

Maya Pauley

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Research Project

A Culture of Horror

There's a reason old fairytales are so dark. Humans love to be inspired by that which scares them, it is quite literally a tale as old as time. Time can be measured by investigating the horror tropes and stories that were most popular at any given moment in history. At least in European culture,¹ the tie between horror stories and oral culture was very strong throughout the centuries. What, then, was lost from the move to the written word, and the co-optation of storytelling from the average person? How could horror survive in an entertainment industry that viewed it as vapid and cheap? Most importantly, can the culture of horror be regained? With the advent of the internet, it can be, and it all culminates in the creation of one of the most popular online horror stories, *The Walten Files*.

More interesting to investigate than any other are the tropes of horror. "Whenever the world gets unpredictable and scary, we see a huge uptick in people's interest in horror movies. Which seems counterintuitive, but it suggests an important function for horror as a tool with which people try to make sense of a scary world."² What we find scary is shaped by our culture, and so the shape of our fears must shift when our culture shifts. While people have always been

¹ Many cultures around the world still place importance on oral tradition, which is why this paper will specifically be focusing on euro-american culture. It's important to acknowledge that the loss of oral storytelling is not universal.

² Mathias Clasen, *Why Horror Seduces*, (Oxford University Press, 2017)

intrigued by horror stories, the context in which we live fundamentally changes the way we define horror, its tropes, and its impact.

To a modern viewer, the werewolf might only inspire as much fear as Jacob Black from *Twilight* is able to – which is to say, not much. However, to a religious peasant in 18th century France, the werewolf embodies the horrifying notion that your very nature is evil. The werewolf, as a monster, represents the part of human psychology that is inherently violent, or goes against social norms, and that no amount of prayer can put an end to.³ Christmas might be a time of twinkling lights and family friendly movies now, but it used to be an excuse to tell ghost stories. Why wouldn't it be, considering, "Christmas arrives at the darkest, coldest point of the year. It's a time when the sun is blocked out, shadows stretch longer, and survival itself once felt uncertain. In pre-modern societies, winter wasn't cozy. It was dangerous. Crops failed. Illness spread. Nights felt endless. Death was closer, more familiar, and far harder to ignore."⁴ William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* was a vomit and faint inducing fright for audiences in 1973, when such gore was hardly seen on screen, and our society was run by Christian sensibilities.⁵ By our current standards, the movie is not nearly worth such upheaval.

Of course, tropes in modern media do not always reflect the reality of the average person. The stories of Hollywood movies do not exist in the same space as stories of oral cultures. In Europe it was common for people to tell the same stories over and over again, and for a story to be built and shaped over time by the many different people who told it. A story changed a little bit depending on who told it, and that was part of the fun. "In oral cultures, the role of the

³ Max Slaughter, "Werewolves in European Folklore: From Beast of Gévaudan to Ossory," *What If Monsters*, 2025 [Werewolves in European Folklore: From Beast of Gévaudan to Ossory - What if Monsters](#)

⁴ "Yuletide Shivers: Why Christmas Used to be a Time for Ghost Stories," *US Ghost Stories*, 2025 [Yuletide Shivers: Why Christmas Used to Be a Time for Ghost Stories - US Ghost Adventures](#)

⁵ Dave Roos, "A Century of Horror Movies and the Fears That Inspired Them," *History*, 2025 [A Century of Horror Movies and the Fears That Inspired Them | HISTORY](#)

performer is central, as storytelling often involves interaction with the audience, making each rendition unique. This dynamic highlights the importance of memory and tradition, as poets draw upon shared cultural narratives while infusing their personal creativity.”⁶ This kind of collectivism is antithetical to our modern values, in which a story can “belong” only to the person who originally wrote it. The only way for a story to be shaped by the collective is when business-minded producers change a person’s narrative to be more appealing to the widest audience.

That’s perhaps why the internet is so special to creatives. On the internet, an artist is not beholden to the tastes of producers, and stories don’t need big budgets to flourish. Horror, which was often disregarded as insipid to mainstream critics, could easily reach an audience who appreciated the genre. Horror belongs in the hands of the common person, not just big time directors or eyerolling critics. As an added bonus, creepypastas⁷ could be built upon like the folklore of old, until they belonged a little bit to everyone. “The spread and development of creepypasta narratives can be seen as a form of collective storytelling that reflects the anxieties and fears of contemporary society (Ondrak, 2018).”⁸ A scary photo uploaded by *one* person could inspire *thousands* of stories written by many others. This was the case for the popular creepypasta character, the Slenderman. Slowly, over time, the character came into being with clarity, made so by all kinds of people using all forms of art. Nowadays, the Slenderman is a beloved character to internet denizens, all of whom can claim ownership over his story.

⁶ Richard Peter Martin, “European Epic and Oral Tradition,” (EBSCO 2022) [European Oral and Epic Traditions | Literature and Writing | Research Starters | EBSCO Research](#)

⁷ “Creepypasta” is a term that originated from internet culture in 2006-2007, and has become shorthand to describe any scary story that was written specifically to be shared on the internet, as opposed to being traditionally published.

⁸ Parthiva Sinha, “Creepypasta and Internet Literature,” *Mizoram University Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 5, no. 1 (2024): 206, [\(PDF\) Creepypasta and Internet Literature: Unmasking Digital Horrors and the Evolution of Contemporary Storytelling](#)

All this to say, horror thrives when people are willing to take risks, to take inspiration from each other, and to reflect modern terrors. So it's no surprise that at the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, horror experienced a boom in popularity, and artists started exploring loneliness. Analog horror uses nostalgia against its viewer, turning the familiar grainy audio and flickering video of VHS tapes into something uncanny and upsetting. The subgenre notably draws inspiration from an entirely different subgenre of horror, found footage. Analog horror is very similar to titles like *The Blair Witch Project* or *Paranormal Activity*, in that the audience could be convinced that they're viewing reality, which is far scarier than what most traditional movies can accomplish. "Analog works by using formats we usually trust. New reports, educational videos, and emergency warnings are all built to feel safe. When those tools are used to deliver fear or confusion, the effect is strong."⁹ It's recent enough to be scary, and old enough that you can believe it was somehow lost and buried.

Analog horror has always been characterized by a pervasive and almost unbearable sense of isolation. It's important to note that analog horror started gaining popularity before the pandemic, "Analog horror cemented its place on the internet in the late 2010s and exploded in the early 2020s."¹⁰ Despite that popularity, it didn't truly become the absolute cultural mammoth it is until people became trapped inside their homes. The subgenre is unique even among other horror media, as it can easily be made from the comfort of one's home. In fact, many series thrived when they were forced to go against the grain. When the pandemic made it nearly impossible to film a full scene in the traditional sense, with multiple characters interacting, writers had to get creative. *The Mandela Catalogue* is a famous example, gaining notoriety from

⁹ Jan Sørup, "What is Analog Horror? Definition, History & Examples," *Film Draft*, 2025 [What Is Analog Horror? Definition, History & Examples - FilmDaft](#)

¹⁰ Ainsha Nurashanti Milande, "From Cult Classic to Forgotten Format – The Fall of Analog Horror," *The Daily Fandom*, 2025 [From Cult Classic To Forgotten Format -- The Fall Of Analog Horror • The Daily Fandom](#)

how well it appropriated real emergency news warnings. It also used old Christian cartoons and edited them to work for the narrative. Whenever there was a more traditional scene that needed to be filmed, it was greatly improved by the fact that the actor was alone. Not only did it add to the tension and fear factor, it also made the characters more relatable to the audience. You could relate more to a character who was trapped and alone in a scary environment when you were in the same situation.

Analog horror may have ruled the early 2020s, but in the 2010s one of the biggest horror franchises in the world was created, and would later be the main inspiration to *The Walten Files*. *Five Nights at Freddy's* became an overnight sensation, and it would lay the groundwork for plenty of other creatives to tell their stories. The first *Five Nights at Freddy's (FNaF)* video game came out in 2014, made by indie developer Scott Cawthon. In it, you play as a nightguard in a shabby pizzeria, the kind with singing robot animals. You watch through cameras as the animatronics become malevolent in the night, and are helpless to stop them from getting closer to your office. The game's aesthetics and concepts were deeply interesting to an audience who grew up having Chuck E Cheese birthday parties. The floors are decked in checkerboard; the walls are covered in posters; the tables are decorated with party hats and confetti. The animatronics themselves: Chica, Bonnie, Foxy and Freddie, are brightly colored and fun.

The gameplay on its own, though, was not nearly interesting enough to inspire an audience to keep coming back for each new game. No, what kept audiences coming back was the lore. The player is made to engage with the visuals as a storytelling device, not just aesthetic choices. The audience has to ask, why do the animatronics look so worse for wear? Why does the restaurant look so haphazard? Why are there newspaper clippings on the wall about missing children and murder? How does all that visual information answer the most important question:

why do these animatronics want to hurt me in the first place? The more the audience investigated the building and its secrets, the more the story unfolded.¹¹ We learn that a birthday party at Freddy Fazbear's Pizzeria took a turn when a psychotic employee killed five children and stuffed their bodies into the suits of the animatronics. Now, their souls are trapped in the robots, stuck in purgatory and desperate for revenge against the man who hurt them.

With each new game, each new piece of media, each new character added to the roster, audiences became more and more invested. So much of the lore was a mystery, and there was plenty of room for the audience to make interpretations. The characters (the animatronics, the nightguard, the murderer), could have almost any personality the audience desired. That was probably why FNaF was so good at sparking our human need to tell stories. When there's so much room to speculate, why not explore to the very best of our ability? Fan comics were illustrated and fan fiction was written, parodies and satire videos were uploaded to YouTube, and theories were made about every single loose thread.¹²

The fandom quickly became saturated with knock off games and spinoffs: *The Joy of Creation*, *Dayshift at Freddy's*, *Five Nights at Candy's*, etc... Mascot horror became an inescapably big subgenre, where "[T]he main terror...with some defanging, could easily be the mascot of a children's media franchise..."¹³ The effect was admittedly nauseating, after a while. It felt like the original concept had been explored to its fullest capacity and then some.

¹¹ Famous YouTuber MatPat, aka Matthew Patrick, was the most prominent *FNaF* theorizer, with his videos on the subject gaining tens of millions of views. His theories are still widely seen as canon by the fandom, and it's nearly impossible to separate his image from the game's.

¹² The tone of these fan creations varied wildly, and it was around the release of the second game that the fandom started to separate into groups. Some creators were more interested in exploring the relationship and character driven aspects of the story. Others enjoyed twisting the dark tone into comedic, "meme-worthy" moments. Everyone cared about the mystery. Personally, when I was little, I loved it all, and was especially inspired by the fanart.

¹³ "Mascot Horror," *TV Tropes*, accessed April 22, 2026 [Mascot Horror - TV Tropes](https://tvtropes.org/mascot-horror)

One would think that with the oversaturation of *FNaF* and (to a lesser extent) analog horror, the internet would be ready to call it quits when Martín Paredes (internet handle Martin Walls) created the epitome of those concepts combined. *Company Introductory Tape* was uploaded to YouTube on April 26th, 2020. The description contextualizes the narrative: someone named Anthony decided to compile some old tapes from the “already extinct Bunny Smiles Company.”¹⁴ Some of the tapes in the compilation were clearly made to train new employees and explain, in an overly cheery way, what their new job will involve. The tapes inform us that the company was created by Jack Walten and Felix Kraken, who worked to make animatronic performers for their restaurant, *Bon's Burgers*. The whole scenario is very similar to *FNaF 1*, where a man on the phone gives you an on-the-fly tutorial on how to do your job. Unlike *FNaF*, though, the first episode of *The Walten Files* holds off on showing the audience what the job really looks like until later on.

The series as a whole is not interested in telling its story chronologically, even in the first episode. According to the lore, the first video in the compilation was made in 1974, when the restaurant opened. The next video is a cartoon made by the Bunny Smiles Company in 1979, and it introduced the viewer to characters and concepts that don't come into play until later in the series. Jack Walten, who's grinning face introduced us to the company in the first tapes, haunts the cartoon with visceral malice. The audience learns that, at some point between 1974 and 1979, Jack Walten must have gone missing, but it's not explained how or why or even when. The cartoon ends before we can receive any real answers. The final video is again a time skip, and the audience watches as an employee works to fix animatronics that have clearly rotted with time.

¹⁴ Martin Walls, “Company Introductory Tapes,” YouTube Video Description, *The Walten Files*, February 19, 2023 [The Walten Files 1 - Company Introductory Tape](#)

While *The Walten Files* appropriated much from FNaF, their stories are very unique from one another. They both center around haunted robots and family restaurants, but *The Walten Files* managed to capture the internet's attention as more than a *FNaF* rip off. Martin Walls expanded and built on the original concept until it was almost new. Walls and his small team's unique touch came from the nuance and depth they wrote each character with. For *FNaF*, much of the characterization came from audience interpretation. As the franchise became larger and storylines more elaborate, it seemed that the horror was more about spectacle than genuine substance. “[*Five Nights at Freddy’s*] *Security Breach* is a simple story of a lost child that the security guard, Vanessa, is trying to return to his parents. From the start, Gregory is suspicious of Vanessa, and as a story element, this should be engaging to the player. However, the mystery is artificial; it has no foundation...”¹⁵ *Security Breach* was a game that severely disappointed 2020 *FNaF* fans for many reasons, but much of that disappointment came from the lost potential in the character writing. An opportunity to play as a child character in the *FNaF* franchise would have been fascinating, considering the original narrative. It felt squandered by the marks of bad writing.¹⁶

Unlike in *FNaF*, *The Walten Files* makes every character's death feel heavy. You see the victims' faces and learn their names and personalities; you watch their family and friends react to the loss. The series forces the viewer to see the situation as not just scary but also tragic. As a result, it also feels very grounded, despite the supernatural elements of the plot and the clearly

¹⁵ “Fundamentally Broken, and I Don’t Mean the Bugs - A Game Design Study of *FNaF: Security Breach*,” *Design Frame*, YouTube Video, September 13, 2022, 19:03 to 19:18, [Fundamentally Broken, and I Don't Mean the Bugs ► A Game Design Case Study of FNaF: Security Breach](#)

¹⁶ You do actually play as a child in *FNaF 4*; a very well regarded game in the fandom for its interesting lore elements. The interesting gameplay and story of *FNaF 4* probably made fans even more disappointed when *Security Breach* failed to live up to its predecessor.

hand drawn pictures. Even when the viewer is looking at a muppet-like rendering of a character, that character still feels real and worthy of mourning.

That's yet another thing that attracted people to the series: *The Walten Files* is so visually interesting because of its unique mix of aesthetics. It uses real pictures *and* cartoonish caricatures to convey the story. In another medium this may have been an overly jarring decision, but it works perfectly in the YouTube environment. The internet is a space for creativity; the handmade; the unique and strange. Why not show the death of one of the characters through a video game, as Martin Walls does in episode 3, *BunnyFarm*? Why not show the same scenes again and again, all in different formats and all adding more context than the last time it played out?

The first time the audience saw the character Susan Woodings, the only information that could be gathered was that she had something to do with the animatronic Banny the Bunny.¹⁷ Her disfigured face overlaid on top of the robot's was our only context. A cartoon rabbit runs across the screen, unable to leave the room it's trapped in, and absolutely desperate for an escape. That was episode two, *Relocation Project*. The next time she's shown, (*BunnyFarm*), she's represented as a retro video game character.¹⁸ The audience learns that she's a Bunny Smiles employee who died when she stayed late after a restaurant birthday party. Finally, in episode four, *CyberFun Tech*, the terrible details of her death are shown in fully animated, cinematic shots. Her body was stuffed inside the Banny animatronic, much like in *FNaF*. There are no cartoon or video game aesthetics to hide behind as we see her in bloody reality.

¹⁷ Banny the Bunny animatronic/cartoon character is an interesting character in and of herself. Within the context of her narrative, she is mistreated the most by Bon the Bunny, the main antagonist of *The Walten Files*. She could be viewed as a metanarrative on misogyny in children's media. She may even be seen as a tragic female figure because of her connection to Susan's death and her soul's entrapment in the robot.

¹⁸ Martin Walls, "The Walten Files 3 - Bunny Farm," YouTube Video, March 19, 2021, 20:37 to 22:10 [The Walten Files 3 - BunnyFarm](#)

Even though the audience knows what's happened to Susan, the full truth of it is still hard to swallow. To the viewer, it's almost as if she's walking into her fate over and over and over again, and the cycle cannot be stopped. Many elements of *The Walten Files* are like this. The story exists in a kind of cyclical pattern, where foggy details at the beginning slowly come into focus over time. This is why the series is so reminiscent of old oral tradition and new internet culture. It appropriates concepts from somewhere else, and builds upon its own base until it is fully realized. It is also terribly lonely, as the audience, having no power in the narrative, even when in some ways we know its end.

With the creation of the internet, storytelling has once again become communal, and on an even grander scale. Stories are not limited to geographic and cultural boundaries, and they're certainly not stuck in the realm of Hollywood. Scary stories in particular can give us insight into the lives and fears of societies we've never lived in, and then build on those concepts until they are new. It's how a video game made by a man in Texas could inspire a creator from Chile – it's how *The Walten Files* came to be. There are no limits to our explorations, and *The Walten Files* proved that by being fresh and new despite the fatigue surrounding *FNaF* and the oversaturation of analog. Through *The Walten Files*, we see the cultivation of community and creation, which was ironically brought together from a time of shared isolation and creative drought.