Scary Business: Mascot Horror as Product and Reflection of Platformisation

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ABSTRACT

Mascot horror is a popular gaming genre that has emerged exclusively online but, despite its domination of the indie horror gaming community, is largely unstudied within academia. While a handful of studies have been conducted on the games' design and character reception, there has been no interrogation of the values these games represent.

In this paper we provide a definition of mascot horror based on an analysis of three popular titles: *Five Nights at Freddy's*: *Security Breach*, *Poppy Playtime*, and *Garten of Banban*. This analysis not only identifies recurring motifs—such as cartoonish antagonists associated with children's media, gross corporate misconduct, and late 20th century nostalgia—but also identifies the way transmedia storytelling techniques have been utilised by the games' developers to secure a large, secondary children's audience. An audience that is, ultimately, introduced to heteronormative gender stereotypes through mascot horror games and their merchandise.

Keywords

mascot horror, game studies, platformisation, merchandise, gender stereotypes

INTRODUCTION

Mascot horror is a fan defined gaming genre that has risen to prominence in the independent gaming scene. Despite frequent coverage online, however, the genre remains largely understudied in academia. Some research has been done into the genre's design and the reception of its characters by children (Klopotova et al. 2023; Kyeong-Seok & Dong Lyeor 2024; Lee 2024), but not the values it represents.

This paper aims to fill this gap in knowledge by providing a definition of the mascot horror genre and conducting an analysis of three popular game franchises that fall within it. Through this analysis, we will identify the transmedia storytelling techniques that mascot horror game developers use to appeal to children and widen their audience, in which YouTube plays a pivotal role. Ultimately, this will lead to the highlighting of mascot horror's reliance on nostalgia as a design principle and its reproduction of heteronormative gender roles, which are then introduced back into the children's toy market by mascot horror merchandise. Here, heteronormativity will be understood as the dominant—yet stereotypical and often archaic—definition of gender that relies on the binary gender perspective (Jeppesen 2016).

Our analysis will also provide an overview of the genre's overarching motifs via an examination of three popular mascot horror titles. This examination will be framed through José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal's theory of the digital platform, a "programmable architecture designed to organize interactions between users" (2018, 9). Here, we argue that the genre of mascot horror is not only a product of platformised culture but also a reflection of it which offers valuable insight into the precarity and plight of online content creators.

WHAT IS MASCOT HORROR?

Defining a genre is a difficult process, as genres are chiefly arbitrary, analytical constructs formed to aid discussion of similarities and differences between objects (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2016, 52). Despite this, genres are useful as the "conventions of each genre create expectations" (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2016, 53). We define mascot horror as a subsection of survival horror games characterised by cartoonish antagonists with associations to children's media or entertainment, frequently produced by independent game developers. Survival horror is a gaming genre originally informed by cinematic horror, modifying the experiences of fear, fight and flight (Chien 2007, 64). Survival horror games often require the player to avoid combat, run or hide from threatening antagonists or monsters (ibid. 65).

The mascot horror genre is widely believed to have originated in a singular franchise: *Five Nights at Freddy's* (*FNAF*), which began as an indie horror point-and-click game of the same name (Kyeong-Seok & Dong Lyeor 2024, 228). Developed by Scott Cawthon and released on August 8, 2014, the original *FNAF* game "brought a new form of horror to light" (Edington & Lee 2024, 724). Over the decade of game development that has followed, the mascot horror genre has both proliferated and evolved, gaining intricacy in gameplay and its own recognisable conventions. Below, we will explore these conventions and the ways in which the genre emerged via an analysis of three mascot horror games.

GAME SELECTION

We have chosen to focus on the games *Five Nights at Freddy's*: *Security Breach* (including its DLC *Security Breach – Ruin*), *Poppy Playtime*, and *Garten of Banban*. These games were selected due to their accepted mascot horror status online, their popularity within associated indie horror communities, and their engagement in emergent mascot horror genre conventions. These conventions, including reliance on nostalgia, cartoonish character design, and corporate malpractice, will be discussed further below.

At time of writing, the serialised games explored within the paper have either announced or released new instalments[1]. To establish a boundary, we will focus on those released up until October 2024.

We engaged in feminist close reading (Stang 2022), by unpacking embedded and encoded meanings in the texts, and employing feminist theory to connect the mediated messages to real world impacts and oppression. The study was conducted via direct gameplay and by watching several major and minor YouTube Let's Players[2]—including Markiplier, jacksepticeye and Gab Smolders—resulting in an analysis covering a range of different perspectives on both gameplay and narrative formation. Findings were documented through fieldnotes of YouTube videos, fan wikis, fan videos, fan theory communities, game reviews, news articles, corporate webpages, and legal documents. This approach provided us with a holistic picture of the texts themselves, but also their market, communities, audiences, and audience engagement. By watching Let's Plays, we also approached the games in a manner similar to how children are introduced to and consume them, giving us insight into how YouTube facilitates interaction with a younger audience and the platform's role in the presentation and product-making of the mascot horror genre.

Five Nights at Freddy's: Security Breach

Five Nights at Freddy's: Security Breach (2021)—hereby known as *Security Breach*—is a standalone video game developed by Steel Wool Studios and published by ScottGames. *Security Breach* builds upon previous lore established by the *FNAF* franchise[3], introducing reimagined versions of existing characters alongside new ones. In *Security Breach*, the player character is Gregory, a young boy who has been trapped in Freddy Fazbear's Mega Pizzaplex who must, with help from friendly animatronic mascot Freddy, avoid being hunted down by the pizzeria's animatronics to survive the night. A free DLC, *Five Nights at Freddy's: Security Breach – Ruin* (2023)—shortened to *Ruin* from this point on—was released on July 25th, 2023. In the DLC, the protagonist, Cassie, is attempting to find Gregory, who she believes to be trapped within the Pizzaplex (again).

Poppy Playtime

Poppy Playtime (2021—) is a serialised video game, the first instalment of which was released on October 12th, 2021. As of writing, three instalments—Chapter 1, 2, and 3—are available, with the fourth slated for release in December 2024. In *Poppy Playtime*, the unnamed player character investigates an abandoned toy factory while being threatened and pursued by some of its formerly most popular toy products.

Garten of Banban

Garten of Banban (2023—) is also a serialised video game, the first instalment of which was released in January 2023. As of writing, five instalments have been released. In *Garten of Banban*, the unnamed player character is a parent attempting to find their missing children in an allegedly abandoned kindergarten, which is inhabited by living mascots engaged in a civil war.

SELECTION CRITERIA

As previously stated, the games in this paper were selected not only for their notoriety within the mascot horror genre but also for their engagement in common genre conventions, which allows them to act as representatives of recurrent motifs. For ease of reading, we have collated these conventions into three categories: setting and narrative, gameplay, and merchandising.

Setting and Narrative

Our selection of games are set in locations where it would be common to encounter mascots: an entertainment complex, a toy factory, and a kindergarten. All these locations share a common trait, in that they're popular amongst children and were, at some point, actively used for children's entertainment and/or care in-game. However, following mysterious and horrifying incidents, these locations are no longer deemed fit for operation and have been abandoned. The Playtime Co. factory in *Poppy Playtime*, for instance, has been described as "a once-great toy factory that has now fallen into ruin" (Tury 2024). Similar descriptions are used for the other in-game businesses: Freddy Fazbear's Mega Pizzaplex in *Security Breach* is "the flashiest, raddest, rockingist, safest pizzeria the universe has ever seen" (Dayton 2020) but, in *Ruin*, the Pizzaplex has become "dark, dreary, and dilapidated" (Steel Wool Studios & ScottGames 2023). Meanwhile, Banban's Kindergarten, the setting for *Garten of Banban*, was "the go-to kindergarten for any parent who needed their children to attend a reputable learning facility" (Euphoric Brothers 2023a).

Central to the narrative of each game is a mystery which will possibly lead to or has already led to the closure of the location. Except for Gregory—the protagonist of *Security Breach*, who is trapped inside the functioning Pizzaplex—the player characters return to these abandoned locations in an attempt to unravel the central mystery or a personal one related to it. In *Poppy Playtime* the player is a former employee lured back to the factory, having received an anonymous note implying the factory's missing staff are alive and on site, and the player character of *Garten of Banban* is a parent searching for their missing children.

Via embedded storytelling, the secrets behind these locations are revealed. The main plot revelation is usually one of horrifying business misconduct, linked to either scientific experimentation or occult practices conducted on the fictional company's employees, their target audience, or both. These people, now victims, are transformed into—or have become a part of—a mascot, leaving them in exceptional pain, distress, and/or desirous of revenge. In *Poppy Playtime*, the living toys and mascots are children (and a small selection of employees) transformed into products via gross[4] experimentation. In *Garten of Banban*, the mascots were created by experimenting with genomes harvested from staff, patrons, and various animals. Meanwhile, in *Security Breach*, serial killer William Afton—a repeat antagonist within the *FNAF* franchise, known for murdering children and hiding their bodies in animatronics—is continuing his manipulations from beyond the grave as a digital ghost, with aid from the game's antagonist security guard Vanessa (Ji & Zhao 2022).

Gameplay

The games selected for this study—when assessed via the theory of action modalities, as proposed by game scholars Bernard Perron, Dominic Arsenault, Martin Picard &

Carl Therrien (2008)—fall into the wider genre of action games. These games engage heavily in the modalities of execution, which require input that "relies on the gamer's sensori-motor skills", and resolution, where the "the gamer must solve puzzles or small quests to progress" (Perron et al. 2008, 248). Further from this, the games are part of the sub-genre of survival horror and, more specifically, what Andrei Nae calls "postclassical survival horror"; survival horror games released after 2004 that have opted for "more gamer-friendly game design" incorporating traits of "other action subgenres such as the first-person shooter" (Nae 2021, 3).

As such, all three selected titles are single player games that use first-person perspective. Their protagonists are defenceless and, if the capability is provided at all, unable to confront or destroy their mascot antagonists until certain ludonarrative criteria have been met that highlight the "hero's perseverance—and sheer brutality—in the face of relentless enemies and seemingly overwhelming odds" (Chien 2007, 16). In *Security Breach*, for instance, each of the antagonist animatronics—Monty, Chica, and Roxy—can only be 'harmed' when the player outwits them during specific storytelling points. Meanwhile, in *Poppy Playtime*, the primary antagonist of each instalment is encountered multiple times but can only be confronted directly as "a boss, or monster, that is especially difficult to kill at the end of each level or area" (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2016, 218).

Before these points are reached, the player must engage in stealth gameplay, utilising environmental features to either hide from or distract enemies. In some cases, this is combined with the use of purely defensive handheld objects: In *Security Breach*, Gregory can obtain either a 'Fazerblaster' or a 'Faz Camera'; both are weapons that temporarily stun the animatronics at long and short range. While in *Poppy Playtime: Chapter 3* (2024a), the player is given an extension to the 'GrabPack'—a wearable backpack flanked with two extendable hands used for traversal and puzzle-solving—that can launch small fireballs to deter light-averse enemies.

Outside of survival, the primary gameplay is exploration via running, jumping, climbing, collecting, and puzzle solving. These puzzles often use the principles of learning-based games for children, focusing on connecting sound, colours, signs, and shapes to other elements. The completion of these puzzles is prerequisite for players to progress within the game or, alternatively, to discover hidden secrets in the game's plot. Each game also makes use of hypermediated collectible objects—including children's artwork, internal reports, diary entries, and both audial and visual media—that "provide an economic means of conveying backstory" via "virtual texts possessing a physical presence and institutional authority within the game world" (Kirkland 2009, 120).

Merchandising

Another deciding factor for inclusion in the game selection was merchandising engagement by the game's developers and, more specifically, the audiences targeted by this merchandising.

Since its launch, the *FNAF* franchise has become a merchandising juggernaut but—at odds with traditional horror franchises, which sell to an adult demographic—this merchandise is largely targeted towards children and young teens. The *FNAF* book series, for instance, is published by children's press Scholastic, who describe it as "perfect for readers in grades 7 and up who love some good scares" (Scholastic

Parents Staff 2024). Similarly, a browse through Target's burgeoning *FNAF* online offerings shows children's multiple school backpack sets (Target n.d.-a); branded kick scooters (Target n.d.-b); hoodies, dressing gowns, and pyjamas (Target n.d.-c) all available for purchase.

These merchandising choices support the idea that a large portion of the mascot horror audience are not adults but children, who consume the characters via associated online content—such as playthroughs, remixes, and fan animations—rather than playing the games themselves (Klopotova et al. 2023; Lenters et al. 2023). This is how Huggy Wuggy—primary antagonist of *Poppy Playtime: Chapter 1* (2021)—became a hugely popular counterfeit toy among 4–9-year-olds, costing Mob Entertainment "millions of dollars in royalty revenue" but serving "as an enormous unplanned marketing campaign for the brand" (Taylor 2023). Through these instances, we see a pattern emerge of mascot horror game developers using transmedia storytelling practices, which "expand the potential market for a property by creating different points of entry for different audience segments" (Jenkins 2007). As such, the transmedial utilisation of toys and YouTube content has become a strategic choice in the mascot horror game genre to gain a larger audience than initially intended.

As a result of this, mascot horror has a notorious 'cash grab' reputation in the wider gaming community (Lavine 2023; Sterling 2024). One seemingly substantiated by franchises like *Garten of Banban*, whose first instalment included a merchandising page embedded in its title screen from the time of its launch (Biggercheese 2023; Lavine 2023).

MASCOT HORROR AND PLATFORMISATION

In his work *Understanding Media* (2013), McLuhan described games as a reflection of the cultures in which they emerge, with the ability to "shift familiar experience into new forms, giving the bleak and the blear side of things sudden luminosity" (170). The genre of horror has been similarly discussed. Horror films, for instance, are described as a way "by which writers and directors can present commentary on contemporary, current or individual social fears and imprint these issues onto its audience" (McLaughlin 2024, 101) while the history of horror films works as "essentially a history of anxiety in the twentieth century" (Wells 2007, 3). In this manner, we propose that the genre of mascot horror is not only a product of contemporary, platformised culture but also a reflection of it and the anxieties it contains.

A platform is a "programmable architecture designed to organize interactions between users" (van Dijck et al. 2018, 9), instances of which include Facebook, Twitter/X, and YouTube. Platforms are effectively two-sided or multi-sided markets, staged by platform companies who aggregate complementors (sellers) and end-users (purchasers) in one single, digital space (Poell et al. 2019, 2). In the case of YouTube, complementors are content creators and end-users are viewers.

In the following sections, we will outline how YouTube helped popularise the mascot horror genre and, further from this, how the genre reflects contemporary, platformised culture.

Documentation of Mascot Horror as Product of the YouTube Platform

Four days after *Five Nights at Freddy's* launch, popular YouTube personality Markiplier posted a Let's Play video of the game titled 'WARNING: SCARIEST GAME IN YEARS' (2014). Soon after, the game was picked up by other YouTubers, including highly viewed creators PewDiePie (2014) and jacksepticeye (2014). With this coverage, the popularity of *FNAF* exploded. Monopolising the sudden attention, creator Scott Cawthon released further franchise instalments in quick succession, with four direct sequels released in three years. Cawthon also developed a storytelling style which encouraged investigation of *FNAF* related media artefacts, obsessive monitoring of Cawthon's media feeds, and consumption of *FNAF* related merchandise to understand the full game story (Ji & Zhao 2022). This technique matches the description of transmedia storytelling posited by Henry Jenkins (2007), in which "integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels" where, ideally, "each medium makes it[s] own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story".

This combination of prolific game production and storytelling style established a mutually beneficial relationship between the *FNAF* franchise and YouTube content creators, who were able to create initial content based on *FNAF*'s jump scares before producing further, more nuanced, content by deep diving into the hidden story (Toniolo 2021, 59). *FNAF* fan content proliferated online and, by the start of 2015, the *FNAF* franchise had inspired hundreds of fan games, which ballooned to thousands by the end of the year (O'Connor 2015). In reaction to this, Cawthon created the 'The Fazbear Fanverse Initiative', which saw several of the most popular fan games gain funding directly from Cawthon himself (animdude 2020). This initiative is just one example of many demonstrating Cawthon's consistent engagement with online fan communities and his fostering of creativity surrounding *FNAF*. These acts ultimately helped the franchise's long-term popularity and led to experimentation in the mascot horror genre by upcoming indie game developers.

The Belanger brothers—two founding members of Mob Entertainment, the developers behind *Poppy Playtime*—were part of the *FNAF* fandom content creation community and directly benefitted from Cawthon's generosity. For over a decade, the Belangers have uploaded child-oriented, *Minecraft*-style animations based on popular game characters to their YouTube channel, EnchantedMob, garnering hundreds of millions of views (EnchantedMob n.d.). One of their series, *Fazbear & Friends*, stars *FNAF*'s animatronics as wholesome children's cartoon characters and, in 2021, they began selling *Fazbear & Friends* merchandise (EnchantedMob 2021); an act for which the copyright ramifications are unclear.

Eventually, the Belanger brothers decided they wanted to "branch out into all forms of media" and developing games was the "next logical step", if they were "approaching YouTube the way a media company would" (Johnson 2024). Demonstrating a knowledge of mascot horror audiences honed via their days as *FNAF* content creators, they developed *Poppy Playtime*; a game openly acknowledged by Zach Belanger to attract children due to its "2000s Pixar-like multi-generational appeal" even if they are not the targeted audience (Johnson 2024).

Shortly after the game's release, Let's Play videos of *Poppy Playtime* were uploaded by many of the same creators who popularised FNAF, with the title of jacksepticeye's

video echoing Markiplier's video of almost a decade earlier: "SCARIEST GAME IN YEARS | Poppy Playtime" (2021). From here, Mob Entertainment engaged in similar tactics to Cawthon by assuring multiple instalments via story serialisation; releasing cryptic story clues to social media feeds ('Chapter 3 Interactable ARG' 2024); and building working relationships with YouTubers—including jacksepticeye, who was given a cameo in the second chapter of *Poppy Playtime* (jacksepticeye 2022, 53:09). They also continued to upload *Fazbear & Friends* videos, now incorporating *Poppy Playtime* characters alongside those from *FNAF*, *Among U*s, and *Minecraft*, with the videos frequently achieving tens of millions of views (EnchantedMob 2022a; 2022b; 2022c). In doing so, Mob Entertainment guaranteed exposure of their brand amongst younger YouTube viewing audiences, demonstrating how YouTube can be used to target children as mascot horror consumers.

Other mascot horror titles have followed similar routes, with *Garten of Banban* attaining similar results via controversy. After a slew of negative reviews and death threats to the developers upon release (@Euphoric_Bros 2023c), the series caught the attention of Let's Play YouTubers, who once again thrust the game into the spotlight (Markiplier 2023; jacksepticeye 2023). The game's developers have since released six instalments in two years, securing *Garten of Banban*'s constant presence within the indie horror recommendation algorithm. They've also co-developed two *Garten of Banban* Roblox games (Roblox Corporation, n.d.) and, via a 'partners program' (Euphoric Brothers 2024), have greenlit officially licensed *Garten of Banban* fan games. Both methods assure multiple access points for younger potential audience members.

Through these three examples, we can see how the *FNAF* created a template for indie game developers and how two of the most popular contemporary mascot horror franchises seemingly followed it. Core to this success was engagement with YouTube to target younger, secondary audience markets. In this way, mascot horror is a product of platformisation.

Mascot Horror as Reflection of Platformisation

The ways in which the mascot horror genre acts as a reflection of platformised society are more nuanced than the ways in which it is a product. Chief among these nuances, however, are the dynamics at play between platform company or operator, complementor, and end-user, which can be seen within the triad of company, mascot, and player character within mascot horror games. In the following sections, we will outline these similarities.

Setting as Platform

As discussed in the Setting and Narrative section of our game selection, the narratives of the mascot horror genre are dominated by companies who seek to create mascots to maximise profit. These companies are, by and large, either the first or the best in their particular business area. Fazbear Entertainment, from *FNAF*, is a lead player in entertainment restaurant industry. Playtime Co. from *Poppy Playtime* is a leading toy manufacturer and Banban's Kindergarten, from *Garten of Banban*, is a highly reputable learning facility. These companies, in turn, are strongly associated with a lone male figure who either founded the company as a whole or dictated the company's development. Playtime Co., for instance, was the brainchild of founder Elliot Lugwig, who dedicated his life solely to his company's development. Meanwhile,

the development of the mascots of Fazbear Entertainment and Banban's Kindergarten were driven forward by William Afton III and Uthman Adam, respectively.

Here, we see the beginnings of the similarities between the mascot horror companies and social media platforms, which are also often attributed to or associated with the 'genius' of a single white male despite the hundreds—if not thousands—of workers who have laboured for them. Facebook, for example, is the result of Mark Zuckerberg. Twitter, now known as X, is Elon Musk's playground.

If we continue this analogy, the in-game settings owned by the companies are their platforms, where the company "stages user interactions, encouraging some and discouraging other connections" (van Dijck et al. 2018, 11). Like digital platforms, these settings act as 'walled gardens' where activity is restricted to particular locations (Ince 2019). They are also characterised by operational opaqueness (van Dijck et al. 2018, 12) and volatile, asymmetric power relations between the operator (company), complementor (mascot), and end-user (guest) (Poell et al. 2019, 6).

These company-owned settings sculpt the way in which the mascot complementors and guest end-users interact with each other (van Dijck et al. 2018, 9). In all the games, the mascots are intended to be encountered within their own specific area, decorated with appropriate theming. In *Security Breach*, for instance, DJ Music Man—a giant, spider-like animatronic, reminiscent in design to a Fisher Price Chatter Phone—can only be encountered in the West Arcade, where he either sits behind the DJ booth by the dance floor or travels through tunnels in the arcade walls.

In all three games, end-users can secure glimpses into the opaqueness of the company's operations by talking to mascot allies and finding collectibles, which often take the form of internal company communications. This dynamic closely mimics the circumstances through which insights are gained into major digital platforms. The full scale of the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal, for example, emerged thanks to a combination of whistleblower Christopher Wylie's testimony and leaked internal documents (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison 2018). In this way, the games' titular characters—Freddy, Poppy, and Banban—also become vital, internal informants as they present critical perspectives of the business' misconduct.

Mascot as Complementor

While the mascots within mascot horror differ from the average platform complementor, being explicitly designed for the platform they're staged upon, they are still independent actors, able to work outside of company expected frameworks. With this in mind, they are best perceived as complementors, whose presence both attracts end-users and creates an endless stream of content to keep them entertained. In *Security Breach* and *Ruin* this content is highly personalized, in the manner of an algorithmic platform; animatronic mascots Freddy and Roxy both use facial scans on end-users Gregory and Cassie in an attempt to access their data profiles. When Roxy successfully locates Cassie's file, her behaviour immediately changes as she adopts a persona that caters to Cassie's preferences.

Modern platform society has been critiqued for teaching young people "to see themselves as a brand, yet one that will be judged according to its perceived authenticity" (Varoufakis 2023, 177). We see this struggle play out amongst all of the mascot characters. Commodified by their respective platforms, they have aspects of

their personality that are undesirable from a commercial point of view and are, therefore, kept hidden from sight. Roxy—a wolf animatronic, with a bold, brash public persona—can be caught crying in the privacy of her dressing room in *Security Breach*, reassuring herself: "I'm not a loser… Why? Why?" Meanwhile, in *Poppy Playtime: Chapter 3*, Kissy Missy—believed to be former orphaned child, now a large, brightly coloured, bipedal toy—can be found in quiet contemplation, holding a photograph of a small girl who may have been her or a friend in a past life.

Present on a platform where they need to constantly perform to satisfy both their platform operators and end-users, mascots encounter the same issues faced by online content creators (Thorne 2022; Gregersen & Ørmen 2023). "For the last two weeks, I don't think I've left my house at all to go do anything," says jacksepticeye, real name Sean McLoughlin, "it gets to you after a while, doing the same videos over and over again" (2018). McLoughlin's lived experience is eerily close to conditions of the mascots in the mascot horror genre; isolated from the world and performing the same repetitive activity for an audience, with their continued presence ultimately decided by the whims of a powerful corporation.

In fact, the homicidal nature of many of the mascots may be attributed in part to this precarity and the inevitable burnout it creates. *Poppy Playtime*'s central narrative, for example, revolves around an event known to the mascots as the "Hour of Joy"; the moment the mascots, long abused by their platform operators, revolted and took control via a genocidal murder spree. Likewise, the mascots of *Garten of Banban* have already attempted a coup against their human operators before the start of the game, which has directly led to the in-fighting the player bears witness to (Euphoric Brothers 2023g).

There Is No Alternative

In his discussion of capitalist realism, Mark Fisher describes the overriding belief that there is no alternative to capitalism and that, without capitalism, society would collapse (2009, 7-9). Aspects of this mode of thinking are found throughout the mascot horror genre. When the corporations that contain the mascots collapse, as described above, the result is not the creation of something new—maybe inspirational—from the ruins, but a festering within them.

In *Poppy Playtime*, the mascots ultimately resort to cannibalism, devouring first the bodies of the employees they've slain before beginning to attack and eat each other. This, despite the fact that they should be able to venture outside the factory—which the player character enters with little difficulty, via the main entrance, at the start of the game—and have been documented doing so before (Mob Entertainment 2023).

Meanwhile, in *Security Breach*, this thinking is displayed directly by Freddy Fazbear in an exchange with Gregory: When asked by Gregory to leave with him, Freddy states that he cannot leave the Mega Pizzaplex, as he requires regular electronic charging via the Pizzaplex's infrastructure. There is plenty of evidence, however, that this isn't true. In fact, in two alternate endings for the game, Freddy is shown outside the Pizzaplex and operational thanks to regular charging from a car battery via jumper cables. This possibility is reinforced in *Ruin*, when Cassie returns to the derelict Pizzaplex and finds the other animatronics operational despite the recharge infrastructure being inaccessible.

So, it is not the case that the mascots are perpetually trapped within the confines of their platforms—and, therefore, capitalism—but rather a case of the characters, or the creators of their respective franchises, not being able to see the many possibilities available to them. In this way, mascot horror functions simultaneously as an illustration of capitalist realist thinking and a critique of contemporary platform society.

THE ROLE OF NOSTALGIA

Nostalgia is often understood as a longing for safety, comfort, and the past. In the Gothic tradition, however, this past is viewed as secretive and dangerous, always threatening to break into the present to demand responsibility (Grafius 2024, 31). One of the most notable traits of mascot horror is its reliance on such uses of nostalgia. Mob Games' Zach Belanger describes *Poppy Playtime* as a game that "taps into that unsettling feeling of nostalgia gone wrong" by feeling "like it's filled with forgotten childhood memories" (Tury 2024). Likewise, the Euphoric Brothers have stated that, in creating *Garten of Banban*, they wished to focus on "a setting that most people would be able to relate to" and that "most people have been to a kindergarten and, therefore, most people would feel uncanny in a twisted kindergarten" (Euphoric Brothers 2023b, 01:25).

With most developers of mascot horror franchises born in the late 20th century, this is the time period that becomes a shared reference point within the genre. A reference point that comes with an in-built emphasis on consumerism, as it was at the end of the 20th century that children started being targeted as age-segmented consumers following the development of mid-century marketing practice (Kenway et al. 2005). During this time understandings and experiences of childhood were "increasingly mediated by advertising and consumer culture more broadly" (Lennard 2012, 136). The anxieties surrounding this development were explored in horror media of the time, including the *Child's Play* film franchise (1988—). The *Child's Play* series antagonist—a Chucky doll "modelled with the ubiquitous Cabbage Patch Kids dolls in mind" (Lennard 2012, 139) and possessed by the spirit of a murderer—introduced a "demonic or occult undercurrent to children's consumerism" which "imagines the child as troublingly synonymous with – and as blameworthy as – the marketing programs designed to capitalize on and exploit those desires" (ibid. 139). The mascot horror genre can be seen as a culmination of these themes, in which the fully commodified child characters stop being consumers and become products, corporate conspirators, or a combination of the two. In the same manner, mascot horror can also be read as a continuation of and response to increasing consumerization of monsters in the 20th century—a trend that gained traction globally before reaching a fever pitch at the dawn of the millennium thanks to franchises like *Pokémon* (Švelch 2023, 23-26)—in which child and monster have been fused.

Entertainment complexes, toy factories, and branded kindergartens—the settings of our chosen games—are symbolic of child-oriented capitalism of the late 20th century. Bright, colourful, fun, and almost exclusively child oriented, they provide a safe and comforting environment but, when the player visits or stays in these spaces too long, their danger becomes apparent and their nostalgia no longer safe. It is the mascots themselves—often children, victims of this marketing and mindset, where profit is placed over wellbeing—that bring the underlying horrors of consumerist culture to light and break the nostalgic illusion of safety. In this way, the mascots work as both a critique of nostalgia and capitalism. Yet, simultaneously, they themselves act as

points of nostalgia thanks to the incorporation of late 20th century aesthetics in their designs. Just as Chucky, the demonic doll, is modelled after an existing product, the mascots of mascot horror draw direct inspiration from popular intellectual properties. In *Security Breach*, for instance, Freddy and Monty share similar designs to classic 1980s cartoon action heroes, including He-Man and the *Biker Mice from Mars*, with their triangular torsos, studded strap accessories, and shoulder pads. Freddy's fluorescent lightning bolt decal is also reminiscent of glam rock singer David Bowie's *Aladdin Sane* (1973) album cover.

We can also see this nostalgic design tendency in *Poppy Playtime*. Second instalment antagonist Mommy Long Legs, for example, has a design similar to the bendable rubber doll Betty Spaghetty, a popular toy in the late 1990s and early 2000s targeted at young girls (Betty Spaghetty 2024). Similar to Betty Spaghetty, Mommy Long Legs has a stereotypical design for female toys with shades of pink, visible eyelashes, and long hair. By playing on the design of Betty Spaghetty, the element of nostalgia is actively used to engage with an audience that experienced the original doll as a part of their childhood. In this way, the game producers target an older audience while simultaneously re-introducing the Betty Spaghetty toy-design into children's toys via merchandising: The Mommy Long Legs character has been made available outside of the game itself as toys, including action figures and plushies, that are being sold in children's toy stores (Lenters et al. 2023). The availability of such mascot horror merchandise in toy stores demonstrates the regurgitation of heteronormative marketing practices.

In this section, we discuss how gender stereotypes are being reproduced in the games selected for this article via an examination of the characters' gendered traits, designs, and roles. We also discuss how this affects the targeting of children as consumers.

Figure 1: Images of Betty Spaghetty and Mommy Long Legs, showing similarities in design. Image of Betty Spaghetty by Reddit user Queasy_Ad_7554 (2023). Image of Mommy Long Legs from *Poppy*

Gendering the mascots

As stated by existing literature on gender and games, there is a clear tendency for games to enhance stereotypical gender traits through hidden gender expectations in the game's design. This includes the exclusion of female representation from much of the games' content, except in objectified or secondary positions (Cassell & Jenkins 1998; Dietz 1998; Downs & Smith 2010; Lynch et al. 2016). In horror, gender remains central to the genre with the presence of gender-specific monsters (Grant 1996). The gendering of toys is also familiar to scholars: Through a discussion on gendered toys, Susan Willis (1991) states that there is a distinct division of toys by gender traits (Willis in Cassell & Jenkins 1998, 19). Toys are also prone to reinforcing binary stereotypes of gender and thus affect children's understanding of gender (Pligou & Tromara 2023). This is of particular importance regarding mascot horror, which uses the shared experience of childhood and emphasises nostalgia for aesthetic purposes.

Gender roles and traits

Within the selected games, a mascot's gender is frequently defined by their name, voice, appearance, and design, which are just as often associated to heteronormative understandings of gender. Male mascots like Freddy occasionally show stereotypical representation of masculinity in toy and game characters—which focus on hypermasculine traits, highlighting muscles, strength, and physical power (Boyd & Murnen 2017)—but it is the female characters in these games that are more explicitly and narrowly gendered. For this reason, discussion will be centred on the gendering of the female characters with incidental mentioning of the male.

Mommy Long Legs, the female primary antagonist of *Poppy Playtime: Chapter 2* (2022), oscillates wildly between a child-friendly, toy-like figure and a monstrous character. The game's depiction of Mommy Long Legs, as noted by the fans, shows her to be "furious", "mentally unhinged", and "deranged and insane" with a voice that "constantly switches from high-pitched tones to aggressive loud ones" ('Mommy Long Legs' 2024). These words are all descriptions of mental states or behaviour caused by extreme emotions and, through them, we can see how the game's portrayal plays into stereotypical understandings of women as emotionally driven beings. This becomes explicitly visible when Mommy Long Legs's portrayal is compared to the behaviour of the game's other primary antagonists—the male characters of CatNap and Huggy Wuggy—who are described as less emotionally unbalanced, despite showing similar signifiers of mental instability. CatNap and Huggy Wuggy are cold and strategic, adapting a "stealthy approach" ('Huggy Wuggy' 2024) and exhibiting "fervent devotion" to the game's final antagonist ('CatNap' 2024). As these fan descriptions show, Mommy Long Legs' development into a dangerous villain is characterized by emotional and mental instability, while the male antagonists' is driven by loyalty to a greater cause. Thus, the game portrays an archaic exaggeration of women's reactions, which are pictured as "crazy" or "insane" (Chakraverty 2023), for horror effect that are further extrapolated in the fandom's wikipages.

Stereotypical gender norms are also shown in the distribution of the mascots' tasks within the (former) corporations of the games. Male characters are often depicted as protectors, while female characters are cast in caregiving roles. In *Garten of Banban*,

for instance, the sheriff is portrayed as a male toad with a top hat, badge, and pistol (Euphoric Brothers 2023f) while the teacher is portrayed as female, with a soft voice, pink bow, and exaggerated eyelashes (Euphoric Brothers 2023e), all traits often associated with representations of femininity and female characters (Ghosh et al. 2023). We see a similar task distribution in *Poppy Playtime* between the characters Mommy Long Legs, who behaved as a mother to the children in the Game Station area, and CatNap, who was the guardian of the orphanage. These roles appeal to the heteronormative traits of men as protectors and fighters and women as mothers and nurturers.

These gendered roles are often reaffirmed when the mascot encounters their intended target audience. For instance, Roxy in *Security Breach* and *Ruin* acts as an antagonist. In *Ruin*, however, Roxy becomes an ally to Cassie in a cutscene towards the DLC's end. At this point, she becomes a caregiver, assuming a role identical to the one of Freddy plays for Gregory in the main game. This creates a homogeneous gender relationship structure, which illustrates the idea of 'only girls play with dolls' and 'only boys play with action figures' (Wagner-Ott 2002). In the sequence between Cassie and Roxy, we see that Roxy is a vulnerable character who is insecure about her appearance. The portrayal of female characters as hyper focused on their appearance, especially their looks, is a stereotypical assumption of women and femininity, based on notions of heteronormative expectations of women's appearance rooted in real life (Puvia & Vaes 2013). This representation, where a woman's worth is interwoven with their physical appearance, reproduces the objectification of women (Heflick et al. 2011) and is a stereotypical and undermining depiction of female characters.

A reoccurring gender identifying element for mascot horror characters is the use of colour in their design. Based on the heteronormative understanding of pink and blue as identifications of gender (Dietz 1998), several of the games' figures have their gender defined. For instance, in *Poppy Playtime*, male character Huggy Wuggy's primary design colour is blue, while Huggy Wuggy's female equivalent, Kissy Missy, is primarily pink. Her name is also gendered by the word 'Miss', a title often associated with women. In comparison, Huggy Wuggy's name is more gender neutral. It also uses the word 'hug', considered a friendly gesture, instead of 'kiss', which is commonly perceived as a romantic action.

As these examples show us, the explicit gendering of female characters is a central part of how gender stereotypes are reproduced within the games. By giving female characters tasks that require care and work with children and utilising stereotypical character design, the games continue playing on heteronormative gendered traits. This then contributes to the gendering of products made for children when the games' characters are merchandised as children's toys.

Sexualised design

For a long time, female characters in games have been underrepresented, a result of gender roles and stereotypical expectations of gendered looks that have been popularised by the one-dimensional thought and behavioural pattern of understanding that characterises advanced industrial society (Marcuse 1964 in Tomkinson 2022, 4). According to this perspective, our understanding of reality is built on an industrial and capitalistic worldview. However, historically speaking, the development of technology and industry has been dominated by men. This means that our industrial and capitalistic worldview is highly gendered, as it is affected by

the male hegemony within technological and industrial development. In other words, this thought and behavioural pattern is based on a male gaze (Gard 2023, 30). An example of this in gaming is the famous action heroine Lara Croft, from the *Tomb Raider* game series. Croft is a classic case for how the visual representation of women in games is often designed with the intention of appealing to the male gaze (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith & Tosca 2020, 177). Despite being a pioneer for active female characters in games, she is highly sexualised. Croft's design, wearing only a tank top and mini shorts, is focused on her feminine traits, with a small waist and highlighted breasts, hips and buttocks (Gard 2023, 19). This form of representation is still used within games and consumerist products today, as evidenced in mascot horror games like Mommy Long Legs, Roxy, Freddy, and Chica.

Figure 2: Chica in *Five Nights at Freddy's* (2014), Chica in *Five Nights at Freddy's: Security Breach* (2021), and Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider 1* (1996). The images show the development of Chica and her similarities to Lara. Pictures gathered from store.steampowered.com, cropped for the purpose of this article. ©2014 Scott Cawthon, ©2021 Scott Cawthon, ©1996 Crystal Dynamics group of companies.

Since the original *FNAF* game, Chica—the character designed like a hen—has undergone a gendered transformation. In the first *Five Nights at Freddy's* game (2014) Chica is not explicitly gendered; she is a yellow chicken with a round design, wearing a bib saying "Let's eat!" while holding a cupcake. The gendering of Chica began in the second *FNAF* game, with a curvier body design highlighting traits that are heteronormatively associated with femininity, and continued as the *FNAF* game series rose in popularity. In *Security Breach*, Chica is designed as a white hen, with a physical appearance that shares design traits with Lara Croft and other stereotypical representations of female characters in games: Chica's body is curvy and her hips, waist, and chest are more defined. Wearing a leotard, a skin-tight clothing item popularised in the 1980s, her clothing also highlights these curves in the same way Croft's do. This version of Chica also wears make-up, green earrings, a pink bow in her 'hair', and animal-print legwarmers, with a primarily pink colour coding. Her design in

Security Breach gives us no doubt that Chica is a female character, according to stereotypical gender design.

In *Security Breach*, unlike other *FNAF* titles, the animatronics are still active and being exposed to children in-game. In both the main game and the DLC, the character design reflects the relationship between child and mascot. For instance, Cassie wears green nail polish, identical to Roxy, to indicate that the player is controlling a female character closely aligned with the female animatronic. In comparison, Gregory does not, from the player's perspective, have a visually gendered design trait until the very end of the game, when the story's ending is displayed through illustrated sequences which include a drawn Gregory figure. Instead, Gregory's gender is indicated though his name and boyish voice. By making these distinct gendered choices of the children and their animatronics, the corporatization of gendered toys is visible, and we can see that making gender focused toys is a conscious choice for appealing to girls and boys— both in-game and in real-life—and, in this way, categorizes children while targeting them as consumers.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have provided a definition of the mascot horror game genre via its commonly understood conventions. Characterised by its cartoonish antagonists, who are often associated with children's media and entertainment, the mascot horror genre is a subsection of postclassical survival horror that chiefly engages in the modalities of execution and resolution. Played through a first-person perspective, mascot horror player protagonists often set out to solve or become entangled within a mystery related to gross corporate misconduct, and, as a result of transmedia storytelling techniques, children are often a large portion of any mascot horror audience.

By addressing the products of mascot horror and their engagement with the ideas of platformisation, we have highlighted how mascot horror works as a cultural reflection of contemporary society; one that illuminates the plight of online content creators and the pervading beliefs of capitalist realism. Furthermore, via our discussion of consumerism, we have pointed towards how these games and their merchandise target children as consumers and, in doing so, reproduce gendered stereotypes for younger generations.

Due to this paper's format, we have only provided a surface reading; the subjects we have covered would benefit by further, in-depth appraisal. Potential future research includes the ways independent game developers engage with platforms to promote content, the role of community in proliferation of online first gaming genres, and how transmedia storytelling in mascot horror games engage in consumeristic tendencies of capitalism.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

AUTHORS' DIVISION OF WORK

Author 1 had the original idea for the article, which was further developed in collaboration. Both authors have contributed to writing the article.

ENDNOTES

[1] Instalment is used, in this paper, as a general term to refer to the 'chapters' or 'episodes' of serialised games.

[2] Let's Plays are "recordings of gameplay with commentary, often made to be humorous, informative, or some combination of both" (McKitrick et al. 2023).

[3] After a decade of franchise production, the previously established lore of *FNAF* is both complex and—in some cases—convoluted. While surface references will be made to it throughout this paper, we will not explore it fully. Those who wish to know more are best directed to the multiple fan-run wikis associated with the franchise.

[4] In both meanings of the word.

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