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Conservative and Radical Madness Narratives in Creepypasta and *Petscop*

One of the more developed Internet-specific genres to have risen out of the past two decades is the modern Internet horror story, commonly referred to as "Creepypasta." What once was simply a digital adaptation of traditional horror and urban legends, spread throughout messageboards with often hundreds of anonymous users engaging with or even contributing to one story, has since evolved into a genre of its own—one that is distinct, though not entirely unrecognizable from its roots in the large horror genre. Tropes, themes, archetypes, and story beats familiar to the horror genre undergo a sort of divergent evolution in which they are reshaped so drastically until they are practically mainstream horror staples in and of themselves.

Yet, more than any particular character or trope, the aspect of traditional horror that has remained pervasive in Creepypasta is the genre's underlying bigotry. Horror's issues with bigotry are nothing new, though these problems take on a new life under Creepypasta. The accessibility of Creepypasta in comparison to other modes of horror has led to an often entirely new audience engaging with these harmful aspects of the genre both in consumption and production. Oftentimes, this has led to the perpetuation of these types of bigotry. However, this accessibility for new audiences and creators has also resulted in the creation of radical new works that are critical of the art that precedes them while still building upon them aesthetically and technically.

Petscop, a two-year long horror Youtube channel by Tony Domenico embodies this type of radical narrative. Domenico builds upon the narrative and aesthetic mechanisms of the

Creepypasta genre, all the while profoundly aware of its problematic depictions of the mentally ill, the traumatized, the abused, and the young. *Petscop* uses its generic links and aesthetic allusions to both Creepypasta and traditional horror (as well as other staples of the Internet Age) in order to tell a radical story entirely inseparable from its Internet medium that is critical not only of the ableism in its genre, but the overarching ableism in society that dehumanizes and animalizes these groups to begin with.

Creepypasta and the Evolving Dehumanization of the Mad

"Creepypasta" is a portmanteau of "creepy" and "copypasta." Copypasta itself is a shortened version of "copy-and-paste," and typically refers to small portions of text that, true to their name, are copied and pasted across the Internet. The average Creepypasta is generally somewhat longer than a copypasta, though the prospect of repetition and virality remains at the genre's core. There is a social element to almost all Creepypasta; stories are often presented as non-fiction, either in a serious attempt to convince the audience or as part of the fiction that the audience must be willing to buy into. Many early Creepypasta were originally posted in horror threads on messageboards in a campfire-story-like format, presented in the first-person as true stories. r/NoSleep, the current subreddit dedicated to sharing original Creepypasta and horror stories, has a rule mandating that all interactions must be entirely in-character. Authors post their stories in-character and, in turn, audiences must respond in-character; they give advice, tell each other off for making inappropriate jokes while someone is in danger, and they may even receive responses from the original poster.

For Creepypasta on other message boards and websites, this social interaction extends to the act of creating Creepypasta as well. Perhaps the most popular example of this is the *Slenderman* story, whose titular character originated from a set of photos that were entered into a horror contest on the *SomethingAwful* forums and later evolved into a full character with vast amounts of lore due to the contributions of many different creators. Beyond just direct evolution of singular works or characters, much of Creepypasta is heavily derivative of both traditional horror and other Creepypasta that precedes it. All of this has created a distinct social character present in almost all Creepypasta, even that which is not noticed by any significant audience. Even if one's r/NoSleep story is not read by anyone else, it is still created with the knowledge that it *might* cultivate an incredibly large audience—that it may go on to receive hundreds or thousands of fans that build upon the story in some way. When combining both the explicit rules of communities like r/NoSleep (regulating things like out-of-character interactions and community conduct) and the implicit rules and workings of the genre, each individual Creepypasta becomes inseparable from the genre as a whole.

It is common for a particular type of Creepypasta to become popular enough to cause a notable shift in the genre that results in the development of both thematic/narrative tropes and new ways for fans to interact with a story. *Petscop* itself is part of a broader subcategory of Creepypasta about video games, specifically about supposedly haunted or creepy video games that the narrator has found. This trope, once again, has its roots in older horror and pop culture, but it became particularly popular in 2010-2012 with stories like *BEN DROWNED*, "Lavender Town Syndrome," "NES Godzilla," and "SONIC.exe"—which, respectively, surround a haunted *Legend of Zelda* game, a *Pokémon* urban legend, an old Nintendo Entertainment System *Godzilla* game, and a fictional *Sonic the Hedgehog* game. Each of these types of stories

contributed to the overall zeitgeist within the Creepypasta community. Some of these stories utilized extensive video game code modification, some created custom pixel art or audio, and many relied on innovative ways to involve the audience in the story. These techniques would go on to be used by a variety of other Creepypasta after them. *BEN DROWNED* is notable for returning nearly a decade after it had first finished uploading with aspects of an alternate reality game (ARG) in which audience participation and mysteries were worked into the narrative. Creepypasta ARGs themselves were popularized by a *Slenderman* ARG video series titled *Marble Hornets* which had been made shortly after the character had first been made. These stories exist in intricate webs of connections to works proceeding and succeeding them—*BEN DROWNED* and *Slenderman* (both as discrete stories and as evolving characters in a larger Internet mythos) grew up with one another when they were released, and to this day have a strong influence on both one another and other works in the genre. Any given piece of Creepypasta is connected to the genre's past, present, and future.

This social character, combined with the general accessibility that the Internet gives, has led to the explosion of a widely diverse genre consisting of often multimodal projects—the canvas of a Creepypasta may be a blogpost, a video game whose code has been modified, a Youtube video, or something else entirely. However, this evolutionary aspect of Creepypasta also applies to many of the genre's more problematic aspects.

There is much to be said about all sorts of bigotry in Creepypasta, though this paper will largely focus on the genre's treatment of disabled people, more particularly the Mad. Madness, here, is used in its reclaimed definition relating to Mad studies; it is an umbrella term that encompasses the mentally ill, the neurodivergent, the traumatized, survivors of psychiatry, and other groups seen by society as being "Mad."

Media has almost always had issues with depicting the disabled community, especially within horror. In a 1992 book entitled *Disabling Imagery and the Media*, disability theorist Colin Barnes categorizes eleven harmful tropes of common disabled stereotypes, many of which overlap. To broadly group some of Barnes's already broad categories, two particular trends in disabled representation are to depict the disabled as either objects of pity that serve to burden themselves and others, or actively malicious and violent threats. On the former, Barnes writes that the view of disabled people as pathetic perpetuates "the myth that disability is synonymous with illness and suffering" (Barnes 8-9). On the tropes of the latter nature, Barnes writes, "This distortion of the experience of disability is present in a great deal of literature and art...The overall message coming out of these stories is that such people cannot be trusted, are a danger to children and should be locked up" (Barnes 10). Although both types of narratives of disabled people take on different tones, both ultimately contribute to the overarching ableism of society by dehumanizing disabled people into objects either to be pitied or to be feared.

Jamie McDaniel expands on this idea and relates it directly to the horror genre. McDaniel uses the concept of narrative prosthesis coined by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder; this framework argues that narratives often rely heavily on ideas of disability both to directly characterize certain figures or to function as a metaphorical tool. McDaniel argues that zombie films, though complicating narrative prosthesis somewhat by allotting zombies certain levels of human characteristics, ultimately create a disability in the form of zombies that either directly poses a threat or must be "overcome" by the main cast. McDaniel argues that the zombie genre, though on the surface level seemingly unrelated to disability, revolves around narratives that serve to support systemic ableism by promoting the idea of a normative, abled body set against a dysfunctional, often violent disabled body that has become literally less than human.

In “The Most Dangerous Deviants in America,” Shawn M. Phillips specifically extends this insight to depictions of the mentally disabled; Phillips argues that the stereotype of insanity typically seen in horror genres like slasher films often serve to create the illusion of a hard line between the abled and disabled. The disabled are depicted as “deviant killers,” as “...near superhuman in strength, as being immune to pain, and near immortal when no evidence exists to suggest such abilities.” The disabled person is monsterfied in these films, and their inhumanity depicts them to be not just a violent threat, but one that cannot be at all empathized with. The Mad characters become perfect embodiments of the medical model of disability—their narratives posit that disability is both a medical certainty and social threat, and therefore that segregation and oppression of the disabled is justified (Phillips).

These tropes are handed down by, as Barnes puts it, “both classical and popular” art (Barnes 10) into our modern evolutions of media and horror, including Creepypasta. These tropes have the notoriety and recognition they had in traditional media, coupled with the effect of being exposed to new audiences due to Creepypasta’s popularity, and evolve in their own right. One of the most popular Creepypasta stories is “Jeff the Killer”, a story about a teenage boy who is bullied, falls into a deep depression, is set on fire and scarred, and becomes a stereotypically Mad serial killer. Jeff represents the culmination of many of the outlined ableist tropes; he is both physically and mentally disabled, and provoked into becoming a violent monster because of it. He is also, following another one of Barnes’ tropes, an object of pity. There is a type of condescending tragedy in Jeff’s story as he is driven to his Madness—a tragedy that lies not in any actual material, realistic ableist oppression that Jeff faces, but rather in him becoming disabled in the first place. There is no discernible difference between the moment in which Jeff becomes disabled and Mad and the moment in which becomes a violent killer; they are one in

the same, and thus the sadness the audience feels as this child goes down this path is inextricable from the sadness they are meant to feel from his disablement. Moreover, because of the social nature of Creepypasta in which stories are shared and constantly evolved (through fanart, fanfiction, and new entries), more and more ableist tropes continue to be added onto the story until they also become part of the larger lore.

However, while many Creepypasta like "Jeff the Killer" still rely on problematic depictions of Madness, the new audiences and creators that the Internet has given to Creepypasta have also led to work that is deeply critical of these renderings; it would be just as incorrect to say that all Creepypasta relies on ableism as it would be to say that all horror does. In "Horrible Heroes: Liberating Alternative Visions of Disability in Horror," Melinda Hall argues that, although much of horror still relies on disability in both metaphor and characterization, some pieces of horror allow us to examine the manufactured, unsteady line between the disabled and abled in a radical way that serves to destroy the barrier between the two; the horror of these pieces of media lies, therein, not in the disability of the characters, but in "society and its rigid cruelty." Hall argues that these pieces of media force us to empathize with the disabled character, and actively work to dis-identify us from the normalizing, able-bodied force (Hall). One of the most promising and popular examples of this phenomenon occurring in Creepypasta comes in the form of Tony Domenico's *Petscop*.

Painting a Picture of the Mad Child in *Petscop*

Petscop is an experimental Internet horror series using the medium of a Youtube channel. The series consists of twenty-five videos of varying lengths, uploaded over the course of roughly

two years, though some aspects of the narrative and writing were also delivered through the video descriptions, the Youtube channel's "About" page, and even the channel's profile icon. The channel tells the story of our protagonist, Paul, who stumbles upon an old, unfinished Playstation One video game. The video game appears to be a cheap puzzle game revolving around catching monsters, though Paul quickly discovers that the game has much more hidden to it. The story is largely nonlinear; many episodes are uploaded in a non-chronological order, and at times during the series it is difficult to tell who is playing the game or recording the episode in-fiction at any given time. This particular investigation will focus on analyzing one of *Petscop*'s main themes: the dehumanization and abuse of children, particularly traumatized and Mad children, by society.

Petscop immediately acquaints us with dehumanization. The Pets in *Petscop* are children; nearly every Pet looks like some sort of bird, object, or non-human-looking creature, though the language used to refer to them makes it clear that they are young humans. In the first episode, Paul guides us through the one level of the game that has apparently been finished. Near the beginning of the game, there are multiple signs explaining the basic objective: the "Gift Plane," which has provided homes to multiple Pets, has been shut down. The signs implore the player to find a Pet they like and take them, even if the Pet does not like them, saying:

> Every Pet is uniquely valuable. You should have no problem finding *somebody* that you love...When you're choosing a pet, find *somebody* that you like. You don't have to love them right away! Don't be discouraged if they run away from you. They really do want a home. They're afraid. Show them there's nothing to be afraid of.
>
> (Petscop 1; emphasis mine)

The wording in these early areas—particularly the use of human-specific words such as "somebody"—brings to mind not the process of adopting a pet, but a child. Further exploration of the first level serves to further confirm the humanity of these Pets. Pets are described as being

friends with one another, as having their own feelings, etc. Yet, these children have been represented as Pets. The language used to describe them, while sometimes granting some level of humanity, is also often dehumanizing. Examining the earlier quote, the use of the phrase "uniquely valuable" is peculiar; the idea that one must have some sense of unique value in order to be loved is based in a horrifyingly capitalist view of the world. The game advises the player to not care about the Pets' feelings or consent if they run away, and to impose the player's own will onto them. Paul even refers to some of the Pets as "it" throughout the earlier episodes, even after reading descriptions of them using gendered pronouns.

At the same time, Paul himself is notably disembodied. We hear his voice, though we never see his face. We associate the character of Paul with the character he plays in the game; this not only aids the nonlinearity of the story (multiple players use Paul's character model throughout the series), but also adds to a feeling of dehumanization. Paul's character sprite is somewhat abstract, and decidedly not human. The sprite depicts a yellow creature of some sort with blank white circles for eyes, a triangular opening at the bottom of his mouth, and a body with two feet and no arms. We know Paul is human, though he is represented with the same level of non-humanity as the rest of the Pets.

This dehumanization of children only continues throughout the series. In a later episode, Paul returns to the Gift Plane and quickly rereads the one piece of dialogue about finding a Pet that the player likes. Though it is only on screen for about a second, we are able to see that the dialogue has changed from "When you're choosing a pet, find *somebody* that you like." (Petscop 1) to "When you're choosing a pet, find *one* that you like." (Petscop 9); the small bit of humanity that was once granted to these Pets has now been taken away.

This dehumanization is made worse with the implication that many of the children characters are, on some level, disabled, traumatized, or Mad. Another recurring character, Care, is a little girl that is deeply traumatized due to abuse. She was kidnapped at an extremely young age by her father after a particularly messy divorce between her parents, and she spent five months trapped in an abandoned school building. She was able to escape by herself, and she wandered around aimlessly for the next day, "ashamed" and covering her face (Petscop 17) due to her father saying that "Nobody would want to see [her] like this." (Petscop 20). She finally returns home on her birthday to a party. Care is represented in the game with relative verisimilitude (albeit with the still somewhat cartoonish style of the video game) via the sprite of a small child. However, Care is also able to be caught in the same manner as the other Pets, and is even able to be deposited in a so-called "child library." (Petscop 7), a decision which mirrors the way other characters view her as less than a full living person. The adults in the story are shown to pity Care to the point of actively worsening her trauma; a scene in Petscop 22 is implied to be a dialogue between Care and a school or family therapist after the event. The scene takes on an unsettling tone as the therapist talks at length at how Care no longer needs to do *anything*, and that everything will now be taken care of by the people around her. They notice Care's face, saying "That's a very big boo-boo on your face." (Petscop 20). In short, Care's family therapist tells Care that she is no longer expected to live her own life and make her own decisions as everything will be taken care of by the people around, and in the process inadvertently manages to reaffirm several parts of Care's trauma—that she's broken, and that the scar on her face (as well as the more symbolic meaning it holds towards her trauma and abuse) are constantly noticeable and now defining of her character. The therapist's policing of language is also worth noting; they make an off-hand remark about how children should not cuss, no

matter how possibly angry they are, because it is “disturbing” (Petscop 20). Saying this to an abused traumatized child—or really, any marginalized or hurt person—is a way to coddle their justifiable feelings of hurt, to remove any power that their speech may have. All of this is deeply reminiscent of the actual struggles faced by Mad people and the abused in their day-to-day lives dealing with psychiatric circles that do not fully care for their needs. It is the exact same rhetoric behind Barnes’s trope of the fragile, useless disabled person. The disabled and the Mad are expected to be inherently utterly ruined by their disability or trauma, incapable of functioning in society. Moreover, they are expected to accept this, and any attempt to speak out against this belittlement (whether “disturbing” or not!) is far too transgressive against the manufactured line between sane and insane, abled and disabled.

Other characters are also implied to be Mad or disabled in some way. Paul for example, repeatedly is depicted as having issues with puzzles and numbers, has trouble communicating his ideas to others in traditional settings, and seems to have a tumultuous relationship with the rest of his family— all of which seem to imply some level of either neurodivergence, mental illness, or general trauma. There are also many times in which the narrative purposefully conflates Paul and Care; they are said to be the same age and almost identical, but Paul says that they have never met. They are also both represented with the same yellow color in dialogue. Whether one wishes to take this as them literally and diegetically being the same person, or just being more of a narrative parallel between the two, for our analysis it creates a link between the Madness of Care and the Madness of Paul. Other characters are codified as disabled through their incompatibility with the standards that are imposed upon them by adults; many of the Pets, for instance, are described as being trouble-makers or being disobedient, both of which are complaints common for neurodivergent youth.

However, unlike the other narratives we have analyzed in which dehumanization is the logical end goal for the disabled, the dehumanization that occurs in *Petscop* is framed as a negative— not inherent to the disabled experience, but imposed by an outside source. Whereas in "Jeff the Killer," Jeff's dehumanization occurs as soon as he becomes disabled (and thus, his lack of humanity is inherent to his Madness), *Petscop* frames the dehumanization of its child characters as not only horrifying and tragic, but an act of oppression that the audience is meant to disagree with. To use Hall's words, *Petscop* "draws the vulnerable forward" (Hall) by aligning the audience with their plight, and in turn we find horror not in their Madness, but in the society willing to oppress and hurt them due to said Madness.

Part of this is due to the source material's frankness with discussing the problems that disabled and traumatized children face. The plight of the children of *Petscop* is not a metaphor for a larger exploration of human nature; it is, to its core, a narrative about dealing with trauma, abuse, and ableism from those unwilling to recognize either of those things. The language of disability being exploited for metaphor has been explored under the framework of narrative prosthesis before, and scholars of other societal frameworks have developed similar lenses to analyze oppression. Feminist and animal rights activist Carol J. Adams describes the danger in using the language of certain marginalization to make surface-level, aesthetic metaphors in "The Rape of Animals, the Butchering of Women." Specifically discussing the tendency to conflate rhetoric of animal rights liberation and other marginalized groups, Adams argues that one way to create an absent referent (that is, a being whose non-existence is necessary so as to enable its consumption) is through metaphor; by using the unique experience of a group to describe another event or form of oppression, some aspect of that group is lost to aid a level of metaphorical consumption. Applying this to the framework of narrative prosthesis, disability imagery is often

used to make metaphorical points on human existence outside of the actual field of disability in a way that often hurts and erases real disabled experiences.

This is not what *Petscop* does; the narrative is, without question, willing to challenge concepts of abledness. One Pet in the narrative, Toneth, has a broken leg, and is likened to a dog who survives a car accident by Rainer, an adult male character. Rainer describes how he wanted to euthanize the dog, even after the dog recovers; "When that dog wags its tail and it appears happy, it's not real. I guess that's toneth then. toneth toneth...toneth toneth toneth. the end. it's yucky outside" (Petscop 6; sic for the improper punctuation and capitalization). This rhetoric mirrors that which many disabled people face in arguing against eugenicist narratives that a disabled life is not worth living—-we see that Rainer is willing to disregard the disabled dog's (and thus, Toneth's) outward feelings of happiness in order to project the level of suffering Rainer believes them to feel due to their disability, much like how the game encourages its players to disregard the happiness of their Pets in their current environment. The sudden uncanny shift to a lack of capitalization as well as the repetition of Toneth's name help further frame Rainer's viewpoint as something to be feared. The narrative is actively aware of its themes of disability and trauma; they are neither a byproduct nor a metaphorical tool, but rather a key meaning of the text.

However, beyond just a willingness to address disability issues, *Petscop* makes use of the genre of Creepypasta and the medium of the Internet to criticize these issues in ways that other, more traditionally told stories cannot. Part of the social process behind Creepypasta is a tendency to hyper-analyze even individual frames to bring meaning out of the work. A subreddit was made for *Petscop* fairly quickly in order to log some of these discoveries, and a "Comprehensive Progress Document " that is over 120 pages long has been made to document each potential

finding and theory. Some of these skew more towards traditional literary analysis while others take on a more conspiratorial approach to create a more literal explanation of the plot or timeline of the series. Either way, this leads to the viewing experience of *Petscop* and Creepypasta having a degree of activity unlike a lot of other media. It should be noted that Domenico was almost certainly fully aware of this aspect to Creepypasta before beginning his story; he anonymously posted a link to the first few episodes on the subreddit r/CreepyGaming which is dedicated to this particular phenomena of horror and Creepypasta video game content (both nonfictional and fictional). Like a r/NoSleep author being fully aware of the genre conventions and rules before posting their story, a creator like Domenico likely understands that this social mystery and analytical aspect to the genre is integral to its consumption.

One of the more compelling techniques is *Petscop*'s use of editing in order to create a feeling of cyclicality and helplessness. After a certain point in-universe, Paul loses control of the Youtube channel; the people editing/uploading the videos and maintaining the channel are often called "the Family," and they are implied to have some hand in both the abuse and mistreatment of a few of the child characters. The editing, to match the in-universe oppressive nature of the Family (and, more metaphorically, to describe the role that actual family structures play in perpetuating ableism and abuse), is almost actively hostile in a way that a medium like a traditional film or TV show could not do. The seventh episode abruptly ends with a black screen with white text—an editing decision so inconsistent with the style of every other video that it becomes uncanny. This screen explains that "We've had to cover up something with a black box. Right now we can't say why. Some other things we're expecting to 'censor' in the future…" (Petscop 7). From there onward, multiple objects throughout the series are entirely censored. Some moments in the editing cut Paul off outright in the middle of a thought, and in-between

longer videos there are videos like Petscop 16, a two-minute long video of nearly nothing but a loud alert message indicating that the controller has not been touched for some time. These decisions ultimately help align us with the characters in their fear; the Family—a conduit of abuse and ableism that does not properly respect many of the traumatized child characters—becomes equally hostile to the audience through the editing.

Other moments in the editing process, though not outright hostile, are similarly unique to a medium in which small, almost hidden editing decisions can be easily replayed over and over. One common technique *Petscop* employs is synchronizing certain aspects of the footage; oftentimes, the movement or actions in two different moments in different videos of *Petscop* mirror one another almost one to one. This happens multiple times; for instance, two clips of gameplay in separate locations from the second and ninth episode of the series synchronize almost perfectly with another. The ninth episode notably includes a line about how the player can "close the loop" of abuse that has happened to Care. This editing decision—one that most viewers will likely miss without the social consumption of work that is typical of Creepypasta, and that would not lend itself to traditional film or television show viewing sensibilities—delivers a slow sense of horror. In order for abuse and trauma to end, its cycle must be closed, and yet even minute actions and decisions are almost unconsciously, cyclically repeated throughout the series. Moreover, these actions are not repeated out of a vacuum,; rather the game itself facilitates the conditions for these actions to be repeated. A sense of helplessness brews in the viewer in seeing these repetitions, and this helplessness mirrors the helplessness created by a society that fosters abuse and trauma even from the formerly abused and traumatized.

The other technique that ultimately allows *Petscop* to uniquely deliver its radical narrative is its command of nostalgia. *Petscop* is inextricable from every other Creepypasta in the medium, but more broadly speaking it is a piece that is deeply entwined with the zeitgeist of the Internet. In her paper on "Candle Cove," another Creepypasta, Jessica Balanzategui coins the term "the digital gothic" to refer to a subgenre that she sees as having grown out of Creepypasta. Balanzategui argues that this digital gothic primarily relies on the "process of uncanny nostalgia," the uneasiness that comes with great periods of change such as the transition into the modern digital age. The genre calls upon this nostalgia aesthetically to investigate this tension between the old and the new, the fear of finding something in one's past that may be better forgotten.

Under this lens of the digital gothic, *Petscop*'s usage of nostalgia to create a feeling of uncanniness aids it in telling a story rooted in trauma. The series heavily relies on aesthetic references to the 90s and 00s, down to its foundational core. The series is, after all, presented as a PS1 game, and very much seeks to replicate the strange feeling of a seemingly forgotten piece of digital media that only you have experienced. The series is also based on the aforementioned larger trope of a "scary, potentially haunted game I found" popularized so heavily by other Creepypasta that it inspires nostalgia as well.

The series also directly references several well-known brands, especially in the third episode. Paul visits the aforementioned child library, an area in which the rooms of various deposited children can be visited by inputting their facial features. Each of the rooms has a different color, a differently patterned rug, and an assortment of different items on the table meant to highlight these unnamed kids' personalities. The camera zooms in on these items for each room even though they are fairly visible from afar and generally few in numbers; their

presence is emphasized for several moments on screen. Some of these objects scattered throughout the various rooms include Rubik's Cubes, Nintendo Gameboys, containers of Play-Doh, and 8-Balls. All of these items are toys, but more importantly they are *branded* toys, an uncanny sight for anyone who has grown up in this digital age and thus has at least some understanding of copyright and product placement laws. The Nintendo Gameboy in particular stands out; it is an extremely distinctive shape and color scheme, though one that is *very* out of place in a video game on a rival console to the Nintendo systems. This uncanniness is going to be especially notable to the main demographic of *Petscop* and Creepypasta: younger/newly adult audiences that have maybe never known a world outside of digital media and are fully aware of how unsettling it is to see this type of strange brand mix-up. This uncanniness helps these branded objects stick out, and thus leads the audience to realizing that, in this child library in which children are nothing more than a set of mix-and-match facial features to be filtered through, the personalities of these children are reduced to the brands they consume. The family structure—the same oppressive one which facilitates much of the abuse we have seen in *Petscop*—is thus tied to this uncanny, inescapable branded presence of capitalism. References and allusions to the past and nostalgia are stripped away to reveal hollow, oppressive, capitalistic structures, and these structures are the same structures perpetuating the ableism seen in the rest of the series.

Yet, not all references to the past are without hope in *Petscop*. The twenty-first episode is a recording that has been saved to the game's memory titled "care-dancing-sign." It is an episode without any background music, though it features the player character (likely controlled by Care) dancing around two signs. The video perfectly syncs up with Ace of Base's 1993 song "The Sign"—an editing decision Domenico makes which, again, is fairly bizarre and really only works

in this digital medium and genre. Here, we have Care, a young girl, joyfully dancing along in-game to one of the most popular songs of the decade. Moreover, it is a song explicitly about overcoming a relationship deemed to be bad for the viewer; a bittersweet song, in which the speaker admits that they must take themselves into a place of life that is good for them—wherever that may be—though is able to still find joy in the fact that they have left the relationship to begin with. It is, without a doubt, one of the most human moments in *Petscop*. It is a moment that produces *genuine* (not *uncanny*) nostalgia of fooling around in a video game while listening to one of the decade's longest hits. And it occurs not when Care is untouched by Madness, but when she has already started experiencing some of her life's traumatizing events. Care is granted the most human and light-hearted moment of the series despite being arguably the most traumatized character of the cast. She escapes the harmful and ableist tropes laid out by Barnes, McDaniels, and Phillips, though to say she is a "normal" girl is equally incorrect. Her experience has undoubtedly still affected her, but while the ableist and saneist society around her expects her to be incapable of living, Care finds comfort and humanity even while deeply entrenched in her Madness and trauma.

Conclusion

This investigation largely focused on analyzing a few specific techniques of *Petscop* in order to place them against a larger conversation about Creepypasta's evolution as a genre and how ableism may be both proliferated and combated against via that evolution. A full discussion of *Petscop* would certainly yield a larger conversation; entire large plot threads and thematic elements have been excluded to avoid obfuscating the main investigation. In particular, a queer

reading of *Petscop* from the perspective of the experience of being transgender or genderqueer could be fruitful, especially depending on how literally one wants to analyze the links between the characters of Paul and Care.

Academic discussions surrounding Creepypasta still have a large amount of ground to cover, especially from the lens of nearly any marginalized group. There is much to say about the exclusion of modern genres and evolution of art from academic discourse—how so often it is tied to problematic ideas of "lower" and "higher" art, and how that stems to large scale systemic exclusion. However, more than anything, these modern genres must be analyzed under a critical lens if they are to continue being popular with younger demographics. The bigotry in these genres—and the conversations combating that bigotry—will not disappear; if that is the case, then a critical lens must be taken to them in order to help dismantle inequity wherever it rears its head.

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