

## Transforming Through The Screen; Ritual Story Telling, Online Folklore and the Powers of the False in The World's Fair

Throughout myth and into popular culture we find examples of texts of cryptic power and secretive origins which promise to change their beholder. As the writing and symbols of *The Lesser Key of Solomon*<sup>1</sup> morphs into the broadcast signal of *Videodrome*<sup>2</sup>, the medium evolves with each epoch, so as best to express the strange exchange one makes when one creates; that that creation might come back and recreate its makers.

Jane Schoenbrun's 2021 feature film debut *We're All Going To The World's Fair* (WAGTTWF), explores what shape such a text might take within the age of web 2.0. A coming-of-age horror hybrid, we follow teenage Casey, played by Anna Cobb, as she takes part in the World's Fair challenge; "the internet's scariest online horror game"<sup>3</sup>. The rules of the game appear simple; take the initiation and document the changes which are promised to befall you as a result. Throughout WAGTTWF we see these changes and the seemingly paranormal effects of the Fair in the home made videos posted online by Casey and the rest of the online community surrounding the Fair. This diverse output of strange, silly and sometimes genuinely creepy content makes up the bulk of the film, producing the feeling of being "lost in the haze of the internet"<sup>4</sup> as Schoenbrun describes. From this haze, JLB<sup>5</sup> emerges, a shady would-be authority figure who tries to guide Casey through the mythos of the Fair. Across Casey's suburban bedroom and the waking dream space of the internet, fantasy seems to take hold of reality as Casey's transformation becomes more pronounced. "It's like I can feel myself leaving my body"<sup>6</sup> Casey

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph H. Peterson (ed.) (author unknown), *The Lesser Key of Solomon: Lemegeton Clavicula Salomonis*, (Maine: Red Wheel/Weiser, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> *Videodrome*, directed by David Cronenberg (Universal Pictures, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> *We're All Going To The World's Fair*, directed by Jane Schoenbrun (Utopia, 2021), 00:11:01.

<sup>4</sup> Jane Schoenbrun, 'I wanted the film to feel like we're lost in the haze of the internet', interview by Natalie Marlin, *Little White Lies*, published 25th April, 2022, <https://lwlies.com/interviews/jane-schoenbrun-were-all-going-to-the-worlds-fair/>.

<sup>5</sup> The acronym of JLB's name is never explained.

<sup>6</sup> *We're All Going...*, 00:36:09.

confesses to her unseen spectators. When Casey eventually discusses shooting her father and disappearing “inside the video, through the computer... screen”<sup>7</sup>, JLB steps in and requests to ask Casey something “out of game”<sup>8</sup>. At this point the fictional apparatus of the MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role play game) which constitutes the Fair is fully revealed to both the audience, and seemingly to Casey too, and the nature of the Fair reestablished as a fantasy structure for collective online storytelling. Following this reveal Casey makes good on her promise to disappear through the screen, logging off and deleting her videos. Despite its themes of dysphoria and emotional isolation, the film’s tone is largely not one of sadness. As Nicole Flattery mentions in her Sight & Sound review, for a film about the stranger fringes and habits of the internet it is “devoid of cynicism”<sup>9</sup>. Instead *WAGTTWF* is heavily invested in the frisson and potential of the adolescent imagination, in how the fictional and the virtual trouble and transform the everyday and the actual.

The following considers the World’s Fair (WF), the narrative device which drives Schoenbrun’s film, and how it uses powers unique to the internet to function as an evolved version of the transformative texts and media mention in our intro. We will begin with how the WF extends forms of ritual play and folklore through the collective mechanics made available through web 2.0. We will then explore how Gilles Deleuze’s concepts of ‘the powers of the false’<sup>10</sup> might further elucidate and expand the transformative potential of the WF’s storytelling processes. *WAGTTWF*’s diegetic complexity means we have unfortunately had to largely forgo many interesting themes presented in the film; for example it’s depiction of gender dysphoria<sup>11</sup>, how it

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<sup>7</sup> *We’re All Going...*, 01:06:50.

<sup>8</sup> *We’re All Going...*, 01:08:50.

<sup>9</sup> Nicole Flattery, ‘We’re All Going to the World’s Fair’, Sight and Sound, accessed 24 August 2022, <https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/reviews/were-all-going-worlds-fair-film-thats-captivating-scattered-internet-itself>.

<sup>10</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema II: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (1985, rev., London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), Chapter 6.

<sup>11</sup> Schoenbrun, who transitioned during the period from beginning and ending work on *We’re All Going...*, has described the work as a trans film, and an explicit exploration of “dysphoria”, see

Jane Schoenbrun, ‘Episode 21 - We’re All Going to the World’s Fair’, The HorrorCultFilms Podcast published 6th May, 2022, <https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/the-horrorcultfilms-podcast/id1552271402?i=1000559831142>, 07:45.

relates dreaming with the internet, how Schoenbrun's makes the audience participants in the Fair, and the seemingly magical video behind the WF and comparisons to its precursor: David Cronenberg's *Videodrome*. This has been done out of an effort to focus on the WF's story telling processes and its relation to real world phenomena, so as to then explore its potential for real world application. Similarly there are other lenses with which we could have explored the Fair, the increasingly popular study of role play games in relation to Johan Huizinga's Homo Ludens theory being an interesting one<sup>12</sup>. We have instead chosen Deleuze's proposal for becoming another through democratised forms of cinematic story telling, a proposition we find mirrored in the WF's central promise. We will begin with an exploration of what exactly the WF is, and what part its participants make with the forces of the internet and the unknown.

## **What is the World's Fair?**

### **An Invocation**

In a dark attic bedroom at some unknown hour of the night Casey sits illuminated like an apparition by the blue white glow of a laptop screen. Staring vacantly into the webcam, she performs a series of ritual operations as initiation into the WF challenge<sup>13</sup>. Through scenes like this introductory one, we can see how the WF conjoins existing folkloric traditions and the power of ritual language within the dark expanses of the internet to enchantment and produce certain effects and powers. During the ritual Casey repeats 'I want to go to the World's Fair'<sup>14</sup> three times with increasing resolve, a phrasing and structure evocative of the summoning of Bloody Mary, a figure from urban legend. Whilst its story changes from region to region with each retelling, folklorist Alan Dundes has distilled the operative elements of the ritual as such: "a child almost

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<sup>12</sup> see ed. Valerie Frissen et al., *Playful Identities*, (Amsterdam University Press, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> *We're All Going...*, 00:00:20 to 00:08:10.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*



Fig. 1.  
Casey pronouncing the initiatory incantation.  
Posted to Home Manchester, accessed 29th August 2022. <https://homemcr.org/film/were-all-going-to-the-worlds-fair/>.

always a girl, goes into a bathroom at night and repeats the name Mary in some form.”<sup>15</sup> This is said to result in the apparition of the frightful mirror witch Bloody Mary emerging from the bathroom mirror towards the girl<sup>16</sup>. In trying to derive a psychoanalytic interpretation of the legend, Janet Langlois remarks the ritual is supposed to “literally reflects the identification of the participants with the revenant”<sup>17</sup>: they see themselves temporarily become the object of invocation. Simon J. Bronner proposes how such a thing might happen, pointing out the legend’s insistence that when participants performing the ritual they ‘have to really believe in her, or else she won’t appear’<sup>18</sup>. The game harnesses the affective power of one’s belief to distort the mirror’s usual function and instead momentarily reflect back their belief, resulting in Bloody Mary

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<sup>15</sup> Alan Dundes, “Bloody Mary in the Mirror: A Ritual Reflection of Pre-Pubescent Anxiety”, *Western Folklore*, vol. 57, no. 2/3 (Spring - Summer, 1998), 120.

<sup>16</sup> This mirror-naming nexus has proliferated variously through urban legend and popular culture, most famously in the invocation of *Candyman* see;

*Candyman*, directed by Bernard Rose (TriStar Pictures, 1992).

*Candyman*, directed by Nia DaCosta (Universal Pictures, 2021).

<sup>17</sup> Janet Langlois, 'Mary Whales, I Believe in You: Myth and Ritual Subdued', *Indiana Folklore*, vol. 11 (1978), 9.

<sup>18</sup> Simon J. Bronner, *American Children's Folklore*, (Little Rock: August House, 1988), 168.

“[becoming] the girl's own reflection”<sup>19</sup>. Dundes' essay also highlights how this ritual is seemingly performed by adolescent girls, those on the cusp of becoming women<sup>20</sup>. The ritual catalyses an anxiety in which they see themselves become that archetype of the demonised older woman: the witch. Similarly the WF initiation marks participants entry into unpredictable bodily changes. Through its adaptation of this ritual summoning, the WF forms a continuation of and relies upon the psychological effects of real folk customs, employing the powers of invocation to affect its participants at a moment of uncertain transition.

When we think about this logic in relation to the version of the ritual Casey performs however, where the dark bathroom mirror is replaced with the mirroring function of the webcam video, who or what is Casey invoking, expecting to find reflected back by the internet and her belief? To answer this we could look to how the ritual demonstrates a belief in the connection between language and affect. Deleuze and Guattari identify types of spoken language where we find a ‘transmission of the word as order-word’<sup>21</sup>, not words as a description of the world but words as an acting upon it. We could think of this in operation when S.H. Hooke writes of how in the context of ritual “the spoken word has the efficacy of an act”<sup>22</sup>. When spoken in the context of believers, Casey's belief converts ‘I want to go’ into ‘I am going’. Similarly to Bronner's emphasis on the importance of belief in the Bloody Mary ritual, when JLB and Casey first meet he demands to know that she's ‘not making it up’<sup>23</sup>, forces her to attest to the authenticity of the stories she's telling. In the statement ‘I want to go’, one is not just uttering the password for admission, but telling oneself a story; that we shall summon Bloody Mary or ‘go to the WF’. The spoken order-word simultaneously catalyses her own desire and declares it to the unseen audience of the WF. Just as the language of invocation produces Bloody Mary, the spoken order-words of the WF ritual allows Casey to see herself reflected back in the WF.

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<sup>19</sup> Langlois, ‘Mary Whales’, 9.

<sup>20</sup> Dundes, ‘Bloody Mary...’, 126.

<sup>21</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (1988; reis., London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 88.

<sup>22</sup> S.H. Hooke, ed., *Myth and Ritual* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 3.

<sup>23</sup> *We're All Going...*, 00:35:08.

As we shall see next, what this reflection entails seems to be found in the confluence of the desires of the participants and those of the WF community.

## **An invitation**

Whilst the Bloody Mary ritual operates through psychological manifestation, the WF extends this manifestation into the constructed reality of the internet, and through the capacity of online collective story telling to turn words into worlds. To understand how this process works we need to look more closely at the creeping and amorphous nature of the WF. Following on from the initiation, *WAGTTWF* slowly reveals the WF as a game of loose parameters and accompanying fictions which emerges from within the interconnection of web users. Within the diegesis of the film, the WF is described as going far back into history, and variously referred to as a conduit, a force which “can access your dreams”<sup>24</sup>, and even hinted at as a reachable location existing in some other realm “across the crowds into the heart of the fair”<sup>25</sup>. We see the diversity of the WF’s weird effects in the symptoms videos; a man pulling arcade style admission tickets out of his arm<sup>26</sup>, someone being pulled through his screen *Ringu*<sup>27</sup> style<sup>28</sup>, and a woman’s face contorted like a warped pink plastic mask<sup>29</sup>. These sorts of ambiguous descriptions, combined with the multivalence of the symptom videos, hint at some intricately strange supernatural force emanating from deep within cyberspace, producing enchantment and allure via a fear of the unknown. More importantly however is how this ambiguity creates a set of open mechanics where interpretation moves towards improvisation and participation within the alternate reality game of the WF. Towards the start of the film Casey watches a video which sets out a key principle of the game element central to the WF; “if other players like the direction you’re taking the story, they’ll help

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<sup>24</sup> *We’re All Going...*, 00:34:03.

<sup>25</sup> *We’re All Going...*, 01:34:03.

<sup>26</sup> *We’re All Going...*, 00:39:15.

<sup>27</sup> See *Ringu*, directed by Hideo Nakata (Toho, 1998).

<sup>28</sup> *We’re All Going...*, 00:41:14.

<sup>29</sup> *We’re All Going...*, 00:15:18.

you expand it further”<sup>30</sup>. This ethos will be familiar to anyone acquainted with the conventions of Creepypasta, a genre of horror content designed for and spread online with the intention of scaring its audience, the most popular sights of circulation being *4chan*, *Something Awful* and the *nosleep* subreddit. With its name derived from a contortion of the “copy” and “paste” function by which it spreads, Creepypasta can exist as memes, images and videos, but are most commonly experienced as text. Primarily they feature a narrative element which, as Christi Williams describes, can be “continuously retold, causing variants in the original story, much like old folklore used to spread”<sup>31</sup>. For this reason Creepypastas have been likened to traditional folklore although told around what Shira Chess and Eric Newsom term the “digital campfire”<sup>32</sup> of the internet. We see these digital campfires in action as Casey and JLB sit on either side of their distant computer

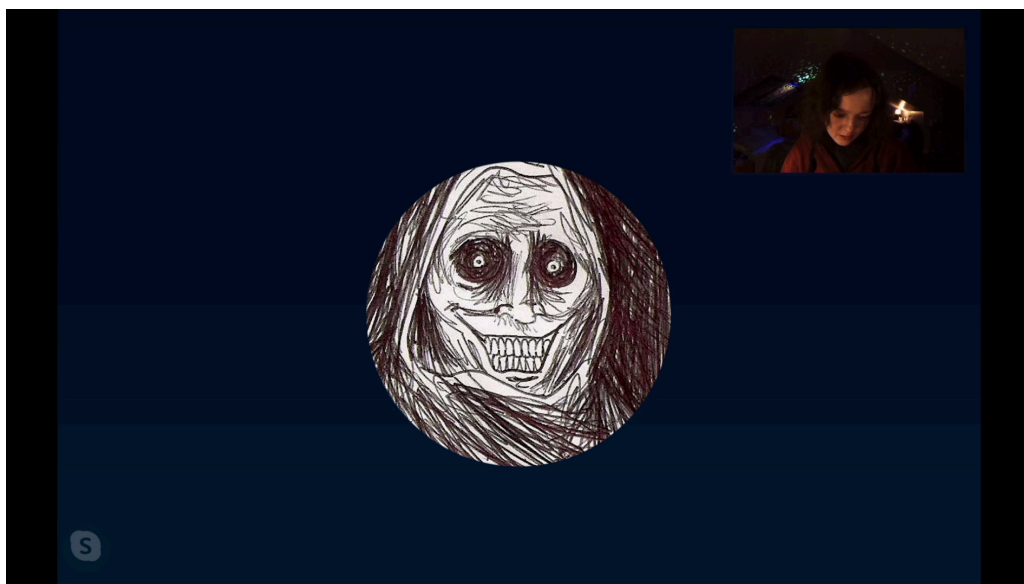


Fig. 2.  
Casey Skypes with JLB, forming a ‘digital campfire’.  
Posted to The Kim Newman Web Site, 27th June, 2022.  
<https://johnnyalucard.com/2022/06/17/film-review-were-all-going-to-the->

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<sup>30</sup> *We’re All Going...*, 00:11:01.

<sup>31</sup> Christi Williams, ‘How has Creepypasta transformed folklore?’, presented at *Digital Humanities Symposium*, (Kansas State University, Manhattan, February 2015), transcript 27–28.

<sup>32</sup> Shira Chess and Eric Newsom, *Folklore, Horror Stories and the Slender Man: The Development of an Internet Mythology*. (New York: Palgrave Pivot. 2015), 102.

screens, discussing the “mythology, lore, history, different theories and supernatural events”<sup>33</sup> which comprise the WF. Whilst Creepypasta can feature monsters from traditional horror, like Schoenbrun’s film, the most successful or noteworthy examples askew such familiar territory in an effort to create new horrific combinations and creatures via the potential for collective imagining opened up by the hive mind of the web. The most infamous of these new formulations is Slender Man, created on *Something Awful* as a conscious effort to create a ‘modern myth with which to terrify people’<sup>34</sup>. This is also where Creepypasta accelerates, or perhaps exceeds, folkloric modes of story telling and sharing. As Shira Chess describes, Slender Man was created through an ‘open-sourcing of generic horror conventions’<sup>35</sup>, where through a process of user contribution, critique and remaking, Slender Man was formed out of a ‘kind of community storytelling’<sup>36</sup> across images, text and video. Like the process which produced Slender Man and the polyphonous nature of the folk tales which proceeded it, the ambiguity of the WF’s lore and myths function to provide a narrative malleability. This openness allows the WF community to development and create its own lore through the ritual testing, offering and reworking of stories within an open source model. The WF is a welcoming structure which promotes a mode of collaborative story telling which anybody can partake in, and where the most viscous and vital tales emerge through a form of narrative Darwinism.

Whilst this process most commonly happens across written text within the world of Creepypasta, more appositely for the medium of cinema, in Schoenbrun's film this process of open source story telling plays out through the videos uploaded by Casey and other participants in the WF, as they react to each other’s content, forming new connections and intricacies between their narrative threads. We see JLB participating in this kind of work during the film. For example in one instance where we see his desktop screen we are presented with a collection of digital post-it notes featuring dates, names and events possibly connected to the World’s Fair; from

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<sup>33</sup> *We’re All Going...*, 00:33:36.

<sup>34</sup> Justin Parkinson, “The origins of Slender Man, BBC, accessed 16th August, 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-27776894>.

<sup>35</sup> Shira Chess, “Open-Sourcing Horror: The Slender Man, Marble Hornets, and Genre”, *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 15, no.3 (2012), 375.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*



‘Qanon drops’, a real Russian internet suicide panic known as the ‘Blue Whale Challenge’, to other seemingly fictional events<sup>37</sup>. At the same time we see JLB’s notes app open as he prepares the script for one of his videos, forming new strands of story and moving from interpretation to the narrativization conjoining both real and fictional events. Shots like this demonstrate that in the minds of WF challengers like JLB, they exist within a dynamic ever-developing web of narrative potentialities which flow between the real and the fictional. In the sprawling unpredictability of the internet and its lack of central authority figures, a space of infinite interpretation and experimentation is opened.

Within the active communities of Creepypasta and the WF, the undisclosed and amorphousness of its true nature doesn’t just add to its potential for horror (to fit to any fear), but the legends, lore and ontological fluidity of the WF function as an invitation to partake, where by story telling begets story creation. The next question then becomes: what is the WF an invitation to, and what have they created?

## **A transformation**

If we cut through the participatory fictions and deliberately amorphous lore, and look for what differentiates the WF from other Creepypasta, it is clear from the WF’s lore that it is an invitation to transform through role play. “I’ve seen [the World’s Fair] do things to people you wouldn’t believe”<sup>38</sup> JLB tells Casey, a warning offered explicitly not to be headed, and more as a challenge to live up to. As an RPG, the WF function as what Kapitany, Hampejs and Goldstein term a ‘Shared Pretensive Reality’, where participants create ‘representations [within] bounded fictional reality..., such that this constructed reality may be explored and invented/embellished with shared intentionality’<sup>39</sup>. As discussed this sharing takes place over the creating, casting out and receiving of the stories of the WF’s transformative effects in the form of the ‘symptoms’ videos, and how they interact with the community. Importantly it is a model open ended enough

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<sup>37</sup> *We’re All Going...*, 00:55:34.

<sup>38</sup> *We’re All Going...*, 00:34:15.

<sup>39</sup> Rohan Kapitany, Tomas Hampejs and Thalia R. Goldstein, ‘Pretensive Shared Reality: From Childhood Pretense to Adult Imaginative Play’, *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 13 (February 2022), 1.



Fig. 3.  
'Demon Wings'  
posted to Mono Digital, accessed 29th August, 2022.  
<https://www.mondo-digital.com/worldsfair.html>

to seemingly play out any transformation which can be assimilated by the bounded reality of the WF's lore; from growing angel wings<sup>40</sup> to uncontrollable dancing<sup>41</sup>. In this sorcerous promise of uncontrollable and unpredictable transformation befalling it's challengers, the WF becomes something markedly different compared to the clear textual boundaries<sup>42</sup> of traditional Creepypasta, in the promise of its creations returning to recreate their creators through contact with the shared pretensive reality of the Fair.

How this sorcerous exchange might overspill the boundaries and emerge beyond the screen however is tied to the mediums the WF unfolds amongst. Not only does its content and themes differ from traditional Creepypasta, but the platforms through which the WF tells its stories demands a greater personal participation. In the WF, challengers don't just anonymously recount their scary tales as is usual in forums like *nosleep*, but enact them in the 'symptoms' videos, and through a sustained inhabiting of these narratives across the different video focused platforms

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<sup>40</sup> *We're All Going...*, 00:41:44.

<sup>41</sup> *We're All Going...*, 00:47:15.

<sup>42</sup> One could argue that the 'Slender Man stabbing' bring Creepypasta's 'clear textual boundaries' into questions however I would argue the assailants later diagnoses of schizophrenia refutes this, see

"Slender Man stabbing: Anissa Weier found mentally ill" BBC, 16th August, 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-41292913>.

amongst which the WF unfurls. Casey's transformation is obviously our key example of this. We could look to her final upload in which we witness her most pronounced transformation. In the video she appears to experience complete bodily disassociation as if possessed by the forces of the WF<sup>43</sup>. Face painted with UV, she haunts the frame performing a ghoulish and menacing version of the timid girl we knew at the beginning. She proceeds to tear apart her stuffed lemma Poe (as in Edgar Allen?), who was with her during her very first video. After destroying this object of comfort and of a life before the Fair, she holds up one of its eyes and peers through it towards the camera, as if to see through the eyes of another. Through these sorts of bodily integration with the community's fictions, where participants seemingly offer up their personal life and attachments as objects of ritual sacrifice, participants perform and in a sense actualise the attested to supernatural powers of the Fair. The WF takes the first person perspectives common in Creepypasta a step further, and produces a more intimate conjoining of story and story teller, as they find themselves recreating themselves and their lives in a ritualised production of content to be viewed and consumed in accordance with the demands of the Fair. If traditional Creepypasta functions as an invitation to participate, then the WF functions as an invitation which elicits a form

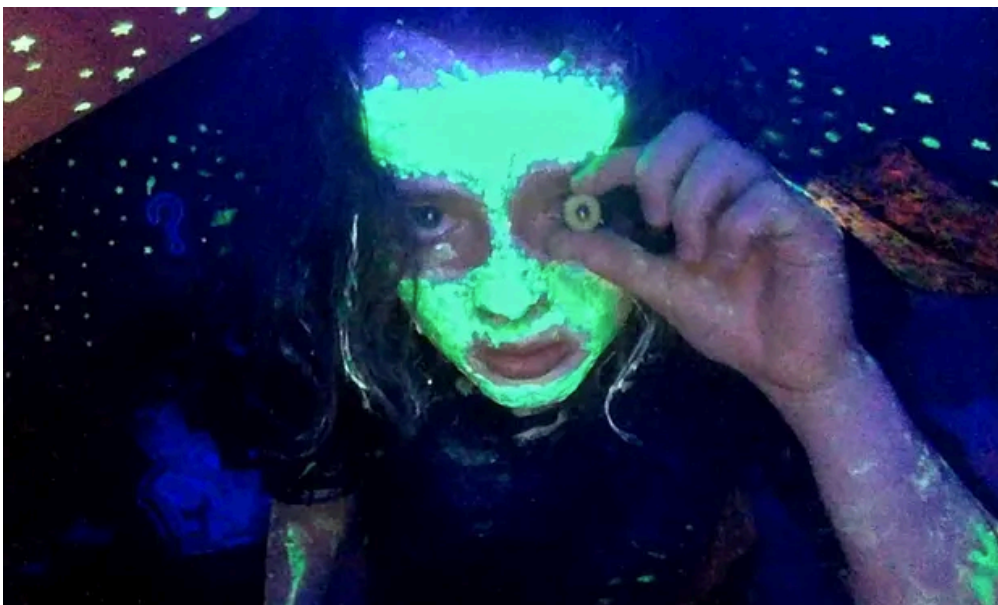


Fig. 4.  
Casey holds up Poe's torn out eye. Photographer: Album/Alamy.  
Uploaded to The Guardian, 22nd April, 2022.

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<sup>43</sup> *We're All Going...*, 01:01:00 to 01:04:51.

of transformation through the intimacy and emotional commitment required of its participation, a transformation which seems at once genuine and performed.

Carrying on we will look closer at what this transformation really is or could be. Is it only a game and community with challengers devoted to their roles or could the WF work as it does 'in game', access your dreams and change us? Building upon our discussion of the ritualised communal story telling processes found in the WF, we might find some answers to this by looking to re-understand the relationship between the real and the virtual.

### **'Everything is true, even if it's not'<sup>44</sup>**

In *Cinema II* (1985), Gilles Deleuze discusses various 'time-images'<sup>45</sup>, more easily understood as images of the various flows of time. Deleuze argues that these time-images allow us a unique perspective on a more complex relationship between the actual and the virtual, and how imaginary constructs like the WF might produce real world affects. In the plainest sense the internet based ARG (Alternate Reality Game)<sup>46</sup> nature of the WF clearly relies on the virtuality of the internet, its avatars, performative social media interactions and the virtual spaces its communities inhabit. However there is also a more interesting virtuality which precedes both the digital online and IRL offline realities. For Deleuze, the virtual is best expressed in Proust's sentiments as that which is 'real without being actual'<sup>47</sup>. The virtual is that real space from which

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<sup>44</sup> "Rules", r/nosleep, Reddit, accessed 16th August, 2022, <https://www.reddit.com/r/nosleep/>.

<sup>45</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema II*.

<sup>46</sup> for elaboration on ARGs, see

Jeffrey Kim et al., 'Storytelling in new media: The Case of alternate reality games, 2001-2009', *Peer-Reviewed Journal on the Internet*, vol. 14, no. 6, (June 2009), accessed <https://web.archive.org/web/20120617032134/http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2484@article/2199>.

<sup>47</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. P. Patton (1968, reis., London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 272.

possibility emerges. Lewis Waller elaborates the virtual as ‘the surplus of the present moment’<sup>48</sup>, existing in a space conditioned by the finite number of possibilities presented by the past, present and future, making it both immanent and ideal.

In what Deleuze calls the ‘organic regime’ of images (what we mostly find ourselves watching), the camera describes an actual ‘supposedly pre-existing reality’<sup>49</sup> made recognisable by a regular continuity of images. In this system, the virtual emerges in the forms of dreams, recollection and memories which are clearly defined as such through how they contrast with reality. Deleuze cites the flashbacks of films like Alain Resnais’s *Hiroshima mon amour*<sup>50</sup>, where the shift in time period and temporal discontinuity distinguishes the arrival of the virtual into the actual. We can think of the early stages of *We’re All Going...* as working with a fairly organic system, where Schoenbrun’s camera presents Casey ‘supposedly pre-existing reality’ of rural American surrounds. The virtual emerge in the video imaginings constituting the WF, presented as a recognisable point of contrast through their framing within the plane of the internet. Whilst still being able to affect each other, within the organic regimes the actual and the virtual exist as ‘two modes of existence as poles in opposition to each other’<sup>51</sup> kept discernibly separated.

Contrastingly, within the ‘crystalline regime’ however, the actual and the virtual become detached from their usual recognisable relation, and the real and the imaginary ‘chase each other, exchange their roles and become indiscernible’<sup>52</sup>. Deleuze cites the moments in Fellini’s *8½*<sup>53</sup> where Guido walks into his fantasies and childhood memories without any break in continuity, the virtual taking the place of the actual before the audience is even aware. The internet and its various platforms are especially well disposed for the emergence of the crystalline regime, as we continually navigate a rhizome of images, narratives and information each with its own agenda and relation to truth and authenticity. We can see this in *WAGTTWF*, where eventually the only

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<sup>48</sup> Lewis Waller: Then & Now, “Introduction to Deleuze: Difference and Repetition”, YouTube video, 16:33, 5th December 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUQTYICTfek&ab\\_channel=Then%26Now](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUQTYICTfek&ab_channel=Then%26Now).

<sup>49</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema II*, 131.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 123-5.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 132.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 92.

access we get to Casey is through her increasingly fantastical videos and how she presents herself to JLB during their video calls. By the end we don't know where the actual ends and the virtual starts, if there is an 'out-of-game' for Casey anymore as JLB fears, or if the two modes have become fully combined. Within the WF a crystalline regime emerges out of our authored viewpoints of these performed fictions, and the virtual 'detaches itself from its actualisations, [and] starts to be valid for itself'<sup>54</sup>. Within the WF community, the virtual outruns the actual and leaves the collective fantasies of the Fair to be felt as if they were profoundly real despite not being actual.

Does this not still function however as a form of deep role play, a suspending or perhaps intoxicating of disbelief? How might the WF's crystalline regime exert a genuinely transformative effect on its challengers? For answers we can look to where Deleuze goes next, to the powers of the false.

For Deleuze the powers of the false emerges from Nietzsche's rejection of an immutable truth and the acknowledgement that we live by a series of invented abstractions we create for ourselves in order to understand the world. In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche claims that 'the falsest judgments..., are the most indispensable to us'<sup>55</sup> since we could not live without the false 'fictions of logic'<sup>56</sup> which order our lives. Going forward we could understand the 'false' as the invented. Without a 'wholly invented world'<sup>57</sup> of abstraction and imagination with which to compare and conceptualise reality, we would not be able to derive meaning, and so 'the renunciation of false judgments would be a renunciation of life, a negation of life.'<sup>58</sup> In accepting 'untruth as a condition of life'<sup>59</sup>, Deleuze makes the Nietzschean acknowledgement of falseness as a generous and generative force. 'Because truth is not to be achieved, formed, or produced; it has to be created'<sup>60</sup> to produce the logical fictions and ideal forms which give meaning and order

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 132.

<sup>55</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Judith Norton (1886, rev., Cambridge University Press, 2001), 7.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema II*, 152.

to the world. This has to be done through the fictional, the untrue and imaginary. Freed from its status as the negative counterpoint of the true, the false becomes a 'life-furthering, species-preserving, perhaps species-rearing'<sup>61</sup> force. This affords new responsibility to the 'artistic, creative power'<sup>62</sup> which produces the virtual, the idealised mirror we hold up the actual and allows us to begin the process of forging new worlds and ways of being from the false.

Within Creepypasta communities, truthfulness has always held a closer relation to a literary or aesthetic regime rather than to actuality, aligning itself with Deleuzian powers of the false<sup>63</sup> and creating fictional horror abstractions with which to contrast our lived reality. We can look towards *nosleep*'s eighth point from its about section; 'everything is true, even if it's not<sup>64</sup>', an incisive instruction that all participants should act as if it's paranormal tales are true, so as to continually extent and renounce none of the virtuality. How though might this attention to fictionality become 'a force of deterritorialisation through which the actual might become metamorphosed'<sup>65</sup> within the lives of its community?

Through the power of the ritualised folkloric communal story telling process we've discussed above, we find an examples of how the WF extends the virtuality of Creepypasta to transform the real lives of its community. Deleuze describes such transformation *through* story telling in the examples of the documentarians he discusses in relation to the powers of the false. According to Deleuze, because practitioners of the 'cinema of the lived'<sup>66</sup> like Pierre Perrault hadn't recognised Nietzsche's acknowledging of 'untruth as a condition of life'<sup>67</sup>, they incorrectly believed they could locate the truthful in the real. Despite their efforts 'the veracity of the

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<sup>61</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond...*, 7.

<sup>62</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema II*, 136.

<sup>63</sup> Lyle Enright has highlighted how Slender Man was a product of 'Deleuzian forgers', see

Lyle Enright, "Powers of the False: The Slender Man and Post-Postmodernism Abstract" *Cultural Analysis*, vol. 16, no. 2, (2017), 10.

<sup>64</sup> "Rules", r/nosleep, Reddit.

<sup>65</sup> Jason Wallin, "Mobilizing Powers of the False for Arts-Based Research", *Visual Arts Research*, vol. 35, no. 1 (Summer 2011), 107.

<sup>66</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema II*, 155.

<sup>67</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond...*, 7.

[documentary] story continued to be grounded in fiction'<sup>68</sup>: those logical fictions which make up reality. Importantly however, the incursion of reality into cinema did in fact produce a 'new mode of story'<sup>69</sup>. In the documentaries of Perrault and Jean Rouch, where subjects were given agency over their own depiction and allowed to shape their own stories, the power of the 'pure and simple story-telling function'<sup>70</sup> is rediscovered. In this redistribution of cinematic agency, in being allowed to tell one's own real stories, a 'discourse with a thousand heads'<sup>71</sup> emerges which counters the master's false truths which govern and effect their subjects lives, and instead allows them to recreate themselves through their stories, contributing 'to the invention of [their] people'<sup>72</sup>.

We see this discourse with a thousand heads at work in the collective ritual story telling of the Fair. In Deleuzian terms, the WF's collective structure contributes 'to the invention of [its] people' when its participants entering into the 'flagrant offence of making up legends'<sup>73</sup>. For Deleuze these types of legend telling are inherently tied to the construction of community and identity. The fabulatory (or myth-making) function of legends holds the ability to bind a people together around 'an image.... so intense *that it has a life of its own*'<sup>74</sup>. We see such empowering images created by participants like Casey, as they submit themselves to the ritual cycle of video production and consumption, and quickly find her stories taking on a life of their own. As Christophe Vitale's writes in relation to Deleuze, the WF allows Casey to experiment with an 'improvising with reality, between fiction and documentary', where her virtual world metamorphoses her actual, her webcam making the 'world itself a laboratory... in a manner that can be shared with others'<sup>75</sup>. For participants like Casey, who are both subject and filmmaker,

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<sup>68</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema II*, 155.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 156.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Gilles Deleuze, 'The Shame and the Glory: T. E. Lawrence', *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 118.

<sup>75</sup> Christophe Vitale, 'Reading Cinema II, Part III', networkologies, accessed 24th of August, 2022 <https://networkologies.wordpress.com/2011/04/30/reading-cinema-ii-noosigns-lecto-signs-and-the-cinematic-worldcreating-for-a-people-yet-to-come/>.



they undergo a process of rhizomatic video becoming, where the intensity of their videos achieves them a legendary status within the community, catalysing the community's desires and breathing life and possibilities into the Fair and its challenger's lives, becoming another together. As Schoenbrun describes when discussing *Videodrome*, a technology like the WF acts as 'an extension of ourself...: we built it because we desire something and in turn it changes us'<sup>76</sup>. In Deleuzian terminology, the WF becomes a 'machine for manufacturing giants'<sup>77</sup> out of the lives, desires and stories of its participants, producing legends which remake their makers and might leave the Fair ground and take on a life of their own.

In Jeffrey A. Tolbert's study of the self-conscious creation of Slender Man, he poses the question of Slender Man's relationship to traditional legends to users of the Slender Nation forum. A user going by the name of Voidmaster offers the following remarks;

"So much of our desire for knowledge and experience can be immediately placated by things like the internet these days, that it seems we've finally found the borders [sic] of the map.... It feels to the layman as if we've learned all there is to know, and all the knowledge in the world is readily available to anyone without training or study via the internet. And so without any apparent black spots on the map, we seek to draw our own."<sup>78</sup>

Posted in 2013, Voidmaster's statement characterises a more open enlightened Internet just preceding the algorithmically constructed bubbles which dictate our experience of it today. Voidmaster's statement also points towards a problematic attitude which would hold the research or truths produced by peer reviewed academics and those produced by internet sleuths as

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<sup>76</sup> Jane Schoenbrun, "'We're All Going to the World's Fair' and a Short History of Movies about the Internet', interviewed by Alex Barron, *Radio Hour*, The New Yorker, published 19th April, 2022, audio accessed <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/tnyradiohour/articles/were-all-going-worlds-fair-and-short-history-movies-about-internet-pod>, 09:24.

<sup>77</sup> Deleuze, *'The Shame...'*, 118.

<sup>78</sup> Jeffrey A. Tolbert, "'The sort of story that has you covering your mirrors": The Case of Slender Man', *Semiotic Review*, no. 2, (November 2013).

equally valid. One must always be careful when wilfully combining the fictional with the real, especially as underground spaces of the initiated spill into the mainstream (Qanon began as a LARP some believe<sup>79</sup>). However Voidmaster also reminds us that man's craving for mystery will always seek new grounds, especially in the spaces opened up by the intent, and that perhaps it is in these black spots that we find new ways of being. The fabulatory function and powers of the false course through Voidmaster's sentiment, the same sentiment which spurs the community of the Fair to together seek out new tales in the darkness. We have seen how the WF forms a historical continuation from the powers of ritual language and folklore through the creative communities of Creepypasta initiated by web 2.0, and how the powers of the false produce transformative possibilities within these new spaces. The World's Fair doesn't just map out new black spots, but actively take its users there, so as to together transform through 'the flicker of the screen[,] the desire to be lost in it and have your world changed by it'<sup>80</sup>.

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<sup>79</sup> Reed Berkowitz, 'QAnon resembles the games I design. But for believers, there is no winning', The Washington Post, accessed 24th August, 2022, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/qanon-game-plays-believers/2021/05/10/31d8ea46-928b-11eb-a74e-1f4cf89fd948\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/qanon-game-plays-believers/2021/05/10/31d8ea46-928b-11eb-a74e-1f4cf89fd948_story.html)

<sup>80</sup> Schoenbrun, *Radio Hour*, 08:54.

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