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“You Shouldn’t Have Done That”: “Ben Drowned” and the Uncanny Horror of the Haunted Cartridge

John Sanders

Abstract:

Written on 4Chan message boards by a user named Jadusable (Alex Hall) in 2010 and later archived by creepypasta enthusiasts, “Ben Drowned” relates the saga of a college sophomore’s encounter with a bootleg copy of *The Legend of Zelda: Majora’s Mask* (2000) supposedly possessed by the spirit of its former owner. Over the course of two weeks, Jadusable records his experiences in writing and short videos as the entity within the cartridge torments him, eventually taking control of his technology and escaping into the Internet. After a brief overview of theories of the uncanny and haunted media, this paper will conduct a narratological analysis of the “Ben Drowned” saga in order to explore the aesthetic and social potential of haunted cartridge narratives, especially how they can reveal the inherent uncanniness of games as a medium. Haunted cartridge narratives like “Ben Drowned” help to elucidate unsettling ambiguities between data and spirit, save files and human identity. Through stories like these, the information-carrying cartridge is revealed to mirror the body/soul duality so familiar to humanity, housing data, which may be possessed, altered, and corrupted by entities unknown. The errors and glitches commonplace in contemporary gaming technologies are recast within the work as being of uncertain and perhaps malicious origins, distorting once familiar digital spaces with the disquieting efficiency of an unseen hand. As such, this under-analyzed piece of digital fiction resonates with cultural fears regarding the primacy of incorporeal information within contemporary network society and casts the medium of the video game as a space ripe for encounters with uncanny entities.

Keywords: uncanny, Zelda, creepypasta, horror, ghosts, nostalgia, intertextuality, cartridge, Nintendo 64, Internet fiction, gameenvironments

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On 7 September 2010, college student Alex Hall (username “Jadusable”, also see Jadusable Wiki n. d.) started a thread on 4Chan’s paranormal message board (/x/)

that began with a rather desperate plea:

“Okay, /x/, I need your help with this. This is not cospasta, this is a long read, but I feel like my safety or well-being could very well depend on this. This is video game related, specifically [*The Legend of Zelda*] *Majora's Mask*, and this is the creepiest shit that has ever happened to me in my entire life.” (Hall 2010a)

The strange saga that followed would later come to be known as “Ben Drowned,” and recounted Jadusable’s experiences with a secondhand copy of a classic Nintendo 64 game that he found at a yard sale. Over the next week, Jadusable would upload posts almost every other day describing odd glitches and eerie coincidences within the bootleg game, accompanying each post with a short YouTube video chronicling the warped sounds, broken textures, and eerily pointed in-game dialogue that seemed to haunt his gameplay experience. Jadusable soon became convinced that the errors he witnessed were more than mere glitches and that “Ben,” the spirit of the game’s former owner (or perhaps something more sinister), was toying with him through the cursed cartridge. Worse, “Ben’s” influence was beginning to spread. No longer trusting his own technology, Jadusable warned his readers to discredit any posts coming from his account after September 12th, signing off with the hope of destroying his equipment before the entity could spread across the Internet. A few days later, however, his YouTube account’s user image mysteriously changed to the grinning face of a sprite from the game and his location was replaced with an ominous message: “Now I am everywhere” (Know Your Meme 2015).

Unnerving tales like “Ben Drowned” are a form of Internet literature commonly known as “creepypastas” – urban legends and ghost stories for the digital age. The term is derived from an older piece of Internet slang, “cospasta,” referring to the practice of copying and pasting text or images from elsewhere (usually a pre-written word document) to create one’s own post on a forum or blog (Considine 2010). As the

etymology of their name implies, creepypastas are intimately tied to technology and digital culture: authors of creepypastas frequently employ hyperlinks, videos, images, and animated gifs in the telling of their tales, often encouraging their readers to participate by posting comments or helping to spread the story to other sites or online forums. This tendency bleeds into the content of creepypastas as well: tales of cursed chain emails, disturbing abandoned websites, and lost, twisted episodes of popular television shows abound in the genre. Despite being mainly produced by amateur writers, the genre maintains a large online following and has spread into the popular sphere. Some of these stories – most notably that of Slenderman – have begun to garner the attention of academics and cultural critics in recent years, each determined to understand the creepypasta phenomenon as it relates to folktales, new media, and contemporary culture (Boyer 2013, Newsom 2013, Philips and Milner 2017, Henrikson 2018).

As academic studies of these digital ghost stories become more frequent, video game themed creepypastas remain conspicuously absent from the conversation despite the popularity of “Ben Drowned” within the digital sphere. Jadasable’s tale and accompanying videos – made with “[G]ameshark cheats and sneaky video editing” (Hall 2010c)ⁱ – quickly spread across the Internet after its creation in 2010, eventually being anthologized on creepypasta archives and even making its way to mainstream gaming sites like Joystiq and Kotaku (Yoon 2010, Good 2010). Among gaming subcultures particularly, the story has inspired fan art, memes, and music videos, not to mention the flood of similar video game creepypastas that take “Ben Drowned” as a template (Know Your Meme 2015).ⁱⁱ Interest in the story even inspired creator Alex Hall to begin an augmented reality game expanding upon the lore of his haunted world, but the project was put on hiatus due to his studies shortly after its creation (Know Your Meme 2015). Despite being eight years old at this point, the original tale

narratological approach emphasizes the creepypasta’s deep engagement with both video games and the concept of the uncanny. While a folklore studies approach might track the saga’s similarity to other urban legends and a sociological approach might draw connections between “Ben Drowned” and technological horror films like *The Ring* (2002) or *Unfriended* (2014), a close-reading inflected by new media scholarship and game studies is better suited to exploring the story’s use of strange gameplay experiences to explore a genre that resonates strongly with a gaming audience. By leveraging specific video games as intertexts, haunted cartridge narratives like “Ben Drowned” help to elucidate unsettling ambiguities between data and spirit, save files and human identity. Through stories like these, the information-carrying cartridge is revealed to mirror the body/soul duality so familiar to humanity, housing immaterial data, which may be possessed, altered, and corrupted by entities unknown. The errors and glitches commonplace in contemporary gaming technologies are recast within “Ben Drowned” as being of uncertain and perhaps malicious origins, distorting once familiar digital spaces with the disquieting efficiency of an unseen hand. As such, this under-analyzed piece of digital fiction resonates with cultural fears regarding the primacy of incorporeal information within contemporary network society and casts the medium of the video game as a space ripe for encounters with uncanny entities. After a brief overview of theories of the uncanny and haunted media, this paper will turn to the popular “Ben Drowned” saga as a case study to explore the aesthetic and social potential of this genre, especially how it can reveal the inherent uncanniness of games as a medium.

Double Play: The Uncanny and Video Games

The transformative and defamiliarizing sense of horror, which lends “Ben Drowned” much of its appeal is tightly bound to the aesthetic experience of the uncanny, a term

first explicated by Freud and expanded upon by later authors. In his 1919 essay on the subject, Sigmund Freud attempts to describe the uncanny (or *unheimlich* in German) as “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (1919, 195). For Freud, the etymology of the term involves something of a contradiction. The German term *unheimlich* is the negation of the term *heimlich*, which is connoted with both domestic familiarity or friendliness and also things “concealed, kept from sight, so that others do not get to know of or about it” (1919, 196-198). *Unheimlich*, therefore, means both something foreign, unfamiliar, and unfriendly, yet also something revealed and thus known. Under these definitions, both *heimlich* and *unheimlich* have been associated with seemingly oppositional terms simultaneously – supernatural and natural, comfort and fearfulness, known and unknown – and the same could be said of their English equivalents “canny” and “uncanny” (Freud 1919, Royle 2003). After giving a series of examples of the uncanny from life and literature – most prominently through a close reading of ETA Hoffmann’s short story *Der Sandmann* – Freud resolves this apparent semantic contradiction by positing that the phenomenon is the result of one of two possible revelations:

“an uncanny experience occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed.” (Freud 1919, 226)

As repression of neuroses (i.e., the fear of castration) and Freud’s so-called “primitive beliefs” (i.e., primal fears of ghosts or other supernatural phenomena) are intertwined more often than not, Freud notes that “this distinction is often a hazy one” (ibid.).

Since Freud, the concept of the uncanny has expanded past the psychoanalytical discourses of repression and childhood neuroses and into a philosophical and

works. Following in the footsteps of German media archaeology, Stefan Andriopoulos' *Ghostly Apparitions: German Idealism, the Gothic Novel, and Optical Media* (2013) traces the uncanniness of gothic fiction through magic lantern shows, short stories, and into the uncanniness of television. Perhaps the most focused treatment of uncanny media can be found in Jeffrey Sconce's *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (2000) which examines the fantasies and fears surrounding communications media such as telegraphs, telephones, radio, and broadcast television. Although he does not use the term in the Freudian sense, Sconce's discussions of electronically mediated ghosts, disembodied voices from beyond the grave, and the blurring of fantasy and reality are steeped in the uncanny, and his work makes a strong argument for the concept's co-development with 20th century media.

As excellent as the histories of uncanny media described by Kittler, Andriopoulos, and Sconce may be, they seem lacking when it comes to the integration of digital games into their arguments. Some of this comes from the focus of each overview: though the uncanny arises in each theorist's discussion (oftentimes explicitly), their interests seem to be on wider-ranging topics such as technological determinism in specific technologies (Kittler 1999), the afterlife of Gothic literary themes (Andriopoulos 2013), or telecommunications' facilitation of "electronic presence," which includes otherworldly simulations, alien communications, and other science-fiction phenomena (Sconce 2000, 10). While these authors do make gestures towards the digital at the tail ends of their works, their limited analyses speak to the time in which these texts were written. Sconce's final chapter views the fantasy of the digital through late 20th century texts like *The Matrix* (1999) or William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* (1984) rather than digital works themselves (Sconce 2000), and Kittler's few explicit mentions of video games as mere war simulations seems somewhat

lacking when applied to the multigeneric spaces of contemporary gaming culture (Kittler 1986, 133). As such, there still remains a need to integrate video games – perhaps the most uncanny of these uncanny media – into the histories set forth by these authors.

This is perhaps easier than one might expect. The very nature of video games give reality to the three major beliefs Sconce identifies in *Haunted Media* as the cultural basis for tales of paranormal telecommunication technologies (2000, 8-9). The act of controlling and identifying with an avatar, for example, fulfills in a very real sense the age-old desire Sconce calls disembodiment – the ability of a user to “transport his or her consciousness to a distant destination” (2000, 9). Games are also literal manifestations of a second fantasy, that of a “sovereign electronic world” which exists as a marvelous alternative to our own (2000, 9). Finally, artificial intelligence which reacts to the player’s choices achieve a level of anthropomorphism only dreamed of in regard to historical telecommunications media, blurring the line between the living and the non-living and fulfilling the third fantasy Sconce discusses. Each of these fantasies extant in video games contain a kernel of the uncanny within them, as does the looping nature of gameplay, the doubling between the player and their avatar, and the often unnatural movements of computer animated characters, making video games perfect vehicles for the unsettling experience described by Freud and Royle. However, the familiarity gamers (and increasingly the culture at large) have with these uncanny operations conceal the inherent strangeness in the disembodiment of a player’s data, their immersion in a marvelous world, or their interaction with seemingly intelligent digital automata. All that it takes to unmask video games as the uncanny media they are is to expose these operations, even for a moment. In their horrifying twisting of this familiar practice, haunted cartridge narratives like “Ben Drowned” do just that.

Saving Data, Saving Souls: Reanimating Life in the Cartridge

Following in the tradition of classic tales of cursed objects and arguably setting the precedent for other haunted cartridge narratives, "Ben Drowned" begins with the exchange of goods. Upon receiving a Nintendo 64 from a friend, Jadusable, a college sophomore, starts combing neighborhood garage sales in search of "those old games of [his] youth that [he] hadn't touched in at least a decade" (Hall 2010a). On his way back home from his nostalgia-fueled quest, one last house inexplicably catches his attention. In the driveway of this house is a table filled with strange inkblot paintings, presided over by a mysterious old man with a crooked smile, a blind right eye, and something overall "displeasing" about him (Hall 2010a). Jadusable politely asks if the man has any old video games (despite presuming that the man "had no idea what a video game was"), and to his surprise the man returns with a rather shoddy-looking Nintendo 64 cartridge, blank except for the word "Majora" scrawled on it in permanent marker (Hall 2010a). The man offers it to Jadusable for free, saying "that it used to belong to a kid who was about [his] age that didn't live here anymore." Jadusable's nostalgia-fueled joy in finding this free game overrides any reservations he might have had about the whole scenario, and he takes the cartridge home, "ready to relive [his] childhood" (Hall 2010a).

Setting aside for a moment the role of the unsettling, mysterious old man – himself perhaps a stand-in for death or some diabolical entity within greater folkloric tradition – I want to dwell for a moment on the nature of the cartridge itself and its relationship to materiality and memory. Popularized by the Atari 2600 in 1977, read-only memory (ROM) cartridges were the standard for video game data storage in the early days of home consoles (Rojas 2013). Consisting of a computer chip preloaded with a piece of game software and encased in a plastic shell, cartridges could be read

like part of the console’s hard drive, resulting in quick load times and the lack of expensive disk-reading hardware early on. Game developers often differentiated these sturdy little cartridges with eye-catching decals or even unique colors of plastic, making them into robust, individuated objects even when separated from their packaging. Further, unlike many optically mediated and (increasingly) digitally distributed games of the present day (which tend to store save data on a console’s hard drive or memory card), video game cartridges stored game data in the cartridge itself. As a result, whenever cartridges were moved, borrowed, sold, or lost, so too was the data inside, lending more importance to the singularity of any given cartridge in contrast to the replaceability of a CD-ROM or packet of downloaded data.

“Ben Drowned” – like many haunted cartridge narratives – leverages these technical properties of the cartridge to warp it into an occult object, one steeped in memory and the theme of death. First and foremost, for those gamers like Jadusable who came of age before optical media had become the industry standard for home consoles, the purchasing of such a material object signifies a return not just to a childhood game world, but to an earlier era of gaming. It is telling that Jadusable’s search sends him after the physical copies of these games rather than raw data one might find in a digital emulator. His desire to reconnect with games “that [he] hadn’t *touched* in at least a decade” (Hall 2010a, emphasis added) is a material desire as much as a virtual one. The presumably twenty-something Jadusable – not to mention the author Hall and his similarly-aged readership – would have come of age at the tail-end of cartridge technology for home consoles, associating the memories of his youth with an already dying piece of technology. After all, the Nintendo 64 (1996-2003) was the last widely available cartridge-based home system in North America until the Nintendo Switch resurrected the form, and it was already losing out in sales to disk-based systems like the Sony PlayStation even in its heyday. After the disk-

This mapping of a data/cartridge duality onto the body/soul duality points to another uncanny affordance of cartridge technology. Due to the fact, data is saved to the material cartridge rather than separate hardware, games in haunted cartridge narratives can potentially carry with them the identities of their previous owners. The physical exertions, gameplay decisions, expressive tendencies, and even names of previous owners are all written on the game world and (especially) their save file's version of a gamic avatar, a literal Freudian automaton manipulated by a living player. Being confronted with another save file presents the player with a potentially unsettling dilemma. Though it ought to be mundane, deleting the file may seem like an act of violence against the previous owner, an individual who is not physically present, yet still shares a virtual space with them via a packet of data containing the past deeds of the player whose name it bears. At the same time, the uncompleted file of a previous owner is enough to pique anyone's curiosity, but to reanimate a game long dead to someone else is somewhat ghoulish and immediately invokes the uncanny concept of inhabiting one's own double.

This uncanny drama is not lost on Jadusable, who sees the name "BEN" and immediately recognizes it as a trace of the previous owner. That this moment of recognition comes after he is *mis*recognized by the old man, who gives it away, makes the encounter doubly uncanny:

"[T]he man smiled at me and wished me well, saying "Goodbye then!" – at least that's what it sounded like to me. All the way in the car-ride home, I had a nagging doubt that the man had said something else. [...] I booted up the game (to my surprise it worked just fine) and there was one save file named simply "BEN". "Goodbye Ben", he was saying "Goodbye Ben". I felt bad for the man, obviously a grandparent and obviously going senile, and I – for some reason or another – reminded him of his grandson "Ben". Out of curiosity I looked at the save file. Eyeballing it, I could tell that he was pretty far in the game [...]. I remember thinking that it was a shame that he had come so close to beating

the game but he never finished it.” (Hall 2010a)

For Jadusable, like many who encounter save files in a used game, the file is no longer mere data: it is a record of the person before. The aura of otherness is so powerful that Jadusable originally “intended to preserve the file out of respect for the original owner,” much like one would preserve a gravestone. Even before he suspects the cartridge is haunted or even knows that the game’s former owner has died, Jadusable is confronted with a ghost in the form of data.

Just as the old man apparently mistakenly marked Jadusable as an uncanny double for Ben, so too does the game itself. While the game seems to work well for the most part, Jadusable notes that “the only thing that was a little unnerving was that at times the NPCs would call me “Link” [the name he used for his file] and at other times they would call me ‘BEN.’” The implication that he is inhabiting someone else’s game – that “Link” is not “Link,” but actually some unknown other – is so concerning to him that he decides to delete the file in an attempt to fix it. This only somewhat works, replacing “BEN” with gaping holes in the dialogue boxes where Jadusable’s chosen name should be – literal manifestations of the ever-present absence of an unknown other haunting the data within the cartridge. Ironically, of course, Jadusable is never playing as himself in these scenarios either, naming himself after the hero of the game rather than inserting his own likeness into the virtual world. This, like the materiality of the cartridge, illustrates the uncanny position in which all gamers find themselves when taking on the role of a character through an avatar. The character is always already a double within the world of the game, and so long as they do not intrude, the uncanniness seems to fade into the familiar. It takes an unruly entity like Ben to reveal this strangeness underlying the process of play and the liminal position the player takes between the “real” world and a virtual one whenever they pick up a controller and boot up a new cartridge.

A World Warped: Glitches, Gameworlds, and Childhood Fears

The uncanny affordances of the haunted cartridge as object – as well as its power to evoke an unobtainable past – are only matched by the potential uncanniness of the game world itself. Writing on the nostalgic power of classic video games, Sean Fenty claims that “the nostalgia felt for video games is not nostalgia for a past state before the trauma of games disrupted us” – i.e. before a certain console technology became obsolete – “but a desire to recapture that mind-altering experience of being in a game for the first time” (2008, 23). While the nostalgic ideal of resurrecting a long dead past can never be truly achieved, he notes that the “seduction” of games is that they offer an unchanging version of the past which may be replayed by rote: “once we learn the rhythms, we are home – player and game, dancer and dance, one and the same” (ibid., 22). Of course, it is precisely within these spaces of domestic familiarity that the uncanny lurks, threatening to twist the benign into something threatening and strange, evoking once-surmounted fears that will return to haunt the player.

This is exactly what occurs shortly into “Ben Drowned.” After choosing to ignore the game’s misnaming of his character, Jadusable relies on his knowledge of the game to exploit a well-known glitch in order to give himself more time to complete objectives.ⁱⁱⁱ The game then unexpectedly transports his character into an eerily empty version of Clock Town, the game’s central hub, with missing walls, inverted music, and a “feeling of inexplicable depression on a profound scale” which washes over Jadusable outside of the game. Every time he would try to escape through an exit, Jadusable found himself reentering the broken town, greeted by the misplaced audio clip of a certain character’s quiet laughter. After minutes of fruitless wandering, Jadusable finally gets the morbid idea to drown his avatar Link in a small body of

water, hoping to respawn in another area outside the looping city. Before he can do so however, a smiling statue of Link – one that exists in the game files, but only appears in specific end-game scenarios – begins appearing behind Jadusable’s avatar at shorter and shorter intervals, as if pursuing him through the abandoned dreamscape. Just as the statue catches up completely, the game cuts to black at the sound of a monstrous scream and reloads another glitched scene, this one of an early boss battle. Every action Jadusable tries results in Link horrifically bursting into flames and falling down dead, contorted in a way not seen in the normal course of the game. After lingering on the virtual corpse for a disturbingly long time, the game resets itself and sends Jadusable back to the title screen. There, he finds that his save file has been deleted – eerily significant in context of the soul-data link explicated above – and in its place were two others: “BEN,” which he had erased, and a new file labeled “YOUR TURN,” beckoning him to play on (Hall 2010d).

Partially because the latter half of this episode is captured in a YouTube video, many of the elements in “Ben Drowned” are frightening whether or not someone has played the game all the way through. The image of a smiling, blank-faced simulacrum appearing behind a green clad hero at every turn, for example, invokes the uncanny whether or not someone knows that the character’s name is Link. However, a familiarity with the original, non-possessed world of the game becomes narratively and affectively important for the story’s protagonist and audience. On the protagonist’s end, familiarity with the game bolsters the illusion of control, which will later prove to be undone by the mutating entity. An experienced player is able to exercise a large amount of control over the game world, a control they can even extend to the hidden operations of the code through the exploitation of glitches like the one Jadusable tries to use before things go awry. That the virtual world is made strange after this hidden code is exposed and exploited is a fittingly Freudian

unearthing of the *unheimlich* processes beneath the game's diegesis, something rarely revealed in the process of normal play. Secondly, a familiarity with the game allows for initially trivial subtleties and deviations to invoke uncanny feelings without much explanation. This is especially true for non-visual portrayals of haunted cartridge narratives: a reader who can visualize the "trippy boxed-in arena" in which Jادusable's avatar is trapped or hear the "background music which was regular for the area (but still creepy)" have a very different experience of the textual elements of Jادusable's story than one who does not know the game at all (Hall 2010a). A reader with a personal connection to the original version of the warped game will almost certainly experience a more powerful sense of the uncanny while watching the videos as well. If the uncanny is truly "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known and long familiar" (Freud 1919, 196), watching the virtual world one mastered long ago twisted into something that defies one's fond memories is the epitome of this phenomenon.

Of course, perhaps not all of these childhood memories are as untouched by the uncanny as one might expect, and this is especially the case when looking at "Ben Drowned's" source text: *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* (2000). As those who have played it can attest, *Majora's Mask* can be a rather disturbing game on its own, especially for a title in the family-oriented Zelda series. The plot initially seems pretty conventional for a Zelda title: Link must save the land of Termina by awakening the guardian giants locked away in its temples and defeating the imp-like Skull Kid before the villain can magically bring the moon crashing down with the demonic power of Majora's Mask. Because he only has three days to do so, however, Link must use his magical ocarina to periodically travel back in time, delaying the final showdown until he is powerful enough to defeat his foe. This time-travel element – a holdover from the previous game in the series, *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*

(1998) – lends the first hint of uncanniness into the game. The non-player characters (NPCs) which populate Termina each have their own motives and routines under the shadow of the looming moon and are not privy to the same time-bending powers Link is, leading to some unsettling scenarios: the postman runs the same route again and again; the same robbery occurs in the same place every first night; and NPCs Link has helped or even saved will not remember him when he returns. The fact that many of the character models for these NPCs are reused assets from *Ocarina of Time* lends an additional uncanny element of doubling for those who have played both games. While it is plausible that many of these characters could indeed be persistent across both games, none of the characters will recognize Link as the hero of any other adventure; they are mere doppelgangers, uncanny doubles of those Link (and the player) used to know.

While these uncanny elements merely emphasize the recursion and reused assets commonly encountered in most video games – once again emphasizing the uncanniness of the medium – *Majora’s Mask* stands out due to its somewhat disturbing themes surrounding death. In the course of his adventure, Link must gather and utilize magical masks which contain the souls of dead heroes, most of whom he meets on the brink of (or after) their deaths.^{iv} Putting on these masks transforms Link into that hero’s likeness after a rather dramatic werewolf-esque transformation scene, complete with head grasping and a disturbing scream. Although these transformation cinematics can be skipped after the initial metamorphosis, other eerie content cannot be. Through the course of his adventure, Link must exorcise a little girl’s half-zombified father, play hide-and-seek with “Moon Children” wearing the faces of the bosses he has slain, and eventually defeat a pulsating, tentacled version of the titular demonic mask itself. The blank-faced statue that features so prominently in “Ben Drowned” is part of the game as well: the effigy

is summoned when Link plays a song called the “Elegy of Emptiness” which allows him to “shed a shell cast in [his] current image,” a “soldier with no heart,” as the skeleton king who teaches the player the song puts it (Cresun 2015). Whether or not young players fully grasped the horrifying implications of creating soulless husks of themselves in order to solve puzzles, the blank stares of the effigies certainly left an impression on players like Alex Hall and those who read his horror story.

There is something to be said on a classically Freudian level about how a game’s originally unsettling content and the childhood anxieties surrounding it play a major part in the uncanniness of haunted cartridge narratives. One of the reasons the core elements of the creepypasta (the Elegy statue, the smile of the mask salesman, Skull Kid’s laugh, etc.) are so effective is because of the uncanniness that arises not from “repressed infantile complexes” or “surmounted primitive beliefs,” but from once-surmounted childhood fears (Freud 1919, 226). In order to complete a game like *Majora’s Mask*, the player would have had to come to terms with any frightening content that sparked the darker parts of their young imagination. Upon doing so, any irrational fears aroused by this act of imagination (say, the fear of a sentient statue) would be dispelled somewhat, banished to the realm of memory. In the process of reading the creepypasta, however, the former player of *Majora’s Mask* is once again faced with the demons of their childhood, freshly exhumed and imbued with new life in the form of a horror narrative. This effect is enhanced by the videos, which better emulate the visual medium of the game and return the players to a twisted version of their own memories, resurrecting the uncanny suspicion that one may be witnessing something paranormal within gameplay.

Ghost in the Machine: “BEN” as Uncanny Entity

As Jadasable delves further and further into the warped world of the corrupted cartridge over the next few days, he begins to recognize patterns behind the noise. The coincidences have become too pointed to be mere glitches: the misplaced game dialogue of “You’ve met with a terrible fate, haven’t you?” appears alongside images of his dead avatar; the recurring figures of Skull Kid and the Elegy statue rather than any other enemies from the game are his tormenters; and the naming of the file “YOUR TURN” taunts him in a way that only an intelligent being could (Hall 2010b). At first, he tries to assure himself that these events are due to human intervention and seeks refuge in the hope of confirming this fact:

“maybe this BEN guy is just a really good hacker/programmer [...] I’m hoping that maybe this is some kind of running gag the developers had and that other people have gotten ‘gag’ or ‘hacked’ copies of the game like this.” (Hall 2010a)

Of course, due to the singularity of the data on a cartridge (as opposed to, say, digitally distributed packets of data), it was impossible to know for sure. Upon going back to the neighborhood, he is unable to find the old man or find out what happened to the game’s former owner, deepening the unsettling nature of the foreign object.

The next time he turns on the game – selecting the “BEN” file despite his original fears of save data (dis)possession – he is “thrust into complete chaos” (Hall 2010a). The once-familiar character of Link is distorted, “back cocked violently to the side” with a “blank look – as if he was dead,” his body spasming irregularly back and forth (Hall 2010e). The unveiling of Jadasable’s childhood avatar as nothing more than coded elements that could be twisted into such a grotesque shape is disturbing in itself, but it was accompanied by something perhaps even more horrifying: “sounds

played back and forth that *I didn't recognize from the game*" (Hall 2010a, emphasis added). After taking *Jadusable* through a gamut of disturbing scenarios, some of which are impossible in the logic of the game, two new game files appear which together answer the question he had sought out earlier: "BEN" and "DROWNED" (Hall 2010b). Not only has the game mutated past the bounds of its pre-programmed assets, but it has proven itself to be sentient, forcing its player to keep playing and eventually taunting him in his dreams.

Through the figure of the uncanny entity "Ben," the creepypasta illuminates the fears of mutation, infection, and formlessness as they relate to contemporary digital culture, anxieties well established in early new media scholarship. N. Katherine Hayles, for example, described culture as entering the realm of "virtuality" as early as 1999, an era driven by a "cultural perception that material objects are interpenetrated by information patterns" (1999, 69). As a result of this cultural condition, the interplay between pattern and randomness which gives information meaning is displacing the previous presence/absence dialectic of the postmodern moment (*ibid.*, 78). Anything, which disrupts the reliable replication and continuation of this informational dialectic (i.e. mutation) becomes exceedingly dangerous to a world run by the logic of virtuality (*ibid.*, 79). Alexander Galloway describes something similar in his book *Protocol*, which takes as its object the hidden technical and social procedures which govern the distributed power structures of contemporary "network society" (2003, 6). Protocols act as forms of power and control based partly on their ability to "facilitate peer-to-peer relationships between autonomous entities," helping everything run as the protocol directs it (*ibid.*, 82). Though Galloway avoids the issue of sabotage and advocates for working through protocol to enact social change, the Deleuzian concept of disruptive "noncommunication" as a threat to network society certainly influences his thought (*ibid.*, 17). Although Hayles and Galloway differ on a number of

elements core to our contemporary epoch (including what to call it), it is striking that both of their item-by-item breakdowns include “mutation” as a psychological threat to our brave new world (Hayles 1999, 79; Galloway 2003, 114-115).

On a basic level, the mutation described by Hayles and Galloway may be seen in the glitches plaguing “Ben Drowned’s” narrative as well as video games in general. Every time a glitch occurs in a game or any other digital system, one is confronted with the fragile reality of the complex systems that run our world. These technical mutations are enough to reveal that “randomness interpenetrates and precedes pattern” both within the game and in contemporary society as a whole (Hayles 1999, 79). This complicates the player’s sense of control over (and thus their place within) the flawed pattern they see before them. Indeed, this was a fear underlying the aesthetic appeal of the haunted cartridge story, as its creator Hall would go on to explain in a later interview:

“As a video game, there are only a finite amount of possibilities that the developers have intended to be created and be experienced in the game [...] So when something goes off the rails out of its programming and does something that is totally thought to be impossible, it’s almost to me this level of surrealism, this feeling of unease. The laws, the rules of what you expected out of a game are suddenly meaningless. That makes you feel vulnerable, in a way.” (Van Allen 2017)

Hall’s “unease” with the familiar becoming foreign, of course, is exactly the uncanniness that resides in all games, revealed every time a glitch mutates the game world.

But there is more to Ben as an entity than the errors which reveal his presence and disturb the user: Ben is also viral. Like many computer viruses, its origins are the result of “shady” technology and a deviation from the accepted protocol of a given system

In its pursuit of variety and its interest in the reactions of the one it has infected, Ben is revealed to have an organic element to its character. The entity, then, inhabits the liminal, uncanny space between the organic and inorganic, alive and dead, exerting an electronic presence that acts virally but exists beyond it.

This ghostly formlessness is perhaps the most frightening and uncanny aspect of entities like Ben. As discussed earlier in the essay, Ben is not confined to the material form of the cartridge, nor does it ever appear in an identifiable physical form throughout the story. It is depicted as either one of many virtual forms (the Happy Mask Salesman, Skull Kid, Cleverbot) or merely a presence with no substance (the assorted text within the game, an "aura" in Jodusable's dorm room) (Hall 2010a). The closest thing that comes to a stable representation of Ben (indeed, the image that the fan art community has latched onto) is the unnerving Elegy statue. But not only is this statue merely a virtual representation of the entity, but it is also a representation of a representation – as discussed above, the statue within the diegesis itself is merely a soulless "shell" in the image of the game's protagonist (Cresun 2015). Jodusable reveals that even the name "Ben" could be a misnomer: "I'm beginning to think that this "thing" maybe isn't Ben at all, in its sadistic nature I wouldn't be surprised if it took the boy's name after it killed him" (Hall 2010a). Ben resists categorization by manipulating the assets around him regardless of whether their code is technological or spiritual, warping them just enough to produce an uncanny doubling within itself between Ben and not Ben, form and formlessness.

This liminality aligns the entity with the classic concept within literary horror of the ghost, a being whose entire existence is steeped in the uncanny. As Fred Botting describes them, "ghosts by definition refuse to stay in their place, crossing between life and death, body and spirit, form and formlessness, consciousness and

unconsciousness" (Botting 2015, 18). Unlike classic literary ghosts however, Ben and fictional entities like it are not necessarily spirits of once living things but instead embody the additional dialectic of spirit/information. The entity, then, is attuned to what Botting calls the final order of spectrality, in which

"there is no reference to reality whatsoever: ghostliness refers only to spectres of other images and phantoms, a move into a realm of simulation and hyperreality in which modernity slips away." (Botting 2015, 19)

The entity in a haunted cartridge narrative – like the code that interpenetrates gameworlds and our contemporary society alike – is an informational simulacrum, made up of data that has no physical reality. These are exactly the sort of entities that inhabit the virtual worlds of video games, mimicking life through automation and artificial intelligence but remaining never quite human. Yet as "Ben Drowned" shows, this entity is still dangerous in that it has the ability to manipulate and mutate the things we hold dear in this age of virtuality. In "providing objectless anxiety with objects of fear" in this manner, entities like "Ben" (and, to a lesser extent, the coded video game characters to which he is related) are perfect vehicles for delivering uncanny dread in a digital age (Botting 2015, 18).

Conclusion: "Now I Am Everywhere"

By 12 September 2010, someone claiming to be Jadusable's roommate had to intervene on the 4Chan forum, announcing that Jadusable had moved out due to high stress and was "just taking this semester off" (Hall 2010a). Before he left, however, he gave his roommate specific instructions to release one final video and a text document labeled "TheTruth.txt", the latter of which was only to be released three days later for download on Mediafire, a media-sharing site (Know Your Meme

2015). In the file, Jadusable reveals that “Ben” seems to have traveled to his laptop through the video card he used to record the gameplay footage and had exerted its control over the entire process, editing posts without his knowledge and cutting out details that might have helped to stop it. No longer trusting his own technology, Jadusable warns the reader to discredit any posts coming from his account after 12 September, further insisting “from here on out do not download ANY images I may have put up, any files, any ANYTHING” – an odd request for those who have just downloaded the file they are reading (Hall 2010a). This phrase becomes even more ominous by the end of the text file, which contains an uncharacteristic shift in tone:

“Again, even though I don’t even know you this is sort of bittersweet for me. This semester I really didn’t have any friends, or rather, I stopped paying attention to them. But I suppose that’s partially to blame because I am the genius who picked to live in a single, I suppose someone to get ahold of me and save me before I got too immersed into this game would have literally saved my life. [...] Lastly, thank you for taking the time to open this and open yourselves up to me by hearing my story, despite maybe not believing [*sic*] me. You didn’t have to do that - really, you shouldn’t have. Your support this entire time has kept me going and now I am finally free of this.” [*sic*].” (Hall 2010a)

The emphasis on achieving freedom and the warped echo of “you shouldn’t have done that” (in turn an echo of game dialogue) evoke Ben’s sadistic antagonisms, and the reference to living in a single casts new light on the identity of Jadusable’s “roommate” from the previous post. The warped character at the end of the note confirms the demonic presence of Ben and implies that it has found a new name (Jadusable) as well as a new host (the reader’s computer). A final YouTube video (“free.wmv”) appeared on Jadusable’s account an hour later – now presided over by the face of the Elegy statue rather than Jadusable’s profile picture – with a cryptic message written in game dialogue for all the presumed infected: “The counter resets...I’m glad you did that” (Hall 2010f). Despite Jadusable and his reader’s best

intentions, they have unknowingly aided the uncanny entity's escape from its material shell and thus its imminent corruption of the once-familiar digital world, a truth revealed by the entity's final gloating line on Jadusable's YouTube page: "Now I am everywhere" (Know Your Meme 2015).

While this final act of audience manipulation may be lost on those reading the story long after the original thread was completed, the horrifying implications of Ben's triumph still resonate with the fears of a network society. Aside from make for a good horror story, the uncanny affordances throughout the narrative – ghostly doubles hidden in haunted cartridges, familiar worlds made strange through glitches and mutations, and the blurred boundary between non-living processes and the machinations of diabolical entities – help bring to light the inherent uncanniness undergirding video games and the cultures that surround them, particularly in the realms of gaming nostalgia, digitally mediated intertextuality, and the insidious fears of corruption in a highly connected world. However, the most horrifying thing revealed by Jadusable's encounters with haunted cartridges, warped gameworlds, and malicious entities is that all of these terrors are based in the technological realities of gaming and digital culture, hidden beneath layers of code or behind plastic shells just waiting to be unearthed. Taken as a horror narrative created by and for a gaming audience, "Ben Drowned" illustrates how a gamic intertext can be effectively leveraged to provoke contemporary anxieties about our uncanny digital world.

While the entity itself is fiction, Ben's final pronouncement of its ubiquity may turn out to be terrifyingly true. As games continue their dominance of the entertainment industry (Nath 2016), the uncanniness inherent in the medium's doubling of virtual bodies, not-quite real worlds, and automata driven by artificial intelligence will

become more and more apparent. With the success of the cartridge-based Nintendo Switch and gaming peripherals like statuesque Amiibos, the properties of data-infused material artifacts are re-emerging from a time long past. Simultaneously, the flood of nostalgia-fueled high-definition remakes, extensive fan mods, and independent developers’ reimaginings of classic genres provide more opportunities to see the familiar made hauntingly strange. Horror-infused games like *Undertale* (2016) and *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (2017) have even incorporated world-bending diabolical entities into their gameplay, giving some semblance of form to the formless, viral, and mutative forces threatening to jeopardize society’s digital protocols. Finally, as new generations of digital natives write their own video-game themed ghost stories, they will have plenty more uncanny material from which to draw and more likely a larger game-playing audience ready for a scare. Soon enough, game-based creepypastas may be everywhere.

As for “Ben Drowned,” the re-release of *Majora’s Mask* for the Nintendo 3DS in November 2014 gave new life to the story: Google Trends data suggests a spike in searches for Jadasable’s creepypasta in the months following the announcement, adding to the already notable popularity of the saga beforehand (Know Your Meme 2015). Those returning to the *Zelda* experience after decades past, much like Jadasable was, will find the digital world to be familiar, but somewhat changed in the intervening years: the characters they once knew no longer have the jagged faces of the 64-bit era, the exploits they once used to gain more time have been “fixed” by the developers, and every so often they will come across a new character or a slightly modified puzzle that will remind them of the foreignness of this once familiar world. Although this uncanniness ought to vanish in the absence of glitches and the presence of novelty, that will never fully stave off the feeling of dread inherent in the return to a game one thought one knew. Perhaps, a decade down the line, a gamer

will come across a scratched-up copy of this version at a yard sale with "Majora" sharpied across its plastic shell, inspiring their own version of the haunted cartridge narrative. Until they do, entities like Ben will lurk behind every shaking screen or botched texture, waiting for an imaginative player to make them real again.

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ⁱ A "GameShark" is a peripheral for the Nintendo 64 and other consoles of its generation which allows users to input codes to access effects, levels, and animations hidden within the source code but not usually accessible through typical gameplay.

ⁱⁱ Some of the most notable "haunted cartridge" narratives following in the wake of "Ben Drowned" include the notoriously awful "Sonic.exe" (JC-the-Hyena 2011), the lengthy "NES Godzilla Creepypasta" (Cosbydaf 2011) and a cluster of stories about twisted versions of *Pokémon* cartridges including "Pokémon Black" (Toxiclullaby 2015a) "Pokémon Strangled Red" (Toxiclullaby 2015b), and "Pokémon Lost Silver" (HyukxHongbin238 2015).

ⁱⁱⁱ The glitch in question is known as the "Fourth Day glitch," which the narrator presumes at least some of the "hardcore Majora's Mask players" in his audience will know and that the rest will be able to picture: "[T]he gist of it is that right as the clock is about to hit 00:00:00 on the final day, you talk to the astronomer and look through the telescope. If you time it right the countdown disappears and you essentially have another day to finish whatever you were doing."

^{iv} The recurring theme of death in *Majora's Mask* is rare in games, especially for an E-rated Zelda title in the Nintendo 64 era. This theme is so striking as to have spawned a popular fan theory, which claims each zone represents one of the five stages of grief – mature content for a children's game. See Boccabella 2011.