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Untitled. Photographer: Pawel Kadysz (<https://stocksnap.io/photo/OZ4IBMDS8E>).

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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

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

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

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

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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