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Two Way Mirror

I: Introduction:

For my senior thesis I created a 32 page horror graphic novel on the dangers of anonymity and the allure of a second life on the internet. It functions as a new kind of ghost story for the modern technological age, where the dangers are not lurking on some foggy road, but behind our computer screen and on the insides of our phones. My comic asks what specifically about horror can reveal truths about our society? The physical threats that scare people change as society advances, but WHY people get scared goes beyond a man in a mask or a hacker stealing one's personal information. Fear and storytelling can be a potent mix when it comes to telling a compelling narrative.

The plot of the comic follows a nameless man who goes about his life with a cheery disposition that melts away the moment no one is watching him. His kind mask falls off to reveal a bully, a monster enabled by the safe anonymity the internet provides. By channeling all of his anger into attacking people he will never meet, he can be free

in his real life to deal with the people he sees face to face. The instigating incident occurs when one of his targets insults him back. The man plants incriminating files on the strangers computer and places an anonymous tip to the police. The next day he is pleased to read about how his victim was arrested, but when he arrives home he finds evidence that someone has cut his power. While waiting for the repairman to arrive, he begins to get messages on his laptop from the same person he supposedly sent to jail. The hacker seems to be watching him through various webcams and threatens to reveal the man's crimes to the police. Enraged, the man breaks his computers and sees someone watching him from his window. Grabbing a meat cleaver, the man attacks the intruder only to find… the repairman. As he is dragged away by the police, his outward persona slips away and all that is left is the darkness he once tried to hide.

There is a reason the concept of a 'ghost story' is so universal. Every culture has their own versions about what happens when one strays too far from the forest path, what happens when one answers the door late at night, and what happens when that feeling of being watched isn't heeded. Parables shift and change with the cultural landscape, and the art of storytelling is so malleable that true ghost stories can function in almost any context. One doesn't need to be living in 19th century German to understand why Hansel and Gretel shouldn't accept candy from a stranger in a gingerbread house.

Recently the horror genre has begun to see a resurgence via the internet. Some of the most critically acclaimed works of fiction in the last few years have been risk taking horror stories. Works like *The Babadook* (2014), *Skeleton Creek* (2009) and

Black Mirror (2011- present) have proven that modern fears can be made timeless through simple narrative devices. When looking at modern narrative devices, my project specifically focuses on how the internet can be used to generate horror and critical self reflection. Online culture has become so well defined that it truly does exist as almost a parallel reality to our own, and just like in real life there are unseen dangers. Like the ocean, the internet has become deep and wide enough that light no longer makes it all the way to the bottom, and in that darkness new monsters have evolved. My IP project draws from urban myths, chain emails and deleted forums to create a chillingly modern set of ghost stories. Hackers watching you from the other side of the webcam, stalkers pouring over their targets personal information available at the click of a button, and addictions can form from the simplest of online games. The goal is not to demonize the internet as a whole, but simply remind people that the tool they use everyday can just as easily become a weapon in the wrong hands. This project aims to become part of those internet urban legends, not forcing darkness onto the readers, but simply reminding them that just because they swim at the surface, that doesn't mean there is nothing lurking down in the pitch black trenches just out of sight.

II: Contextual Discussion:

In 2008, a man living alone in Tokyo discovered some of his food missing, and awoke several times to noises as if someone else was inside his apartment. Convinced his apartment was haunted, he set up a hidden camera to hopefully capture whatever

was bothering him. When he came home from work and watched the video, he assumed he would see at best, rats, and at worst, a burglar. Much to his horror, the moment he left his house, a old ragged woman emerged from his closet and began to live in his home as if it were hers. She ate his food, used his bathroom and even showered. To end the video, moments before he came home, the woman crawled back into the closet, a few feet away from where he was sitting at that very moment. When the police arrived they found a homeless woman who had been living in the crawl space in his walls. The final fact of this story that left a pit in my stomach was the fact that this woman had been living inside his apartment for more than a year. For an entire year of this mans life a possibly dangerous stranger had been watching him from just behind the doors of his closet.[1]

This story served as a major inspiration for my comic. The idea that something is lurking right behind you, and by using technology, the abstract horror transforms into something physical and somehow even worse. This disturbingly real story that could only have be told with the technology present. That moment of the man sitting at his desk, watching the grainy camera feed from his phone only to see the monstrous entity crawl out of his closet. That moment of a vague fear turning into something tangible and very close inspired the very foundation of my story. The internet is integral to modern day society. Entire social circles exist in cyberspace, as well as it's own languages, art styles, and etiquette. As much as people joke about it being a literal virtual world, they are right. As much as we try to ignore it, there is always a darkness waiting for us to let our guard down. The alluring, almost addictive nature of the internet seems to let people

forget about these dangers even more. When we share personal information, when we trust a stranger and when we go to websites we shouldn't, we invite that darkness into our computers and thus into our homes. As it is basically part of our everyday lives, it only makes sense that new cautionary tales should go along with the digital frontier. Ghosts stories around the campfire, urban legends told whispered on playground, and late night TV-movies we watch with the lights on and our blankets clutched tight. Fear can be healthy and when used as a narrative tool it can be indispensable for presenting a moral narrative.

There are numerous artists working online to use the culture of the internet to craft compelling horror narratives. The webcomic *Bongcheon dong ghost* [2] fully utilizes the medium to craft new scares and new ways to absorb the narrative. Animations and interactive elements accentuate the story at hand and turn the comic into an immersive experience rather than just another comic with a ghost. *Bongcheon dong ghost* tells the story of a girl meeting the ghost of a suicide victim on her way home. The most compelling part of the comic is the way the panels are arranged to be read on one's phone or on a computer screen rather than a printed comic book. As the reader scrolls down the impactful story beats are revealed at a slow methodical pace, and the animated jump scares are wholly unexpected when the ghost woman begins to move and the once stagnant images become 3D monstrosities. The story itself is accentuated by how it viewed, with the reader's face close to the screen and even has audio to scare headphone users.

My social studies teacher knew I loved horror stories and showed me this comic, it has stuck with for years and years after my first reading due to just how impactful the scares in it were. Even knowing when and where the jump scares were I still dread reading this comic. Regardless of genre, every story tries to stand out and cement itself in the audience's mind, horror employs scares to make it's narrative memorable. The art of the scare goes far beyond just jumping out and yelling 'boo'. The ghost woman jumping at the screen on it's own would not be very memorable if the pacing, formatting and overall tone wasn't as finely crafted it was in *Bongcheon dong ghost.*

When exploring the implications of technology in a horror setting, the biggest influence for my work was *Black Mirror*. A british short form horror tv series that focuses on possible futures and the darker side of progress, the show served as a way to gauge my tone when writing. Even my title "*Two Way Mirror*" was inspired by the meaning behind *Black Mirror*. A black mirror works the same way as a regular mirror, but instead of perfectly reflecting one's face it shows almost a negative, and a black mirror invokes the image of computer screen with no power. My title, *Two Way Mirror* is a reference to real life two way mirrors, where one side is a standard mirror and the other is a pane of glass. Just as a computer screen can reflect one's face, someone could be watching from the other end of the webcamera. *Black Mirror* tells scary stories of people who abuse technology or become victims of unseen forces that are more advanced than them. One episode could focus on the torment of pop up ads in a superficial society, another focuses on a VR afterlife where mental immortality is attainable. None of the episodes show the progress of technology as a bad thing, in fact it shows that our

human flaws remain consistent regardless of what the technology around us becomes. If anything, by the end of each episode it is the people who ruin the technology rather than the technology ruining the people. I find this incredibly important because the way media shames whatever the newest item on the market happens to be. In one hundred years no one will be telling jokes about the iPhone, but the very concept of 'corrupted progress' scared people when the steam engine was first built and will be scaring people when the first teleportation is invented.

One of the biggest influences on my visual style is the illustrations of *Junji Ito*.[3] A famous horror writer who focuses on turning the everyday horrific by perverting them in minor ways. Beyond the simple aesthetics of his beautiful artwork, the larger horror concepts of mixing realism with the abstract is a major inspiration. One of the stories that I focused on was *The Enigma of Amigara Fault.* The first time I had come in contact with the works of *Junji Ito* was his comic about a mysterious stone formation that draws people in like hypnotic personal voids. While thematically and tonally, I take much more
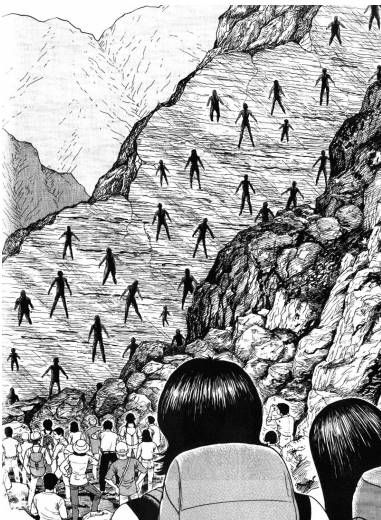
from *Bongcheon dong ghost* and *Mirror Black* with my writing, when it comes to the technicals, *Junji Ito* is my main influence. The inking techniques and the way horror is hidden then suddenly revealed is exactly the sort of visual method needed to compliment my story. By mixing shadows with light, areas of detail and areas that remain vague, and the realistic with the surreal, I can propel my horror to another level of immersion and terror.

[The inking techniques used in The Enigma of Amigara Fault,[4]]

The short form cautionary tale about society, is not a new narrative. Shows such as *The Outer Limits (1963), Alfred Hitchcock Presents (1955)* and *The Twilight Zone (1959)* master the art of weaving storytelling with the fear of the unknown. *The Twilight Zone* in particular is now a household name, with people whistling the opening bars of the theme song whenever something bizarre occurs. The reason such an old, and admittedly silly show stuck around for as long as it did, was the ability to hold a mirror to society by exaggerating its darkest aspects. Audiences weren't always scared of the men in rubber masks, they were scared of the ideas it presented. No one was scared of the monster beyond the initial jumpscare, they were disturbed by the last man on earth losing his glasses, stuck in a sea of books he was unable to read. They were chilled by the two lovers trapped in a terrarium to be an alien's plaything for the rest of their lives. They were repulsed when the aliens closed the spacecraft doors right as the scientists discovered they only wanted them for food. The power of a well written story is always more impactful than the individual visuals. Far too often the genre of horror is fixated on the jumpscare, by how good their CGI can be and how cool the monster will look on the poster. The visuals are just the cherry on top, they should be used to *accentuate* the narrative rather than be a fun distractions from it.

Horror is often ignored as a 'popcorn genre' when discussing influential literary works of the past 100 years. But some of the greatest movies of all time have been horror movies. Like *The Exorcist (1973)* which grossed $900 million, or *Jaws (1975)* which grossed over $1 billion. (both numbers adjusted for inflation.) [5]

Going beyond the financial aspects, these are cinematic masterpieces that can shock audiences even to this day. By guiding the audience's anticipation through ups and downs of a tightly crafted horror story, a simple story can become a memorable experience that will linger long after the last page is read or when the final credits roll.

III: Methodology:

My methodology has always been chaotic and crude. By letting my emotions rule what I draw I have cultivated a very rough art style. Me and my entire family have ADD tendencies so we often jump from one short project to another in quick succession. Focusing on a single project all year long was a new experience for me and I found that I spent most of my time researching. Brainstorming was my forte and I could write up a story in no time flat, the actual execution took more time and effort. Despite the difficulty I faced in my IP project, I now know that, concept art, sketches, character design, and environmental design are key to making a good comic book. It is comparable to building the lego molds, pouring the melted plastic and coloring the bricks before you start building your lego statue. My outlook on my own artistic method has changed quite a bit. I initially focused on the project as a whole, jumping from project to project, but now I know that working on each individual piece, and jumping from piece to piece *within* a project makes it go faster.

The specific pieces that I built to make my project complete were as followed. I started by drawing literary parallels to older horror stories I could use as inspiration.

Specifically I focused in on *Dr. Jekyll and Mister Hyde,* for the story of dual personalities and suppressing evil in exchange for maintaining a 'good' outer persona. *Phantom of the Opera* specifically for how it related to my initial inspiration with the woman in the closet. A stalker watching from right behind someone's mirror rang a little close for me. Lastly, *Dracula* to research the father of most gothic tales. The initial iteration of my project was going to be a series of scary stories based on the framework of these 3 stories. A story about dual identity, a story about romantic obsession and a story about addiction vs repression. While I did make concept art and preliminary sketches of all 3 stories, I eventually narrowed my focus to just one story so I could focus all my efforts on making it the best I could rather than spreading myself out too thin.

I created 3 rough drafts of my comic before I moved to my final inking and digital shading. The first was a series of sketchbook drawings to just get the basic story and layout ready, to visualize a few key scenes that I knew I wanted. The second iteration was a 6 page zine in the finalized shading style I wanted with preliminary concept art, this was my "proof of concept" art. The final draft was a 32 page long mock up done in pencil of what the story as a whole would look like and where the panels would be arranged. The final product was lightly pencil on bristol paper and then inked over, when completed it was scanned into a computer and shaded with Photoshop. When all 32 pages were finished they were printed and bound, along with larger posterboard version. The artifacts collected over the two semesters included the countless practice sketches, the concept art, the original story sketches, the 6-page zine, the 32 rough

storyboards, the 32 large inked bristol boards, the 4-32 page bound comics and the 16-double sized posters. Which I consider to be rather productive.

IV: Creative Work:

I have always been making comics. When I was younger my dad had to keep me out of his home office because I would keep stealing his pads of sticky notes . I would turn the tiny pads into flip books by drawing stick figures on each page. I would spend my day in class folding pieces of paper into 4x4 grids to function as my panels. My mom would give me stacks of loose leaf paper to keep me busy and I would fold them in half and staple them together. Making comic books has been my past time for the past 21 years.

Last semester I viewed the gallery of Senior IP projects. There was a comic book presented on a table and on a wall. The table had several smaller print versions of the comic for people to stop and read in all it's detail, and a larger poster version hanging up in order for passersby to simply glance at the story as a whole if they didn't want to spend the time to stop and read. I mimic this approach by having a table with 4 small prints of my comic and 32 large posters depicting the story from start to finish.

When compared to the other students my work was always on the smaller scale as it was intended to be in a book format. I had initially planned to bind my comic in a more professional manner, but time constraints forced me to get creative. I bound the 4 printed comic books with heavy duty staples and office clips. When I was haphazardly

assembling my final comics, I felt that same rush of euphoria I felt when I was stealing my dad's sticky notes to make something of my own from salvaged materials.

V: Conclusion:

This brings me to my conclusion, during my senior year I came full circle. I came to the university of michigan because I made comic for fun in my free time. I wanted to learn how to do what I love professionally, my Sophomore review focused on re-making my old comics and my Senior IP was basically a microcosm of childhood projects. If I can take anything away from my experience at the University of Michigan is that the more experience I have the more I unlock the artistic inspirations that were in me all along. I know that I will continue to work on my comics, write my own stories, scary or not for as long as I can hold a pen. This is what I have been doing since I was child and I will still be doing this until I die but more than ever I am confident that I made the right choice.

My future plans include focusing on my original webcomics *Rapid Pixel Adventure* and *The Adventures of Tara & Kevin.* Two already long running comics that have a small but loyal fanbase that I would love to make into more focused projects. Patreon and ad space allows young artists to make a living via the internet. Ironic that the device that made my comic so scary is where I am going to spend most of my time. I hope my *Two Way Mirror* is a project I can look back on fondly when I am working on bigger better things.

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