

Temporality and  
Collective Story-sharing  
Through Horror  
Narratives

# Children's Engagement with Urban Legends



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Cover photo: Artistic interpretation of Click Click Slide created by Haley Biswell.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how children engage with horror narratives in the digital era and how this engagement has changed over the last decade. The term ‘Horror narratives’ encompasses a wide range of genre-based storytelling from urban legends, to creepypastas, to images, YouTube videos, and internet forums. It is a broad form of story-sharing that transcends physical and digital mediums. I examine the relationship between the horror narratives, the individual child, and wider group engagement in real-life and on a digital platforms, and how this has changed over the last 15 years. Over the past twenty years children’s access to personal devices and digital media has expanded rapidly. I ask whether oral tradition has been overtaken by digital horror narratives. What does story-sharing look like in a digital medium?

Part of this paper is looking at how children’s horror narrative repertoires develop and what stories are retained and disseminated among their peers. In my childhood era the predominant form of dissemination was oral story-sharing, but during my fieldwork with young scouts I learned that children engage in a variety of media for dissemination as they now have easier access to internet communities on their personal devices. I have compared popular oral urban legends from my childhood (Click Click Slide, Drip Drip, and “Johnny, I want my liver back”) to contemporary horror narratives children engage with both in real-life and in the digital medium. My thesis also explores the relationship between young adults in their early twenties and memories of these horror narratives from their childhood, and how these memories have been impacted by nostalgia and retroactive knowledge. The major question of this thesis is how has horror storytelling changed from my childhood fifteen years ago to present time, and what have new technologies contributed to this evolution in horror narration?

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## **GLOSSARY**

### **Online Terms**

Copypasta – an online text that is easy to copy and paste to various forums and websites

Creepypasta – a portmanteau of ‘creepy’ and ‘copypasta’ used to describe horror variations of the copypasta

DeviantArt – a website dedicated to users uploading their own art and pictures for public sharing

Fanfiction – stories written by fans based around popular media

Fanart – drawings, paintings, and visual artistic interpretations of characters from popular media

Hentai – sexually-explicit Japanese manga and anime

Jeff the Killer – a fictional physically scarred serial killer with pale skin and lidless eyes

Lemon – sexually-explicit fanfictions

Let’s Play – video-recorded game playthroughs that feature player commentaries

Lurker – an internet user who observes internet discourse without ever participating

Mary Sue – characters in fan media designed for the author to live through vicariously

Momo – a fictional large-eyed birdlike woman who sends malicious messages to children online

nosleep – a Reddit forum community where users post original horror stories

Reddit – a website that hosts various community forums where users can post and vote on content

SCP Foundation – a fictional organisation that documents supernatural entities in a shared online wiki

Slenderman – a fictional tall, faceless monster in a business suit who resides predominantly in the woods

Wattpad – a self-publishing website that allows users to post and read stories

Wiki – a website developed through communal collaboration that allows users to edit pages and articles

YouTuber – an individual or company that produces video content for the website YouTube

### **New Zealand Terms**

Kiwi – a nickname for New Zealanders based off the kiwi bird: the national symbol

Māori – the indigenous people of New Zealand (Aotearoa)

Te Reo – the indigenous Māori language of New Zealand

Waiwaikau – a goat-like creature from Māori legend

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There is no end to the gratitude I feel for my family. My parents and sister have never wavered in support of my academic ventures and supported me through dark times. Thank you, Haley, for creating the spooky image of Click Click Slide for my thesis, and thank you to Mum for putting your editing skills to work spell-checking my thesis. Thank you, Dad, for helping me organise my flights to the Memphis conference and all other trips throughout the years. I also want to thank my extended family who sent me their love and support from the United States. My grandparents have always made me feel loved and supported even across the ocean. Uncle Gerry, without your help following my passion would not have been possible. I know you all wanted me to get the most out of education, and I have.

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Lastly, I want to thank all the familiar strangers on the internet. The nosleep and creepypasta Reddit forums have allowed me to test my own horror writing skills, and let me witness the transformation of horror narratives in the digital realm and understand what digital communities look like. In the same vein, I thank the hosts of *Last Podcast on the Left*, who, despite us never meeting, have influenced my interest in horror narratives dramatically, showing me the fun that can be had when researching the macabre.

## INTRODUCTION

### The Horror Begins

*Who remembers click click slide/clickety clack?*

*I remember this urban legend scaring me when I was in primary school in 2006. It sounds so silly now but I still love it.*

*For those who don't know: the story goes a woman's car was hit by a truck, but all the police found was her legs. People started to talk about a legless lady dragging herself around with her long, sharp nails. Once children started going missing in the nearby town a curfew was enforced.*

*A little girl was running late to get home when she started to hear a strange noise.*

*Click click slide*

*Click click slide*

*Looking back, she didn't see anything but picked up her pace.*

*Click click slide click click slide click click slide*

*It was getting faster.*

*Finally she reached her home. The door was locked. Her mother was asleep inside having forgot to unlock the door to her.*

*Click*

*Click*

*Slide*

*The mother woke up the next morning. Realising she had forgotten to open the door for her daughter she ran downstairs and swung open the door.*

*She screamed in horror. The welcome mat was stained with blood, and a dark red smear trailed back to the street.*

*The body was never found.*

\* \* \*

On August 10<sup>th</sup>, 2018 I posted this retelling to the creepypasta forum on Reddit. User ellenmacdonald commented “Yes!! I’m from NZ and I used to have nightmares about the click click slide lady!” and user shesanoddity said “Heard a similar story in primary school over here in Australia, except I heard it as "Click Click Drag" and it was a legless guy instead of a legless woman.” There were other comments of people telling the variations of this story they heard in childhood from New Zealand, Australia, and the United Kingdom.

This is where the foundations for the start of my project begin. The inception for this project was when I listened to a *Last Podcast on the Left*'s episode about urban legends (Kissel, Parks and Zebrowski, Episode 108: Urban Legends 2017). The podcast also regularly covers internet creepypastas (copy-and-paste horror stories) among other horror-related content with amusing results. I started to think back to my own childhood and what spooky stories had stuck with me. From the back of my brain, Click Click Slide clawed her way back into the forefront of my thoughts. A monster I had not thought about in a decade suddenly became the object of my newfound passion: horror narratives.

The question of this thesis is as follows: **how do children engage with urban legends and how has this changed with technological advancements?** I began by looking at my own childhood and the shared memories I had with other young adults who grew up in the same era. I then spoke with children in Britannia Sea Scouts<sup>1</sup> to learn more about how they engage with horror narratives today. This thesis will explore children's engagement with urban legends of the horror genre. I will be examining the relationship between time and story-sharing by exploring how urban legends are disseminated across two timeframes: the 2000s and the 2010s. In exploring how children engage with urban legends across these two decades I will be enacting Étienne Bonnot de Condillac's concept of ‘double attention’ which is “giving one's attention to two objects at once” (Candea 2019, 4). By interviewing children now, in 2019, to young adults my age, I am able to demonstrate how technological advancements have impacted on New Zealand children's engagement with urban legends.

### **Research on Urban Legends**

Urban legend research falls under the umbrella of folklore studies. The term refers to contemporary narratives and stories shared by folk under the pretence they are true stories regardless of their believability and validity of sources. “Like the plaintiff and the defendant

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<sup>1</sup> The Britannia Sea Scouts is a volunteer organisation catering to youth-oriented camping and sailing activities.

in a legal process, advocates of belief and non-belief face each other in the course of the legend process” (Dégh 2001, 1). Legends stem from word-of-mouth and communal gossip rather than from mainstream media. They are constantly retold and adapted to different timeframes and audiences. Although the dissemination of urban legends has strongly been associated with oral tradition in the past (Burne 1995, 261), “folklore in general has not withered in our mass communications society, and some urban legends in particular have flourished with the help of widespread news coverage (Brunvand 2003, 153). In the early days of the internet chain letters were particularly strong where participants would forward warning messages about hackers, viruses (Pollock 1999, 160), serial killers (Kissel, Parks and Zebrowski 2017), and all sorts of spam. “This may be because new and inexperienced users are continually deciding to go on-line” and when they receive warning emails “they may well pass it on, imagining they are doing a public service” (Pollock 1999, 160) rather than spreading a hoax. As computers and personal devices have become ever-present in daily lives, urban legends continue to thrive and scare fearful internet users. The Home Box Office (HBO) documentary *Beware the Slenderman* (2017) brought digital urban legends into the spotlight, discussing the incident in which two girls stabbed their friend to try and appease the Slenderman, whom they had discovered on the internet. The incident also spawned the book *Slender Man is Coming* (Blank and McNeill 2018): a selection of interdisciplinary essays examining the rise of legends on the internet and the consequences. This is one of the most recent advancements in the research of urban legend evolution. In comparison to oral tradition, urban legends of and in internet are beginning to be approached in a holistic, interdisciplinary manner in order to comprehend the technological, societal, and cultural factors in the creation of legends during rapid technological advancements.

### **Research on Folk Groups and Communities**

Folk groups are used to describe semi-informal congregations of people that are “punctuated routinely by various units of traditional material that are memorable, repeatable, and that fit recurring social situations well enough to serve in place of original remarks” (Brunvand 2003, 2). This means that folk groups often are discussing folklore and sharing legends within the group setting. The prerogative of urban legends coming up in discussion usually stems from there being a group of people “often closely related by occupation or family ties, who have for various reasons developed a particular shared mood” (Toeklen 1996, 55). The sharing of legends may not always be part of the initial plan when these people get together,

but it comes naturally into the conversation in “nocturnal events” (Fee and Webb 2016, 850) from campfires, to sleepovers, to friends sitting in the backyard drinking at night. When it comes to childhood, the folk group helps children “to acquire and practice their future adult competence in performing and understanding folk traditions” (Bronner, *Children's Groups* 2006, 183). Often children are exposed to these new legends when they start school, meet with neighbourhood kids, or through extracurricular activities such as scouts and other clubs. These various, often incidental, folk groups are necessary for the survival of legends and beliefs that are shared through oral storytelling.

The past few decades have given rise to the concept of digital folk groups and their relationship to real-world folk life. The anthropologist, Tom Boellstorff is notable for conducting fieldwork entirely within the digital community with his book *Coming of Age in Second Life* (2008) and recognising that the community was not supplementary to real life, but rather constituted an independent community. There has been a shift among folklorists and anthropologists towards recognising online communities’ contribution to folklore. In particular with younger people who have grown up with such technologies, there is a “convergence of online/offline expression” and children are the “most likely to engage in many ostensive practices. For this age group, much of the identity work they do online feeds back into constructing their offline identities” (Peck 2018, 55). To date, anthropology has leaned towards recognising online communities as stand-alone entities as demonstrated by the works of anthropologists like Tom Boellstorff (2008) and Alex Golub (2010) who did ethnologies within *Second Life* and *World of Warcraft*, respectively. On the other hand, folklore studies recognise and research the blurring between the two realms where online and offline communities seem to have equal influence over each other. Especially in regards to online communities creating new legends are now viewed as “a collective effort and deliberately modeled after an existing and familiar folklore genre” from the offline world (J. A. Tolbert 2018, 27).

### **Research on Children’s Storytelling**

The literature on children’s storytelling and story-sharing is far more niche in comparison to the vast expanse of studies on urban legends and the up-and-coming studies on digital communities. The most significant research comes from *Children’s Folklore: A Source Book* (Sutton-Smith, Mechling, et al. 1999) which contains various essays and studies of research in and of children’s groups and how these children share stories. Sociologist, Gary Alan Fine

writes a chapter in the book, ‘6 Methodological Problems of Collecting Folklore from Children’ (Fine 1999), which addresses the difficulty of accessing children’s groups both from an ethical standpoint and an observational one. This topic is repeatedly addressed throughout the chapters. “The children tell me how it *should* be. In their actions—both the performance of the folklore and their daily lives—they show me how it *really* is” (Zumwalt 1999, 25-26) and observing such performance is difficult for an adult research. “The private, often hidden realms of children” (Bronner 1999, 270) is difficult to observe as children often keep it out of the eyes of authority figures who would disapprove of the morbid nature of urban legend storytelling. Despite the invaluable information about children’s folklore in the *Children’s Folklore* collection, the detriment of this being the book was published over twenty years ago and therefore lacks insight into children’s interactions with digital technologies. “Children and adolescents use electronic mail and other Internet services to communicate with their friends they know in face-to-face settings, but an increasing number of children and adolescents would count their Internet friends, many of whom they have never met in person, as their most significant folk groups” (Bronner 2006, 185). The essay collection *Slender Man is Coming* (Blank and McNeill 2018) tries to fill this knowledge gap as contemporary cases of the Slender Man Stabbing and Momo Challenge Hoax have heightened parental fears of the type of legend content children engage with on the internet. However, this book focuses almost exclusively on folklore surrounding Slenderman, when the horror legends of the internet have expanded dramatically in the past decade and become more accessible to children in a variety of media formats.

### **Brian Sutton-Smith and my Research**

Play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith (1924-2015) was from New Zealand. Because of that, many of his works contained New Zealand-based research. In particular his book *A History of Children’s Play* (1981) chronicles New Zealand children’s play and folklife in school between the early pioneer era in the 1840s up until the 1950s. His research focussed on the introduction of mandatory schooling and the “unusual mixture of agrarian existence in everyday life and an industrial social philosophy in the schools shaped the lower and yeoman classes of New Zealand immigrants in peculiar ways” (Sutton-Smith 1981, XV). His research was based on archival research and interviews with various generations of adults. Brian Sutton-Smith was a major influence on me when approaching my thesis topic as he used both multidisciplinary research and a New Zealand framing to research children’s folklore. His

final published book, *The Ambiguity of Play*, was published in 1997 and Brian Sutton-Smith passed away from Alzheimer's in 2015 (Tucker 2016). I was born in 1997, and this is also the year of the start of a brand-new era in children's folklore: the internet. My project acts as a spiritual successor to the work of Sutton-Smith, focussing on children's engagement with horror-themed folklore in the past two decades during the rapid development of the internet. Sutton-Smith's research focussed on the folklore dynamics within the playground setting, but I am expanding to incorporate other adult-controlled institutions from Britannia Sea Scouts to school camp. However, I am also incorporating children's access to the internet and how this impacts them internally and socially both in their presence online and offline.

### **Nostalgia**

At the heart of this thesis is my nostalgia for Click Click Slide and urban legends from my childhood. Nostalgia is a "longing for what is lacking in a changed present . . . a yearning for what is now unattainable, simply because of the irreversibility of time" (Pickering and Keightley 2006, 920). This is reflected in my own recollections of childhood, and the reminiscing done within the young adult group discussions. The relationship between memory and time creates this temporal form of nostalgia, where memories and associations of my childhood—and the childhood shared by other New Zealanders my age—is "longing for a lost place, and especially, a vanished time" (Angé and Berliner 2014, 2). Even if such physical locations where urban legend story-sharing took place still exist, the associations and experiences created in childhood of group story-sharing are unattainable, trapped in the past. In this thesis nostalgia is used to not only contextualise certain urban legends to particular locations and cultures, but to particular timeframes as well. This creates a temporal relationship between the child and the urban legend as it was shared with them in the past. The use of the group discussions I facilitated with young adults allowed us to recall circumstances of childhood urban legend story-sharing in the past despite the fact such experiences are no longer attainable in the adult life stage.

### **Thesis Outline**

Chapter One of this thesis will discuss the methods I used as well as define the field of this project. I will justify my use of methods such as autoethnography, comparison, and interdisciplinary research that help create a holistic approach to the topic of horror narratives.

In this chapter I will also introduce the participants and explain where I met with them and how I organised our discussions.

In Chapter Two I define clearly what horror narratives are. I use the term to encompass the broad, multi-media genre of horror ranging from urban legends to independently made video games. This also includes the internet's urban legend equivalent: the genre of creepypastas which also requires the introduction of Jeff Case: the creator of the famous creepypasta 'Jeff the Killer'. I will also examine a child's personalised engagement with horror narratives such as how they experience these horror narratives when they are alone. This will be followed by discussion of how children can contribute to horror narrative lore through creating their own stories and characters within the genre.

In Chapter Three I introduce the communal settings where children share these horror narratives and how this has changed during the past decade. This ranges from campfires and sleepovers to forums and group chats. This is where the changes in group dynamics over time are highlighted from my generation to the current generation of children who now have broader access to horror narratives from the internet. This chapter breaks down the dynamics of the children's story-sharing group and the necessity of the performance involved for both the storyteller and the listeners—both in the physical and the digital realm.

In the final chapter, Chapter Four, I examine what role time and location play in the changes the sharing of content horror narratives go through. This includes how a story such as Click Click Slide has transformed in its shift from Japanese to the western New Zealand audiences. I also look at universal, travelling, local, and niche legends and the terminology as related to placing stories in terms of location. I then will discuss of the role of nostalgia as a temporal standpoint and its relationship to horror.

This thesis covers a range of aspects of horror narratives and how they are disseminated. The core of this project is children's engagement with horror narratives. I am talking about the campfire setting and the internet forum. I am talking about hanging out with friends and being terrified alone at night, worried of monsters in the dark. The experiences children have had over the last two decades make up the story of how horror narratives have been transformed and expanded in the digital era, even if stories such as Click Click Slide seemingly get left behind in the past.



## CHAPTER ONE: METHODS

### Introduction

In this chapter I am discussing the methods I used to gather information about children's engagement with urban legends. For this project I wanted to gauge the temporal shifts in how and where urban legends are shared in addition to how the narratives have evolved. To discover this, I interviewed two separate groups of young New Zealanders—colloquially called Kiwis. The first group consisted people my own age who grew up in the same timeframe as me, being aged between twenty and twenty-five-years old. The second group interviewed was children aged between ten and fifteen years-old. Having conducted group interviews with both groups has allowed me to understand how children engaged with urban legends in the late 2000s—my childhood—in comparison to how children engage with urban legends in 2019, and this decade shift will allow me to reflect on the evolution of how horror narratives are disseminated among children between these two points in time.

For this project I needed to choose methods which would give me the best understanding of the relationship between temporality and story-sharing when discussing horror narratives among children. I concluded that ethnography would be the best way to approach collecting data in addition to broadening my research scope beyond anthropology into interdisciplinary research. Part of the understanding the difference between urban legends among children in the 2000s and contemporary children's engagement with creepypastas is acknowledging benefits and limitations of memory and nostalgia. For this I will also be incorporating elements of autoethnography for this project and how group discussions with contemporary children informed my understanding of creepypastas and the similarities and differences between childhood in the 2000s and childhood in the late 2010s. I will also be discussing decisions I made about gathering data and how I chose to transcribe interviews and approach information. This includes the balancing of respecting a child as an autonomous individual able to speak for themselves, but also acknowledging the importance of the consent of their guardians and deciding how to present the information they provided in an informative and representative manner.

### Ethnography

Ethnography is the core method used by Anthropologists for analysing fieldnotes and interpreting collected data. "In constructing ethnographies, anthropologists do more than

merely “write up” the fieldnotes they record as part of the process of doing fieldwork” and instead fieldnotes “are filtered through and interpreted against comparative theory and contextual documentary materials” (Sanjek 2014, 59). Ethnography—as both method and written product—is key to defining anthropological writing and its “methodological values” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 1). As with all methods associated with anthropology, the definition of ethnography is constantly challenged and evolving, but the basic concept is that an Anthropologist, through fieldwork and/or participant observation, observes and records a group of people and then synthesises those fieldnotes into academic literature using an anthropological lens and theories. Ethnography provides glimpses into groups or cultures and, despite many new variations how to approach the ethnographic method, “ethnography should continue to be understood as an ““exemplar”; an instance or “case” to which “casuistic” reasoning can be applied” to the development and interactions within a certain group structure (Wardle and Gay y Blasco 2011, 118). This is the method I used for the group discussions I conducted, as I transcribed the interviews with the incorporation of speech patterns, unspoken gestures, laughter, and other dynamics within the groups.

Catherine Allerton argues that “ethnography is *uniquely* suited to research that aims to work *with* rather than *on* children” in a form that other research methods do not achieve (2016, 7). The goal of ‘ethnographic humility’ allows me to renounce “writerly authority, and being aware that the stories we weave are always partial and limited” (Gidley 2015, 26). In the case of working with children, my goal was to ensure that I engaged with them in an unpatronising manner and accurately captured their voices and opinions. In this case I approached the group discussions with the mentality that the child participants were much more informed about the subject of modern horror narratives than I was—which is true. And because I approached the topic in this manner, I was able to benefit from their knowledge and learn how they engaged with modern horror narratives.

It is, however, not a fool-proof approach. Contemporary ethnography is about destabilising author authority, but “ethnographic fieldwork with children emerges as a dual process for both immersion in children’s worlds and an uneasy awareness of adult perspectives on childhood” (Allerton 2016, 13-14). In this case I was treating child participants with respect, but the fact I am an adult makes it unavoidable that I have a degree of authority over them, which was demonstrated whenever I had to organise who got to speak first if particularly excited participants started to talk over each other. Despite this constant dual-mentality, the

ethnographic approach allowed me to learn from the participants crucial information about their own engagement with horror narratives and helped me transform my initial assumptions; they challenged my expectation that digital creepypastas had overtaken orally-transmitted urban legends which resulted in me taking a different approach to my project.

### **Autoethnography**

In addition to comparative anthropology I have also incorporated elements of autoethnography into my project. Communication scholars Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams, and Art Bochner describe autoethnography as when “a researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography” with the method being “simultaneously personal and scholarly, evocative and analytical, descriptive and theoretical.” (Denshire 2013). At its core autoethnography is about stripping away the concept of researcher superiority over by personalising the voice of the author, thus eliminating the perception of objective research. “It does not seek to appropriate the voice of the informant... rather, what autoethnography here accomplishes is to focus attention on the relationship of the self to the world that is investigated” (Dauphinee 2010, 806). This is important for situating myself in relation to both my child and young adult participants in order to remain unpatronising. Autoethnography is also viewed as an ideal method to enable “voices previously silenced to speak back” (Denshire 2013, 2) and allow the readers to see author intentions and processes (Dauphinee 2010, 813). Given that there is only a small body of literature about folktales of children, it is important for this project both participants and readers can see that I am working to incorporate the voices of those who have had less say in their representation surrounding horror narratives, especially in regards to parental reactions to stories of Momo and Slenderman—where the voice of the child is often overshadowed by the parental concerns. By personalising my experience with participants, I am able to humanise them and convey their voice in an approachable manner for non-academic readers.

For the same reason that autoethnography’s non-academic nature is praised, I also had to take into account the criticism it faces for its connections to the literary genre. “Autoethnography is a fictive tradition. Tensions exist between autoethnography and literary traditions, with stories being put together using composite characters and sources” (Denshire 2013, 4). What this means is that the narrative structure of autoethnography can present a degree of embellishment for narrative purposes. Events that were separate may be condensed into the same occurrence; people the researcher/writer may have met may have their characteristics

fused into a single fictional person. This is all to benefit the narrative flow of an autoethnography, but it does bring to light that “the complex relationship between social science writing and literary has led to a blurring ‘between “fact” and “fiction” and between “true” and “imagined” (Denshire 2013, 1). A reader expects the accounts of an autoethnography to be and may feel deceived when they learn elements are fictitious or hyperbolic. For my own inspiration I look to Laurence Ralph’s *Renegade Dreams* (2014) and his use of composite characters. Ralph explains that “sometimes Eastwoodians preferred not to have a particular quote attributed to them” or that he “changed identifying characteristics of people and organizations upon request, creating composites” (2014, xix). Ralph made these decisions based on the safety and requests of those involved, so although some elements of *Renegade Dreams* may be interpreted as fictional, the story is a reflection of the truth created in conjunction with real participants. This is also true to the narrative tradition of urban legends: they are usually false or unproven stories, but these narratives reflect a deeper truth, tapping into personal suspicions and anxieties. “They are a unique, unselfconscious reflection of major concerns of individuals in the societies in which they circulate” (Brunvand 2003, xii). Given I am working with children I primarily took this into consideration for safety: concealing identities in this thesis is done to ensure a child’s identity is kept safe, but still revealing their testimonies. This was the case with one child participant informing me about their nighttime habits of staying up late and watching YouTube videos, but requested I did not let this information be revealed to their mother who would oppose this behaviour—for this reason such information is not attributed to any particular participant as this is the request of the participant to avoid getting in trouble.

One main influence on how I approached the autoethnographic method was Shamus Rahman Khan’s *Privilege* (2011) as he explores privilege and elitism at a school he once went to, returning as a teacher. “It is a strange feeling to know that you are partly responsible for shaping the minds and hearts of children who are expected to one day lead the world. Doubly strange because I had once been one of those students” (Khan 2011, 12). Khan and I are both attempting to explore our own youth and compare our experiences with contemporary children. He also navigates the balance between being an authority figure with children—their teacher—and also an anthropologist. Like with Laurence Ralph, there were also times his informants ask him to withhold information he had learned, and he respected those requests. “This does not mean that there are bits of information that would change everything I have written about, or even that I could forget these vents. In fact, I often actively

remembered them and used them to form my argument” (Khan 2011, 203). Thus, although we are focussing on different topics, the structure of memory of childhood and engagement with contemporary children is something that I have taken influence from. In the discussions I had to balance being a ‘fun adult’ sharing horror stories with them, but also step in to ensure participants were not talked over or made fun of.

### **Reflexivity**

In addition to autoethnography influencing this project, reflexivity has been key to developing my voice in the narrative and discussing my positionality in the field. It is important for ethnographies to have a reflexive element because “only honest disclosure of the researcher’s “position” will allow the reader to assess the substance of the ethnographic research” (Salzman 2002, 807) and perceive the ingrained biases and desires of the researcher themselves. Throughout this project I sprinkle my own voice into the discussion to reflect on my own engagement with horror narrative sharing. I address my own use of humour both with engaging in horror and group discussions. I make jokes to break the tension both when playing horror games as well as when discussing scary urban legends/creepypastas in a group setting. Adding my own voice and experiences to the project has allowed me to humanise the writing and make it clear that this thesis does not take an objective stance, but rather is the culmination of my own interests and research with my peers.

A key factor in contemporary anthropological studies is discussing how “how data gathering impacts the quality of the data itself” (Rode 2011, 124) based on the anthropologist’s personal bias or influence on the field. To be reflexive of my work in this project, I have incorporated elements of the confessional ethnography that presents my doubts and helps to “demystify the fieldwork process” (Rode, 124). This includes using ‘I’ statements and presenting myself in the writing rather than as an impartial narrator. Reflexivity is easily paired with the autoethnographic approach as situating the researcher in the fieldsite helps confront “crisis of objectivity that haunts modern scholarship” (Nazaruk 2011, 73) and allows the reader to see that these works are influenced by the desires and cultures of the researcher themselves.

I also discuss the fieldwork process and decisions I made about constructing this thesis. This includes a discussion of how I chose to present the participants in the writing and the choice between verbatim transcribing or edited transcription for the purpose of using in-text quotations. This helps show the process of constructing the dialogue and positions myself as

an active participant in the interviews rather than just a receptor. I also mention my own speech ticks that I discovered when transcribing myself which shows the informal elements of the interviews and gives insight into how I presented myself to the participants. In addition to how I present the participants, I freely admit to removing one source from the project after retroactively learning the writer was a Trump supporter and climate change denier—a fully biased decision I have made as I want to reflect voices I support and respect even if I have a different view on their theories.

In addition to discussing the construction of ethnography, throughout the project I examine the successes and failures of creating the online surveys, including discussing why the child survey failed and oversights in data collection when conducting the young adult survey. I address my oversight in the survey of not having a non-binary option for gender selection. It is important to address the failures in research just as much as the successes, because ethnography is not a step-by-step linear process, it is all over the place. Reflexivity in anthropology “is to insist that anthropologists systematically and rigorously reveal their methodology and themselves as the instrument of data generation” (Ruby 1980, 153) and demonstrate that researchers, themselves, are human still in the process of learning and adapting.

### **Interdisciplinary Research**

In approaching my research on the topic of folklore and child’s engagement I came to the conclusion that this project would have interdisciplinary elements. Just as horror narratives can be part of broad literary genres that span multiple medias, I chose to engage with literature beyond the anthropological discipline, adding literature, film, media, and folklore studies to my discussions.

When it came to investigating children’s engagement with urban legends in groups I have investigated the research done on the ‘shared high’ of watching horror movies in groups as well as the biological justifications for such reactions. I have also incorporated comparisons of horror narratives in oral tradition and creepypastas and their resemblance to horror movies that adhere to the same tropes. This stems from my undergraduate degree in film in which I had a particular interest in horror movies—which is also my favourite genre to this day. The research of play theorists such as Brian Sutton-Smith who researched children’s group engagement have also been utilised, especially in relation to how to approach studying with children. Because there is also a digital element to this project, I have incorporated the

interdisciplinary research of digital humanities including “media studies, digital text analysis, big data, and visualization studies, to name a few” (Pothumus, Sinclair and Poplawski 2018, 156). Even folklore cannot be the singular label for the modern creepypastas. Famous creepypasta monsters such as Slenderman “is not easily classifiable as either folklore or popular culture—he is both, or at least has characteristics of both” (Evans 2018, 129). In Chapter Two I will explain how I have reconciled the multimedia of horror genre folklore and came up with the term ‘horror narratives’ to classify the various legends and tales I cover.

Folklore studies have also contributed majorly to this project. Earlier in 2019 I attended the International Society for Contemporary Legend’s Perspectives on Contemporary Legend conference in Memphis, Tennessee where I both presented my survey findings and learned about other folklorists’ research projects—I was the only one from an anthropology background to present. This conference ranged from Eleanor Hasken’s presentation about Mothman’s sexuality to Elizabeth Tucker’s discussion about the relationship between school shootings and hauntings of schools. The conference showed me that contemporary legend studies is just as broad as the discipline of Anthropology, with many similarities. However, I have also seen that anthropology can beneficially contribute to the Folklore studies. One notable feature at the conference was that while many cultures and ethnic backgrounds were considered in the research almost all of the presenters and participants, including myself, were white. This made me question what was being left out of the dialogue on contemporary legends when the primary scholars were still white people. This is an issue modern anthropology has also been trying to address. For anthropology to be inclusive “it is necessary to address the disconnections between approaches and methods, which challenge anthropology’s fundamental claim to represent the lifeways and worldviews of others” and the inclusion of indigenous and minority scholars “can only enrich and deepen” the scholarly discourse (Sillitoe 2015, xvi). In my case I have been working with child participants not just as someone who is collecting their stories for archival purposes, but as someone who engaged in the group discussions and shared equally with them my own repertoire of horror narratives.

Anthropology has a long history of interdisciplinary connections, more commonly associated with archaeology and sociology, it is also connected to law, economics, and digital humanities. A key benefit of anthropological thinking being incorporated into other disciplines is that it helps to “contribute to wider academic and professional conversations, by

framing other disciplinary discussions in different terms, or by challenging their operating assumptions and defining principle” (Shore and Wilson 2012, 9). I believe it is also important to consider the mutually beneficial relationship between disciplines, and that expanding beyond anthropological thinking has given me a more holistic understanding of how these urban legends are disseminated through oral and digital transmission.

### Choosing Participants

Name	Age	Sex	Group No.	Name	Age	Sex	Group No.
Ashleigh	22	F	1	Ben	14	M	2
Elizabeth	22	F	2	Connor	15	M	1
Emma	??	F	2	Dan	11	M	2
Jarvis	22	M	2	Harry	13	M	1
Jeff	25	M	Independent	Izabel	11	F	1
Mikayla	20	F	2	Leo	11	M	1
Pippi	22	F	1	Madeline	14	F	1
Rowan	25	M	2	Ollie	12	M	2
Ruby	22	F	1	Sage	11	F	2
Sami	24	M	2				
Sophia	22	F	1				

*Figure 1 Table of interview participants*

When planning my project, I estimated that I would speak to a total of sixteen to twenty-four participants in a total of four to six groupings. The goal was to speak to an even-gendered split of at least eight young adults aged between twenty and twenty-five, and at least eight children aged between ten and fifteen. The age range and locality of Wellington were the primary criteria for choosing participants. I did not make any specificities beyond this because the goal was to speak to a diverse group of people within these age ranges.

In a sense, I was my own gatekeeper to accessing the young adult community, as I was not an outsider to this group and all but two of the adult participants were friends of mine. Of the ten young adult participants, seven were friends of mine, while Mikayla and Elizabeth joined via the survey follow-up, and Emma attended with Mikayla despite not initially planning to participate. One issue with being the gatekeeper and researcher is that I had access to my friend group, but my friend group is not an even gendered and ethnic split. For this reason only three of the participants in the young adult discussion were male as my friendship group consists predominantly of young women. My participants were also predominantly white. Sami and Jarvis were the only two non-white young adult participants with Jarvis being Māori and Sami identifying as Dutch-Egyptian. The insularity of my friend group means I



lacked ethnic diversity and did not manage an equal gender split, as well as lacking any non-binary or genderfluid participants.

With the child participants, the gatekeeper who could “facilitate an outsider’s entry into a ‘restricted’ location” (Tolich and Davidson 1999, 94) was my friend Pippi, who was also a participant in the young adult interviews. As a sea scout leader, she offered to discuss with the scouts and their guardians my desire to hold group interviews, and she organised the guardian consent process as well as the benefit of participants receiving Urban History badges for their scout programme. Pippi was the ideal gatekeeper as she was respected by both the scout children, their guardians, and the other scout leaders. She already had the trust of this community and could therefore induct me with ease.

Although not a gatekeeper per se, Jeff was a strong informer for the early 2010s creepypasta community. He has recognition by the creepypasta community for creating one of the more iconic figures of the era: Jeff the Killer (Dictionary.com). Because of this, Jeff was able to give me greater insight into the creation and spread of popular creepypastas based on his own experience.

### **Choosing Interview Locations**

The young adult interviews took place on the 20<sup>th</sup> of June and 11<sup>th</sup> of August in the afternoons at The Aroma: a café on the bustling Cuba Street in Wellington. The child interviews took place at the scout boathouse on the 4<sup>th</sup> of September in the evening during the weekly scout meetup.

The main task for the young adult interviews was organising a suitable location that could easily be congregated at, was informal, and quiet enough so there would not be too many disruptions. For this reason both sets of young adult interviews took place at The Aroma on Cuba Street before it closed for renovation. This was a large cafe with an ideal booth that had padded walls on three sides—dampening the external sound. This cafe was accessible by both bus and walking and near a prominent Cuba Street landmark: the umbrella statue. Choosing to host the discussion at a cafe also gave me the opportunity to provide free bowls of fries to the participants as a ‘thank you’ gesture and meant some of the participants bought themselves drinks and snacks. Another consideration, although it did not come to fruition, was disability access. The Aroma was wheelchair accessible. At one stage a person in a wheelchair desired to participate in the discussions. Unfortunately, they were sick on the day

of the interview and could not attend. However, if they had been able to make it, they would have had no issues accessing the chosen interview location.

The child group discussions took place at the Britannia Sea Scouts boathouse in Hataitai (a suburb of Wellington). This is a location all the scouts and their guardians were already familiar with and they had all already organised to be there that night for scout boating lessons. The boathouse has a ‘ward room’ which is a small room at the back next to the kitchen. The ward room is where the group discussions took place as it was isolated and allowed the interviews to occur without observance or interference from other scouts or their guardians. One disturbance occurred when a few scouts could be heard screaming outside the window while boating was taking place and this distracted some of the participants, but otherwise the ward room worked well for conversing.

### **Entering the Field and Going ‘Home’**

Whether being the US ‘ambassador’ who organises Thanksgiving, or being called upon in the Dominion Post five-minute quiz to answer American questions, I am regularly reminded that I am, in fact, an immigrant. Perhaps I could pass most of the time for being a Kiwi if it were not the sharp vowels and pronunciation of ‘aluminium’ instilled by my Californian accent. I am ‘the other’ and ‘the insider’ at the same time; a Frankenstein of Kiwi and American culture. I am a fierce defender of canned pumpkin and I don’t know what a Tim Tam Slam is, but I also had the Kiwi childhood of lolly scrambles and I was in the Clyde Quay School Kapa Haka group. What I am getting at is that my concept of what counts as being familiar is cross-cultured and confused—even if still inherently white. My background as an US immigrant, however, does mean even entering ‘home’ as the field, I am also still the outsider. And this temporal and location-based confusion of my own makeup is perfect for urban legends. They are also immigrants, constantly adapting to new environments. The home of Click Click Slide is New Zealand—as assumed by New Zealand children—but did you know she is also a Japanese citizen? She has been spotted in Utah of all places as well. She is always the ‘other’ of the monstrous, but she also knows how to adapt to her location in other ways. I am not calling myself a monster, but I take comfort knowing Click Click Slide has made her home across oceans just like myself.

Traditionally in anthropology, the field had to be some faraway exotic location with “some ‘fields’ are more equal than others” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 13) based on how different to ‘home’ the field was. This is the ‘hierarchy of purity’ ingrained in anthropology since

Malinowski ventured to the great ‘other’ of the Trobriand Islands, completely contrasting the white Western society he came from. The ‘purity’ of the field stems from the idea that “the field is most appropriately a place that is “not home”” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 13) and unfamiliar to white Westerners. Coming up to Christmas in 2019, I mistakenly found myself saying I am going ‘home’ for Christmas. In reality I was going to Ireland to stay with my parents and sister. I had never been to Ireland before, but my assumption still was I am going home because my family is there. My family constitutes ‘home’, but I am a stranger to that country. New Zealand is home, but I am still identified as ‘other’: an American. The US is home, but it is my childhood home, lost to the dream, only realised in weird traditions I cannot escape. So, although my field is ‘home’, this particular ‘home’ is an embodiment of New Zealand youth in Wellington where I have the dual role of local and foreigner.

On paper, my fieldsite is home. It is set where I live it is and involving my friends and a personal passion of mine. “Familiar locations or topics are difficult to research since it is difficult to comprehend those things that are normally taken for granted” (Tolich 1999, 17). In order to comprehend my field in a new light, I had to work to defamiliarise home. It is not possible to become a stranger to home unless actual amnesia is involved, but the concept I was working with was that I needed to re-educate myself about what I thought about horror narratives. This includes challenging my nostalgia of engaging with horror narratives as a child: are these truthful memories of a temporal ‘home’ or a pastiche seen through rose-tinted glasses? Nostalgia is “a desire to recapture what life was before” (Angé and Berliner 2014, 3), but life before *what*? Before I grew up? That does not suit. I still consider myself in the process of growing up even as a twenty-two-year-old. This re-evaluation is what made me understand that my nostalgia is goes back to a time before I ‘met’ the Slenderman creepypasta. This was one of the first major internet creepypastas, but my nostalgia is for a time when oral urban legends were the standard. Mentally, this puts the parameters of my field between my childhood in primary school to the change in high school, which is the same point in time creepypastas became more accessible to mainstream audiences.

In the modern anthropological field “we are enjoined to focus on the construction of reality by our informants and on the ways we as analysts construct cultural statements in collaboration with those informants” (Rubel and Rosman 1994, 337). This means the fieldsite is a construction of both how the author records it in conjunction with how participants describe their reality. My chosen fieldsite is not defined by precise location, but does take a

localised leaning towards Wellingtonians. The field I am engaging with encompasses contemporary youth in both the Wellington setting as well as their online presence. Through this fieldwork I am trying to contextualise my own knowledge of horror narratives with that of peers my same age, and then compare to the shared knowledge of urban legends from our childhood with the contemporary child's engagement with urban legends and creepypastas. So, although I have tried to keep my fieldsite limited to my 'home' in Wellington and within two timeframes (2000s and 2010s), I understand no culture develops in isolation which is why broader concepts of horror narrative dissemination have been acknowledged. In this case I understand globalisation and international media is intrinsic to children's engagement with urban legends, but I am trying to avoid the pitfall of embracing "un-critically the hypothesis of the cultural homogenization of the contemporary world" (Amselle 2002, 214) that make generalisations about youth on a worldwide scale.

Re-evaluating home also means understanding there is more than one way to engage with the location associated with 'home'. Dutch anthropologist Lodewijk Brunt discovered this to be the case when doing fieldwork in the Netherlands (Brunt 1985). Doing ethnography in his homeland would bring the assumption that the field was the same as 'home', but he discovered that he "was not at all familiar with all kinds of conventional rules, nor could or would he call himself an insider vis-a-vis certain local groupings" (van Ginkel 1994, 9) as I found when engaging with the child participants. I was at 'home' physically in Wellington, but the temporal differences in childhood between me and the younger participants meant we took different homely experiences for granted. The haughty joke I made with the participants to highlight this contrast was that I could see R-rated horror movies in cinemas and they were not able to. We live in the same city, but our shared spaces and norms are different. What is highlighted here is that my 'space' in Wellington is adult while they are all in the child 'space' which comes with different restrictions. We all call Wellington 'home', but we live differently within the same locations.

### **Working with Child Participants**

One of the major considerations when beginning my project was how to conduct data-collection appropriately with children. The main issue is regarding child participants and ensuring informed consent. "Informed consent, while a goal toward which we must always strive, will frequently be only partially achieved" when working with child participants (Fine 1999, 135). So, when preparing to work with children I had to take into consideration both

the consent of the child as well as their guardian. Beyond this, another factor was ensuring respect and humility with child participants “together with a frank sense of the limitations of our research” when it comes to gaining insight into children’s interactions with contemporary legends (Allerton 2016, 1). The limitation comes from the fact I was conducting group discussions to gauge a sense of children’s interactions with contemporary legends rather than being present at the dissemination of such stories. What a participant tells me versus the unidealised truth is difficult to distinguish (Zumwalt 1999, 25-26). It is for this same reason that I will be taking into account my own nostalgia of childhood and memories of how I engaged with urban legends—this is the autoethnographic element of the research. The information received from group discussions will work in correspondence with my personal recollection of childhood horror narratives as well as the shared memories of horror storytelling among peers my age who will also be interviewed. When using my own memories as comparison to contemporary children’s recollections, however, I must ensure I remain conscious of my own unreliability due to nostalgia and romanticising of memory (Allerton 2016, 1).

“It takes work and effort to get families, and in particular, their children, to participate in research” the Stanford Expressing Culture and Health through Activity and Lifestyle Education (ECHALE) group writes (2010, 14), and I found this to be the case. It would have been difficult to try and organise interviews with children had my friend Pippi not been a scout leader who allotted time for the interviews during the scouts meeting at the boatshed to speak with two groups. The goal was to make sure that both guardian and child were informed on the interview discussion and understood their answers would be used in a published thesis. I again stated the discussion goal of my thesis project to the participants at the start of the interview. No parents contacted me for clarification about the project and the child participants seem unfazed by my intentions. The children were more interested in clarifying what creepypastas and urban legends were as the terminology was not used among them (“pasta that’s creepy?” was the suggestion Dan made when I asked the group if they knew the term).

At the start of the interview I gave a general introduction of my expectations of the discussion and outlined the protocols of talking in a group. This included making sure the participants were weary of not talking over one another and did not judge other participants’ answers. I also clarified that this was not a formal interview and that they had the right to refrain from the discussion even if their parents had urged them to come. This introduction was “in order

to put the child at ease and make clear there were no right or wrong answers” even when discussing topics their guardians could possibly disapprove of (Azevedo, et al. 2010, 15). It was also made clear that the interview was going to be audio recorded for the sake of my transcribing purposes, this was also stated in the consent form given to their guardians.

In regards to the benefits of participation for the children, Pippi organised that partaking in the interviews would go towards receiving their Urban History badge. I also brought along grapes and pretzels for us to eat during the discussion as both a token gesture and to help establish an informal atmosphere. Pippi sat in on both discussion groups to moderate the situation and ensure I was not making the children uncomfortable, and that none of them broke the scout rules. None of the parents were present at the interview nor requested to be. This is for the best as the present of a parent “can impede the child from sharing what she is genuinely feeling due to the pressure of the guardian” (Azevedo, et al. 2010, 17). One participant even requested I not share some of the information they gave with their mother, as she would disapprove. Pippi fulfilled the role of a guardian figure who can give reassurance, while also not holding children to the same expectations of their actual guardians.

### **Online Surveys**

Surveys was my initial method of collecting data from the two age groups. The goal was to present two surveys with general questions about participant knowledge urban legends and creepypastas in relation to how this information was disseminated. The child and young adult surveys were nearly identical, with the difference being the child had to confirm adult consent in the survey as well as through a written consent form. If they had parental consent, they would be then asked questions about which urban legends they had heard of, and if they shared these stories with their friends or online in any way. The young adult survey was virtually identical, with the difference being the addition of “before the age of sixteen” to questions about their remembrance of childhood knowledge. The goal was to have these two surveys give me an initial understanding of what current young adults children know about urban legends and how they interact with them. I wanted to use this information to inform how I managed the group discussions later on and help angle my research, in case I was making incorrect assumptions about how urban legends are engaged with then and now.

Although the young adult survey was quite successful with 174 responses, I learned that the child survey was not going to work despite my efforts. The issue was that although the survey was anonymous, I still needed guardian consent for the sea scouts. This means that I could

not send the surveys directly to the child participants. Instead, I had to create consent forms for their guardians to read and then return to the scout leader, who in turn would provide them with the link for the survey. In my perspective this was excessive effort for a less than ten-minute survey, but it showed me the delicacy of dealing with child participants. The scout leader only got two consent forms back, but only one participant made it to the stage of filling out the form. It became clear that with this process I would receive very few responses, especially in comparison to the young adult survey so comparing the data would be futile.

The young adult survey, however, was quite useful in terms of data. I requested a student-targeted Facebook page called ‘Wholesome Memes for Happy Victoria University Teens’ post a link to the survey, along with posting it myself to the Vic Deals: a Facebook group designed for Victoria University of Wellington students to share and sell items or offers. This allowed me to target the desired age bracket of people aged between twenty and twenty-five-years-old who reside predominantly in Wellington. The goal of the survey was not only to learn how young adults recalled urban legends, but also to see if my own experiences with urban legends such as Click Click Slide were isolated or not. Prior to the survey I knew friends who recalled Click Click Slide and other legends such as Drip Drip, but I could not infer how widespread this knowledge was beyond my social group until I learned that over half of those who took the survey recalled Click Click Slide—demonstrating I was dealing with much a larger scale urban legend than just my social group.

One oversight made with the young adult survey was the lack of gender options for participants to choose from. I had ‘boy’, ‘girl’, ‘genderfluid’, and ‘I’d prefer not to say in addition to an ‘other’ option for participants to write in their specified gender pronoun. Of course, one participant used the ‘other’ box to make a joke, giving themselves the gender of ‘mad lad’, but this did not detract from the overall data. What was missed, however, was a default ‘non-binary’ option, as three participants used the ‘other’ option to write-in. The ‘other’ box did allow for non-binary folk to identify themselves correctly, but because it was not already a pre-listed option I did “further marginalize non-normative gender identities” (Zimmerman and Herridge 2019, 230). So, although I acknowledge this was an oversight on my part, it was not a total, restrictive exclusion of gender diverse people. It was for this same reason I made the decision that my survey would not have ‘male’, ‘female’ and ‘intersex’ as the only options as “this is misleading because the construct of gender and identity is distinct from the biological binary of male and female” and would exclude participants from

accurately representing their gender (Zimmerman and Herridge, 230). In the surveys I also made the decision to not have transgender distinct options such as ‘girl: male-to-female’ or ‘boy: female-to-male’ or any differentiation between cisgender and transgender. Although my data does not show how many transgender individuals took part in the survey, making a specific option would exclude transgender people from being classified as the normative ‘boy’ and ‘girl’ and single them out unnecessarily. The gendering of participants is only small part of my overall research, but it was crucial I made this survey as inclusive as possible in all regards which is why such decisions about gender options had to be considered carefully. Maintaining this gender diversity inclusion was a continuous process even after the survey ended. However, because it was an anonymous survey, I could not confer with the survey participants themselves. To ensure I was using the correct language for discussing gender diversity, I consulted two friends—one transgender and the other non-binary—to assist me in writing, including discussing the use of the word ‘folk’ and the inclusion of ‘cisgender’ and ‘transgender’.

## **Interviews**

Prior to the group discussions, I conducted one messaging-based interview on DeviantArt with user *sesseur*—aka Jeff Case — who is credited with creating the creepypasta character Jeff the Killer. As Jeff lives in the USA it would be impossible have him join the group discussions or be interviewed in person, so instead I prepared an initial list of fourteen questions for him to answer at his leisure. After completing the group discussions and coding the themes I realised I had a follow-up question for Jeff, and sent him another message asking for additional information to which he promptly responded. We had regular correspondence throughout the writing process, with me informing him of my progress and letting him know when I hoped to send him a copy to review.

Group discussions was my primary method of data collection. The setup involved between four and six participants in the boathouse (children) or The Aroma café (young adults) with casual snacks provided and my phone—the tape recorder—sitting in the centre of the discussion. I interviewed a total of nine children and ten young adults in a total of four interview groups. I tried to be conscious of the fact that participants might be hyperaware or uncomfortable with the tape recorder even if they consented to it being used (Tolich 1999, 120), but this did not come up as an apparent problem and none of the participants acted particularly aware of the recorder, except in one situation where I balanced the phone on a



glass of water with Mikayla commenting “dude, that’s ballsy”, but no other remark was made about the phone recording. I was also aware that participants may feel initially shy or uncomfortable in an interview setting, but the goal of having these discussions in a familiar, casual setting was to ensure they felt in their element. A one-on-one interview might make participants feel under pressure to speak, and make the power dynamics of interviewer and interviewee more obvious, but doing interviews in a group allows people to “‘bounce’ ideas and experiences off one another” (Tolich 1999, 121) with a natural flow to the conversation.

The benefit of hosting group discussions instead of one-on-one was the emulation of how folk groups would traditionally work when unobserved. Folk groups spawn at random when there is “a group of people, often closely related by occupation or family ties, who have for various reasons developed a particular shared mood” (Toelken 1996, 55). The difficulty with the spontaneity of folk groups is that this makes them difficult to observe. Instead, the creation of my own groups with the intent of discussing horror narratives was the most efficient way to imitate discussions and story-sharing that happens at random in different environments. Sutton-Smith advises that “folk groups should be small enough that each member has, or could have, face-to-face interaction with every other member” (Sutton-Smith 1999, 8) which was the case with my group interviews; even when participants were positioned in a circular formation so everyone faced one another. This allowed everyone to be in an equal position to speak and hear when anybody else was talking.

### **Interview Coding**

The word count of the transcribed interviews totalled 21,922. The shorter ones were the child interviews at approximately three-thousand words and 3,800 words. The young adult interviews were longer approximately 5,500 words and the longest being 9,800 words. The children interviews were the shortest because there was a time constraint of twenty minutes per discussion, while the young adult ones were free-flowing. The longest interview was in-part due to the fact that this was the largest group of participants at six (although one participant joined later).

The interviews were transcribed almost verbatim, with main alteration being the exclusion of redundant ‘ums’ and ‘uhs’ that interrupted the flow of dialogue. I also took out the parts of the interview that were not relevant to the conversation, such as discussions about ordering food or the final parts of the interview where we said our goodbyes (Tolich 1999, 123). I also recorded down group reactions to show moments of shared jeering, laughter, or fear, such as

when a joke was told or a familiar story was mentioned. There were some parts where I kept in speech ticks such as the case of Rowan, who frequently began his sentences with “yeah,” or Madeline who used the word “like” quite frequently. New Zealand sociologists Martin Tolich and Carl Davidson suggest that fieldworkers should “transcribe not only the person’s words, but how they say them... If you go to great lengths to capture the person’s meaning, how they say something may be important too” including the pauses, laughter, and ‘ums’, and ‘ers’ in their speech (Tolich 1999, 123). I took some influence Tolich and Davidson by including some of the language ticks participants demonstrates as well as noting laughter moments. However, I did not transcribe verbatim with the ‘ums’ and ‘ers’ that often interject into how people speak, as well as sometimes editing sentences to make more sense once in written form.

To find the middle ground of verbatim and fictionalising, I took influence from Laurence Ralph and his dilemma of using Ebonics—African American colloquial language. Although he wanted to accurately represent how the informants spoke, the informants themselves wanted him to alter their dialogue into ‘proper’ English. One participant saw his African American Vernacular English (AAVE) transcription of their interview and chided him about “you’re supposed to be an educated boy” despite the fact he had written verbatim what she had said. “I addressed Mrs. Pearl’s concerns and standardized her voice” without giving up the language features of Ebonics by refraining from “getting creative with my spelling of urban colloquialisms” (Ralph 2014, xix). I had to make similar considerations and followed in Ralph’s footsteps of finding a middle ground, maintaining some of the language ticks such as ‘like’ and ‘yeah’, but not to the point where they interrupted the flow of dialogue or made the participant look particularly unconfident. I also found upon review that I also use the word “like” quite frequently in conversation, but it is important for me to keep that in to show how I presented myself in interviews—very casual and conversational.

## **Conclusion**

The most important thing about choosing methods was deciding what methods would be the best for gathering the information I needed, but also the most suitable for the participants themselves. Reciprocity is part of the ethnographic process where both the researcher and the informants gain new knowledge and feel the information they provided will be treated with respect. This is why the group interviews worked well as the horror narratives were shared between myself and a participant, but also participants were able to discuss these horror

narratives with the others at the discussion. Such dynamics allowed me to learn a variety of urban legends and engagement types from participants, but they were also able to pool their knowledge together and learn new things about the collective childhood, whether present or the nostalgia of childhoods in the 2000s. The method of group discussion also assisted in alleviating the tension of researcher authority that one-on-one interviews can have when a single participant is more in the spotlight and all questions are singled on them. In the case of group discussions, people could contribute at their own leisure rather than feel the pressure to constantly talk.

The question remains: did my chosen methods allow me to get the information I needed for this project? The use of group discussions was beneficial because interviewing the two separate age groups worked in tandem with the comparative elements of my project. Talking with the two age groups allowed me to gain a good understanding of the evolution of horror narratives within the past decade, including the rise of creepypastas. However, talking with child participants with the retrospective of the young adult participants also allowed me to see what similarities and traditions were still intact from my own childhood, including the fact that oral tradition for horror narratives still existed rather than being eliminated by digital creepypastas as was my initial suspicion.

The overall process of deciding methods and working with participants also allowed me to understand my own biases and positionality in this project. This includes examining why I desired to do this project in the first place: why is my project about horror narratives shared among children? Well, because I am a horror fan myself. The project is set in Wellington because I am a Wellingtonian and one of the groups was young adults between twenty and twenty-five-years-old because this is my personal age range. These are all very egocentric aspects of my project driven by my own interests and assumptions. What has been very personally enjoyable about this project to see my own assumptions about others' knowledge of horror narratives challenged and reformulated with the new knowledge the participants gave me. By the same token I believe this project is fascinating for others who want to understand how contemporary children engage with and share horror narratives and, like me, may have their expectations challenged.

## CHAPTER TWO: HORROR NARRATIVES

### Children's Engagement on a Personal Level

I met up with a friend from primary school. I have not spoken with her in a long time, but recently reconnected. A wave of memories washed over me, seeing her again with “you remember that time...?” being a frequent phrase. There was a sinking feeling in my stomach just before she arrived. Will we still get along? How awkward is it going to be? When you have not seen somebody in over a decade you have a certain image stuck in your brain, and it is quite weird to see them in a whole new light with all these years of reflection behind you. We were both different people back then, and much of who we are remains, but we have grown up and lead different lives. Luckily, our catch-up was very fun. We may not remain as close as we used to be, but I certainly plan on seeing her again in the near future.

I am not actually talking about a real person. This is how it felt to reconnect with the legend of Click Click Slide: the mythical monster with long nails and no legs who dragged herself around with the ‘click, click, slide’ sound. She spread like a wildfire across Clyde Quay School in the early 2000s when I was still quite new to New Zealand. When talking about her I realise the language I use is almost as if I am talking about a friend of mine. It is similar to how I discuss Slenderman now. I refer to the monsters as ‘she’ and ‘he’ and humanise them instead of calling them ‘it’ despite their inhuman natures.

Urban legends are often associated with their dissemination in “the course of casual conversations and in such special situations as camp-fires, slumber parties, and college dormitory bull sessions” (Brunvand 2003, 4). However, the first step in the process of engagement with horror narratives for children is the personal reaction. How these stories are experienced and internalised by an individual child varies. We have to ask children how they find these stories outside of the ‘campfire’ context, how they feel about these stories when they are alone, and how they internalise their repertoire of stories. In this chapter I will examine children's personalised engagement with horror narratives in relation to how these stories are experienced on an individual level. I will also explore the child's process of story collecting in preparation for the horror narratives as a social experience. I will also take a look at the more modern phenomena of ‘Mary Sues’ in creepypastas: where young people insert a fictionalised version of themselves into these mythoi to engage with these horror monsters and control the narrative.

In this chapter I work to define my term horror narratives: a term I am using describe the cross-media genre ranging from urban legends to YouTube videos. There is also a focus on which types of horror narratives children engage with in particular today, and to comparing these with what children engaged with in my childhood. Part of this analysis is examining how children engage with horror narratives as an individual experience, as well as how horror narratives are disseminated in a group dynamic. I also address the significance of developing a horror repertoire, building their ‘stock’ from both friends and internet sources.

### **What are Horror Narratives?**

In the middle of this project I realised that the term urban legend was not a broad enough label for what I was talking about. “Urban legends are fluid, and tellers adapt them to reflect their own era and preferences as well as their fears or prejudices” (Craughwell 1999, 12) and are usually associated with the speaker telling how they heard the story from ‘a friend of a friend’ or some distant connection that still keeps it local. As a friend of mine stated: “saying someone told you that story is perfectly legitimate when it comes to urban legends.” Evidence of the story is not necessary providing it seems like it could be true. Urban legends do range from humorous anecdotes to full-blown horror, so for this project I am only discussing the horror-themed urban legends “These types of tales seem to be common to tellers of a very young or very immature age group; they are bogeyman stories. They seem to lack any point beyond their ability to give you a shiver” (Pollock 1999, 13). The horror genre is most suitable for the urban legends discussed in the group discussions such as “Humans can lick hands, too” or whatever nursery rhyme-esque tale Izabel and Madeline were trying to chant with ‘Lollipop Man’.

However, the term urban legend is not as suitable for creepypastas and their close associate: indie horror games. The term creepypasta is a combination of ‘creepy’ and ‘cospypasta’ “which in turn derives from the phrase copy/paste, serving as shorthand for any block of text that is repeatedly copied and pasted to various online forums” (Blank and McNeill 2018, 6). This is similar to how urban legends are heard and retold orally, but creepypastas are digitally-spread across forums and online videos with titles like “Top 10 FREAKIEST CREEPYPASTAS Ever Told” or “5 Seriously Scary Stories That Will Give You Nightmares — Creepypasta Horror Story Compilation” or any other attention-grabbing title. So, urban legends do seem to have a connection in terms of broad dissemination, but through different media. However, Slenderman—arguably one of the most famous creepypastas—does throw a

ringer into this easy connecting of urban legends and creepypastas. He certainly spread both digitally and orally, especially after the Slender Man Stabbings in 2014<sup>2</sup>, but his mythos does not line-up with the standards for an urban legend. Brunvand defines urban legends as a “subclass of folk narratives, legends, that—unlike fairy tales—are believed, or at least believable, and that—unlike myths—are set in the recent past and involve normal human beings rather than ancient gods or demigods” (Brunvand 2003, 3). Urban legends balance between believability and fiction, but are often presented as fact through word-of-mouth, and even reported local news outlets (Brunvand 2003, 153). Slenderman is ‘masquerading’ as an urban legend, his original conception had no actual rooting in folklore or a deeper legend. All the stories about Slenderman—from his secret mansion in the woods to all his proxies—came later as people contributed to the mythos with the knowledge it was all fake. “They know that Slender Man is a fiction, but winkingly create media that pretend otherwise” (J. A. Tolbert 2015, 102-103). That is why the lore surrounding Slenderman is often referred to as the ‘mythos’ rather than as ‘legends.’ Slenderman acts more as creative open-source project for the digital community rather than having an actual cult of believers, despite the moral panic surrounding the two girls who claimed to think he was real (Mar 2017).

And then there is the video games. *Slender: The Eight Pages* is an independent free-to-play horror game inspired by the Slenderman mythos. *Slender: The Eight Pages* was created by independent developer Mark J. Hadley, under the name Parsec Productions (DeBord 2013). The premise of the game is quite simple: collect all eight pages in the mysterious woods before Slenderman gets you. “This game and its sequel, *Slender: The Arrival*, were and continue to be popular subjects for reaction and Let’s Play videos<sup>3</sup>, highlighting that the appeal goes beyond the experience of first-person play and extends into a shared sense of mutual tension and release” (Blank and McNeill, 5-6). The *Slender* videogames not only contributed to the creepypasta community, but also introduced a whole new audience to the Slenderman: The Let’s Play community. Even if you had never read any of the Slenderman lore or creepypastas—like me—he became a pop culture figure when the games gained traction for playthroughs on YouTube, aiding the popularity of YouTubers such as Markiplier, Achievement Hunter, and, unfortunately, Pewdiepie, who had his *Slender: The Eight Pages* playthrough be one of his first major hits (Pewdiepie 2017). Slenderman was not

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<sup>2</sup> In 2014, two twelve-year-old girls lured their friend, Anissa Weier, into the woods and stabbed her nineteen times. They later claimed they were trying to appease Slenderman (The Guardian 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Let’s Plays: where internet personalities release videos of themselves playing various video games with live commentary. Predominantly released on *YouTube* and streamed live on *Twitch*.

the only creepypasta to get an indie video game. The SCP website<sup>4</sup>—known for creating an expansive mythos for a fictional Men in Black-esque organisation that contains monsters and anomalies—has the game *SCP: Containment Breach*. Even lesser-known creepypastas such as The Theater—in which the narrator recalls an unsettling CD-ROM game they played as a child (Anonymous, The Theater 2010)—has two different independently-made video game adaptations. And, with the recent Momo Challenge Hoax, the eponymous monster has received her own fan-made video game (Caffeine 2018).

There is a substantial connection between creepypastas and video games developed independently by passionate creators from the community—but this connection between video games does not extend to urban legends. There are no Click Click Slide, Phantom Hitchhiker, or Hook Hand games getting played by YouTubers. And this is where creepypastas diverge majorly from urban legends: their transmedia nature. Narratives and concepts that extend beyond just traditional storytelling, whether it be oral storytelling or written literature, “the modern narrative property cannot exist in one form alone” (Dowd, et al. 2013, xiii) and is instead interconnected with a greater media landscape. Slenderman has creepypastas, images, video games, a YouTube series, and a terrible movie sitting at a truly terrifying seven percent on *Rotten Tomatoes* (2018). This was the challenge of trying to define my project when I realised it was getting far bigger than urban legends. Creepypastas are undoubtedly related to urban legends as the “folk literature of the web” (Cooley and Milligan, Haunted objects, networked subjects: The nightmarish nostalgia of creepypasta 2018, 195), but then there is a greater leap between the transmedia nature of creepypasta development and the more stagnant nature oral storytelling of urban legends.

It is for this reason I have decided to define the content in this project as ‘horror narratives’: an overall embodiment of the folktales, urban legends, and creepypastas that were designed to inspire fear. Not all urban legends and folktales are horror-themed. While the Hook Hand and Bloody Mary are urban legends, so are stories such as the man who walked into his own surprises party naked (Craughwell 1999, 98) or Neil Armstrong saying “good luck, Mr Gorsky” on the Moon (Pollock 1999). I am talking about a very particular subset: urban legends that focus on horror and the supernatural. However, all creepypastas have an element of horror given they are already the ‘creepy’ subgenre of cospypastas. The idea of horror

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<sup>4</sup> SCP Foundation is a wiki dedicated to fictional articles about anomalous monsters and objects. See: [scp.wiki.net](http://scp.wiki.net)

narratives can also be related to how folk narratives are approached in which “the student of folklore observes folktales mainly shaped and carried by different groups of people” (Dégh, 1 Folk Narrative 1972, 53). This is the same concept I am observing for horror narratives which contain many elements of folklore. However, ‘folk horror’ is also a concept that exists—mainly in cinema—with films like *The Wicker Man* (1973) and “British films of the late 1960s and ‘70s that have rural, earthy association to ancient European pagan and witchcraft traditions or folklore” (Paciorek 2018). Newer examples of folk horror would include *The Witch* (2015) and *Midsommar* (2019). So, unfortunately the term ‘folk horror’ is already in use and its applied meaning is not representative of my project. The specificity of my project is the aspect of horror involved, so using the word ‘narratives’ instead of ‘tales’ or ‘stories’ is intentional as it allows me to incorporate the transmedia aspects of modern folk horror.

So, what are horror narratives? In the context of this project horror narratives are stories and concepts with horror elements that are disseminated through multi-media story-sharing modes. Horror narratives embodies oral storytelling, forum discussions, dedicated wikis and websites, independently made video games, YouTube videos, fan art, fanfiction, and any media related to these folk-esque urban legends and creepypastas. The multi-media and transmedia nature of these horror narratives is important to acknowledge because, in the modern digital era, this allows children a variety of ways to engage with contemporary legend content and create a personalised experience.

### **What Kind of Horror Narratives do Children Engage With?**

As suggested by Brunvand, children’s engagement with urban legends begins with the transformative process when they start to “reject the overdramatic and juvenile “scaries” and adopt a new lore of more plausible tales with realistic settings” (2003, 47). During this time children start losing interest in more fantastical fairy tales that take place in the distant past or fantasy lands. Freudian psychologist Bruno Bettelheim sees the use of fairy tales in early childhood as fascinating to children because “the unrealistic nature of these tales is an important device, because it makes obvious that the fairy tales’ concern is not useful information about the external world” and instead “the fairy tale reassures, gives hope to the future, and holds out the promise of a happy ending” (1978, 25-26). Reassuring, formulaic fairy tales become less relevant as a child grows and life becomes more complicated—the world starts getting a lot bigger and much darker. ‘Eco-anxiety’ is the new term psychologists are using as children feel disarrayed and depressed about climate change (Elks 2019). To



summarise: growing up is scary, especially when it feels like the world is falling apart. Fairy tales become less relatable and kids start craving a good hit of controlled fear, but from a safe distance learning of the horrors that happened to others: *schadenfreude*.

So, there is an additional element to the question: what kind of horror narratives do children engage with *and* have they changed over the past two decades? The horror narratives shared in my childhood in the 2000s are not identical to what is being shared among modern children. “It is just as likely that the item of folklore will perish, either through neglect or through transformational processes” (McDowell 1999, 61) including societal and digital shifts that alter the relevancy of certain urban legends. For a broader example, Brunvand says that many urban legends surrounding cars are popular among young people because “access to a car allows youngsters to separate themselves from family, home” (2003, 19) and to become independent. Of course, the age group I am discussing is not old enough to drive quite yet, but the mindset for children in the US is as *soon* as I can drive and as *soon* as I can go where I want without my parents at any time. In the US teenagers can have a full licence by age sixteen (Miller 2018) when they still live at home and go to school. The car does not have the same association with independence for New Zealand children because it more closely associated with the adult realm since you can only get a full licence by age eighteen (NZ Transport Agency). Furthermore, less and less young people are learning to drive (Neal 2016). What this reflects is that having a full licence is not aspired to in New Zealand the same way it is in American culture. Therefore, hearing horror tales of what can go wrong on a car ride is not as relatable for New Zealand children. The whole idea of young teens driving to a ‘lover’s lane’ and being attacked by the hook-handed man, or picking up mysterious hitchhikers—popular premises for American urban legends (Brunvand 2003, 19)—is completely disassociated from the New Zealand child’s cultural expectations. Part of my research project was discovering which horror narratives from my own childhood were still in circulation because, like cars, certain things may have become less relevant for the modern New Zealand child with the rise of internet access among other societal shifts.

When I started to formulate this project three urban legends or ‘scaries’—as Brunvand calls child horror narratives—came to mind. The most vivid is Click Click Slide: the story of a woman (although some participants argued they were a man) who loses her legs in a car accident, and drags herself around on long nails, stalking and killing children. Obviously, this is terrifying imagery for a child even if the realism of the story is fallible, which is possibly

why it stuck with many of us so strongly. In the young adult survey over half of the 174 participants remembered hearing about Click Click Slide, making this story the most recalled of the 2000s urban legends. Coming in second was Drip Drip (aka: “Humans can lick hands, too.” see: Figure 2 on the following page) which is a much more famous urban legend across the world. The story elicits the same visceral disgust as Click Click Slide from those who remember it. Both stories are still terrible to think about. When discussing the horror narratives from childhood in the young adult groups, Jarvis—hearing the Click Click Slide and Drip Drip for the first time—found them unnerving even hearing them new as an adult. As Mikayla said in the same discussion, these particular stories are “all kinds of fucked-up” because they are disgusting and horrifying, but in such a way that they almost seem plausible—especially when you are a child.

The third of the ‘scaries’ from that period that I mentioned in the survey and in group discussions was “Johnny, I want my liver back” in which the titular Johnny spends the money his mother gave him for meat on candy, so he goes to the cemetery and digs up a body and takes its liver instead. Then that night he hears the ghostly “Johnny, I want my liver back. I’m coming to get you” echoing through the air, repeatedly saying how close it is getting before eventually killing his family and him. The story is aimed at younger audiences rather than those reaching their teens. ‘The Stolen Liver’ prepares younger children “to handle the concept of “a good scare” before they move on to more serious supernatural narratives they will meet in upper elementary school” (de Vos 1996, 321) such as Click Click Slide or—in the modern era—Slenderman. “Johnny, I want my liver back” is a jump scare story. The narrator usually ends with “Johnny, I want my liver back. I’m under your bed... BOO!” which does not have lingering horror in the same manner as other urban legends I discussed, ones that rely on dread rather than the tension-release system of a jump scare.

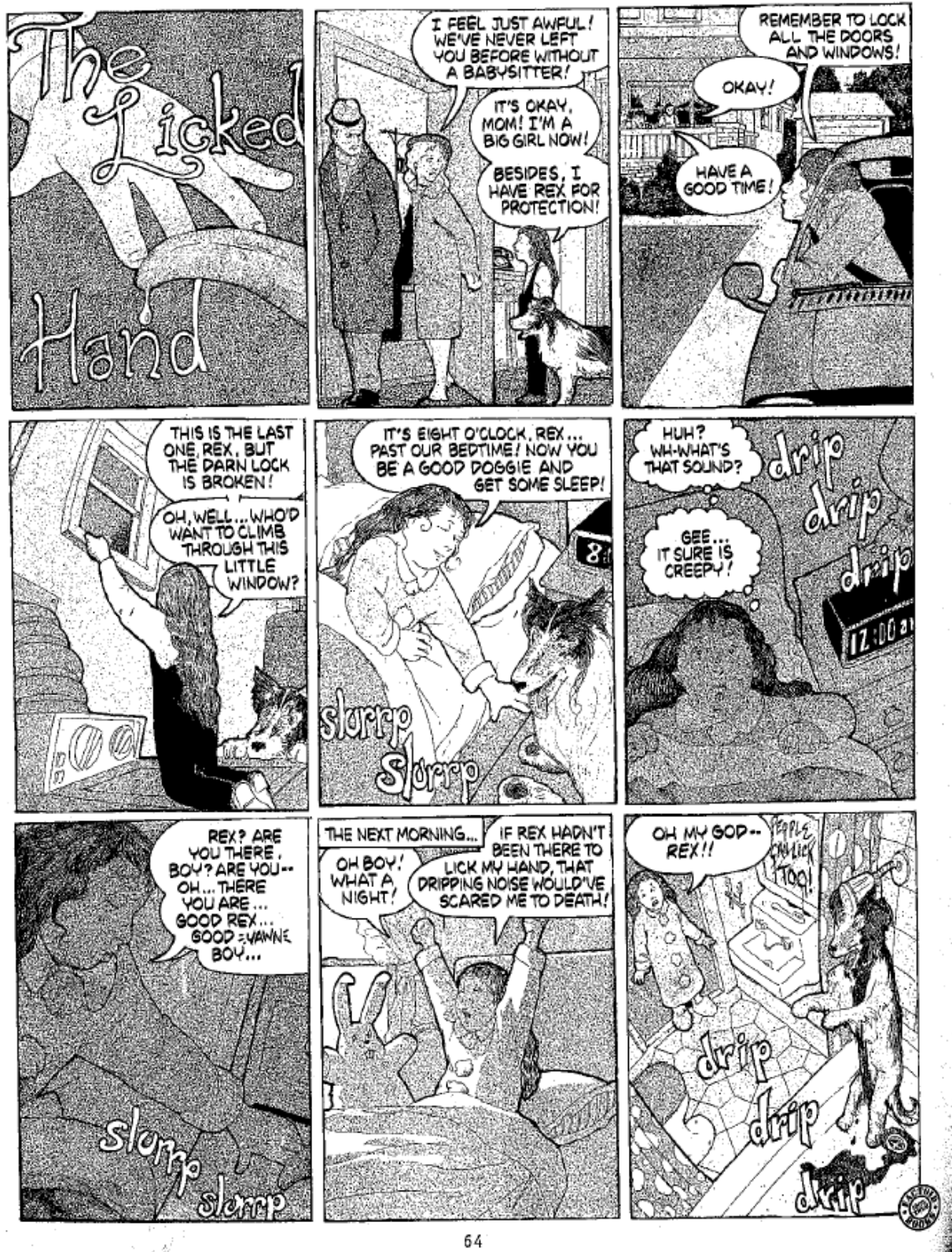


Figure 2 'Drip Drip'. Illustrated by David Chelsea (1994)



In the surveys and group discussions I also brought up another famous creepypasta that was popular around the same time as Slenderman: Jeff the Killer. The story of Jeff—a scarred maniac who stabs people to death—is a little too old for current children to know. The story appeared in my early teens and associated with a particular unnerving image. Just like Slenderman, people may recognise the image without any further context or knowledge of the lore. In my young adult survey, Jeff the Killer was the least well-known, with only just under thirty percent of participants recognising the story. The image was not shown in the survey so it is possible more would have recognised this particular creepypasta even if they did not know it by name.



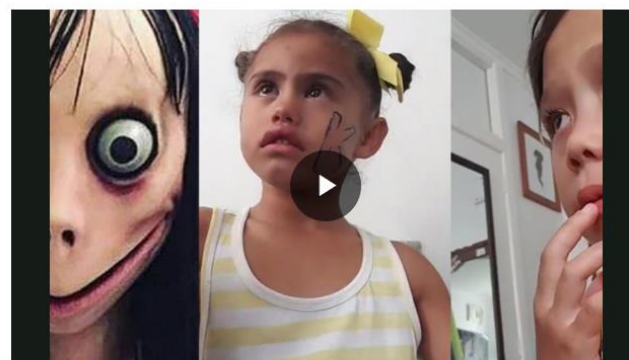
Figure 3 Posted by killerjeff on Newgrounds (2008)

In the group discussions with children I was cautious about discussing Momo and Slenderman. The children themselves may not find these creepypasta figures scary, but the moral panic surrounding both of them had to be acknowledged. It seems children’s knowledge of Momo—the creepy bird-like woman—came predominantly from cautious authority figures as it does from other children. Within the scouts’ group, Madeline had been told to ‘stay away from Momo on the internet’ by her mother while Harry’s whole class was warned about the malicious messages Momo supposedly sent. What seems to be the case with Momo is that, rather than children intentionally engaging with Momo on the internet, we are dealing with more of a Streisand effect. The Streisand effect takes its term from Barbara Streisand and the “quite staggering lack of success Streisand enjoyed in attempting to preserve her privacy by suppressing the image of her home... Thanks to the legal case, however, over 400,000 people visited the site over the following month” (Chatfield 2013, 96). What this means is that in attempting to suppress information, such commotion may

## Parents warned after Momo 'suicide game' said to appear in YouTube Kids videos

28 Feb, 2019 9:22am

© 6 minutes to re



Auckland mother Khamara Ashby was sickened after her children accidentally watched the character Momo - a scary doll's face holding a knife - which interrupts shows and threatens viewers.

Figure 4 Example of the NZ news media response to Momo Challenge hoax (The New Zealand Herald 2019)

actually draw more attention to it. In the case of the Momo Challenge hoax, the media storm about the supposed suicides made concerned parents warn their children about Momo, thus making children aware of her even if they had had no prior knowledge of the story. All the scouts had not learned of Momo prior to adult intervention, thus defeating the purpose of the warning. What it led to was children learning of a taboo topic, and they started to share the forbidden information about Momo among themselves, getting scouts such as Sage and her friends in trouble when they told year fours (ages seven to nine) about the monster. In my own knowledge of the internet, the creepypasta of Momo had been circulating around the internet since late 2018 and was dying off before news outlets picked up on the story in early 2019 and blew it way out of proportion.

The children's horror narratives I am focussing on seem to occupy the transitional period between young children's 'scaries' and the more teen-oriented urban legends. While 'scaries' lack a degree of realism and are more comparable to fairy tales or nursery rhymes, urban legends take a darker, more mature tone that draws adolescents to them. "In the strange no-man's-land of adolescence, between innocence and adulthood, the stories helped him to understand sex, its dangers, taboos and power" among other societal norms (Pollock 1999, 9). Examples of this would be 'The Hook Hand' where a couple goes to make out on lover's lane, only to hear a loud banging sound and find a bloodied hook in the car door. It's got sexual tension and horror in one, just like teen-skewed slasher films. However, the scouts I interviewed—most of whom were eleven years-old—were not old enough to watch slasher films which is why nursery-rhyme style urban legends such as 'Lollipop Man' and the 'Bunkbed Twins'—ones that have a rhythm and repetition rather than a story—were the more popular ones. Of the 2000s urban legends discussed: "Johnny, I want my liver back" would appear to be categorised as a 'scary' rather than an urban legend, while Click Click Slide is the in-between of a ghost story and realistic setting—plausible to a child but the story becomes less believable as you age. "Humans can lick hands, too" is firmly an urban legend as it is grounded in a realistic setting with no supernatural elements. And, as you get older, the idea of a man licking a little girl's hand pretending to be a dog only gets more and more disturbing.

When talking with the scout children, 'Momo' seems to occupy the same liminal space as 'Click Click Slide' did in my generation. A degree of fantastical is added to the monster based on their deformities. For Click Click Slide it is her long, sharp nails and lack of legs,

and for Momo it is her giant eyes and unnatural stretched smile (and, if you've seen the full image, you know she has a bird body). Both target children in particular which is why they are especially terrifying when you are young. 'Bunkbed Twins' and 'Lollipop Man' seem to fall into the same category as "Johnny, I want my liver back" as lyrical ghost stories that lack realism, but prepare children for "a good scare" (de Vos, "The Stolen Liver" 1996, 321).

### **How do Children Engage Individually with Horror Narratives?**

In chapter three I will explore how children engage with horror narratives on a communal level, but initially it is important to understand the personal experience of horror narratives in the midst of the story-sharing process. How do children feel about these stories when they are alone? What internal fantasies do we create for ourselves with these horror narratives? In this section I will be examining both the fear and reverence that are associated with horror narratives and the creation of individual ritual for children. I will also examine the development of personalising the story to suit one's own desires: the development from a horror narrative into a fandom.

In my own memories of childhood, I recall vivid fears at night of Click Click Slide and, later on in life, Slenderman. I would be scared of any unfamiliar tapping sounds in the dark—thinking it was the sharp nails of the monster. Of course, this is not something I would have told anybody else at the time. This was a personal fear that I would not share with anyone in case I was mocked for being scared of a ghost story. But, as I have learned from the young interviews, these horror narratives creep back to us when we are alone in the dark. For my friend Sophia: she did not put her hands outside the bed because of Drip Drip "even though there's no gap under my bed." The bedtime habits relating to engagement with horror narratives is part of the internal process for children. These stories return to active memory in the darkness when the rest of your family is sleeping and you are all alone. Ruby, in the same group discussion, recalls 'psyching herself out': "I decided that pirates were gonna come chop my ears off unless I didn't cover my ears with my hair" which she continues to do even to this day. I failed to mention to Ruby that in my childhood I also had a fear that pirates were coming to get me, but this was inspired by my fear of the skeleton pirates in *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003) which was released at that time. In the same manner as Ruby, Sophia still does not put her hand out from underneath the covers. It is interesting to see these rituals surrounding urban legends at night-time and how these superstitions follow us into adulthood. For my friends, who are all secular, the role of fears of urban legends may fill the

role of ‘procedural bias’ when it comes to fear of the dark. Procedural bias in religious ritual is when “the doctrine becomes explanatory of the ritualized behaviour” children are indoctrinated into in childhood “which earlier had no particular meaning beyond performance” (Toren 2004, 229). In anthropology, ritualised behaviour is when there is perception that actions have a deeper symbolic meaning. “Young children take ritualised behaviour for granted as part of the day-to-day material reality of their existence” (Toren 1999, 87) before they learn to understand the meaning behind the actions. My friends may not be able to justify their fears what is under the bed or in the dark with rational thought, but the Drip Drip of the man licking the little girl’s hand from underneath the bed justifies the actions of keeping all limbs on the mattress. Correlating fear of the dark with fear of horror narratives helps to bridge the gap for children in expressing “otherwise intangible truths” (Toren 1999, 87) of their behaviour.

Similar to Sophia and Ruby’s practices surrounding sleep, Ashleigh follows a similar ritual to this day of avoiding mirrors at night because of Bloody Mary. “I don’t have a mirror in my bedroom for that reason. I don’t want her to be in my room.” In the young adult survey, twenty-nine participants wrote-in Bloody Mary as a legend they recalled from childhood. Bloody Mary, as an urban legend, requires a ritual by participants in order to be ‘summoned’. The regular version is saying her name three times in front of the mirror will summon her image. “Isn’t there a thing where if you say it thirteen times... Bloody Mary will attack you or something?” suggested Ben in the scouts group discussions. Superstitions and ritualistic behaviour surrounding mirrors can be found in broader culture references. In Judaism during the period of mourning (shiva) mirrors are covered because “mourners need special protection from demons, which are more likely to be glimpsed in the mirror” during this particularly vulnerable period for a family (Paul 2018). At the same time, the mirrors are also covered to ensure mourners are not distracted by temptation of examining their own appearance (Schlueter 2017). Alan Dundes suggests the reason for Bloody Mary being popular among Catholic girls is the paradox of sin girls experience in the Catholic faith during puberty. Girls who spend too much time in front of the mirror are perceived as vain, while girls in this pubescent stage feel guilt and fear over the changes going on in their bodies that make them sexual beings. “The Bloody Mary figure might be justified so to speak in attacking prepubescent girls, some reports suggest that it might be a punishment for sins, real or imaginary” (Dundes 1998, 128). Dundes also relates the blood of ‘Bloody Mary’ to menstrual blood, suggesting the figure in the mirror reflects a feeling of internal monstrosity

as the body changes. “The image is in some sense a self-image” that reflects pubescent anxieties (Dundes 1998, 128). Children in Wellington experience a relatively secular culture, and all participants in the young adult group discussions identified as secular or non-religious. Despite this, the ingrained broader cultural influences of mirrors and horror may impact even secular children’s engagement with the Bloody Mary legend. Going with Durkheim’s idea of ritual in collective consciousness in which “collective representations are enabled to persist with some measure of authority in the minds of individuals” (Greenwald 1973, 166), we see that Bloody Mary is tied a sinful ritual of mirror-gazing—vanity, and her appearance can be perceived as punishment for pubescent girls who start to see their body changing in front of the mirror. Such interpretation may not be conscious in the minds of all children who ‘summon’ Bloody Mary, but even unintentionally the roots of Bloody Mary are still connected to greater societal anxieties surrounding girls’ sexualities.

By conducting and analysing the scout discussions I was able to gain some insight into contemporary children’s own ritualised behaviour and how they cope with fears of horror narratives when they are alone at night. One participant, who did not want to be identified, confessed to me that they stay up some nights past their bedtime and watch YouTuber Reaction Time read scary text chats. I had never heard of Reaction Time, but looking up this channel’s name on YouTube search brings up the suggestions of ‘scary text’, ‘scary videos’, and ‘creepy text’ as he has done multiple videos about these “creepy-as texts, like last moment texts people have ever sent”. In the same manner as urban legends, the veracity of these texts is questionable, but my participant certainly believed they were real. Reaction Time even put “The Scariest Text Chat History (Based On A True Story)” (2018) as a title for a video with over five million views. Another participant also mentioned that they used to watch similar videos, but stopped out of ‘boredom’... Perhaps watching too many videos from Reaction Time in a row starts to reveal the flaws. I would suggest watching these Reaction Time videos alone at night with the knowledge they might freak you out is similar to how Ruby scared herself with the thought of pirates: semi-intentionally ‘psyching yourself out’ at bedtime. Both circumstances contain “elements of primeval fears – fears older than humanity – doubtless enter into the child-terror of darkness” (Hearn 2019). The difference is that during Ruby and my childhood watching videos in bed was much more difficult: portable devices were not widespread yet. I fully believe that if I would have had a device with internet access when I was a child, I would have looked up Click Click Slide and gone down the rabbit hole of child-safe horror lore. I say ‘child-safe’ because the Reaction Time



YouTube Channel, with over fourteen million subscribers, is clearly targeted towards a younger audience. There is no profanity and the humour is edgy for teens, but on the tamer side overall.

While fear is the main element in young people's engagement with horror narratives, in the modern period there has been a particular rise to the fandom concept of Mary Sues in fanfiction and fan media. The term 'Mary Sue' was coined by Paula Smith who wrote a parody of bad fanfiction 'A Trekkie's Tale' for a *Star Trek* fanzine in 1973:

I'm very much a pattern seeker, and you could see that every Trek zine at the time had a main story about this adolescent girl who is the youngest yeoman or lieutenant or captain ever in Starfleet. She makes her way onto the *Enterprise* and the entire crew falls in love with her. They then have adventures, but the remarkable thing was that all the adventures circled around this character.

Everybody else in the universe bowed down in front of her. Also, she usually had some unique physical identifier—odd-colored eyes or hair—or else she was half-Vulcan. (Walker 2011)

Despite being a very different genre and medium from *Star Trek*, creepypastas like Jeff the Killer and Slenderman experience similar fan additions as young people insert themselves into these horror narratives. I have not found any Mary Sues versions relating to oral tradition urban legends such as Click Click Slide or Drip Drip, possibly because fandom has a strong digital presence in the manner that orally transmitted urban legends do not. What is interesting is that this way that young people engage with such horror narratives goes against the original idea of these creepypasta monsters. Something like Slenderman—a mysterious child abductor—suddenly becomes a romantic interest or fatherly figure. Jeff the Killer—a psychotic killer without remorse—becomes an angsty teen romantic interest. These 'misunderstood' monsters gain the attention of young people who also feel ostracised or different. The horror narratives become a canvas for young people to paint their own desires onto. As young people continue down the rabbit hole of creepypasta lore "they feel the need periodically to infuse new life into these ideas" (Greenwald 1973, 166) with their own fan additions. The easiest way to join Slenderman's universe is by making a 'proxy' character: someone who commits crimes for Slenderman. Or become Slenderman's long lost daughter who falls in love with a proxy of his. The openness of creepypastas and accessibility for younger audiences allows anyone to engage with lore how they please and tether it to their own fantasies.



Figure 5 Still from YouTube video of 'Slenderman's Daughter (PART 5)' (2019)

When I spoke to Jeff Case—the creator of the Jeff the Killer creepypasta—about the modern state of creepypastas he expressed some dismay: “Creepypasta of today is completely a joke, all these cutesey OP, marysue, anime, romance, fan crap stories that honestly try to pass off as scary is just so painful to even think about.” Jeff feels older creepypastas were more urban legend-esque that were told as realistic stories, rather than more modern fandom additions which focus on the romance or drama aspect. As Jeff Case stated: “And Sadly Jeff [the Killer] was used as a tool for so many fan fictions that go completely against what it was meant to be and represent” as the character becomes less a monster and more an angsty teenager. ‘Lemon’ is the term used by the online community to describe erotic fanfictions, deriving from the Japanese hentai community slang referring to a particularly pornographic series called *Cream Lemon* (TV Tropes). Jeff the Killer is not safe from such interpretations. It is not easy to discern how old the writers of such stories are as we can only work of the cues of the writing styles. Generally, Wattpad fanfictions are written by children and DeviantArt entries are teenagers based on the target demographics for those sites. Fanfiction writing, however, is a very personal experience and many friends I know who wrote fanfiction in the past are now incredibly embarrassed to talk about it now. Sadly, nobody in the group discussions revealed to me they had created self-inserts for creepypasta fanfictions. I, myself would come the closest in this regards. I wrote a Jeff the Killer fanfiction in 2019 from Jeff’s mother’s perspective—and I am not ashamed to say it! Jeff the Killer himself is

an avatar for Jeff Case, whom he created because he loved urban legends himself and “later down the line I decided that I might want to make a story myself that delves into macabre territory.” What creepypasta fandoms have introduced to horror narratives is a broader way to engage with these stories on a personal level. People who enjoy these horror narratives can contribute to the lore and immerse themselves in the world creatively through creating self-inserts to interact with these creepypasta characters.

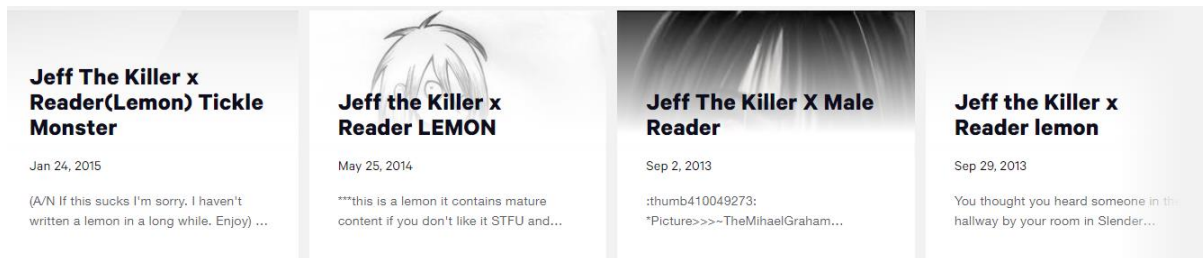


Figure 6 The first journal entry suggestions for Jeff the Killer on DeviantArt

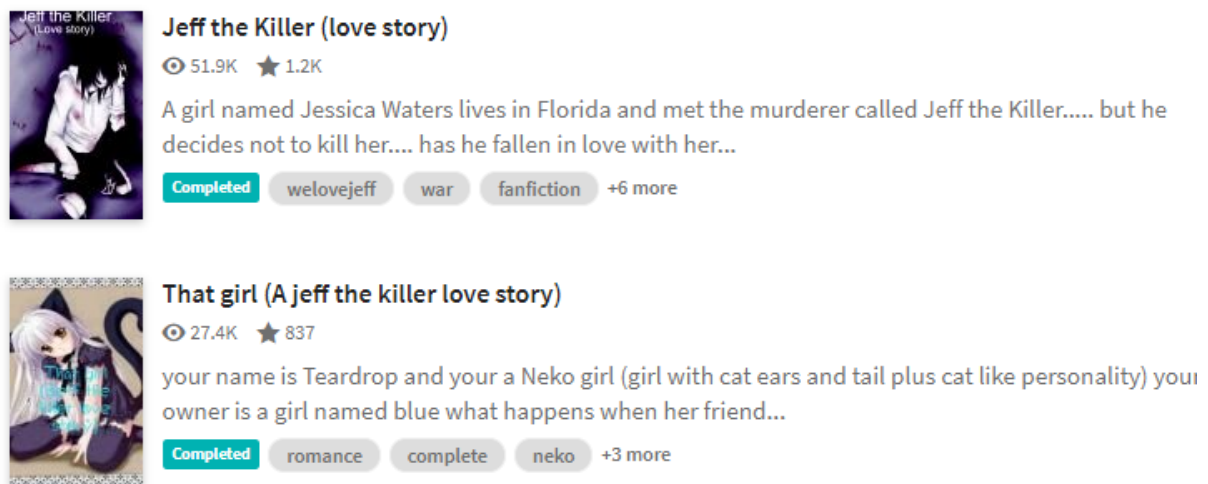


Figure 7 Jeff the Killer search results on Wattpad

What I explored in this section appear to be starkly different ways young people individually engage with horror narratives in contemporary times. There seems to be little connection between ‘freaking yourself out’ at night alone in bed and creating your own character to enter creepypasta lore. However, fear and desire are emotions present in both routes of engagement. You can watch horror videos on YouTube knowing they will scare you, but there is this desire to be afraid or engage with taboo. The creation of fan characters is an extension of this desire. As Mircea Eliade writes: “every man wants to experience certain perilous situations, to confront exceptional ordeals, to make his way into the Other World” (1958, 126). A young person can experience the ‘Other World’ of horror through a literal

screen of protection: a computer or phone screen. Watching horror videos alone allows a child to challenge themselves to experience fear. Children who are anxious about “the prospects of sex, marriage, work, and mortality” can “confront uneasy situations before they happen; they learn by symbol and parable from stories heard from a friend of a friend” (Bronner, 1. An Overview 1988, 33). The creation of Mary Sues is an extension of the desire to enter the realm of horror, even if the final fan product is vastly different from the original creepypasta. Jeff Case later said about fan characters that, despite some disconcertion at the decline in creepypasta quality, “it’s all cute, I’m glad to see kids be motivated and inspired by my work.” I am no different. I was terrified of Click Click Slide when I was young, but in this very project I have come back to her... and tethered her image to my own interpretation. She inspired this whole thesis.

### **How do Children Develop Repertoires?**

In all four group discussions there seemed to be certain stories that participants could produce from memory and recite, with the knowledge that such stories would spur a particular reaction of disgust or shock. I was no different as I recited Click Click Slide to the children who had not heard the story before, and I performed it in a certain manner with sounds and slow pacing to heighten the impact... and Pippi the scout leader told me that later on that week a few of the scouts were telling others the Click Click Slide story just as I had told it. The horror narrative repertoire of a child becomes central to performativity in a group setting. This will be discussed more in-depth in chapter three where I discuss story-sharing among children. In this part I will be focussing on what a horror narrative repertoire is and how young people develop them.

The world repertoire is originally related to music and theatre, with Merriam-Webster defining it as “a list or supply of dramas, operas, pieces, or parts that a company or person is prepared to perform” in the same manner as a setlist for music (Merriam-Webster Inc. n.d.). Folklorists, however, have also adopted the word to refer to “a person’s repertoire, most folklorists imply that repertoire designates the number of examples or items of folklore a person knows” (Georges 1994, 315). In the case of this project, repertoire refers to the ‘stock’ of horror narratives young people collect and retain. Talking with participants, the main ways they discovered new horror narratives was from friends and siblings telling them, or coming across them on the internet in their own time. This was confirmed in the young adult survey where almost ninety percent of the 174 participants saying they heard urban legends from

friends, followed secondly by discovering them on the internet at forty-eight percent. Leading into performativity, there are certain traits and tropes the stories in children's repertoires contain. For the same reason particular urban legends spread successfully; in order for a horror narrative to become part of a child's repertoire it has to be simple to remember and effective. The more complex a story becomes the more difficult it becomes to recite later on in casual conversation, which makes it less likely to be retained for the repertoire. This is possibly why urban legends like Click Click Slide and "Johnny, I want my liver back" are still remembered by young adults—they have strong repetition of the key elements of the story.

Another factor in the development of a child's repertoire is their own creativity and storytelling abilities. In this instance the horror narrative is created by the storyteller themselves rather than adapted from other material. In the young adult discussions, Pippi reminisced about the stories she would make up for her family friends:

**Pippi:** Because, like, over New Years, we would go and camp in the Wairarapa and I was always the oldest kid of, like, twenty kids, so I would get them in tents and be like "guys, did you here this story?" and then I ran out of ones so I made some up.

**Piper:** You made some up?

**Pippi:** Yeah, like "there was a baby in the woods which had 666 on its head. It was born in 2006" and stuff.

This is a prime example of the necessity of expanding a repertoire for group engagement. A child must have a good stash of stories in their mind in order to maintain relevance within a group dynamic. This also ties into performativity of horror narratives in a group dynamic as I will discuss later (see: Chapter Three). New Zealand play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith suggests children's societies "manifesting moments of high fantasy and silly innovation" (Sutton-Smith 1999, 7) which is shown in the case of Pippi and her family friends. The '666 Baby' of Pippi's repertoire spun-off into more absurd stories: "I had, like, a prequel and then I made a sequel when there was a 222 baby and it killed the 666 baby." In this case Pippi was expanding her repertoire through improvised storytelling in order to engage the other children. Because the story of the 666 Baby did well with the younger children she continued to create the narrative even if it began to deviate from the initial horror premise. A memory I have from childhood is a friend telling me their own story revolving around Click Click Slide. She pretended it was a typical urban legend, but I knew she was making it up on the spot as it was a messy, meandering story that lacked fear. Click Click Slide was a pre-existing

story, but like Mary Sues, people can appropriate horror narratives for their own storytelling. Neither the 666 Baby or my friend's variation of Click Click Slide are particularly scary and lack the tension of popular urban legends, but they reflect the importance a child's repertoire development as they infuse their own creativity and storytelling.

It is much more difficult to track how the horror narratives in a child's repertoire change over time. I was not able to conduct this project as a multi study with particular children, checking in every year to see what stories they have. It is difficult to know if the stories I recall now are the same key horror narratives I retained when I was young, and what is absent "because memory plays nostalgic tricks" (Sutton-Smith 1981, 74). Scouts Madeline and Izabel, reciting fragments of 'Lollipop Man' and 'The Bunkbed Twins', reflect how horror narratives can fall out of circulation in a child's repertoire, as these were 'scaries' they had heard years ago. And, just like learning a language, if you do not repeatedly refresh your memory of the repertoire the stories will deteriorate. This was the case with the young adults, who also only remembered bits and fragments of certain horror stories, and had to work with others to remember the story. The phrases "I can't remember any details" or "I don't remember anything about it" came up frequently in both sets of young adult interviews. When I asked Pippi for more details about the 666 Baby, she could not recall anything more: "Look, I was a kid." As with nostalgia, the memories of the horror narratives in an individual's repertoire decrease over time, but certainly the sensations and memories of the experience of engaging with horror narratives remain. What we all agreed on in the young adult groups is that the exact stories may not be remembered, but 'the feeling' of experiencing horror narratives was intact.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I defined the parameters of what constituted a horror narrative and how such narratives are engaged with by children on an individualised level. To summarise: horror narratives encompass horror-themed urban legends, nursery rhymes, folklore, and creepypastas. But a key factor of defining the subject of my project as horror narratives rather than just urban legends is the fact that there is a contemporary transmedia nature to newer horror narratives. Creepypasta lore extends to forum posts, video games, YouTube videos, creepy images, and fan art based on its digital medium, while urban legends are usually tied to a more oral tradition. What is important to note, however, is that the children and young adults in the group discussions and the survey agreed both oral storytelling and digital media

played a part in their engagement with horror narratives. It is not a case of one or the other exclusively.

What I also covered in this chapter was the child's individual experience with horror narratives. This includes how such 'scaries' affect bedtime routines and 'psyching yourself out' when you are alone in the dark—as multiple participants admitted to doing. On the seemingly opposite end of the engagement spectrum we have the Mary Sue phenomenon: self-insertion into horror narratives. Although the term Mary Sue has been around since the seventies, Mary Sues are particularly associated with creepypastas rather than traditional orally spread urban legends. The open source nature of the lore for major creepypastas figures like Slenderman and Jeff the Killer means young adults can tailor these characters to their personal desires and enter the 'other world' by creating an idealised avatar of themselves to interact with these characters.” Whether watching scary YouTube videos in bed or writing a creepypasta fanfiction we can see young people's desire to engage with the world of horror, even if only through a computer screen or through a fictionalised version of oneself. Just like with horror movies, engaging with horror narratives allows children “to take pleasure in the artifice of fright, or at the bravado in subjecting themselves to such a sight” without any real danger (R. C. Solomon 2007, 47).

In this chapter I also discussed how a child develops a horror narrative repertoire. They can gain these new stories from a friend through oral story-sharing, or they can discover these stories by exploring the internet and YouTube channels targeted at creating horror content for children. In the following chapter I will be discussing the importance of developing a repertoire and its relationship to performativity in a group setting. This chapter was about how a child experiences horror narratives when alone, but the story-sharing and performativity of such stories in a group setting is crucial to the social experience of horror narratives.

## CHAPTER THREE: COLLECTIVE STORY-SHARING

### From the Campfire to the Group Chat

I am the bane of my friends on Facebook. In one messenger group I created I have added multiple Facebook profiles with names like ‘Slenderman Park’ and ‘Slenderman Will Getyou’ along with ‘Ticci Toby’ and ‘Jeff Thé Killér’. All of these are Facebook profiles made by fans of these creepypastas who pretend to be such monsters. In the same chat I force my friends to witness bizarre and cringey fan images of such creepypastas. I have also shared readings of the internet meme Man Door Hand Hook Car Door: a corrupted form of the original Hook Hand urban legend in which “the epically bad delivery of a familiar text only serves to reinforce the failure of this as a successful “scary story” in the context of the Internet” (Blank and McNeill 2018, 13). At my age these horror narratives that were once considered scary are now the butt of jokes among friends.

hetaliantimelady:



Figure 8 Tumblr post joking about fanart of Slenderman

Figure 9 Original anonymous post on 4chan

But what is happening here? What is really going on when my friends and I engage with horror narratives in such a critical manner? In this twisted nostalgia, it seems our story-sharing has become a parody of the original ‘campfire tales’ tradition. In a traditional setting, stories of the Hook Hand or even Slenderman are told “in spooky situations, late at night, near a cemetery, out camping” (Brunvand 2003, 9) but the rise of digital media has opened new routes of story-sharing of horror narratives through forums, Facebook messages, and YouTube communities. What must be understood is that ‘spooky situations’ moves beyond a



physical location, and also incites the state of mind a group are in for the process of horror narrative dissemination to begin.

In this chapter I will be exploring how these horror narratives move among groups of children. This includes dissemination through oral tradition of friends telling one another, and newer methods of digital communities' story-sharing through different mediums. I will also examine the importance of performativity within a group story-sharing context and the impact this has on sociality of children and group dynamics.

### **How are Horror Narratives Disseminated?**

Dissemination refers to the circulation and spread of these narratives among different groups. What I have come to learn in my research is that horror narratives spread among children through both oral tradition as well as more modern digital media on devices. To understand how horror narratives move, we must understand *who* is sharing them and who their audience is. To discover the answer to this I examined both the survey responses and talked with children and young adults in the group discussions to gain a better understanding of who was sharing horror narratives and how.

What was discussed among the scout children and the young adults was the huge importance the school setting played in the dispersion of horror narratives. It makes sense as most New Zealand children spend six hours a day, five days a week within schoolgrounds. It is the location where you get to see your friends and be exposed to other children's repertoires of horror narratives. "At recess, after school, and at parties, boys and girls share the stories they have recently learned-often from somewhat older friends or siblings" (Tucker, *Tales and Legends* 1999, 202). In the survey among 174 young adults, most placed the age they first heard urban legends between eight and twelve years-old which places them right in primary school. The survey also showed outstandingly that young adults heard urban legends mostly from friends with eighty-nine percent claiming that to be the case. Talking with my friends, there certainly was an association between spreading urban legends and school. I do not remember who first told me the story of Click Click Slide, but I strongly associate that story with Clyde Quay School. My sister, her friends, and my friends from Clyde Quay School all seem to remember that story being spread around, but none of us can remember who started it. Sophia suggested that at her school "it was like the outspoken kids at school who liked going and being the person sharing new things and like new stories like 'hey, have you heard this?' and, like, tell scary stories." It is possibly a similar case at Clyde Quay School of a

more confident and performative child hearing the story, and then telling a group of friends, who then spread it to others in a web of networking.

With the child scouts—of whom most are still presently in primary school—I found it was a similar situation with dissemination in school grounds. As Sophia suggested, it only takes one or two outspoken children to spread horror narratives across the whole school. Sage admitted she and her friends had looked up the notorious Momo in class, and then one of her friends spread the story to the year fours, and then “we had to get talked-at” by the staff for scaring the younger children. Camp was also mentioned by the scouts and the young adult groups as a central location for the spread of oral horror narratives. Among my friends, we all initially believed camp had a stronger connection to the urban legends we heard, but as the discussion continued we realised it was our own nostalgia at work rather than a reality of our camp experiences:

**Sophia:** I feel like it’s a precedent around camp. Mystical things happen away from school.

**Ashleigh:** It’s the mindset.

**Piper:** There are no adults.

**Sophia:** Anything could happen in the woods.

**Ashleigh:** It’s anarchy. Always.

**Piper:** I don’t remember Click Click Slide being told to me at camp though. It’s very much a Clyde Quay thing.

In this case our memories and associations were being affected by hindsight and traditional stereotypes of what camping was like. As anthropologist Catherine Allerton discusses, it is difficult for anthropologists to reconcile “his or her own – possibly unreliable, possibly romanticized – memories and experiences of being a child” (2016, 1) with the actual experiences of childhood. Pippi, as a former scout and current scout leader, had the most insight of the young adults into the camping experience. Her argument was that horror narratives were much more present at scout camps in her formative years: “everyone was in one tent when no one would give a shit about who was in who’s tent. And then they were telling scary stories.” However, Pippi believes stricter rules about bedtime on camp has led to the decline in current scouts spreading horror narratives among each other. Despite this assumption, I was able to hear from the scouts themselves that horror stories do still get disseminated on camp. Madeline first heard ‘The Bunkbed Twins’ story while in bunkbeds at camp. Cossgrove, where the younger scouts go camping, is a central location for the spread of horror narratives, especially at the bonfire that takes place—which is arguably a very traditional setting for ghost stories to be told. It was important to have this insight from the

scouts because, had I only been talking with adults, I would have assumed horror narratives had ceased to spread at camp in the traditional sense.

The adult retrospective of summer camp fits the closest “the adult’s romantic notion of what child’s folk culture should be” (Mechling 1999, 284). It was interesting to hear how the children also partook in digital routes of horror narrative storytelling. Across New Zealand, up to ninety percent of children between ten and fourteen years-old spend more than two hours ‘screen-staring’ on devices or computers (Stuff.co.nz 2018). School has a strong impact on children congregating and sharing horror narratives because school is a mandatory and ever-present part of children’s day-to-day life, and in the modern period computers and devices are also demonstrated to play a major part in everyday life for children. Many intermediate schools now have a BYOD (bring-your-own device) request on the stationary lists for children to use in class and for homework (Stock 2019). Because of this, it makes sense to expect that children are exposed to and engage with digital dissemination of horror narratives. It was not until my mid-teens that creepypastas like Slenderman and Jeff the Killer broke big on the internet, and personal devices were not something common in my era, so I associate my discovery of digital horror narratives with a different time in my life—teenage years. Because of accessibility to devices in modern times, however, it seems children are able to start engaging with horror narratives online much younger than my previous generation was able to. Sage, who is eleven years-old, said the spread of horror narratives starts with her friends telling her “and then I search it up online.” Ollie’s case was a reverse of this, where his friends would search it up and then tell him because “I don’t really go on the internet or anything.” In this case these children are demonstrating the mixing of oral tradition of how horror narratives spread with digital interfacing. Click Click Slide spread solely through word-of-mouth, and when I was eight or nine years-old ‘searching it up’ or ‘Googling it’ was not a phrase children used or fully understood. In the young adult survey only one participant said they recalled searching up an urban legend once they heard it. But for children today, the process of sharing horror narratives does not follow a single medium. In the same manner traditional oral urban legends have been transcribed and archived online, creepypastas and digital horror lore are taken offline and spread through word-of-mouth in this mixing of dissemination mediums.

The question then becomes what are the results when children ‘search it up’? In the young adult survey, I found twenty-four percent of participants recall reading creepypastas online while fifteen percent watched YouTube videos about them before the ages of sixteen. This is

when I lament that I was not able to create an equally successful children's survey, as comparing the results of a wider group could have given us a stronger idea of how YouTube videos have become central in the spread of horror lore among children. Previously I mentioned the participant who watches horror videos alone intentionally after bedtime, but then there are children like Harry who watch videos about videogames on YouTube "but sometimes ones about videogame creepypastas pop-up" in the suggestions without provocation, which takes can take him down the rabbit hole of horror lore. This is because there are major YouTubers who produce a mixture of genres on their channel. The previously mentioned channel, Reaction Time, mixes 'scary text' videos in with pranks and humour-based content, and YouTubers who play video games may play light-hearted games on one day and play horror games on another. The YouTube algorithm does not distinguish and suggests more Let's Plays by the same channel or similar videos. "The computer algorithm that brings new videos to children can also lead them down a rabbit hole of unintended views" (Gibbs 2019). What this means is that a computer sorting through videos will detect keywords such as 'Pokémon' and 'games' and not distinguish between horror conspiracies and Let's Plays as a human would be able to. Harry, for example, likes Pokémon and watches videos about that franchise, so YouTube suggests a video about Pokémon conspiracy theories or creepypastas. For instance: the Lavender Town Pokémon creepypasta came up "and something about if you went to the right grave there was a super creepy cutscene" as Harry said or scary music that is rumoured (not true) to have made Japanese children go insane and kill themselves (Hernandez 2016). This is a case of accidental dissemination on behalf of YouTube's indifferent algorithms, rather than how children get excited about a scary story and tell other kids at school as is more expected and traditional.

But not all engagement with online horror narratives for children is unintentional. On the internet you can just be a 'lurker' who absorbs all this information passively but does not engage with the digital community, or you can be more active and involved in the community. In the concept of folklore, there is the idea of the 'folk group' which "should be small enough that each member has, or could have, face-to-face interaction with every other member" (Sutton-Smith 1999, 9) and is based around "a particular place, a certain group of people present, an esoteric language being used, an intensely shared culture or tradition, a particular activity taking place, and so on" (Toelken 1996, 56). In the context of children at school, camp, or in scouts it is easier to picture how a folk group looks. It is more difficult to conceptualise how a folk group looks in the digital realm. My discussion of the Facebook

messenger chat at the start of this chapter provides an example of how folk group can translate to a digital medium. The group is small enough that everyone can contribute, even if ‘face-to-face’ contact is not the norm. The discussions are similar to those had in real life, including the horror narrative discussions I had with others in the group discussions. A main factor that alters how people engage in discussions in a digital medium is that some of the communication is done with text, memes, images, videos, GIFs, website links, and other transmedia story-sharing features (Anderson and Chua 2010) as the conversation flows. It is much more difficult to bring out all these different media in a face-to-face conversation as you have to drop out of the oral conversation to go onto your device and search for the relevant media, at which point a quick-moving folk group discussion will have already moved on. A concept like Momo, however, is a creepypasta that can be easily disseminated from the internet to friend groups in conversation. She has a simple premise and one memorable image that can swiftly be brought up on a device and shown to friends without any further context needed. Talking with the scouts, many of them had heard about her and looked the photo up online or had a friend show them the photo, but such interactions took place in real life with devices as supplementary to the conversation. Creepypastas like the SCP stories, Slenderman, and Jeff the Killer have more backstory and lore that has to be established, which is easier to disseminate online when people can do personal reading rather than continuously hold the conversation.

Digital communities also allow participants to engage in the broader discussions of horror narrative in a manner that feels personalised. This can be through the previously-discussed individual creation of author-inserts for the horror narratives, but it also takes us into the idea of forums and wikis that are created for larger groups to interact. Traditionally, agora and forum are respective ancient Greek and Roman public spaces that “that served as a meeting ground for various activities of the citizens” (Encyclopedia Britannica 2017) and a point of congregation for assemblies and discussions. The goal of such spaces was to give citizens a feeling of inclusion in discussions about state or cultural affairs. Forum is now the term used to refer to text-based websites dedicated to users being able to hold discussions about specialised topics. Anybody can make a profile (although some request you to be of a certain age) and contribute to any of the topics listed in the website forum or start their own discussion. Forums also act as supplementary or in tangent to ‘wikis’ that provide all information about special topics in an open-source contribution style made by fans. For instance, the Creepypasta website has an associated forum relating to discussions of digital

horror lore, but there are also independent wikis dedicated to creepypastas such as Slenderman and Jeff the Killer. With the ability and likelihood for thousands upon millions to engage with such discussions, we come to Benedict Anderson's idea of media-based imagined communities. "It is *imagined* because even the members of the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (B. Anderson 2006, 6) in a similar manner to how the agora and forum made citizens feel included. In larger online forums there will be hundreds or thousands of users that an individual will never hold a discussion with—including the 'lurkers' who never post at all—but there is a sense of a community bound by shared interest in creepypastas.

What becomes clear is that current children disseminate horror narratives in a multi-media manner that was not a possibility for previous generations prior to the rise of the internet. Oral tradition of story-sharing has remained present as my child participants demonstrated, as much dissemination of horror narratives still occurs in school premises or on camp. However, personal devices have also become incorporated into oral discussions children 'search up' monsters like Momo and show their friends the results. Personal devices and the internet are not always supplementary to oral narrative, and the two mediums of story-sharing can act independently of one another. In this case digital communities disseminate horror narratives through either small folk groups—such as private messenger—or through larger internet forums and wikis where wider communities are united over shared interests.

### **How are Horror Narratives Performed?**

For a horror narrative to have a lasting impact, it is equally important for the story to be conveyed in an enticing manner. "Legends are not folk literature, but folk behavior" and the performance of the legend (Ellis 2003, 10). The heart of urban legends like Click Click Slide is in the ostension of the sounds, the clicking and dragging the narrator does to send shivers up the spines of the audience. Performativity is essential for the dynamics of a folk group. In linguistic anthropology, performativity is tied to studies of ritual and the study of speaking, with spoken declarations and announcements being performative "not constative, because it is by the utterance of the words that the act is performed" (Hall 1999, 184). What this means is that performativity in language is not the ostension of facts but still working to provide information with authority. Urban legends can be argued to be true or false, but the performance of the legend must be convincing.

Think back to a sleepover or campfire situation where horror narratives enter the conversation. You may have never experienced horror narratives in these situations, but cultural osmosis makes the stereotype easy to associate with. We understand horror narratives are “designed to be told in a traditional scary environment, such as around a campfire, at sleepovers, and at other nocturnal events” (Fee and Webb 2016, 850). The narrator will put on a suspenseful voice and take dramatic pauses to build the tension. In the case of “Johnny, I want my liver back” the narrator will surprise the group by screaming at the end—a jump-scare to end the story. Pippi recalled in her scout camping experiences two or more would collude on the performance of an urban legend. “They were telling scary stories. They were like ‘and then the door opened’ and then people came and opened the tent doors and started screaming and everyone screamed.” Elizabeth recalled a similar experience where someone at the sleepover would pop-out from behind the couch and scare everyone in the middle of a horror story. In my own school camp experiences, I do recall somebody scratching on the other side of the cabin shared walls while urban legends were being told, but it is difficult to tell if this an actual memory or an assumption based on how I anticipate urban legends were shared.

Even within the discussion groups I found there are certain rules of engagement we all adhered to. In the same manner as dancing, everyone must know the moves and rhythm to keep in step. What this means is that it is more than just the narrator who must perform. Think of yourself watching a horror movie: how do you act watching a horror movie alone in comparison to being among friends? When watching alone, it is a personal, isolated experience and I never find myself being as outwardly expressive—no screaming or yelling at the screen. When my friends and I get together to watch a horror movie I am suddenly part of a social performance and the engagement with the media changes. “Youthful audiences learn to comport themselves, thus, to take pleasure witnessing and exhibiting appropriate responses” (Tudor 2002, 50) within the context of watching horror. The dynamics of the folk group when horror narratives are being shared is similar to the horror movie social experience. In all the discussion groups, participants would respond to the reciting of horror narratives with shudders, jeers, gasps, and often laughter as well.

At the start of each discussion the participants were less responsive, but as the mood became established and they gained confidence, the reactions to the topics were more boisterous. The children groups seemed particularly self-conscious about following the performative script until they felt more settled-in to the situation. With my friends and the young adults,

however, we seem to be at an age where we are more comfortable with performing fear. I say ‘performing fear’ because I find myself to exaggerate my actual feelings for horror when with friends, possibly because I want to appear sympathetic rather than indifferent to macabre narratives. Recently I watched the horror movie *Ready or Not* (2019) on the long flight from Dublin to San Francisco. I was technically watching this film alone with my headphones in, but I still found myself subconsciously performing fear and recoiling in disgust at certain points. I had a very visceral reaction to a certain hand injury scene on the plane that I tried to taper once I realised how I was responding. I do not believe I would have reacted like this had I been watching this film alone. My reaction to the gorier hand-injury scene in *Gerald’s Game* (2017) was more subdued when watching alone in my house... and then I watched it again with a friend and was very vocal in disgust. What this leads me to believe is that if performance of emotions are not “biologically based or genetically programmed, then they must be cultural, or at least deeply influenced by culture” (Reddy 2001, 34). In the case of horror narratives shared in folk groups: fear, disgust, and even amusement are performed by the participants in a heightened manner different from how horror narratives are experienced when we are alone. “Watching television or films in groups can have quite a dramatic effect on our emotional behaviour” and “may produce an exaggerated response” to content when among friends (Giles 2000, 66). This may not be a conscious decision, but our reactions are influenced by the social norms of our culture and the expected dynamics of the folk group.

The question is: what are the benefits of performativity in folk groups? Why do we feel the need to comport ourselves in a certain manner when sharing horror narratives? This takes us to the anthropological idea of sociality or “the human capacity for the social” (Barnard and Spencer 2003, 622). Sociality is “a dynamic relational matrix within subjects are constantly interacting in ways that are co-productive, and continually plastic and malleable” (Long and Moore 2013, 4). In the context of my project, sociality is reflected all throughout the dynamics of the folk group. The process of story-sharing and performative reactions is all done in benefit of enriching sociality. Children collect these horror narrative repertoires from friends and the internet so that they can engage in story-sharing social situations. What seems as simple as children sharing ‘scaries’ and ‘campfire stories’ is actually a “transformative and significant” (O. Solomon 2012, 110) process where children are learning social cues and contributing to a long history of oral tradition. This all leads to a greater understanding of the society they inhabit and how to negotiate their own presence within the community. These stories are not only entertaining and part of the social experience at the time, but also



incorporated into the later nostalgia of childhood experiences as I found for myself and the young adults I interviewed. Sharing these stories allows children to engage with other children in a positive social manner. It also allows them to later reminisce on the collective experience of folk groups once they become older. Having shared experiences for children is crucial to relate to larger society and expands their social reference frame for that culture.

### **How is Sociality Enriched Through Online Communities?**

When discussing sociality, we are not only talking about human-to-human interactions. The network of sociality incorporates “assorted connections between humans and non-humans” (Moore 2013, 25) and “distributing personhood across emergent networks” (Küchler 2013, 177) and the significance of these interactions in society. Non-humans can include both organic and inorganic entities from therapy dogs to computers that still have a part in a person’s experience of societal networks. When perceiving computers and devices from this perspective, we can understand how digital engagement is a conduit for sociality and allows us to interact with larger networks of different communities.

When discussing sociality in a basic sense, the supposed evolutionary necessity of capacity for social engagement derives from the fact that “humans as individuals are relatively helpless and survive by working together with other humans” and “this dependency means that humans must get along with others” (Higgins 2011, 153). By this definition there is an urgency for sociality starting from an early age: you must learn how to interact with others because you cannot survive alone. Such folk groups in real life help develop these bonds and sense of community, but what is the function of sociality in online communities? Folk groups can be emulated online in private chat groups, while larger online communities reflect forum-style congregation. The difference between the digital realm and the real world is the perceived urgency for participation. You *need* to learn to get along with other children in school or you will become socially isolated. You *need* to have a horror narrative repertoire so you can enter a folk group who likes to share these stories. The evolutionary purpose of sociality is not what is crossing a child’s mind when they think of these situations, but being socially isolated—or even bullied—is a very real fear for children who struggle with social interactions. With online communities, the urgency is not present. The difference is that the user can choose to engage with the different communities or refrain without ostracization. In the real world a child has little option in their community as it is determined by where they live, their financial situation, and where their family has chosen to send them to school. There

are no such restrictions in online communities. Another factor of the user's experience in online communities is the ability to be part of multiple forums and chat groups at once, allowing them to express all their different interests and not be limited to being a part of a single community as a restraint to be considered with physically oriented communities. It reflects "the multiple identities and negotiated roles individuals have within different sociopolitical and cultural contexts" (Wilson and Peterson 2002, 456). The internet allows a user to explore the multi-faceted parts of their own personality as they take on different identities in various forums and chat groups.

Online communities may emulate the sociality of real groups, but without the necessity of survivability. The function of online communities, in this sense, is entertainment.

Anthropologist Nicholas Long suggests that online groups do not follow 'communitarian sociality' in which communities largely influence the individual—as in the real world—but instead users engage with online communities in a manner that demonstrates 'sympathetic individualism' where the users "established horizons of the good life make those characterizations of sociality an important element of its pleasure" (Long and Moore 2012, 43). What this means is that people in online communities interact as if the urgency of sociality is intact, but the individual user has far more independence from the community than how they would perform sociality offline. This emulation of communitarianism is part of the enjoyment as it strengthens the bond of the online community if they feel a sense of dedication and involvement in the group. "A sense of belonging may be announced by liking, clocking or sharing, photos, music or memes" that tie them to the community (Hakamies and Heimo, Introduction 2019, 11).

This brings us back to the idea of performativity. Online interactions may lack face-to-face interaction, but performativity is still a part of the online experience with horror narratives. Some parts of the community do dramatic readings where they take written creepypastas and dramatically interpret them in YouTube videos. This happened with a short creepypasta I wrote on Reddit that was given the dramatic treatment by Youtuber WolfsCampFire (2019). In this case the performativity is clear as it replicates how a narrator tells a horror story to a group with dramatic pauses, sound effects, and intensity in their tone. It is the digital campfire—hence WolfsCampFire being the name of this creepypasta reading channel. But for a predominantly text-based genre, creepypastas adapt the writing style of horror narration to present these stories with realism and authority. The novel *Slender Man* (Anonymous, Slender Man 2019) based off the eponymous Slenderman creepypasta uses the common

narration techniques in the creepypasta writing community to perform the story in a manner less static than standard narration. The book incorporates diary entries, text messages, emails, Reddit posts, audio transcripts, doctors' notes, and so on to create a story that feels cobbled together from authentic sources despite being fully fictional. The ostension of a realistic narration ties back into 'ironic belief' (J. A. Tolbert 2015, 103) in which they know they are writing fiction, but seek to imitate the feeling of urban legends. This means that the same idea is used by narrators when performing urban legends and working to justify the believability of the story. The authority factor stems from hearing the story first-hand from a 'friend of a friend' or having the event occur in their hometown. The goal for the storyteller is to construct legends "in a believable fashion... making specific allusions to verifiable topographic features or historical personages" (Tangherlini 1990, 372) in a manner that asserts superior insider knowledge to the other users. In the case of the *Slender Man* novel, the authority comes from the narrator being absent—and anonymous—and instead the story is told through a cobbled collection of supposed sources and treated like research. The SCP website uses a similar measure of authority by outlining the creepypasta entries must be written as a file with lab notes, transcriptions, and test results. These entries are knowingly written as fiction, but must be performed in a realistic manner in order to carry authority and acceptance from the community.

How other digital users engage with the 'narrator' differs from the standard dynamics of a folk group based on temporal differences. There is no urgency to perform fear or react to the narrator's actions if you are watching a dramatic reading posted three years ago. A lurker would be a user who does no performance in a digital sense: absorbs the media passively but does not reciprocate performance. This does not impact the narrator's performance as it is not a live communication and there is no face-to-face engagement. However, if we go back to Nicholas Long's concept of 'sympathetic individualism' we can see sociality is still emulated by a large amount of the community (Long and Moore 2013, 43). For the WolfsCampFire channel, engagement can be as simple as 'liking' a video to show approval of the content, but more dedicated fans choose to write a personalised comment praising WolfsCampFire's dramatic reading. As user Dylan Olivier commented: "Every night I go to bed I play one of your stories get nightmares cause I play it while I fall asleep 😊 but the Hart [sic] attacks I get is worth it 🤝 thanks for making this channel appreciate the content ❤️".

WolfsCampFire 'hearted' this comment and pinned it to the top of the comments, but they also went through and hearted most of the twenty comments on the video. The video has

almost two-thousand views at the start of 2020, but the amount of those who actively engage in the content drops to only 122 ‘liking’ the video, and then only twenty comments. So, while the internet may allow for larger groups to engage with horror content, the amount users who enact sociality by responding to the material drops significantly. On this dramatic reading channel, WolfsCampFire has over twelve-thousand subscribers, but the daily users who demonstrate sympathetic individualism shrinks to those who interact in the comments.

It is important to note authority and communal standing have an impact on the sociality of online horror communities when it comes to the narrator. In a campfire or sleepover setting any child with enough confidence can tell a story and be acknowledged by the whole folk group. With the internet, however, certain users are more famous—and more watched—than others. Theoretically, anybody can start a YouTube channel dedicated to dramatic readings of creepypastas—as is the democratic nature of the internet. But posting a creepypasta video when you have no communal standing or subscribers is the equivalent of doing a dramatic reading to an empty auditorium. In a space like the nosleep Reddit forum, anybody can post a creepypasta, but it is a competitive process to see who gets

the most recognition and ‘upvotes’. It is the equivalent of ten campfire tales going on at once, and the audience choosing who to listen to. That is why the creepypastas in this subreddit have to have gripping titles, such as my successful creepypasta: ‘I found a kidnapped boy in my basement’ (EndTheMadnessPls 2018), or user Mr\_Outlaw\_ posted a story called ‘My local theater recently screened a film called “Mr. Blank.” Everybody who’s watched it has now gone missing’ (2020). These are very long titles in comparison to urban legends such as ‘the Hook Hand’ or ‘Click Click Slide’, but the more competitive nature of the internet means writers must hook users with a pitch-like title. What is particularly interesting about the nosleep Reddit in connection to performativity is the roleplay aspect. The motto of this subreddit is “everything is true here, even if it’s not.” What this means is that performance is a rule of the community: the writers and readers must all respond as if the horror narratives are true regardless of plausibility (see: Figure 10).

Participants who go OOC (Out of Character) risk having their stories or comments deleted by

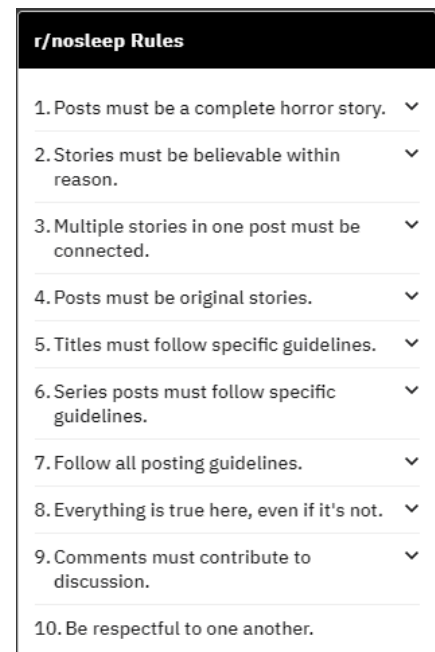


Figure 10 nosleep sidebar featuring the community rules

the moderator. In the case of real-world folk groups, the unspoken rules of performativity are part of a process towards social acceptance, but with digital communities the performance emulates sociality for entertainment purposes and certain communities make these in-character rules to maintain a certain level of immersion.

## **Conclusion**

Talking to the children and young adults, the focal point of horror narrative dissemination took place in the school setting. In my own time at school most sharing of horror narratives was through word-of-mouth in the playground or on school camp, as was the shared experience of the of the other young adults I spoke to. For the contemporary children, however, personal devices also factor into the story-sharing process as creepypastas and horror-themed YouTube videos are easily accessible. The scouts gave me insight into how the different mediums of oral and digital storytelling intermingle in their daily life. Oral legends were still shared, but creepypastas like Momo were also moved from the internet into schoolyard conversation. Although digital horror narratives were beginning to pick up steam in my teen years, the easier dissemination through children's personal devices has allowed YouTube channels like Reaction Time to target children with horror themed 'last text' videos and other new urban legends. The digital medium has proven itself to not act as only supplementary to oral dissemination, but has developed its own fully-online communities and performance rituals. Outside of YouTube videos, online forums and wikis dedicated to horror narratives have developed dedicated communities from users all over the world.

In both the schoolyard and digital environments, what becomes clear is the importance of performativity as shared action by all the participants rather than just the storyteller. It is the responsibility of the storyteller to be authoritative in their presentation of the story to keep it convincing and immersive regardless of the factuality. In the digital context this also includes having communal standing and attaining a large amount of 'likes' or 'upvotes' to get attention. For the audience however, they must have appropriate dramatic responses, expressing sympathy or disgust for the story are the social norms. The experience of the folk group dynamic works to enrich sociality as it helps children to bond and understand social performance. How performance looks, however, depends on the medium. Digital performance can be described as more sympathetic individualism that imitates the urgency of sociality. For this, participants will emulate the realism of living an urban legend regardless of the believability, as is the case with Reddit's nosleep forum. The performance is more for

entertainment rather than necessity as it is for children's group engagement. And, unlike in real life, performance is optional without ostracization as 'lurkers' can witness horror content and discussions without engaging in the conversation—making them invisible to the other members of the community.

In the following chapter I will be discussing how horror narratives have evolved from a temporal standpoint. This includes examining their shifts both in terms of time and location. When talking about horror narratives and 'time' I will be looking at how some stories become 'trapped in the past' and stagnant while others seem to have a continued existence being shared among folk groups. As discussed with story-sharing in this chapter, 'location' is used to refer to both physical places and groups as well as digital movement as internet spaces also play a significant part in the locality—or delocalisation—of legends. I will also discuss how the significance of memory and nostalgia enact retroactively on the horror narratives.

## CHAPTER FOUR: TEMPORALITY

### The Evolution of Horror Narratives

As I discussed in the Introduction to Chapter Two, Click Click Slide is an urban legend from my childhood era. The story is something I closely associate with Clyde Quay School where it spread among students rapidly. When I started this project, I thought Click Click Slide was a story isolated to New Zealand—particularly Wellington. Through research and talking with others, I learned my assumption was wrong. In the International Society for Contemporary Legend’s conference I learned her story had made it as far as Utah—across the Pacific. The Click Click Slide story I learned in New Zealand bears strong resemblance to the more prolific Japanese urban legend Teke Teke.

Perhaps I should not have been surprised. It is not really surprising an urban legend came from somewhere else. I revealed Click Click Slide’s origins to Ashleigh—a fellow friend who attended Clyde Quay—who was equally surprised and protective of our version of the legend. I told her some versions had Click Click Slide as a man, and we agreed this was somehow wrong. It can be difficult for a piece of nostalgia to be revealed as one of many versions as a story that has “supposedly happened many times before to scores of other people” (Brunvand 2003, 2) with no single true version.

For this chapter I will explore how time and location change horror narratives. This includes how certain narratives evolve and shift while others stagnate and get lost to time. I will also look at how horror narratives develop localised variants to make them suitable for new audiences. This all ties back to the heart of this project: nostalgia for horror narratives and the temporal relationship it creates. Nostalgia is a temporal orientation in the past that is created through story-sharing and collective memories. My nostalgia is for a time prior to widespread digital horror narratives, when oral narration was the most common form of dissemination among children and when technology was less advanced. I will examine nostalgia’s relationship to temporality when it comes to horror narratives from the past versus horror narratives still being shared in the present.

#### **How have Horror Narratives Evolved over Time?**

When discussing this term we need to understand what ‘change’ or ‘evolution’ are in the context of horror narratives. With oral storytelling tradition, most individual narratives are in a constant state of “communal re-creation” wherein “people in a folk community absorb new

material into their oral culture, then remake it through repetition and creative retelling” by removing or adding new elements (Brunvand, 13). Because horror narratives are often in a constant malleable state, I understand ‘change’ as the microlevel adaptations whereas ‘evolution’ refers to macro level alterations to the narratives over time.

An example of macro level evolution is when a horror narrative shifts “from one culture to another” (Sutton-Smith, *Children's Folklore: A Source Book* 1999, 68) and adapts to become culturally appropriate. Ethnologist Petr Janeček found a macro level transference of legend with the British Spring-Heeled Jack moving into the Czech Republic and becoming known as *Pérák* (‘the Springer’). The basic concept is a man with a supernatural ability to jump, but as the story shifts throughout Europe it always has “localized names and unique local traits which served to strengthen their credibility for local audiences” (Janeček 2020). Teke Teke undergoes the same localisation process and is given a new name—Click Click Slide or Click Click Click Drag—in order to be successfully appropriated. Anthropologist Sarita Sahay discusses cultural parallelism in which “several cultural elements evolve in parallel and almost simultaneously in different societies” despite no apparent connection (Sahay 2005). It is possible that Teke Teke and Click Click Slide developed independently of one another, but their shared formula in terms of titling and story mechanics are starkly similar. In Japanese language ‘teke teke’ is onomatopoeia of a scratching or tapping sound which because of her “claw-like hands, creating the “teke-teke” sound” (de Vos 2012, 170) in the same manner that Click Click Slide is the clawing and dragging sounds. Performance by the storyteller is a necessary part of creating a lasting memory of this legend. “With subtle gestures, eye movements, and vocal inflections the stories are made dramatic, pointed, and suspenseful,” (Brunvand 2003, 5) and the clawing or tapping of the hands helps create the image of the monster. The adaptation of the title is key to the memories the urban legend elicits. The title is also the sound storytellers produce with their hands as they act-out the story, with Teke Teke being a light tapping sound while Click Click Slide is a scratching and dragging of nails. The title ‘Teke Teke’ does not have any cultural meaning in Western society as that is not how we would write-out the sound such a monster would make. As historian Richard W. Bulliet discusses with animal sounds: humans vocally imitate the sounds animals make, but “they only use phonemes in their own language in making these imitations” (2005, 67). In the case of Click Click Slide, this would be equally irrelevant to Japanese children who grew up with Teke Teke: because there is no ‘L’ in the Japanese phonetic language. The clicking and dragging sounds elicited by the Western title would not stimulate the same response as ‘L’



sounds are not associated with Japanese onomatopoeia words. In this case the evolution of the horror narrative requires a change in the most crucial feature of the story—the sounds—in order to be culturally appropriate as it moves from Japan to New Zealand and abroad.

Shifts in medium are also a significant change in horror narration on the macro level.

Throughout the chapters I have touched on the rise of digital-based horror narratives. “Alan Dundes reckoned as long ago as 1980 that the development of information technology would offer new, exciting opportunities for the communication and birth of folklore. In the following decade, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1995) assured folklorists that information technology would not destroy oral tradition, but it would come to operate as a foundation for it to grow upon” (Hakamies and Heimo 2019, 9). The group discussions I conducted have indicated oral tradition is still practiced by children, “yet it is also true, among younger people and in some countries such as Sweden and the US at least, that digital media have largely displaced – even if they also complement – traditional media” (Schroeder 2018, 2). The creepypasta genre evolved out of urban legend and continues to actively imitate the style of folklore—even if the imitation is known to be fake. The group interviews with children also showed me the coexistence of oral traditional and digital media. This is significant because with oral tradition we are dealing with a long, expansive history of human storytelling for thousands of years, but creepypastas and digital horror have only come into existence in the past thirty years. The age gap between oral tradition and digital media is significantly larger than the age difference between the newspaper and digital media—a comparison that is often referred to as ‘old’ and ‘new’ media (Schroeder 2018, 2). The coexistence of both forms of dissemination brings for the idea that evolution of storytelling does not necessitate the extinction of previous forms.

The digital medium also allows for the micro level changes from one storyteller to another as is the case with oral tradition. This is when the story has not shifted in culture, medium, or time, but micro level changes are when there are additional or changed elements in the story that do not impact on its cultural appropriation. In this case it is rather a storyteller giving their own slightly different variation either because their recollection of the story is wrong or they want to introduce new elements with a “creative retelling” (Brunvand 2003, 13). Often when a folktale or urban legend was written down it cemented that version of the story. This was the case with the Grimms’ Fairy Tales, stories from oral tradition recorded and now the Grimms’ versions are the standard telling. “As a consequence of that belief, tampering with the classic texts of Perrault or the Brothers Grimm is considered by some to be tantamount of

sacrilege, similar to revising the text of Holy Scriptures” (Haase 1993, 383) Although many creepypastas are text-based, “creepypasta stories — whether visual or written — are always undergoing transformation” (Newitz 2014). This can be through the addition of new content—fan characters—or retellings. I found this to be the case with the Jeff the Killer creepypasta. There is the initial image Jeff Case created, but other storytellers have taken the concept and retold or expanded on it a multitude of times. This is when spinoffs such as Jane the Killer, self-inserts, or any of the Jeff the Killer erotic ‘lemons’ come into the picture, but there are also more serious additions such as the reboot of the story on the Creepypasta website (Banning-Kellum 2018)—which in turn is a reboot of a reimagining of the original Jeff the Killer origin story. So, while creepypasta may at-first appear to share more similarities to literary horror as much of it is text-based, it needs to be recognised that written creepypastas are not static and are still constantly being retold and reimagined by online communities. These retellings are micro level changes, however, as they still retain the same cultural reference points rather than transporting from one cultural group to another.

Both micro and macro level changes play a significant role in the evolution of horror narratives. On the macro level, urban legends like Click Click Slide alter the onomatopoeia to the relevant phonemes in different languages in order to translate the desired effect. A major evolution in horror narration is the technological developments in the past thirty years, offering new routes of digital dissemination. Despite being in the digital medium, creepypastas like Jeff the Killer also constantly undergo micro changes by different storytellers who constantly contribute to the story. This is similar the Springman of Prague and Teke Teke in their cultural transferences: the basic mechanics of the story remain, but the names are appropriated for different cultures. The changes demonstrate that horror narratives are in a constant state of change and adaptation to be relevant to new groups.

### **Local Versus Universal Horror Narratives**

Up to this point I have discussed universal urban legends. These are legends that are spread worldwide even if they are conveyed in a manner that makes them feel local. As discussed with Teke Teke transforming into Click Click Slide, “these specific local touches make believable what is essentially a travelling legend” (Brunvand 2003, 6). While universal legends may masquerade as local, in New Zealand there are also local urban legends that have not entered societal conscience from an international source. These are legends that spawn specifically from New Zealand and are culturally specific. As a Wellingtonian, I will

be specifically discussing horror narratives from Wellington, but participants in the group discussion I conducted exposed me to urban legends from other regions such as Palmerston North, or broader legends that can be applied to any part of New Zealand.

In particular, Jarvis—who grew up in Gisborne—told me about a contemporary Māori urban legend—Waiwaikau—that is set in New Zealand, but not localised to any particular town or city:

**Jarvis:** There's a family driving out on the road travelling to a city. They see this guy out in the middle of the road hitchhiking, so they pick him up and give him a lift. And after fifty or a hundred miles he asks for them to stop. So, they stop in the middle of nowhere and he hops out. And as he hops out, they notice his legs are, like, goat legs—or cow's legs—and when they look up to look at him he's already gone. That's about it.

Jarvis confirmed Waiwaikau translates to 'leg cow' which would refer to the cow's legs, but in English it is referred to as the Goatman which would imply goat's legs. Faunlike creatures are not exclusive to New Zealand and the story has similarities to the universal legend of the Phantom Hitchhiker, but the story in this case has strong ties to Māori folklore. "The Māori view on them [Goatmen] is that they are Kaitiaki, or a guardian, an entity that protects the lakes and forests" (Wallbank 2017).

While Waiwaikau is a broader New Zealand urban legend, there are horror narratives that are very centralised on particular locations. Through working with the scouts, I learned about the ghost Hector who haunts the boathouse. "The myth is Hector was a Venturer that jumped out of the window in the Venturer's loft (which is the attic) and now lives up there and eats Cubs and Keas [named after the New Zealand Parrots] if they go up into the Venturer's loft" as Pippi told me. At one point in the galley (kitchen) there was a biscuit tin labelled 'Hector's Biscuits' where biscuits would be placed to satiate Hector and prevent him from eating the younger scouts. If there were mysterious noises or occurrences in the boathouse Hector would be pinned as the culprit. Pippi and the older scout leaders may not actively believe in Hector, but they play into the legend and encourage the younger scouts to participate in the belief, passing the legend from one generation to another. In addition to the boathouse the camp settings "are also likely to have *legends and ghost* stories, two genres that depend the most upon children and adolescents for their survival and diffusion" (Mechling 1999, 278). In equal fashion there is the scout legend of the 'Bog Lady' on camp. As Pippi told me: "the toilet at camp was called the Bog" and when scouts have to get up in the middle of the night to use the outhouse "she pulls children down into the toilet and drowns them." The

believability of these ghosts may be questioned, but it is easy to imagine how they can feel plausible in a creaky boathouse or in the dark of night at camp. Both location-oriented urban legends may bear similarities to other universal legends, but these horror narratives are niche, being only shared among the scouts in this troop rather than Wellington as a whole.

Talking with both the scouts and the young adults, school-based horror narratives resided strongly in memories. In the previous chapter I discussed the centrality of school in a child's everyday life, and how the imagination of children is heavily influenced by this location. Brian Sutton-Smith found that urban legends surrounding school developed quite early into the mandatory education system introduced to New Zealand. "In the Takaka district there is a story that around the turn of the century a teacher strapped a four-year-old boy 144 times and killed him. It may not be a fact, but fact or no, it is a significant legend" (1981, 34). The legends created at schools range from plausible to supernatural. Recalling such legends forms our relationship to temporality as it asks us to recall our conscience from an earlier era, placing ourselves back in time when we believed the supernatural and outlandish stories were true. At Wellington East Girls' College—my high school—one rumour was that a male teacher was made redundant because he was looking at porn on a school computer and got caught by a student. Another legend was of a certain set of toilets being haunted—but none of us can remember what was haunting it. Rowan also recalls the bathroom in the hall at his school being haunted "and there was a story going around that there was a girl who died in there. Ages ago, because the hall is quite old." Mikayla and Emma, who were part of the same group discussion, responded excitedly because their school's old hall had a similar legend of a girl dying in there long ago. What is interesting about Mikayla and Emma is the first-hand experiences of the legend:

**Mikayla:** So, this is before I went to intermediate, but I had older siblings and my mum worked there as well. [*To Emma*] I think you might know the one. I remember being told to not go into where the mats were being kept in the hall because a girl had hung herself in there. I remember it so clearly. I wasn't in intermediate yet and I was just visiting my mum after school and the door was open so I was like "ooh, I wanna see if I can see anything" since the story was fresh in my mind. I remember walking in, psyching myself up, and seeing something there, swinging, and actually running out in tears. I was convinced. I couldn't go into the hall or that room for the first six months at intermediate, and that was at least a year later, because I was convinced this girl was haunting it. I don't even know who told me or where I heard it from, but I just remember going in there and seeing this body and losing my mind.

**Emma:** When they were redoing classrooms, my class was put into the hall for the rest of that year. It was divided into three classrooms and my classroom was on the side of the mats. And I had a dislocated knee, so I was out from gym class for the day. And there was, like, four of us sitting in there

because the teacher said “oh, just stay in there and do work.” We all talked about this story and then we went inside the mat room. We went to the back.

**Mikayla:** Yeah, that’s where I thought I saw her as well.

**Emma:** And the door, I don’t know if it was faulty, but the door went straight down and we were all just like “uh oh.” And we never went back in there. Like, the four of us stayed on the other side of the hall for the rest of the year.

Emma had not initially come along to join the young adult group discussion. She had come into town with Mikayla for errands and was not going to talk. However, the draw of engaging with the folk group was too strong, and she wanted to share her experiences. Coming back to the idea of temporality, what the group discussions showed me was how strong the memories of such school legends remained ingrained in the memories of different young adults. And, in the case of Mikayla and Emma’s experiences, some supernatural legends may not be as fictional as we would like to believe.

When dealing with the idea of ‘local’ versus ‘universal’ legends, personal devices provide a new spatial medium that is a mixture of local and universal. Creepypastas are ‘local’ to the internet, but the internet is a globalised space accessible on your device or computer. In particular many creepypastas work with the concept of glitch horror or “horror media that exploits the anxieties surrounding the fallibility of technology” (Cooley and Milligan 2018, 206). When the internet becomes location, it opens up the possibility of hauntings in a solely digital realm—a ghost in the machine that downloads from the internet to your device. The trick of digital horror is to upset the person-object relationship, where the person is now being acted upon by the computer rather than vice versa. When websites and internet creatures start to feign sentience, for the users it “upsets their sense of safety wrapped in those restrictions” of the standard person-computer relationship (Cooley and Milligan, Haunted objects, networked subjects: The nightmarish nostalgia of creepypasta 2018, 207). Momo is a notorious creepypasta localised solely in the internet but having real world ramifications. Although the suicides and self-harm related to the Momo Challenge are hoaxes, the creepypasta itself is still a strong example of digital horror. The actual Mother Bird sculpture—which serves as the image for Momo’s character—was created in Japan, but Momo is said to be a malicious being residing on the internet “that goads young children into violence or even suicide” through messaging apps such as WhatsApp on their tablets and phones (Sakuma 2019). What is important about the creepypasta of Momo is that anyone can replicate it. Anyone can make a profile resembling Momo and send threatening or bullying messages to other users. In the group discussions with the scouts I learned how the Momo

Challenge Hoax had local ramifications, parents' and teachers of the scouts warning them of the dangers of Momo's malicious messages. The Momo Challenge is similar to what Jan Harold Brunvand calls a travelling legend (2003, 6) that originates from another, often far away location and moves through different groups, similar to universal legends. Travelling legends like Momo, however, do not undergo the same macro level cultural transformation because Momo is known to originate online rather than be localised variant. Momo is a horror narrative disseminated to multiple groups across the world all at once, because Momo resides in the digital realm where the story can be accessed on a global scale immediately.

As our world becomes more interconnected it is difficult to differentiate local from appropriated universal legends. While universal legends may be adapted into different cultures, they still originate from an international source rather than from within the culture itself. Local urban legends often have strong ties to certain locations, especially more niche urban legends. Many schools have localised urban legends originating from superstitions about the old structures, with the hanging in Emma and Mikayla's hall being an enduring legend. The scouts also had different legends associated with their campgrounds and boathouse from the Bog Lady to Hector the resident ghost. These are legends only shared by a small percentage of a population. Waiwaikau is a larger legend among Māori that is not associated with any location in particular, but could take place along any isolated road in New Zealand. Internet-based horror narratives pose a challenge to defining local and universal—providing local access to global content. Digital monsters such as Momo demonstrate how horror narratives located online can be engaged with simultaneously across the globe. Unlike travelling legends, digital legends like Momo are not adapted and appropriated to respective cultures, but treated as existing both locally in the personal devices and globally as an internet figure.



Figure 11 Survey responses to Click Click Slide. Illustration by Haley Biswell



### **What is the Role of Nostalgia?**

As mentioned in the introduction, nostalgia is a form of temporality oriented through story-sharing and memory elicitation, taking me back in time to my childhood. What spurred this project was nostalgia. Listening to a *Last Podcast on the Left* episode about urban legends (Kissel, Parks and Zebrowski, Episode 108: Urban Legends 2017) on my morning walk made my mind wander to what horror narratives I recalled from my childhood. Click Click Slide in particular elicits such strong memories and associations with my school time at Clyde Quay. On the other side of the nostalgia coin comes the horror storytelling, where the safety of childhood memories is threatened by defamiliarization—a technique used in many famous creepypastas. For this section I will explore nostalgia and its relationship to childhood memories of horror narratives, and how contemporary creepypastas tap into nostalgia to create new horror.

At the start of this project I ran a survey for young adults in Wellington (and wider New Zealand) asking them about urban legends and creepypastas. I wanted to understand if the memories of the oral tradition urban legends Click Click Slide, Drip Drip, and “Johnny, I want my liver back” were shared by a wider group of children than just Clyde Quay School students. I knew my sister, her friends, and my friends from Clyde Quay all knew the story, but I had not encountered as many friends from other schools as familiar with all three when such topics came up in conversation. Of the 174 respondents over half recognised Click Click Slide and, as shown in the illustration graphic on the previous page (see: Figure 11), a large amount of respondents had a strong reaction to being reminded of that monster. I asked what urban legends stuck with the respondents in particular and got answers such as “Click click slide for sure ! Still gives me the creeps !” and “Click click slide was told on a school camp and scared me so much at the time.” What this showed me is that I was not alone in my nostalgic memories of Click Click Slide, and it was a significant oral horror narrative disseminated among children in the 2000s. If she is still remembered by so many young adults now—and can still cause such strong response—then her impact on children during the 2000s cannot be understated. Nostalgia does not always mean particularly joyful experiences in the past. As Adrienne Matei writes for *Quartz*: “Nostalgia can manifest in a variety of ways, but unlike emotions like happiness, which have a spectrum of English words to express their variances, nostalgia lacks nuanced synonyms for its various types” (Matei 2017). The memory of a monster such as Click Click Slide is fondness for childhood mixed with the original fear. I love Click Click Slide now, as an adult, as she connects me to a time when I



used to be afraid of horror. Back when the only thing I thought to fear was a fictional monster, rather than fearing that the whole world is going to end as I have come to understand in a climate-change-aware modern world. A simpler time in retrospective, but certainly fear was still part of my childhood even if what caused the fear is a source of amusement now.

In the two young adult groups I facilitate, nostalgia was a central theme guiding the discussions. The sharing of familiar horror narratives from childhood created “‘sameness with others’, as in group identity” among the participants (Bryant 2015, 164). Among the eleven participants I had only attended primary school with Ashleigh, but the discussion of urban legends brought us all together through shared childhood memories. In the first group—all my girl friends from high school—we shared very similar urban legends. Click Slide, Drip Drip, and “Johnny, I want my liver back” were all recognised by at least one member of the participants. The second group included some of my boy friends and two girls I had not met before. I found there was less familiarity with the three previously stated legends, but during the group discussions we found horror narratives that connected our childhoods. The boys—Jarvis, Sami, and Rowan—were less familiar with older oral legends, but they found connection with Mikayla and Elizabeth through digital horror such as *Salad Fingers* and Sonic.exe:

**Sami:** Yeah, I didn’t really hear them from people, per se. But I remember—this one was a while ago—when I was a young teenager. Me and my sister... she heard from one of her friends and we watched online a series called *Salad Fingers*.

[*Whole group commiserates and jeers*]

**Rowan:** Good old *Salad Fingers*.

**Sami:** Yeah, I watched like one or two episodes, but she was pretty into it. I don’t know why.

**Rowan:** Some people were.

**Sami:** Yeah. That’s probably one I won’t forget because it was pretty creepy, or it was pretty creepy at the time.

**Mikayla:** Even now. There was an anniversary for it not long ago and I was, like, “cool” and watched it for childhood memories, but then ten seconds in I was like “why did I watch this?”

**Elizabeth:** I never got it. Like, I didn’t even think it was creepy. I was just like “is this some sort of weird humour that I’m not getting?”

**Sami:** I feel like there is humour there, but I never bothered to try and get it.

**Rowan:** It was just really weird.

**Mikayla:** I was scared

I had never watched the *Salad Fingers* videos, but I still shared in the group nostalgia. In the same manner as Slenderman and Jeff the Killer, I knew the image of *Salad Fingers* even without the context of the storyline. The image of the eponymous main character is disturbing enough to permanently remain in my brain, and spring to the forefront of memory when the name is mentioned. Name-dropping *Salad Fingers*, Slenderman, and Click Click Slide elicits ‘where were you when you heard this?’ memory flashbacks. Within the young adult group discussions mentioning these horror narratives brings each respective participant back to a certain time and place when such narratives were relative. Part of the joy of the group discussions for myself and the participants was learning of similar experiences we had with these horror narratives despite going to different schools and growing up in different places.

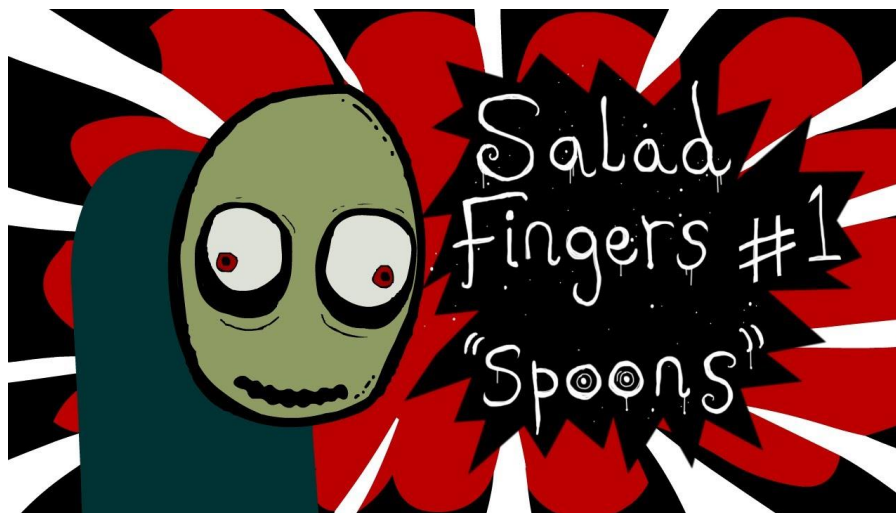


Figure 12 *Salad Fingers* YouTube thumbnail (Firth 2007)

While discussing horror narratives from the past elicits nostalgic responses, the reverse of such social phenomena is when an object associated with childhood suddenly becomes horrific and uncanny, disrupting our relationship to the past. *Five Nights at Freddy's (FNaF)* was discussed in both age groups as the series began in 2014 and has continued to be popular with “every single YouTuber you can think of, from PewdiePie to Markiplier, has probably made a Let’s Play” (Hernandez 2015) and there is even a new augmented reality sequel set to be released in 2020 (Takahashi 2019). The series focusses on the player monitoring the security cameras in a children’s pizza restaurant. The horror stems from the animatronic animals—meant to entertain the children—coming alive at night and seeking to attack the player. From an outside perspective the success of *FNaF* may seem unrelated to the creepypastas and nostalgia. However, the incorporation of nostalgia in horror-themed games taps into “the inner nightmares of technological nostalgia for seemingly static objects by

rendering them sinisterly active subjects” and disrupting comfort children’s entertainment is meant to provide (Cooley and Milligan 2018, 197). In New Zealand the nostalgia relationship may be less understood, the target of the nostalgia is directed American audiences. The animatronic animals are parodical of the real-life animatronics at Chuck E. Cheese restaurants. Although the direct cultural reference point may not be had in New Zealand, seeing these childish images become menacing monsters still upsets the safe association of child-oriented products.



Figure 13 Chuck E. Cheese animatronic (Cush 2017)

Figure 14 Still from FNaF on Steam website (ScottGames 2019)

Another game mentioned in the children discussion groups was *Granny* (DVloper 2018). The title was recognised by all the children in the first scout group discussion. Izabel, Madeline, Harry, and Leo had played the game while Connor had watched a YouTube Let’s Play of *Granny*. “I played it once and I freaked out so much” Madeline admitted, and the other children nodded to express they felt the same way. The game centres on the player waking up in a mysterious house, and a zombie-like woman claiming to be your Granny locks you in a room and hits you with a club if you try to escape. This taps into nostalgic anxiety by flipping the traditional family concept of visiting grandma’s house on its head. In the US, Lydia Maria Child wrote the Thanksgiving song “Over the River and Through the Wood” which is known known for the line “to grandma’s house we go” where grandmother has prepared pudding and pie for the children coming in the snow—a sign of comfort and warmth (The Tabernacle Choir Blog 2018). The song is referenced in a variety of children’s media from *A Charlie Brown Thanksgiving* (1973) to the Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen movie *To Grandmother’s House We Go* (1992). The image of grandma’s house, particularly in Western culture, is portrayed as a place of comfort in children’s media. The game *Granny* inverts the stereotype of ‘grandmother’s house’ being a place of security and comfort and instead challenges “the hazy border that separate the normal from the abnormal” (Flint 2019, 140). In

this case nostalgic feelings are disrupted by the uncanny sensation in which “what was once well known and had long been familiar” is suddenly frightening and defamiliarized (Cooley and Milligan 2018, 197).

When discussing *Salad Fingers* in the second group discussion, BEN Drowned and Sonic.exe were also mentioned in passing. They are well-known creepypastas that centre on the nostalgia and horror of video games. BEN Drowned and Sonic.exe are both creepypastas that “upset the subject/object relationships that fuel technological nostalgia” (Cooley and Milligan 2018, 193). These horror stories are based on the *Legend of Zelda* and the *Sonic* video game franchises respectively. Both franchises are subject to nostalgia of ‘90s kids’ who played these in their youth, meaning these games are associated with a sense of “safety and subjecthood” of the familiar (Cooley and Milligan 2018, 194). These creepypastas threaten the comfort of nostalgia by transforming these video games into objects of horror and unfamiliarity. The ‘ghosts in the machine’ of BEN Drowned and Sonic.exe distort the video games and create horrific imagery that seems to be aware of the narrators themselves. “Online horror and its subversive commentaries on social media practices do not permit a safely linear relationship with the things we love” and reverse the player-object relationship (Cooley and Milligan 2018, 194). Another example is the creepypasta The Theater (Anonymous, The Theater 2010) in which the narrator recounts playing an old seemingly-broken video game that is disturbingly existential. The game itself is not real, but the descriptions of playing a CD-ROM from that time is a shared childhood experience of children in the 90s and early 2000s. The story makes particular reference to the game *Doom* to help readers contextualise the period of video games the game originates from. The common tropes of CD-ROM games such as constantly crashing, textbox dialogue, and poor graphics are all familiar, but the horror of the game itself “does not just become unfamiliar, but uncanny” and challenges the normalcy of comfort and nostalgia associated with these old games (Cooley and Milligan, Haunted objects; networked subjects: The nightmarish nostalgia of creepypasta, 194). Interestingly, The Theater is not a real game, but as with *Slender: The Eight Pages* and Sonic.exe, fans of these creepypastas have created video game adaptations that imitates the lore of the original stories.



Figure 15 Still from playthrough of fan made *The Theater* game (Markiplier 2013)

What became clear through the young adult group discussions and the survey was the centrality of nostalgia in recalling these horror narratives. Reminding participants of horror narratives from their past elicited strong emotional responses and associations with childhood memories. Even in the case where horror narratives were not familiar to the whole group, there was still a sense of communal childhood as we continued to discuss experiences at school and camp and found the similarities. In this case the memories of horror have become nostalgic, while modern creepypastas flip these memories of childhood into horror. Digital horror narratives tackle objects of familiarity from childhood and make them uncanny. Child-friendly franchises such as *Legend of Zelda* and *Sonic the Hedgehog* become monstrous in these horror narratives and upset the person-object relationship. Independently made horror games like *Granny* and defamiliarize the stereotypical traditional comfort of grandmother's house and make it menacing. In both instances nostalgia is a key factor of engagement with horror narratives, but memories of horror narratives bridge us to the past while creepypastas about childhood objects disrupt our connection to the memories.

## Conclusion

When dealing with horror narrative evolution it became clear that macro versus micro changes through cultural appropriation needed to be defined. By discussing the example of Japanese story Teke Teke transforming into the Western Click Click Slide it was possible to trace such changes. While the story underwent some minor changes during transformation such as the catalyst event severing the body in half changing from train to car crash, the

macro changes evolved the story in significant cultural ways. As was stated, the titles of Teke Teke and Click Click Slide are respective onomatopoeias for Japanese and English, as the way our cultures interpret phonemes for the monster's sound differ. The internet also plays a factor in the evolution of horror narratives that are constantly being retold and expanded upon, as is the case with Jeff the Killer and the various retellings available on the internet.

The idea of local versus universal or 'travelling' legends needed to be defined. In this case there are different levels of locality, from Waiwaikau being set broadly in New Zealand, and then there are more niche horror narratives centred on particular locations as is the case with Hector haunting the scouts or all the schools with supposed dark pasts. What is more difficult to define is internet creepypastas that are localised on the internet which makes them instantaneously available across the globe. Such stories share the duality of local and universal as they come from the internet, but are easily accessed on personal devices or computers. As shown by the Momo Hoax, monsters residing on the internet can still have ramifications on a local level, as many of the scouts I interviewed had to be given warnings about Momo by teachers or parents.

Another key factor of horror narratives was how they interacted with nostalgia. Nostalgia creates a temporal orientation that elicits our feelings and memories of the past. Within the young adult survey and group discussions it was clear that certain urban legends were associated with childhood memories. Horror narratives such as Click Click Slide and *Salad Fingers* still elicit visceral responses and bring up strong memories. When talking about horror narratives from childhood there is a mixture of fondness and fear, thus showing the complexity of nostalgia. So, while horror narratives from our childhood have become nostalgic, modern creepypastas use nostalgic parts of the childhood experience and transform them into uncanny horror. Creepypastas like BEN Drowned and Sonic.exe challenge the safety of childhood nostalgia embedded in these video game franchises and distort the person-object relationship, defamiliarising the product and making it horrific. A game like *Granny*—as the scouts brought up—brings up similar fear of defamiliarising the comfort of the stereotypical 'grandmother's house' and making it a place of danger.

Through all these sections we come back to the idea of temporality and its relationship to horror narratives. What becomes clear is how horror narratives are in a constant shifting state in terms of time and location. An oral horror narrative like Click Click Slide travelled across culture, language, and location when it finally made it to Clyde Quay School in Wellington,

New Zealand. But stories like Click Click Slide also travel through time through nostalgia as discussing horror narrative memories connects us to our childhood. Such a story may not be as frequently disseminated today, but for the young adults who remember it the legend still ignites strong memories of the initial fear felt when hearing the story in childhood. Click Click Slide thus becomes a legend trapped in the past, a story from childhood and now an object of nostalgia. However, the version of the story of nostalgic reminiscence is only one variation of a constantly evolving story, as narrators over time and across locations appropriated the legend to new audiences.

## CONCLUSION

### The Horror Ends?

The overarching question of this thesis is as follows: how do children engage with urban legends and how has this changed with technological advancements? Through the chapters of this thesis I have been able to demonstrate the complexity of answering this question, showing the elements of engagement that have remained static as well as the new routes of engagement enabled by the internet and personal devices.

What I learned from doing this research was how expansive children's access to horror narratives is today. When I was a child in the early 2000s the predominant spread was through oral storytelling—as that was how I heard the story of Click Click Slide. In my teens I saw the rise of creepypastas in correlation to technological advancements and the shift in access to personal devices. Monsters like Slenderman and Jeff the Killer made their appearance in this era, the early during 2010s. Also came the rise of horror narrative video games made by independent creators, with major successes being *Slender: The Eight Pages* and *Five Nights at Freddy's*. The popularity of these video games expanded the media of horror narratives even further, and Let's Plays on YouTube joined the flood of horror content, allowing people to easily engage with horror content without actually playing the game. Momo has also made her way into the public eye recently, highlighting that these digital monsters can be accessed by children right on their phones and tablets.

It is important to understand that engagement with horror narratives incorporates a personalised process. Although much engagement takes place within a group setting, a child looking up horror YouTube videos alone in bed at night is an equally valid method of engagement. The individual journey into the world of horror narratives includes tailoring the experience to your own desires. Creepypasta lore particularly lends itself to such engagement, as the vast array of stories and images about monsters like Slenderman and Jeff the Killer allow children to explore their own creativity by incorporating these pre-existing entities into their own stories. Creepypastas invite children to use these stories as a creative playground and get lost in the fantasy through writing their own stories and creating their own author-inserts to interact with the monsters. In addition to the creativity, the personal freedom of the communities allows users to choose to incorporate themselves into different creepypasta groups, either as a lurker or someone who contributes to the discussion.



Such engagement, whether personal or within a group, on the internet contrasts to the urgency of sociality children face with the real-world social group context children have to cope with. Whether in the scouts or at school, children are forced to interact with their peers in a meaningful manner or else face isolation. Although the folk group sessions where children share horror narratives are for entertainment, they are utilised to help children develop their social skills and help them understand the dynamics of the community they are a part of. In the case of the internet, however, the ability to engage without urgency allows for users to choose the communities they desire to interact with or remain invisible as a lurker who does no participation but absorbs all the information. This is a rather new development for children's engagement with horror narratives due to accessibility to the internet on personal devices. In comparison with the childhood of children in the 2000s—my childhood—the predominant form of engagement was through oral storytelling. In this time period phones were not advanced enough to access the internet yet and most computers were shared by the whole family.

Another aspect to be acknowledged in children's engagement with horror narratives is the impact location has. Urban legends vary from universal, to travelling, to local, to niche. Universal legends are those such as the Hook Hand, Phantom Hitchhiker, and Bloody Mary that are familiar throughout Western society with some localised variations. Something like Waiwaikau is a Māori urban legend that parallels the Phantom Hitchhiker story even if the two are not directly connected. Travelling legends such as Click Click Slide that seems to have moved from Japan to the West, undergoing cultural appropriation in adaptation. These changes occur to make it relevant to Western audiences, including the change in the onomatopoeia based on English phonemes rather than Japanese ones. Local legends are stories located within a particular community that do not have wider spread. The Mount Victoria Tunnel is a local legend in Wellington, where commuters honk their horns to ward off the ghost of a pregnant woman murdered and buried in the tunnel (Graham-McLay 2019). These legends still reach thousands of people, but niche legends are horror narratives shared only among very small groups. In particular schools are often the subject of legends among children from ghosts to hidden undergrounds. Such is also the case of the Britannia Sea Scouts resident ghost, Hector, who haunts the galley of the boathouse. The question then becomes: where do creepypastas fit into localising narratives? Digital monsters such as Slenderman and Momo are universally accessible legends with local consequences. They are universal because they reside on the internet, but they are taken by users offline and

interacted with on a local level. I found this to be the case when discussing Momo with the children, many of whom had heard of Momo from parents and adults rather than from the internet.

The temporal aspect of this project allowed me to understand how children's engagement was impacted by technological advancements, as I grew up prior to the release of widespread personal devices with internet capabilities. The childhood experiences of myself and the other young adults my age allowed me to compare and contrast the changes in children's engagement with horror narratives. Most significantly was the finding that oral tradition was still practiced by children today, and that the lines between the digital world and the physical one overlapped in terms of content. Momo is a creepypasta figure residing in the digital realm, but children discussed taking what they learned about her to their friends in the real world. The vice-versa of this interaction is myself posting about Click Click Slide on Reddit, effectively digitally archiving an oral tradition story. This research showed me the significant role technology has had in the changes to horror narrative dissemination among children, and allowed me to observe these changes from an outsider perspective as someone who grew up prior to widespread personal devices.

### **Final Remarks**

The goal of this thesis was to understand how children engage with horror narratives, but on another level it was me trying to reconnect with my childhood fear of Click Click Slide. I wanted to understand why a story like hers was so impactful for many Kiwi children. On this journey I discovered this legend was not as 'local' as I had assumed, and the story was not rigid, but rather my version of Click Click Slide was one of many variations as the story was constantly appropriated and retold from Japan, to the United Kingdom, American, Australia, and landing in New Zealand.

One curse of nostalgic thinking is the rose-tinted glasses: everything was better back in my day. When I started this project such thinking deluded my expectations. As I grew up and became distanced from stories like Click Click Slide, I thought oral dissemination of urban legends and horror narratives had become obsolete. In 2017 Henry Zebrowski of *Last Podcast On the Left* joked once that they were witnessing the steady decline of creepypastas. "It's been so long since I've looked at them and I've gotta tell you what... the quality has not increased" (Kissel, Parks and Zebrowski 2017). Jeff Case, one of the original major creators of creepypasta, also lamented the same thought: "creepypasta is a withered husk of what it

used to be, a real damn shame.” The way many feel now about the decline of creepypasta was the same assumption I made about oral tradition at the start of this project. My assumption was that oral tradition had declined with the rise of internet horror narratives, but the children I interviewed proved me wrong and demonstrated engagement with oral tradition alongside digital.

Inadvertently, my research seems to have sparked new interest in Click Click Slide. After I told the children the story in the group discussions, Pippi let me know she heard scouts sharing the story a few days later. Click Click Slide may soon come out of retirement and return to the horror narrative circuit. Children will be telling stories of the legless sharp-nailed woman at camp, sleepovers, school, and whenever the macabre mood lures children into such discussion.

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