chan' the doll look brand new and untarnished. Some of them, such as a little piano

and the weather wheel, have signs of being in long-term storage such as a covering of dust and cobwebs, but also do not show signs of frequent use or wear the way you'd expect a toy for a young child would be. Instead, the toys are brightly colored, relatively undamaged and seemingly unused. This is a point of contrast to the attic itself, which has a dark and dingy appearance with poor lighting, leaking sections, and grimy corners. It also contrasts with other items around the attic more associated with adult life, such as a toolbox, a safe, and several different kinds of clocks (a bedside digital alarm, a pocket watch, an office-style analog clock and a grandfather clock) which show an accumulation of grime, scratches, and damage. This point of contrast implies that the lack of damage is intentional.

At first I considered that the childhood toys being undamaged and colorful was a form of 'yellow paint' for the sake of the player (in many games, yellow paint is often used to signal interactable objects like barrels, ladders, and climbable ledges that might be difficult to see in a busily-textured setting). However, because those other damaged items are also used in puzzles throughout the game, this theory is somewhat disproven. So, what is the reason for the unique lack of wear and tear on these items? If the toys were well worn and packed away in the attic, it would be a reasonable conclusion to draw that the child has outgrown their toys and no longer needs or wants them, but I believe the lack of use is meant to imply that the child the toys were bought for did not get to use them much, if at all. Considering Hameln 's involvement in Rebecca's later life, it is possible to take this analysis one step further and consider the fact that the toy piano and the weather wheel seem much older and dirtier than the 'Blabbot' and the oven, two electronic items that could conceivably be a great deal more expensive than the former items, given as a 'gift' to draw herself and Sam in closer. Either way, an attic full of toys clearly represents a passing of childhood, the closing of a certain chapter of someone's life, which may coincide with Amanda's descent into the care of Hameln, 'ending' her childhood as she becomes corrupted. Furthermore, I think that the existence of the tapes within this space further emphasizes the theme of lost childhood. It invokes the theme of childhood as a relic of the past, something one can look back on if they find the correct items in the correct place, but you cannot return to it. Even when you recreate the circumstances of childhood, something is fundamentally changed.

In this way the attic represents childhood as a whole, within the circumstances of a 'post-corrupted' state of being. Within the universe it surely represents a profound loss of innocence. Specifically, Amanda's childhood, and the childhoods of all the children who have gone missing since her corruption, are gone and cannot be recovered. Perhaps even the

children themselves cannot be recovered, although it is unclear what is happening to the children at this time. This is a more frightful truth than confirmation of their deaths, as it acts as a call to action for adults, with no way to help or seek them. But, beyond the obvious, the conceptual relationship between childhood and innocence can also be extended to the innocence of adult characters who are also affected by the events of the plot. Sam's faith in Rebecca's brightness has been tarnished, whether he left the show's production willingly or not, and Riley Park knew nothing of the twisted devilry that lay within the tapes and the show until her Aunt Kate died, and she inherited her house. In many ways, these two characters, while adults, have also lost a certain innocence (or ignorance, as interchangeable as they may be in this context) with the passing of Amanda's childhood.

I believe it to be relevant to note that despite the dangers posed by Amanda, and the threat to the children, the game still abides by the rule of the safe home. Even though the attic is derelict and a storm wails outside, despite the fact that items move on their own and the layout of the location changes occasionally, the attic still abides by the structure of the safe home. There are no active threats in the attic until the monster is summoned by the tapes, which are relics of the show, which is produced by Hameln and thus relics that come from outside. In the tape where the girl was taken, the door to the street was opened, implying that either she left the safety of the home, or something came in from the outside to take her. The show, which is a way for insidious forces to infiltrate the home from the outside, was allowed in on the basis of the parents allowing their daughter to watch it.

Iconography and Stylistic Influence

Amanda the Adventurer includes a great deal of childhood iconography both on a diegetic and meta level. Amanda the Adventurer as the TV show is presented in-universe is a warped homage to the real world show *Dora the Explorer*, with which it shares many stylistic elements such as a curser icon of a cartoonish arrow and glove with cartoonish eyes, a similar cadence of line delivery, and the way in which the 'host' interacts with the audience. Both have young girls with animal companions as protagonists, and the 'shows' display them fulfilling basic tasks while narrating them in ways that might help children understand what they are doing. The episodes end with teaching children about basic problem solving, morals, or some form of informative message. We only see a few episodes of Amanda the Adventurer, but the codes and conventions used to communicate the genre it is emulating are inherently familiar and easy to recognize. Tudor (1976) explains the phenomenon of an

individual within a culture being able to identify a genre based on their familiarity with other media with similar features.

Dora the Explorer is made in the style of a classic 'point and click' adventure game, the introduction of which showing the camera 'entering' a computer at the start of every show. The 'clicks' are made when the cursor interacts with something, and there is a toggleable map and 'backpack' (acting as an inventory). The show pretends there is a person interacting with the computer and 'playing the game' to simulate a certain level of audience interaction. *Amanda the Adventurer* inverts this by being a computer game that contains a show that has the stylistic mechanics of a computer game with which the user can interact. A point is made to change the game mechanics between the world outside and within the show in order to emphasize that the show itself incorporates video game mechanics into its structure. The game goes out of its way to emulate a well-known and beloved children's program in order to make an immersive experience in presenting a show that has enraptured children in order to lead them to their doom. In addition, Amanda's silhouette bears enough resemblance to the iconic silhouette of Mickey Mouse to be evocative of yet another figure associated with famous child-aimed brands, using the player's cultural familiarity with intellectual property intended to be child-safe to present a warped version of the familiar and the safe. It intentionally mimics something that people expose their children to on purpose and would not think to question or suspect. This both augments the horror of the fiction and emphasizes the real-world fears to which *Amanda the Adventurer* speaks.

The Looming Threat

As previously pointed out in part 3 of the discussion section, in a given narrative, the looming threat is an overhanging threat that presents a great danger once a prospective victim has its attention by interacting with or being near a seemingly innocent or inconspicuous location, item, or being. In the case of *Amanda the Adventurer*'s narrative, the role of the looming threat is fulfilled by Amanda and the TV show in which she resides. It is clear that the monstrous (or demonic as the case may be) version of Amanda is summoned by the show. It appears to arrive when Amanda experiences profound emotional distress within the show, for example when the player refuses to help the lonely kitten in *What is a Family?* and after Amanda says she can "feel herself rotting" in *Everything Rots.* It is not entirely clear if the Amanda in the show can *control* what it does, but the timing of its appearances cannot be taken as coincidence.

Through unlockable secrets, the player discovers that not only has Amanda become a physical and ideological threat to other children, but also to those who meddle too much with the tapes, tying the symbolic threat to the show. The show is clearly incredibly attractive to children. Their enjoyment blinds them to anything that could be wrong, and the use of a children's show to enthrall their victim clearly shows that whoever is responsible is targeting children specifically. The cultural view of children that depicts them as helpless and innocent also tends to carry the implication that they are physically and mentally weaker than those who would wish to harm them, and thus require constant protection by someone who is strong enough to do so. The fear of the looming threat hinges upon the anxiety that an adult is simply not physically or mentally strong enough to defend the child, either by also being deceived, being negligent, or simply being overpowered or overruled.

During the secret tape in which a little girl ignores her parents' attempts to celebrate her birthday with her, in the brief moments her parents look away to discuss what to do, she disappears. This distinctly unchildlike and insolent behavior (not being excited for ice-cream cake or her birthday in favor of ignoring her parents) is in violation of the traditional Western ideal of a child, demonstrating that the show (and Amanda's influence through it) presents both an ideological threat to the children interacting with it and an authoritative threat to the parents. The letter from the sister on Kate's corkboard notes that her brother used to "…[stand] in front of the TV. Like he was in a trance" and that Amanda seemed to speak to him, saying "weird stuff" that causes the writer to doubt the police's banal theories on her brother's disappearance. This serves to imply that the case of the little girl was not the first instance of the show being connected to missing children, and suggests a behavioral pattern within the show. The Western ideal presumes that a parent knows what is best for their child and that the demand for obedience is due to a concern for their health and safety. An outside influence encouraging or coercing a young child not to listen to their parents is an ideological threat. Then when the young girl goes missing in mere moments, the audience can also presume there is now an additional physical threat to the affected children, as the child has been removed from the 'safe home'. This is the first secret tape the player can find, establishing Amanda as the immediate threat and the first one that the player is aware of, as this information comes before the player finds out about Hameln or Rebecca.

The Threat of Corruption

Hameln

Like *The Park, Amanda the Adventurer* invokes a fairy tale, albeit in a more subtle way. The company that bought out Sam Colton's show was called the Hameln Corporation, with a logo depicting a stylized mouse or rat, with the slogan 'follow us to fun'. This is almost certainly a nod towards the 'Pied Piper of Hamlin' fairytale, in which a musician arrives in the German town of Hamlin, experiencing a rat infestation, claiming to be a rat catcher. The Mayor and the piper agree on a sum of 1000 guilders and the piper leads away the rats with the tune from his magical pipe and drowns them in the Weiser River. When the mayor refuses to pay the piper the full sum, the piper returns on a day when all the adults are at church (usually Saint John and Paul's day) and kidnaps the 130 children of the town the same way (sometimes excluding three who for various reasons were unable to follow). Depending on the telling, the children are sequestered away in a cave, returned once the piper is paid, or even drowned in the same river as the rats. The company's logo is everywhere. At the end of all of the 'Amanda tapes' and on the toys that make up the puzzle section of the game. As previously discussed, the corruptive influence to the child leads to the loss of the child. Hameln is definitely a corruptive entity and the location that represents Amanda's childhood, and the tapes in which Amanda reside, is covered in its marks.

As mentioned, the source of corruption is usually not the primary antagonistic force to the player, if it is an antagonistic presence at all. From the plot one is able to infer from the secrets scattered through the game that the people responsible for Amanda's state are Hameln Entertainment, who tricked a young girl and her father into giving herself away to demonic forces that corrupted her. Clues also suggest that Hameln is still a corruptive influence on children who watch the show, as indicated by the several mentions of children going missing since Amanda the Adventurer began to change their subject matter. It is reasonable to assume that, since no clear motivation has been laid out for Hameln bringing Rebecca into their fold, the reason for doing such will be a relevant plot beat later in the series. If Amanda is kidnapping children, either simply because it is the nature of the demon inside her, or on Hameln's orders, it is likely that Hameln expected this behavior. Whatever they intend both the show and the monster to do with these children, their plans are still in motion.

While Amanda acts as the looming threat for the duration of the game, as is often the case, the looming threat is some facilitation of the source of corruption, while being distinct from it. Amanda is the active threat, but Amanda is Rebecca, and Rebecca is Hameln's first victim.

Establishing the Corruption of Amanda

Amanda appears in two capacities through the game. As the character in the show on the tapes, and as the demon or monster that attacks the player when they die. The monster is solely aggressive and while some inferences can be made from its appearance and existence, a substantial portion of the game's information comes from the Amanda in the show. Her behavior is unsettling and inconsistent. While it could be written off as a simple 'creepy child' character, I suspect that there is more depth to her behavior. Largely, Amanda's behavior seems to serve to keep the 'episode' on track, and deviations from that persona can vary depending on in what way the progression of the episode was interrupted. If the player, or Amanda's sheep companion Wooly tries to refuse the way the episode is 'supposed to go' such as saying something is wrong or refusing to go along with what she's doing, she gets angry, and the world of the tapes distort. However, when she is reminded of her past life as Rebecca in some way, she seems to become melancholic or confused before the tapes cut and she is back to normal. There is some overlap to this behavior, but largely I believe the existence of this dichotomy is to establish both that Rebecca still exists within the confines of Amanda, and that the corruption has affected her deeply on an emotional and ideological level. She seems at her happiest and stereotypically childlike when the tapes are on track. When Wooly or the player attempt to break the illusion of the tape, she in turn attempts to course correct them and if she is unable to, the world becomes unstable and unsafe. As we know the tapes are tied to Amanda's distress levels, we can also deduce that if they are running smoothly, she is as happy as she can be in her condition. If we are to assume that Rebecca sees the world of the tapes as a 'safe space' because of their normalcy in the face of a presumably tormented existence, of course she would get upset when they are meddled with and called into question. However, her response to that upset is at best jarringly dry sarcasm and at worst excessive violence (to the point of attempting and potentially succeeding at unanesthetized brain surgery on Wooly). These are very deliberately not typical child behaviors, and the game invokes the antithesis of childlike kindness and innocence in order to make it clear that despite appearances, Amanda is not a child in the ways that matter. Not anymore.

And yet, there is no horror in the suffering of a child one has no sympathy for, and the game makes an equal point in establishing what remains of a bright, innocent child as it does the product of the corruption. There is a significant amount of evidence that the spirit of Rebecca is trapped within the world of the tapes and is slowly losing her sense of self. As the player

continues to explore the tapes, the world inside of them and Rebecca's sense of herself seems to degrade. In the first run through of the 'episode' *In Your Neighborhood*, Amanda tries to send a thank you card and some cookies to Kate, but suddenly forgets her name at the post office and prompts the player to help her remember it. She grows increasingly distressed if the player does not input Kate's name until the player is forced to type in the correct answer. In the next run through the same tape, however, she becomes more confused much earlier. She cannot remember what the card is meant to be for and continues to implore the player for help as the player is forced to try and take her to the butcher's rather than the candy store she wants to go to. The video gets distorted, glitchy, and red as she screams that she doesn't want to go there and asks why she cannot stop the player from taking her there. In the final tape, *We Can Share*, she seems to struggle to even remember her own name. In this tape, if you refuse to hear her secret, she disappointedly says "I thought you were different" and the player is instructed to leave.

Animals and the way they are treated seems to be an important parallel to Amanda/Rebecca in the game. Seeing the family of chickens and realizing the rooster is the father of the chicks makes her sad, and if the player types 'Sam' when she asks them what a daddy (rooster) is called, she becomes even more confused as the world of the tape itself freezes and does a doubletake. In *Everything Rots,* Amanda speculates as to what killed a dead fox, prompting the player to choose what killed it between a knife, a gun, and some poisonous berries. The player will attempt to click all three because none of them will progress the dialogue. Amanda will laugh at the fox's tongue sticking out and then ruminate on how much easier it would be if the fox could tell her what killed it. It is revealed when the player has exhausted their options that a bear trap, previously hidden in the bushes, is what killed it. In two separate tapes, a kitten appears, once at the end of *What's a Family?*, and once in a cage at the end of the second iteration of *Everything Rots.* Both times Amanda shows great sympathy for the kitten and implores the player to help it, once because it is lost and alone, and once because it is trapped in a cage and "she might die before anyone can help her". The use of she/her pronouns for the kitten and not any other animal or character in the series could also be an added layer of connection.

All of these instances symbolically tie into Amanda's situation in some way. The chickens represent what she has lost, her father and the safety of a home. The fox represents Rebecca's past. She was not taken away by violence (the knife and the gun) or toxins (perhaps analogous to the toxic home she came from before Sam adopted her) but a hidden trap laid

for her by Hameln that nobody could see or expected. But by far the strongest symbol is the one Amanda herself has the strongest reaction to. When Amanda asks the player how they think the lost kitten feels, Amanda's character rig mimics the behaviors of the cat as they cock their heads the same way and wear similar sad expressions as they look to the player. If the player repeatedly refuses to help the kitten, Amanda becomes possibly the most distressed in the entire game. Screaming and crying and even appearing close to the camera with a spider-like mass of eyes similar to the demonic version of her that kills the player in the bad ends. In the instance where the kitten is trapped she seems more resigned if the player denies her, but if they agree to help the trapped kitten, she eerily smiles in silence until the tape ends, before the player is given an ending in which they are meat in a butcher's shop. The kitten represents Rebecca/Amanda now. Trapped, alone and afraid, but also a trap herself. She wishes for the player to help the kitten because she is the kitten, she is asking, begging really, for help, but she likely on some level knows that whatever she wants the player to do will not end well for them (as exemplified by them becoming meat in a butcher's shop).

Lashing out at Others

We have now established that the version of Amanda that exists on the tapes contains some remnant of Rebecca, but I believe that the demonic figure that lashes out at the player at the end of each cycle, 'killing them', is also Amanda/Rebecca; the result of Rebecca's corruption at the hands of demons. Specifically, the element of her corruption that will continue the cycle by becoming the new threat. Not only does it sport her distinctive hair buns, but it also seems innately connected to the tapes and the show. These two creatures exist in tandem, as the demon controls what was once Rebacca's physicality, while what remains of her mind and spirit inhabits the tapes, slowly becoming more and more warped by the show's inherent corrupted nature. In the episode *We Can Share,* Amanda asks if she can tell the player a secret. If they reply yes, she will say "I'm out there, somewhere" before the TV glitches and a figure begins pounding on it from the inside. It is not said in a menacing way, and in fact, upon the word 'somewhere' she sounds almost unsure. As if she does not know where 'she' is, implying that her body is separated from herself and wandering the world apart from her. In *Everything Rots*, Amanda says that "sometimes [she] can feel [herself] rotting but… it feels far away". This could be taken as her simply dismissing death as something far in her future, but in context could also suggest her strained connection with her real body keeping her aware of her body's slow decay or her awareness of her soul's slow degradation within the world of the tapes. It is unclear whether Rebecca's body is actually dead and being

puppeted in a distorted form by the demon possessing it, or if it is alive and she is simply not the one inhabiting it, but either way it is clear that *simultaneously* Rebecca exists in a state of distress and psychological torment to the point that she is willing to become violent towards both the player and Wooly, and that grievous bodily harm was done to her. At the hands of Hameln she has been physically, emotionally, and ideologically harmed, and as a result she has been physically, emotionally, and ideologically corrupted as supported by her body's monstrous appearance, both her spirit and her body's newfound aggression and cruelty, and the way her distress is causing her to lash out at anybody within her reach. Her participation in the abduction of the missing children, whether of her own volition or on Hameln's orders, casts her in the role of the next corruptive force. When the children become entranced by the show and ignoring their parents and bribes with sweets, this distinctively un-childlike behavior represents the beginnings of the next iteration of corrupted children. The corruption is more than merely a threat of harm; it spreads from one victim to overtake more.

Rebecca being distressed and threatened within the world of the tapes, even if she does not seem to be in any *danger*, is the worst possible fate because the suffering is perpetual and adds an element of sympathy to Amanda's actions that does not allow the audience to simply dismiss Amanda as a purely evil child. However, Amanda is still a problem. During what one would conclude to be the most true ending, where the player has collected all of the secret tapes and destroyed the spasming TV after agreeing to hear Amanda's secret, there is no indication at all that the problem has been in any way resolved and the promise of a sequel implies that Amanda still roams free after the events of the game (Note: the trailer and demo of *Amanda the Adventurer 2* was released four months before this thesis was completed. Nothing actively contradicts my analysis here, and some plot points help my argument, I will detail these briefly at the bottom of the section). The spirit of Rebecca is being tormented, but *Amanda* is tormenting both the player and the other children she is presumably involved in abducting. The looming threat is a product of pain and corrupted innocence, but it is still a threat in its lashing out. The child existing in a perpetual state of pain is perhaps worse than the child being dead, and it's made clear that Amanda is not enjoying her existence as it is now, but it does not change the fact that Amanda is the foremost threat of the game, and the foremost threat to the children at risk of exposure to the looming threat. This duality is vital to the narrative of the corruption. If the fear at the core of these games is losing not only the child themselves but the inherent goodness of childhood innocence, then Amanda is truly and irrecoverably lost.

Real World Fear

I believe *Amanda the Adventurer* to be a particularly poignant example of the real-world fear phenomenon I have observed. As previously stated, within the realms of fears of 'the looming threat', there exists endless potential for nuance and tighter focus on specific social fears that exist under the umbrella of this base fear. Broadly speaking, the adult fear of the looming threat and corruption is a fear of loss and being at fault. A crucial aspect of fear of the threat occurs alongside the belief of the child's perceived innocence and oblivion towards danger. The child does not know how to look below the attractive surface in order to see the metaphorical razor blade in the candy bar. The threat asks the frightening question, 'what if the adult missed it too?'. The fact that Hameln was able to get Rebecca to repeat the strange 'vocal exercises' despite Sam's misgivings and sign herself into their custody supports the cultural idea that children are not able to identify potential dangers. The fear of the threat also interacts in large part with the fear of adult helplessness. If Sam represents the 'ideal' loving parent, it makes sense that he would be simultaneously unable to stop Hameln 's corruption of Rebecca and the only thing standing between her and total corruption. He is able to identify a source of harm to Rebecca but is too innocent (or ignorant) to remove her from that harm's way. Rebecca does not seem to be aware of the threat Hameln poses to her, despite Sam's misgivings, but she also would not be there if Sam, her guardian, had not put her in that position. That said, when Sam is removed from her life, her situation gets undeniably worse, demonstrating that when she was left alone without a (safe) adult, she was still very much worse off. Later, parents who allow their children to watch Amanda the Adventurer make the same mistake, by exposing their children to something that seems harmless on the surface, but in reality, wishes to harm them.

One of the many utilizations of children's media is education. Texts aimed at children are an effective method to impart information and messages onto them, be it philosophical, scientific, or moral. Where there is a market, content is sure to follow, but as children's media solidifies into a genre enough to be advanced and subverted, conversations about what should and should not be shown in them grow in intensity. Currently, there are pervasive discussions regarding media, especially media for children, and content regulation. There are many reasons for this tightening of regulations, especially online, such as global shifts in moral propriety, increasing pressure from advertisers to keep potential audiences as broad as possible, and a reactionary response to increasing diversity in film and TV from more conservative political parties being only a few, but this discussion seems to have roused a

mistrust in the safety of the content we show to our children and that exists in our media in general.

I believe *Amanda the Adventurer* reflects this cultural unrest and embodies the fear of the content we allow our children to be exposed to (and on a deeper level, the prerogative of the companies that produce that content) as it contains something that will physically, emotionally, or ideologically harm or corrupt them.

Something in the Media

Amanda the Adventurer presents a children's television show that is demonic in nature, inspiring children to act in unusual ways, presumably due to some evil and demonic influence that they are intercepting through the television. This is the most extreme presentation of this fear, but even then, it is not unorthodox, as concerns about children's behavior changing when they are exposed to certain content is a well-documented phenomenon, which is more relevant in the age of the internet than ever before. Modern children consume content frequently unchecked by their parents and almost always made in its entirety by someone else, for example television shows, YouTubers, educational video games, etc. All of these things have far more sway over an individual child than a piece of plastic like a doll or toy on its own. Creators all have their own imperatives and opinions that they might want to impart on an impressionable child. This is not a new concern, and the more classic examples of cursed and possessed dolls perhaps still imply the concern of corrupting forces towards children is a largely external one, but the modern influx of unfamiliar and unchecked opinions on children almost certainly has an effect on the ways in which adults concern for and about children.

There is perhaps no better example of the ways in which this particular fear can be blown into a sensationalized panic than the Slenderman stabbings. In 2014 there was a stabbing in Waukesha, Wisconsin, in which the two 12-year-old girls stabbed a classmate nineteen times (Dunlap, 2016; Jermont Terry, 2015). When questioned why, they cited the Slenderman mythos as the reason for the crime, although stories conflict on whether they wanted to appease (L. Miller, 2015) or appeal to the creature. It was ruled by a judge that the girls were not in their right mind soon after and they were hospitalized, but by then a moral panic, especially among parents, had cropped up around the digital folktale (Greene, 2018; Velocci, 2018) that was violently fanned by the media (Koven, 2018). The local chief of police reportedly stated that the incident "should be a wake-up call for all parents [that] the internet

is full of dark and wicked things" (Dewey, 2014), and several other supposed incidents of children committing violence due to exposure to horror-based (or foreign such as manga and anime) media on the internet, with accusations ranging from threatening parents with knives (Evans, 2014) to committing arson (n/a, 2014). The truth of these stories and the reasoning of the supposed perpetrators cannot truly be verified, but they stand as testimony to the way that media can become a martyr of fear when people believe it to be an ideological threat to their safe home. These events function as an example of how strongly adults will respond to a perceived threat to children, despite unusual events such as the above being statistical outliers. The creepypasta community, a subsection of the internet fandom spaces centralized on such digital folktales such as *'Jeff the Killer'*, *'Smile Dog'*, and '*Laughing Jack'* also took a massive blow in the wake of the resulting panic, officially making what could have remained 'small-town news' into an international issue.

This is but one of innumerable real-world examples of a fear of a looming threat corrupting innocent youths in the form of ideological corruption distributed through media. There is a long and storied history of people attempting to scrub the world of anything they deem 'inappropriate for children', whether or not the media is intended for or even *available* to children, on the basis that they morally disagree with it. This spans the entire spectrum of morality in the West, from calls to boycott 'sexist' children's media (however the loudest voice may define that, from simple gender inequality in the cast to deliberate sabotage of shows marketed for young girls (Kinder, 1999)) to discourse sparked over portrayals of queerness and racial diversity. For example, *Steven Universe* (2013-2019), a children's cartoon heavily associated with queer subtext, saw censorship in more than 20 countries (Kennedy, 2021; Moore, 2019) and was banned in Kenya (Anyango, 2017), as well as facing constant slander from more conservative audiences claiming that it was exposing children to 'inappropriate content'.

The discussion of censorship in children's media is a surprisingly complex one. While I am of the opinion that all censorship, no matter how egregious the content, is always rooted in fear, there is a somewhat more valid argument that not all content is appropriate for children and children are not necessarily able to identify or differentiate the two. There is a legitimate discussion to be had regarding what restrictions should be put on the content that is marketed as safe for children, but it also acts as a ground of perpetuation for a 'think of the children' style reactionary political culture, in which content in any way affiliated with what a particular political group deems to be ideologically impure is censored on the grounds that a

child might see it and become ‘corrupted’ in some way. This is becoming increasingly true in the digital age where the fact that unsupervised children (unfortunately the default state of kids on the internet these days) could theoretically encounter *any* content is often used as an excuse to sanitize *all* content to the point at which it would be suitable for children (Finlayson et al., 2022; Smith, 2022). This content could be anything from sexually provocative images to the mere existence of queer and transgender individuals online (Bronstein, 2020; George & Goguen, 2021), any and all politically controversial existence.

Censorship and Concern – A symbiosis

Censorship regarding media in the name of children has always been reactionary, and more often than not heralded by concerned parents. A good example of this is the famously strict Comics Code Authority. It was a result of book burnings and lobbying by parents and educators in 1950s America who believed that comics were more violent and sexually evocative than was appropriate for children (Phoenix, 2006; Schodt, 1986) and was associated with a rise in juvenile delinquency (Nyberg, 1998). The code heavily regulated the ways in which language, violence, and sex could be used in comic books, whether or not they were aimed at children, despite the issue supposedly being that the books’ contents were not appropriate for children. Additionally, depictions of morality were also heavily restricted, demanding that comics never portray crime as glamorous, or the US government as ‘evil’ or corrupted. This quite famously somewhat ruined the quality of storytelling in comic books for quite some time, leaving no room for moral neutrality or philosophical discussion, even in comics aimed at adults. This is but one example of the ways that ‘protections for children’ in media stem from a fear of ideological corruption, even if they often end up perpetuating a useful dogma for those in power.

The concerns began with “…symbols of social authority over childhood and children's reading" expressing concerns that it was impacting children's reading ability. When academic research proved this to be untrue, "…the criticism of comic books persisted [because they were] rooted in adult beliefs and attitudes about children's leisure time activities. Adults’ concern stemmed in large part from fears that children's culture, especially in control of leisure reading, had escaped traditional authority. [...] The struggle between children's taste and adult authority was presented as a 'challenge' to be faced and a 'battle' to be won; adults sought to substitute their own choices for the comic books favored by children" (Nyberg, 1998, p. viii). In the above discussion about the Slenderman stabbings, it is mentioned that the media named and blamed for the supposed actions of the perpetrators was not limited to

Slenderman, or even horror media. There is no definitive way to prove this, but it is not an unreasonable assumption to make that the panic around Slenderman opened an avenue for parents to martyr media that their child was reading that they simply did not like or approve of.

Nyberg (1998) also details how this discourse was inflamed by associating church and civic groups in order to align cultural morality with the adult's choices, allowing the condemnation of comics to come from voices of authority, attributing delinquency and bad behavior with the connection to this media. It is within this discussion that we return to the idea that adults believe children do not know what is good for them, and the fear as described earlier by Lennard (2014) of the child's imagination unbound by adult authority. There is an innate desire for control over children that sits at the root of this fear, in order to protect them from harm and remove something that the adults in the child's life perceive to be a physical, ideological, or emotional threat. Without an adult telling them not to, what is to stop a child from attempting to fall from roofs and canyons like Looney Tunes characters, or enact violence like superheroes? Without an adult to tell them that it is unnatural, what is to stop a child from seeing a lesbian couple kiss on *Adventure Time* (2010-2018), what's to stop them becoming gay and being lost to the devil? Without someone telling them that YouTube conspiracy videos are not true, what's to stop them from being pulled down an algorithmic pipeline to bigotry? Whether or not these things are a reasonable threat are, of course, dependent on the adult, but the underlying thesis of the fear remains clear.

Amanda the Adventurer 2 Demo: Some Supporting Points

The demo for *Amanda the Adventurer 2* was released on June 20th 2024, too late in the thesis for integration into the case study at large, but seemed to contain relevant information to my point, so I will briefly explore them here. The player appears to be a librarian, presumably working in Kensdale Public Library. After a short puzzle with some desecrated books, the player gets access to a tape with a new Amanda the Adventurer episode on it. It entails Amanda planning an imaginary trip to famous world destinations. All through the demo, there is the sound of something crawling through the overhead vents. At the end of the tape an elongated black arm, seemingly belonging to Amanda's demonic form, stretches from a ceiling vent and hands the player a tape labelled 'watch me :)'. The tape seems to contain a series of clips from other episodes montaged together.

The demo appears to support and emphasize the idea that Amanda is trapped. The tape in the demo is about preparing for a trip, but Amanda frequently makes references that she is not allowed to leave where she is. The tape opens with the following scene, with Amanda sitting on a couch in what appears to be a living room:

Amanda: Hi friends, I'm Amanda.

Amanda jumps off the couch

Amanda: Have you ever wanted to go far, far away? Well, we can!

Amanda looks around before looking at the floor, dejected

Amanda (sadly): At least in our imaginations we can…

She declares that in her imagination she can go anywhere on her 'magic train', which is an electronic toy train large enough for her to ride on a circular track. When she asks who the player would want to visit if they could go anywhere, if the player replies 'Amanda' she will reply "do you really think you could do that?" with an annoyed expression and twitching eye before shaking her head to clear it. She also talks about daydreaming about "all the places [she] could have gone" before the tape glitches and she is corrected into saying "all the places she *could go"*. When she departs on her 'magic train journey' she looks unhappy and says that while the train ride is fun, she "[wishes] she really could go see the world".

In the first game, Sam is symbolically tied to roosters, and in the demo Amanda 'sells' a toy rooster (throws it in the air where it is torn apart while making squeaking noises) off camera in exchange for some money. This could indicate that Sam was indeed killed or removed by Hameln (perhaps by way of having Amanda attack him) in exchange for profit gain.

The montage of clips contains many details that could be relevant, but for the purposes of this analysis, the relevant ones appear to be clips mentioning being afraid while in the dark, and being lonely, and Amanda saying seriously "we shouldn't talk about them". In the title screen Wooly's image is blacked out, and he does not appear in either tape. Wooly has been removed for unclear reasons. That, in addition to the fact that Amanda seems both lonely and more discontented, implies that she is perhaps less attached to the world of the tapes than she was in the first game. It is difficult to infer anything of substance from the game's demo out of context, but I believe the games will continue exploring this avenue of child exploitation and loss.

Conclusion

Amanda the Adventurer very clearly follows the pattern of narrative demonstration that I have noticed. It also interacts with a secondary real-world fear in such a way that establishes the way in which the 'corruptive force' can be changed in order to reflect cultural concerns in a time and place. I believe this framework could be applied to many other horror games in order to explore and identify other perceived threats to children in a culture.

Recommendations for Further Research

I believe this topic (and other topics in regard to the observation of cultural trends in storytelling should not be limited to a single narrative medium. While I acknowledge that stylistically and mechanically books, movies, video games, and other ways of conveying a meaningful narrative operate very differently, the narratives that they convey once interpreted are not so meaningfully different that they need be studied independently from one another. Technology is changing fast, and with it comes many more opportunities and technologies with which to tell stories. When discussing technical operations, such as the *ways* in which emphasis is given to a subject in a narrative, of course there are differences; a film may linger on the subject with the camera, a game may incorporate the subject into the player's experience so it holds weight and value, a book may spend additional time describing the subject at multiple points. However, when a researcher is adequately able to interpret all of these media and the way they interact with themes, symbols, and narrative choices of importance, the narratives across all of them are not hindered by the fact that they are presented in a medium that allowed them to be told. Furthermore, if a trend in horror is extrapolated and interpreted to reflect cultural trends but only appears as a trend in horror *video games*, the trend may not be as culturally ubiquitous as first thought. I would have very much like to have discussed recent films such as *M3gan* (2023), *Skinamarink* (2022) and *Late Night with the Devil* (2023) as a larger part of my evidence, as they demonstrate similar themes towards fear of a corrupting influence in a child and the weaponization of nostalgia for an earlier time perverted in order to extrapolate horror.

In addition, I believe that more research should be done on the evolution of internet horror trends. The skill and financial bar to clear in order to make internet horror has always been lower than standard methods of publishing and thus the themes present in them could potentially be more indicative of cultural fears by virtue of having more varied creators contributing to a larger range of narrative sources without interference from studios or sponsors encouraging a more standard direction.

Conclusion

Video games, as a platform, have reached the point of complexity that its narratives are evolving techniques that take advantage of the medium's strengths. The developer's ability to encourage empathy and investment in the world of the game and the avatar's perspective allow for explorations of topics that interacts and responds to a player's investment. This is a valuable trait for a platform to have in order to explore ideas that are culturally resonant, and that people have a great deal of emotionally reactive thoughts and instincts towards. Horror is a reflection of that which occupies a culture's mental space, both what we take for granted and what we are unable to shake off. Certain themes like parenthood, violence, technology, and safety 'come back around' even as more specific anxieties and concerns wax and wane. Considering that the highs and lows of parenthood, general pleasures and inconveniences of sharing public spaces with children, and the way our own childhoods influence a majority of an adult's development and profile are fairly consistent human experiences, it is perhaps unsurprising that childhood and our preconceived notions of it take up a great deal of cultural memory and thought explorations. The exploration of these themes remains ongoing and evolving, the most recent *FNAF* game (*Into the Pit* (2024)) was released extremely late in the process of this thesis, and while I mentioned my reasons for not wishing to closely analyze the *FNAF* series, I believe it also supports several of my points, including the relationship between technology and nostalgia, the infiltration of the home by corruptive and misleading forces, and a child being privy to supernatural horror that is dismissed by the adults in his life. The continued generation of cultural snapshots of the ways in which we think about children, what we believe childhood to mean and exemplify, and what we believe we owe both of these things is informing the ways in which media encourages us to interact with and explore the theme of childhood. The reactivity and 'immersive' nature of video games makes for fascinating interplay with such an emotionally charged cultural concept.

Contemporary trends in the sphere of horror games in regard to the theme of childhood grant fascinating insights into the current cultural state of adults' fears for and about children. They examine the fear that one's childhood may not have been as safe and innocent as it seemed, and that modern children could be just as endangered, if not more. It illuminates anxieties of the world being increasingly deceptive and malicious towards children who do not know how to look out for danger by themselves. It explores the possibility that a caregiver might brush off a sign or signal that could have spared the loss or corruption of a child. And, perhaps most critically, it exposes a fear of failure on the part of adults in their duty to protect and care for

children. That their incompetence places children in danger or worse, and the resulting social and moral implications and consequences of that failure.

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