

“EVERYTHING IS TRUE HERE, EVEN IF IT’S NOT”: RECONSIDERING
FICTIONALITY IN REDDIT’S R/NOSLEEP

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ABSTRACT

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R/NOSLEEP

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The rise of digital participatory cultures has corresponded with new online discourse communities, each with their own languages, genres, and communicative norms. This thesis represents a detailed examination of one online discourse community: the forum r/Nosleep, housed on the social media site Reddit. Nosleep allows users to share amateur horror stories with the caveat that that all narratives posted on the site are treated as if they were “true,” regardless of the actual truth value of the accounts. This creates a unique situation in which conventional concepts of fact and fiction are suspended, inviting us to reexamine fundamental assumptions about narrative’s use as a transmedial communicative mode, about what distinguishes factual and fictional narration, and about the degree to which contextual, social factors shape our understandings of fact and fiction. To explore these questions, this thesis draws both from narratology and from traditions of rhetorical analysis to consider the implications of Nosleep’s deliberate subversion of our commonsense concepts of fact and fiction. While many of these questions are specific to Nosleep, this thesis argues that they also have broader applications across the fields of narratology, rhetoric, and literacy studies.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The field of narrative studies has long since encouraged the understanding of narrative as a transmedial, cross-cultural phenomenon fundamental to human communication (Abbott, *Cambridge Introduction* ch. 1; Ryan “Theoretical Foundations”). However, this does not mean that narratives are unaffected by the cultures and contexts from which they arise; indeed, a culture can shape every aspect of a narrative from the material facts of its creation and delivery, to notions of authorship, to the ways narratives are disseminated to and received by audiences. In the digital age, with the rise of participatory web cultures, storytelling occurs increasingly online in a diverse array of contexts and communities. Understanding these contexts is an essential part of understanding the narratives themselves and, as such, scholars of narrative must consider the ways in which the theoretical frameworks used in traditional, print-based literary narratives do (or do not) translate to other contexts.

This thesis examines one online community that challenges many of the traditional frameworks for understanding narrative: the subreddit Nosleep, an online discussion board dedicated to sharing amateur horror stories which are framed as real, first-hand experiences. In particular, it centers two major frameworks of narrative theory, namely the concept of fictional and factual narration (and the supposed binary opposition between the two) as well as that of unnatural narratology. By reading these concepts with

and against the born-digital narratives shared on Nosleep, this project considers both how the community challenges and subverts conventional epistemologies of narrative and the implications of that subversion for a rhetorical, pragmatic understanding of narrative. My hope is that this project will not only encourage further inquiry into emergent digital narrative forms but will also contribute to a growing body of scholarship which views narrative as a rhetorical mode and, accordingly, seeks to expand beyond narrative studies' traditional domain of print-based literary narratives.

However, it is first necessary to define certain key terms and frameworks that will appear throughout this thesis, including Nosleep, the community itself.

Everything Is True Here, Even If It's Not

In its simplest terms, the subreddit Nosleep is a discussion board hosted on the popular social news platform Reddit. Founded in 2005 by then-college students Steve Huffman, Alexis Ohanian, and Aaron Swartz, Reddit uses a model of social news aggregation in which registered users (referred to as "redditors") share multimedia content to the site. In 2019, Reddit recorded approximately 430 million active users globally, far below many other social media platforms, including Facebook which tallied 2.74 billion (WeAreSocial et al.). However, it is somewhat difficult to judge the site's popularity using this number alone. Most subreddits can be accessed freely without registering for a Reddit account, meaning that many more readers might browse the site without an account. Further, among those who are registered, many users choose to consume content without actively participating either through commenting or creating posts.

Users who are productive members of the reddit community, regularly commenting or creating posts, will also be familiar with another key feature of Reddit: the karma system. A formalized means of group validation (White 155), users may “upvote” comments or posts to express agreement or approval or, conversely, “downvote” comments they disagree with. Each upvote contributes positively to the content’s overall score and to the user’s personal store of “karma” while downvotes deduct from it. An individual user’s total karma score is displayed publicly on their profile and, according to Reddit, reflects “how much a user has contributed to the Reddit community” (“What is Karma?”). More importantly, a post’s score influences how Reddit’s interface displays content; posts with higher scores are more visible, while posts that receive many downvotes can be hidden (Kiene et al. 1154; White 155).

When a post is created, it is shared within smaller communities called “subreddits” (styled as r/nameofsubreddit; i.e. r/nosleep), which are user-generated fora organized around a particular topic or interest. Registered users may choose to “subscribe” to any number of subreddits, with the most upvoted posts from each displaying on the user’s “front page,” allowing them to curate the content they interact with according to their interests. Nosleep was one of approximately 138,000 active subreddits in April of 2018, a number which has likely increased in the intervening years, given that the number of active monthly Reddit users has increased by close to one million between April 2018 and January 2021 (Marotti; WeAreSocial, et al.).

Subreddits cover topics as lofty and broad as r/science and r/worldnews or as niche or inane as r/catpics and r/BreadStapledToTrees—which, quite literally, features

pictures of bread stapled to trees. Accordingly, Reddit serves purposes as diverse as the people who use it. Generally speaking, however, Reddit is for most users a place for entertainment and discussion. In 2019, AudienceProject reported that 72% of Reddit users used the site for entertainment and another 43% used it as a source of news (“Leading Reddit Usage Reasons”). Together these two uses far outstrip all other reported usage reasons such as “follow[ing] brands or companies” (15%), “strengthen[ing] professional network” (5%), or “keep[ing] in contact with friends or family” (5%). Users’ reasons for using Reddit help illustrate how the site differs from other, more popular, social networks, such as Facebook,¹ which tend to be more oriented around maintaining and strengthening real-life social connections, a sharp contrast with the relative anonymity Reddit offers its users.

While entertainment is clearly the most popular reason for using Reddit, its use as a site for consuming and discussing news cannot be discounted. Reddit houses too many subreddits oriented around news and current events to list; they range in scope from global to highly localized and in their political orientation from relatively objective to highly partisan. While a majority of users likely consume news media from Reddit in a fairly passive way—or else limit their involvement to posting and commenting—Reddit can also be a tool in organizing political activity. For example, in January of 2021, Reddit made national headlines when members of the subreddit r/WallStreetBets began to buy

¹ In a similar survey, 88% of respondents reported using Facebook to keep in touch with friends or family while 33% and 23% reported using it for entertainment and news respectively. See AudienceProject’s 2019 Survey “Leading Facebook Usage Reasons According to Users in The United States as of 3rd Quarter 2019.”

stock of the struggling company GameStop en masse. The movement was a coordinated effort to one-up hedge funds who were short selling the stock—essentially betting that the price would drop. When large groups of amateur traders bought GameStop, it drove the price upwards, creating catastrophic losses for major hedge funds and ultimately leading some trading platforms to halt sales of the stock. David J. Lynch of *The Washington Post* characterized Reddit’s GameStop frenzy as a “populist uprising against Wall Street,” a phrase which speaks to the participatory, communal nature of subreddits, as well as their many potential uses—both personal and political.

While Reddit serves many different purposes, it should be of interest to those in English and rhetorical studies because of its potential as a storytelling platform. While users may not explicitly regard it as such, Reddit trades in narrative. In part because narrative is such a pervasive communicative mode, one could argue convincingly that the same is true of virtually all forms of social media. Without disputing this point, I argue that it is difficult to overstate just how much of Reddit is built around narrative, making it both an ideal site for considering narrative’s importance as a transmedial communicative mode, and a potential venue for literacy sponsorship. For example, many subreddits generate content almost exclusively through user-created narrative, even if they do not explicitly frame the posts as such. The popular subreddit, r/TIFU (Today I Fucked Up), for instance, is populated by user posts containing humorous, first-person anecdotes about a mistake, social faux pas, or embarrassing situation the user endured. Likewise, r/AmItheAsshole allows users to share accounts of interpersonal disputes and asks commenters to determine if the user who created the post (referred to as the “original

poster” or “OP”) was at fault. On these subreddits and others, posts often adopt formal elements that tend to be associated with narrative prose, such as the incorporation of dialogue or a strong authorial voice. As Caitrin Armstrong and Derek Ruths point out in a working paper, many Reddit posts, including those with the most enduring popularity, “are characterized by well-written prose with a strong literary style, where Redditors have attempted to tell their peers a story, and tell it well.”

“Narrative” and “story,” in the context of this project, are not to be understood as synonymous with “literature,” but rather as a fundamental communicative mode. This understanding stems from the observation—central to several humanities disciplines including rhetoric and folklore—that storytelling is an innate human impulse (Abbott, *Cambridge Introduction* ch. 1; Copley ch. 1). H. Porter Abbott characterizes narrative as fundamental to human communication—a mode of discourse we enter almost “as soon as we follow a subject with a verb” (*Cambridge Introduction* ch. 1). Long before him, in his seminal analysis of Dostoevsky, Mikhail Bakhtin suggested that “the very being of man . . . is the deepest communion. To be means to communicate” (287). Likewise, Paul Copley argues that narratives exist “wherever there are humans” (ch. 1), invoking the work of Claude Levi-Strauss to probe the universality of myth and storytelling across cultures and, notably, media, including both oral and written traditions.

Theories of humanity’s narrative impulse and debates about the degree of its universality easily exceed the scope of this thesis; however, by thinking of narrative as a transmedial communicative mode, we see how central the practice is to Reddit. Consider, for instance, the popular subreddit AskReddit, a forum where users may pose virtually

any question and receive responses from the community at large. Many of the most popular questions of all time on this subreddit are, in effect, prompts for users to tell a story whether personal and factual (i.e., “People of reddit who have gone through or are going through cancer, what was the first sign that made you go to the doctor?”) or speculative and fictional (i.e., “What if Earth is like one of those uncontacted tribes in South America, like the whole Galaxy knows we're here but they've agreed not to contact us until we figure it out for ourselves?”). Users often take these questions as opportunities to create narrative responses—sometimes highly imaginative ones. Whether or not these writers consciously view their posts on reddit as narrative, these storytelling practices nevertheless represent a real and growing literacy practice in the digital age.

Indeed, as we live more of our daily lives online, there is a growing need to understand how digital contexts mediate our engagement with cultural forms that long predate the internet. For many younger users in particular—the undergraduate students of today and tomorrow—the internet is home to communities that can serve as “literacy sponsors,” a term coined by Deborah Brandt² to describe people, institutions, or communities that support or suppress access to and engagement with varying forms of literacy (166). Online communities serve as a unique space to engage in reading, writing, and analysis of fictional texts, perhaps constituting some of their first exposures to creative writing or literary studies. Most research on this phenomenon to date has

² See also Brandt’s landmark book *Literacy in American Lives* (2001) for a more rigorous definition of literacy sponsors and their profound roles in shaping American literacy throughout history.

examined fanfiction—original stories created by fans of existing works which incorporate elements of the original canon—as a site for literacy and literary engagement, including means of exploring creative writing (Bahoric and Swaggerty), or as contexts for engaging with a second language for English Language Learners (Black; Thorne and Black).

Though there is relatively little scholarship on Reddit as a literacy sponsor to date, it stands to reason that similar principles could apply. Because Reddit is a collection of communities—often with their own particular norms, vocabulary, and genres—Reddit users learn to read, participate, and assimilate across communities. This process is made somewhat more visible by the karma system’s effect of expressing validation or approval (White 155), allowing established users to enforce the norms of a given community.

With respect to the writing dimension of literacy, there are a number of subreddits that explicitly center writing or literature. Users can join subreddits dedicated to—among other things—writing support and motivation (e.g., [r/writersgroup](#), [r/keepwriting](#)), publication and professional development (e.g., [r/pubtips](#), [r/freelancewriters](#)), and particular literary forms and genres (e.g., [r/scifiwriting](#), [r/screenwriting](#), [r/poetry](#)). Many of these communities are places where amateur writers can share their work and receive feedback; similarly, because writers routinely share their work, they offer opportunities for other users to hone skills in reading, analysis, and recognizing generic conventions. The result is a unique space that is equal parts discussion group and living archive.

Of the many writing subgenres that thrive on Reddit, horror fiction is among the most popular. In addition to [Nosleep](#), amateur horror writers can share their work in and across several subreddits including [r/TwoSentenceHorror](#), [r/LibraryofShadows](#), and

r/creepypasta. The term creepypasta refers to short horror stories or images that spread across online communities, roughly akin to a digital urban legend. The term creepypasta is a play on the internet neologism “cospypasta” (itself a play on “copy/paste”), which describes texts that are repeatedly copied and pasted across internet discussion boards (Balanzategui 188; Blank and McNeill 6). These terms help capture the organic, mematic nature of cospypastas’ creation and spread—factors that are crucial in shaping how stories are received by their audience.

Considerable scholarship to date has examined online amateur horror in the tradition of folklore studies, with many scholars viewing creepypasta and online amateur horror fiction as a digital remediation of much older folkloric traditions (Newsom 6; Peck, “Tall Dark and Loathsome,” 334; Tolbert 55). Eric Newsom, for instance, draws on more than thirty years of folklore studies as a “performance-based framework” to help explain digital storytelling communities, like those found on Reddit. Contrasting such spaces with the model of mass media storytelling that dominated the latter part of the twentieth century, Newsom demonstrates how online storytelling is performative, and participatory, recalling pre-digital storytelling practices like the ghost story told around a campfire. He argues that participatory culture, a term popularized by new media scholar Henry Jenkins (3), is a digital reimagining of these communal storytelling settings (Newsom 6). In much the same vein, Andrew Peck traces the creation of The Slenderman, a “crowd-sourced monster” (“Tall, Dark, and Loathsome” 334) who was created on the SomethingAwful.com forums in 2009, and subsequently became a viral cultural phenomenon, inspiring movies and videogames (Blank and McNeill 4-5). Peck

argues that Slenderman's creation, a process filled with performances that negotiated and constructed "the details, motifs, and shared expectations," constitutes a "digital legend cycle" ("Tall, Dark, and Loathsome" 334) .

This digital legend cycle shares many features with its pre-digital counterpart, particularly with respect to the ontological status of the legends. In pre-digital urban legends, often transmitted orally,³ accounts often gained a vague aura of plausibility by relying on first-person accounts—albeit ones that were generally several degrees removed from the audience. The possibility that a friend's cousin's classmate's brother really did encounter a ghost or monster allows the narrative to couch itself as "true" regardless of its actual ontological status, or, indeed, whether the audience believes it to be true. Just as with pre-digital, primarily oral urban legends and ghost stories, the organic evolution of a text and its repeated transmissions can obscure its genre and origins, making it difficult for audiences to determine the truth value of a particular myth or story. As with their pre-digital counterparts, digital legendry like creepypasta does not always overtly signal its fictional status, particularly when it has been shared and re-shared across communities (and, occasionally, across media). As such, some audiences may receive and other the stories as authentic accounts. Heather Duncan goes so far as to

³ Oral storytelling is obviously integral to many folklore traditions, including modern urban legends. However, it seems that this storytelling impulse is highly adaptable to emergent communication technology. For instance, in her history of creepypasta, Line Henriksen suggests similarities between creepypasta and chain emails, which gained popularity in the 1990s as email communication became more commonplace.

suggest creepypastas “often subvert the epistemological expectations attached to traditional narrative forms” (86).

On Nosleep, which has been one of the most popular horror subreddits since its creation in 2010, the question of narratives’ ontological status is deliberately muddled. The community has a unique set of rules and posting guidelines, which dictate that all content posted in the forum is to be treated as though it were true, hence their maxim: “everything is true here, even if it’s not” (“Posting Guidelines”). In other words, authors routinely share stories with fantastic content that would seem to violate most readers’ common-sense views of what is possible within the physical laws of the universe, but the community is expressly forbidden from publicly doubting, asking for proof, “or even insinuating” that stories are anything other than factual (“Posting Guidelines”). In fact, even comments that would tend to frame the stories as works of fiction (praising the style of a text or reference to a “plot,” for instance) are disallowed under Nosleep’s community guidelines. These same rules about “plausibility” (“Posting Guidelines”) apply to writers, particularly with respect to the form and narrative structure of stories. Because Reddit relies on user-generated content, most posts, regardless of the subreddit, take the form of first-person accounts—the clear exception being stories that are explicitly framed as fiction. However, because the premise of Nosleep is that the stories are not fictional (despite any evidence to the contrary), stories must be first-person accounts and the narrator must have some clear means of posting the story to Reddit. That is, the narrator must plausibly have access to a device with internet access and retain the mental and

physical capacity to post the account. Second- and third-person narration are not allowed unless they occur within the frame of a first-person narrative (“Posting Guidelines”).

Nosleep stories, then, are works of fiction that readers must respond to as if they were factual or “true.” Moreover, the content of the stories is not merely fictional but often fantastic or impossible, rife with monsters, spirits, time travel, and parallel dimensions. Yet, despite the apparent impossibility of the content, the stories present themselves as sincere first-person accounts and are received as such in the comments, without skepticism or derision. As Duncan points out, these features often lead to “epistemological confusion” (86) when outsiders encounter the stories because they so blatantly flout our usual understandings of truth and fiction.

This project, therefore, is primarily interested in how we might reexamine our understanding of fictional narrative and its fundamental characteristics within the new and largely unique context of Nosleep. To do so, I draw both on the methods and frameworks of the field of narratology while ultimately positioning this work within the field of rhetorical studies insofar as narrative—whether fictional or otherwise—is fundamentally a communicative act.

Theory and Methodology

Narratology has been variously defined as a method of analyzing texts and as a humanities discipline unto itself. This project roughly aligns with the latter definition, as put forward by Jan Christoph Meister, of narratology as “a humanities discipline dedicated to the study of the logic, principles, and practices of narrative representation.” However, given my own training in rhetoric and composition, this project aims to put the

two disciplines in conversation with one another by applying methods and analytical strategies of each to reach a fuller understanding of how the discourse community of Nosleep intentionally subverts, questions, and plays with the ontological status of fictionality. The result, I hope, will be a work that enriches both disciplines, creating an application of narratological frameworks outside the field's traditional domain of print-based, fictional narratives and allowing rhetoricians to consider narratives as cultural artifacts, situated within particular moments and cultures. In other words, narratology provides language to describe narrative as a transmedial phenomenon and a central component of human communication. Placed in conversation with frameworks from rhetorical studies, we can gain a fuller understanding of the pragmatic dimensions of narrative and how it works on and within discourse communities.

To be clear, narratology itself has never limited its field of study to literary or fictional narratives. Growing bodies of research seek to explore the role of narrative in other domains, including law and medicine.⁴ Likewise, there has been increasing attention to “the historicity and contextuality of modes of narrative representation as well as to its pragmatic function across various media” (Meister). This is somewhat in contrast to narratology's classical period in the mid-1960s through the 1980s, when the field began to emerge as a recognizable discipline (Meister) and structuralism was still the *dernier cri* of critical theory. In line with this structuralist bent, early narratological

⁴ See, for instance, Sandra Heinen's chapter “The Role of Narratology in Narrative Research across the Disciplines” in *Narratology in the Age of Cross-Disciplinary Narrative Research* for a far more thorough investigation of interdisciplinary applications of narratology.

criticism concerned itself with identifying universal, constitutive features of narrative. This often—though not always—coincides with an emphasis on formal and/or syntactic elements of texts, perhaps leading to the misapprehension of narratology as exclusively a method of formal, literary analysis. This project, however, is part of a tradition of post-classical narratology that takes a more pragmatic approach to narrative, instead considering how it mediates and is mediated by larger discursive forces.

It is worth pausing here to define how this work uses the term narrative—a term that has gained popularity in the vernacular as synonym or near synonym for the word “story.” Though largely interchangeable in colloquial speech, this project defines these terms in line with Cobley, who distinguishes between narrative, story, and a third element: plot. For Cobley, a story “consists of all the events which are to be depicted” in a narrative and the plot “is the chain of causation” that links these events logically and justifies their depiction in relation to each other. Each of these terms is distinct from the term “narrative,” which Cobley defines as the “showing or telling of these events and the mode selected for that to take place” (ch. 1). Narrative, then, refers not so much to the content depicted but to the utterance that represents that content to an audience. On Nosleep, narratives are usually—though not exclusively—rendered as alphabetic texts, and the term “text” is used throughout this thesis to refer to the material artifact used to convey a narrative. While the majority of texts discussed in this thesis are alphabetic, the term text should be understood broadly as any artifact of human communication, regardless of its medium or the tools used to create it.

A further assumption underlying this project is that Nosleep is a distinct discourse community, or, according to James E. Porter's definition, "a group of individuals bound by a common interest who communicate through approved channels and whose discourse is regulated" (38-39). Notably, it fulfills each of John Swales's six characteristics of discourse communities: (1) common public goals, (2) mechanisms of communication among members, (3) participatory communication methods to provide information and feedback, (4) genres that further the groups communicative aims, (5) a specific lexis, and (6) a standard of content or discorsal knowledge needed for membership (24-7). Many of these six criteria were proven—albeit not explicitly—by Charles Kiene et al. Kiene and his colleagues approached Nosleep from the fields of communication and social computing in an effort to understand how the community self-regulates, particularly in the wake of the massive influx of new members it experienced in mid-2014. In their interviews with community members, the researchers found a "a striking degree of shared understanding across all participants" as to what constitutes a "good Nosleep story" (1154), suggesting both a common public goal and a well-defined (if often unspoken) set of generic conventions. Furthermore, Kiene et al. found that discourse was regulated both by formally appointed moderators or "mods," who the researchers describe as a team of "community insiders," and by average members who utilize reddit's upvoting system to "bury" unacceptable content (1154). The result is a community that is remarkably effective at self-regulating, and an immersive user-experience that is dedicated to the premise that all accounts shared on the forum are "true."

Thus, while Nosleep is in some ways conventional in its status as a discourse community, the rules of the group violate normative communicative practices for most other contexts. Specifically, the stipulation that all stories be treated as “true” without corroboration or evidence would be received as absurd if not outright dangerous in most other contexts. It stands in sharp contrast to other subreddits, such as AskScience, which specifically require evidence in the form of peer-reviewed sources. Even more fundamentally, Nosleep asks its users to participate in an immersive form of role playing wherein there is an agreement to treat accounts as true even if all parties believe or understand them to be false, a communicative situation with few analogues in other contexts. In many ways such a practice fundamentally subverts our understanding of narrative, which tends to assume that narrative’s ontological status hinges on whether the account it describes has a referent in reality. In other words, we tend to expect fictional narratives to be fictional regardless of the context in which they are received and disseminated, and we expect that our understanding of their fictional status will fundamentally shape our engagement with them. Nosleep violates these assumptions on both counts, asking us to reconsider our views on the very epistemology of narrative.

While Nosleep is certainly a unique context, I contend that understanding how it unsettles and subverts our usual communicative practices around truth and fiction holds potential applications beyond the forum itself. For one, the ubiquity of narrative as a communicative mode necessitates that we continually deepen our understanding of how and why it is used in different contexts, including its relatively new iterations across social media. Further, across virtually all contexts the divide between fictional and factual

narratives is intuitively accepted as a foregone conclusion, and the rationale for the distinction generally remains unspoken and untheorized. However, amid growing cultural concerns about information literacy, “fake news” and “alternative facts,” this distinction deserves to be articulated and examined anew. Although Nosleep is not a clean analogy for the spread of political disinformation, I anticipate that my examination of the forum will highlight the degree to which the norms for what constitutes truth and evidence are dictated by the norms and mores of particular discourse communities.

This project, therefore, should be considered primarily exploratory in nature, in that begins to build a general framework from which subsequent, more specialized lines of inquiry can develop. To do so, I engage in close readings of narratives posted on Nosleep and the surrounding utterances that frame and shape those narratives. These include comments from readers, authorial responses to readers’ comments, multimedia elements included to enhance or support the narrative, and reader responses to texts created and shared outside of the Nosleep forum. The project is divided primarily between two chapters: Chapter II examines how Nosleep disrupts the usual binary construction of factual and fictional narration while the next engages with questions of unnatural narratology, generally understood as referring to a subset of fictional narratives. It considers two major definitions of fictional narration put forward by narratologists—namely, semantic and pragmatic definitions—and reads these against one of Nosleep’s most popular series titled “I’m a Search and Rescue Officer for the US Forest Service, I Have Some Stories to Tell.” My analysis of this series focuses on the ways that it challenges our usual assumptions about fact and fiction, its deliberate obfuscation of its

ontological status, and what this means for traditional definitions of factual and fictional narration offered by classical narratology. Ultimately, Chapter II offers Richard Walsh's model of rhetorical fictionality as a framework that more accurately accounts for Nosleep narratives' unique ontological status and allows for a deeper understanding of its pragmatic effects on readers.

Having established the murky ontological status of Nosleep stories, Chapter III addresses the topic of unnatural narratology—a popular if somewhat contested line of inquiry within narratology. After outlining major debates within the subfield and considering the limits of its applicability to Nosleep, I analyze the popular post “My Dead Girlfriend Keeps Messaging Me on Facebook. I’ve Got the Screenshots. I don’t Know What to Do” alongside Jan Alber’s cognitive model of naturalizing reading strategies. I suggest that, though far from universally accepted, Alber’s proposed naturalizing strategies are evident in reader responses to the narrative and, further, that Nosleep’s formalized rules about the plausibility of narratives means that the question of naturalizing fantastic or impossible elements takes on particular significance in this community.

Finally, Chapter IV concludes by briefly considering some of the many possible avenues for research both about Nosleep specifically and digital literacy practices generally while also considering the limitations of this research. Though far from comprehensive, this thesis offers a starting point for scholarship that seeks to bridge narrative theory with more traditional approaches to rhetoric and literacy in an effort to better understand emergent and dynamic online literacy practices.

CHAPTER II

FACTUAL AND FICTIONAL NARRATIVE

Fact and fiction are concepts almost all readers understand intuitively but which prove surprisingly difficult to define once we move past their commonsense applications. Accordingly, narratology has put forward several definitions that each try to solve a question most readers answer intuitively: what makes a narrative fictional? Yet, despite the many available explanations and heuristics, none of the major definitions of fiction can completely account for the ways Nosleep intentionally subverts our usual understandings of “truth” and “fiction.” If anything, the highly contextual, social nature of Nosleep texts lends credence to Richard Walsh's concept of fictionality as a distinct rhetorical mode rather than a quality inherent in particular texts.

Defining Fiction

Questions of factual vs. fictional narration are, of course, central to narratology. Most working in the field are quick to stress that narrativity is not a feature unique to fictional texts or, indeed, to what we might think of as literary genres. There is a growing push to consider how narrative representation works in fields and genres of writing that we generally consider to be rooted in the factual, such as law and medicine. Nevertheless, fictional narration is a central tool in narrative representation and narrative representation, in turn, is central to human communication and meaning making (Abbott, *Cambridge Introduction* ch. 1). Ergo, understanding what fiction is and how

it works would seem to go a long way towards understanding how we communicate, yet there is not as yet a definition of fiction that narratologists accept as universal, let alone a definition that can account for Nosleep's deliberate blurring of conventional understandings of truth and fiction.

It is useful to pause here to clarify the distinctions between “fiction” and “fictionality” and how I use each term throughout this project. Without taking a particular position on what fiction is and what characteristics define it, in this thesis the terms “fiction” or “fictional” will refer to texts and genres whose content is (or is understood to be) imaginary. One might reasonably assume that “fictionality,” then, refers to the “qualities and affordances of fictional genres” (Zetterberg Gjerlevsen) and the term has certainly been operationalized in that sense. However, as I will discuss at length later in the chapter, I understand fictionality as a broader concept, if not one that is wholly separate from questions of factual vs. fictional narration. “Fictionality,” in this thesis, is conceptualized in line with Walsh's model of the concept as a distinct rhetorical mode, “a way of using language” (*Rhetoric of Fictionality* 15), rather than a quality that is inherent and unique to fictional texts.

However, to put aside the question of fictionality, defining fiction—and articulating when and how it departs from factual narration—is surprisingly complex. As Jean-Marie Schaeffer aptly summarizes in his entry on fictional vs. factual narration in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, virtually all readers intuitively understand fact and fiction as a “pair of opposites” but there is “no consensus as to the rationale of this opposition.” Certain poststructuralist strands of thought have even gone so far as to

question the validity of the distinction in the first place (Schaeffer; Worthington 473), arguing that all narrative is a human construction and therefore a model or representation projected onto reality. By definition, a representation is not the same as the object it endeavors to represent so in some sense all narrative, even a factual narrative, is a fictionalization in that it “constructs a world” (Schaeffer). However, as both Schaeffer and Worthington point out, the fact remains that whatever one's philosophical views on the symbolic nature of narrative representation, in real-life scenarios readers and writers distinguish between factual and fictional narratives almost automatically (Worthington 474).

Narratology has put forward several major definitions to account for this divide and of them, the so-called “semantic” definition is both the most traditional and that which most nearly replicates our “commonsense” understanding. A semantic definition of fiction holds that factual narratives are referential and denote actual concepts or circumstances in the real world. Fictional narratives, by contrast, have no reference—at least, as Schaeffer puts it, “not in our world.” This view is neatly summarized by Bennison Gray who, in 1975, described fiction as “a statement that refers to a made up event, an event that has been invented or feigned rather than having actually happened” (117). The question of fact or fiction, then, is one of ontological status or the “truth value” of a narrative’s content. However, semantic definitions are not without their limitations. Schaeffer points to the difficulty incorporating historical fiction and counterfactual histories into the semantic framework of fiction. One noted set of difficulties are questions about the ontological status of works that assign “‘fictive’

properties and actions to . . . existing entities” (Schaeffer)—such as works of fiction that are built around the premise that the Axis Powers won World War II, a popular basis for many alternative and counterfactual histories. Is the Adolf Hitler referred to in these works “the same” Hitler who existed in reality or a fictional counterpart?

One answer to this question seems to lie in the concept of possible worlds. It derives from the work of twentieth century philosophers attempting to solve an analogous issue in formal semantics: “the truth conditions of counterfactual statements” (Ryan, “Possible Worlds”). Later in the century, David Lewis—among several others—adapted the concept to narrative studies to account for fictional words. Broadly speaking, possible worlds theory asks us to consider reality as “the sum of the imaginable rather than as the sum of what exists physically” and therefore “a plurality of distinct worlds” (Ryan, “Possible Worlds”). Put more simply, possible worlds theory suggests that the events of fictional or counterfactual narratives take place in alternative worlds distinct from our own where the events they describe are true. To return to the example of a narrative that describes an Axis victory, possible worlds theory would hold that while these events are untrue or counterfactual in our world, the narrative refers to a distinct, alternative world where such a scenario *is* true.

Narrative theory has also proposed a concept that helps explain the mechanics of how readers construe these many possible worlds: the principle of minimal departure, first articulated by Lewis and eventually popularized by Marie-Laure Ryan. This principle holds that readers will construe a fictional world as being as similar as possible to reality unless a difference is specifically indicated. In her 1991 book *Possible Worlds*,

Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory Ryan uses as an example the premise that the character Charles Bovary of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* has two legs. Nowhere does the text specify how many legs Charles has—be it one, two, or seven. However, most readers⁵ would understand the claim “Charles Bovary is one-legged” to be “false in the universe of the novel” (Ryan, *Possible Worlds* 51). Ryan reasons that this is because Charles is “presented as a human being” and a majority of human beings have two legs, thus—unless the text provides evidence to the contrary—readers will assume that human characters also have two legs (*Possible Worlds* 51). Perhaps there is a tacit ableism underlying these assumptions, but the fact remains that readers will construct fictional worlds as closely in line as possible with their understandings of ordinary realities or, as Ryan puts it: “any departure from norms not explicitly stated in the text is to be regarded as a gratuitous increase of the distance between the textual universe and our own system of reality” (*Possible Worlds* 51).

Though both possible worlds theory and the principle of minimal departure help us understand and operationalize a semantic definition of fiction, certain ontological issues remain. Schaeffer points out the inherent contradiction of attempting to apply both theories to questions of narratives that reference persons or events in the real world, such as the counterfactual Hitler mentioned above. Possible worlds theory is ontologically holistic, so the victorious Hitler of an alternative world could not be “the same” as the

⁵ In her example, Ryan points not to general readers but rather the works of two particular theorists of fiction: Dominique Châteaux's “La Semiotique du Recit” (1976) and Lubomír Doležel's “Truth and Authenticity in Narrative” (1980).

historical figure who existed in our world. However, Schaeffer points out, the principle of minimal departure would seem to suggest that the two figures are one and the same—that the realities only diverge at the point of claiming a victor in WWII. Thus, while a semantic definition is in some ways the most intuitive, using truth value as the key parameter for defining fiction necessarily raises ontological questions without clear-cut answers.

Interestingly, Nosleep expressly forbids the inclusion of a “celebrity, politician, public figure, etc.” as a major character in a story (“Posting Guidelines”), presumably to avoid these thorny ontological issues entirely. For similar reasons, the forum does not allow descriptions of “apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic scenarios and events that happen on a large scale,” suggesting that “if readers can look outside or turn on a national news channel and immediately know that the events are not actually happening, the story is not appropriate for r/nosleep” (“Posting Guidelines”). These rules speak to a recognition of the centrality of a semantic concept of fiction in most readers' understanding of a text. Nosleep's many rules about plausibility are, in some ways, formalized instructions on how to abide by the principle of minimal departure or create an immersive alternative possible world. Kiene et al. suggest that this sense of plausibility—the creation of a story “that's almost believable”—is foundational to the genre of Nosleep stories (1154) and, according to Balanzategui, to creepypasta more broadly (190).

In this respect, we might argue that Nosleep—and its imperative that stories be “plausible”—prioritizes a semantic definition of fiction. However, if we are to apply a semantic definition alone, then we must deem the vast majority of Nosleep narratives

patently and unambiguously fictional.⁶ Most stories do not have an actual referent in our reality and many represent scenarios that are not only untrue but generally regarded as impossible. However, to simply say that Nosleep contains fictional horror stories is to overlook much of what makes the community so fascinating. Readers may (or may not) understand the texts as fictional, but they are required to respond to them as though they are factual.

In some respects, this contradiction points to one of the major limitations of a semantic definition of fiction and, by extension, one of Nosleep's defining qualities. As discussed in Chapter I of this thesis, most scholarship on Nosleep to date has approached the community from the perspective of folklore studies, arguing that the communal, participatory nature of storytelling on Nosleep creates a "digital legend cycle" ("Tall, Dark and, Loathsome" 334). In many ways, Nosleep recalls pre-digital storytelling traditions—such as the ghost story told around a campfire (Newsom 37; Wiles). For instance, Duncan argues that the Nosleep narrative's closest relative is the urban legend—an utterance that relies on "traditional narrative conventions while posing as 'true stories'" (85). The semantic definition, with its emphasis on the ontological status of

⁶ There are several notable exceptions to the general rule. There are many readers who sincerely believe (with varying degrees of certainty) in supernatural phenomena. While a ghost story may be completely fictional to a reader who does not believe in ghosts, a narrative's fictional status may be less certain among those readers for whom a ghost story *could be* referentially true. Likewise, there are many stories that appropriate real-life mythological traditions as a horror element, for example, the monstrous Windigo of Algonquian-language spiritual traditions or Skinwalkers of Navajo culture. The definitions of fiction discussed here cannot fully account for myth or faith. These issues are revisited in my discussion of unnatural narratology in Chapter III.

narratives, cannot fully account for narratives that fall within the categories of myth or legend. Schaeffer acknowledges this limitation, noting that the sharp dichotomy between fact and fiction fails to explain myths, which he deems “some of the most socially important narratives.”

The social importance of myths is confirmed by celebrated folklorist Alan Dundes who differentiates the term’s use in folklore from its more colloquial definition as a fallacy or “untrue statement” (1). In folklore, Dundes explains, a myth is a “sacred narrative” that explains how nature and man came to exist in their current forms (1). Thus, both the biblical Book of Genesis and the creation stories of oral cultures would qualify as “myths” under Dundes's definition. Within folklore and anthropology, this definition is broadly agreed upon, as is the distinction between myth and other forms of folk narratives, such as legend. Anthropologist William Bascom offers a survey of how the terms “myth,” “legend” and “folktale” are generally deployed in folklore studies and concludes that myth and legend are primarily differentiated based on their content, their status as sacred or secular, and the time period they refer to relative to the moment of creation. Myths, in this schema, are sacred narratives featuring primarily nonhuman characters that explain nature’s creation at some point in the remote past. Legends, by contrast, can be either sacred or secular, feature primarily human characters, and refer to events occurring in the more recent past, at some point after the creation of earth and nature (Bascom 9). Crucial to this project, though, is the quality that both myths and legends share: they are regarded as factual, in contrast with folktales which are understood as fictional (Bascom 8-9). Though Schaeffer does not seem to differentiate

between myth and legend in discussing the limitations of the fact/fiction dichotomy, he too characterizes myth as a type of factual discourse, one that people adhere to as serious or as “referring to something real.”

If we accept these definitions, as well as the claim that Nosleep narratives are most analogous to legend, then we must also accept that semantic definition alone cannot explain Nosleep. This suggests that Nosleep also relies—at least to some extent—on a pragmatic definition of fiction. Pragmatic definitions of fiction, which are often associated with the work of John Searle, center not so much the ontological status of a narrative but whether that narrative “advances *claims* of referential truthfulness” (Schaeffer). A narrative's fictional status derives not from an inherent quality in the text (i.e., whether the events it describes are ‘true’) but from the contextual relationships between author and reader that construct meaning. Thus, a pragmatic definition of fiction allows us to see why narratives which would be unambiguously fictional using a semantic definition suddenly inspire “epistemological confusion” (Duncan 86) when posted on Nosleep. By virtue of their presence on Nosleep, all narratives posted there are “claiming” to be true—even if their content would be implausible in most other contexts.

As an example, I take one of Nosleep’s most popular series which began with a post on August 25, 2015 by u/searchandrescuewoods titled “I’m a Search and Rescue Officer for the US Forest Service, I Have Some Stories to Tell.” The first of what would grow to be an eight-part series, the original post alone has amassed more than fourteen thousand upvotes to date, making it one of the top 50 most popular posts of all time. The series’s popularity was not limited to Nosleep, however, and quickly grew to become a

viral internet phenomenon. The broad popularity of these narratives allows us to study how readers' perceptions of the narratives' truth value shift based on context, lending credence to more pragmatic definitions of fiction. However, as I demonstrate, a traditional pragmatic definition alone is insufficient in explaining the deliberate play and subversion around questions of "truth" that characterize Nosleep. Instead, I look to the potential of Walsh's concept of rhetorical fictionality, in some ways a product of the study of pragmatics in the broader linguistic sense.

"Are The Stairs Real?" Rhetorical and Pragmatic Definitions

Throughout the "Search and Rescue" series, a nameless narrator, purported to be a search and rescue officer, shared the "weirdest" experiences they had encountered working in the wilderness.⁷ Initially, many of the included stories were entirely plausible, and all the more tragic for it: tales of lost hikers and freak accidents. However, the post also included events that were more difficult to explain rationally including a mysterious "man with no face" and a child's encounter with "the bear man." Perhaps interspersing realistic horror with more supernatural events lent the post an air of plausibility because

⁷ Though arguably one of the most famous Nosleep stories, the narrative structure of u/searchandrescuewoods's posts is in some ways a departure from the ideal or typical structure of a Nosleep narrative. Since 2015, Nosleep's rules have evolved, notably to include the stipulation that all posts must contain "a complete horror story" ("Posting Guidelines"). u/searchandrescuewoods's posts do not fit these criteria; the posts are structured more as a series of loosely connected anecdotes than as a singular, unified narrative. Were the same posts created today, they would likely be removed. However, new rules are not applied retroactively, so older posts will not always conform to current rules allowing us to trace the development of the Nosleep genre over time. It is also worth considering that the conversational style of the posts—and the absence of formal elements generally associated with fiction—encouraged readers, particularly outsiders to Nosleep, to regard the narrative as factual.

one particular element of the story seemed to capture readers' imaginations, becoming a viral internet phenomenon: an account of abandoned stairs found in the woods. In the first installment of the series, the narrator explains:

I don't know if this is true in every SAR unit, but in mine, it's sort of an unspoken, regular thing we run into. You can try asking about it with other SAR officers, but even if they know what you're talking about, they probably won't say anything about it. We've been told not to talk about it by our superiors, and at this point we've all gotten so used to it that it doesn't even seem weird anymore. On just about every case where we're really far into the wilderness, I'm talking 30 or 40 miles, at some point we'll find a staircase in the middle of the woods. It's almost like if you took the stairs in your house, cut them out, and put them in the forest. I asked about it the first time I saw some, and the other officer just told me not to worry about it, that it was normal. Everyone I asked said the same thing. I wanted to go check them out, but I was told, very emphatically, that I should never go near any of them. (u/searchandrescuewoods, "I'm a Search and Rescue Officer")

u/searchandrescuewoods concluded the post by asking readers if they had ever encountered stairs in the woods or had any theories as to their origins. Almost immediately, commenters obliged and shared their own accounts of abandoned staircases deep in the woods across the United States. By the time u/searchandrescuewoods shared the second installment of the series, the legend of abandoned staircases in the woods was quickly cementing its status as a viral digital legend. On the second post,

u/Frozen_Brownies commented “lets [sic] be real - how many of us googled looking for stairs in the woods?” to which u/SawseB responded: “EVERY.LAST.PERSON.”

Though clearly these comments were made in jest, they speak to a real phenomenon: the confusion readers encounter in their efforts to label a Nosleep narrative’s ontological status. Elsewhere on Reddit, a post about the mysterious staircases was created in the sub r/OutOfTheLoop, which allows users to post questions about current events or trends they have missed or do not fully understand. In November of 2016, almost a year after the final “I’m a Search and Rescue Officer” post, u/iDidntReadOP asked “Are the Stairs in the Woods real? Or is it just really well made fiction?”⁸ Commenters quickly explained that the narratives were fictional, but several insisted that the stairs they described are real, citing legends that pre-date the Nosleep accounts.

Attempting to apply a semantic definition of fiction to this story is likely only to raise more questions than answers. Because of Nosleep narratives’ similarity to urban legends and the participatory nature of the community, users were quick to share their own tales of mysterious staircases, which, though not necessarily true, are impossible to

⁸ Though anecdotal, the poster’s use of the adjective “well made [sic]” to describe immersive, plausible fiction is fascinating. For this reader, at least, a fictional narrative’s plausibility is a central factor in its quality. While this thesis has already established that plausibility is a central generic element of Nosleep narratives and creepypasta more broadly, this comment might also invite us to consider the degree to which readers seek plausibility or immersion from fiction in other forms or genres. To an extent, these questions are addressed through the study of cognitive narratology, particularly with respect to the topics of immersion and defamiliarization. See, for instance Miranda Anderson and Stefan Iverson’s “Immersion and Defamiliarization: Experiencing Literature and World.”

verify and tend to create more confusion for audiences, like u/iDIdntReadOP who had to resort to asking for clarification in an outside forum. More to the point, on Nosleep, truth value is not measured through seeking evidence or proof of a referent in reality. Instead, the “truth” of the stories derives from an agreement between authors and audiences that is formalized and enforced by the community. In many respects, an understanding of fictional narration rooted in pragmatics is necessary to make sense of this phenomenon, as it is predicated far more on contextual, social rules and relationships than on an inherent quality in the texts. However, it is also insufficient to simply say that Nosleep stories are factual because readers respond to them as though they are true. As Kiene et al. established in their interviews with Nosleep community members, readers seem to derive the most pleasure from stories that are “*almost* believable” (1154; emphasis added). There is nothing particularly remarkable about choosing to interpret a narrative as factual if its content does not test the limits of plausibility to some extent. It is not simply that readers must respond to the narratives as if they were factual, but that they must do so even though a majority of readers would likely label them as fictional in any other context. In other words, the semantic conception of fiction still bears on Nosleep if only because it tends to govern readers’ responses to narrative in “real-life situations” (Schaeffer) and because Nosleep narratives, because of their horror content, tend to feature stories that test the limit of what is plausible—if not possible—in the real world.

While neither the semantic nor the pragmatic conceptions of fiction offer a complete understanding of Nosleep, Walsh’s rhetorical model of fictionality allows for a more nuanced view. Walsh seeks to shift the focus away from the product of fiction (i.e.,

fictional forms and genres) towards an emphasis on its production (*Rhetoric of Fictionality* 14). That is, for Walsh—writing alongside Henrik Skov Nielsen and James Phelan—fictionality or “fictive discourse” is a way of using language founded upon communicative intent (64). Nielsen et al. argue that fictionality is ubiquitous in virtually every facet of culture, existing in “the intentional use of invented stories and scenarios” including “what-if projections, if-only regrets, thought experiments, and hypotheses of all kinds” (62). Each of these uses carries a particular communicative intent and can be used to move audiences in particular ways. While the scenarios described in these uses of languages are imagined, their fictionality is distinct from lying in that there is no intent to deceive; both sender and receiver of the fictive discourse understand that the communicative act operates based on different principles and based on different sets of assumptions than nonfictive discourse.

Furthermore, Walsh argues elsewhere that “narrative fictionality is worth distinguishing from narrativity in general” (*Rhetoric of Fictionality* 15). He reasons that that fiction is generally understood “to have a second-order relation to the real world” because it represents or imitates discourses that we interpret through “nonfictional modes of narrative understanding” (*Rhetoric of Fictionality* 13). However, as discussed earlier in this chapter, it is also true that all narrative whether fictional or factual is to some extent “artifice” (Walsh, *Rhetoric of Fictionality* 14). For some theorists, then, there is no need to distinguish between fiction’s “second-order relation” to reality if all narratives are constructs. In other words, this perspective would hold that the “general quality of narrativity subsumes the concept of fictionality entirely” (Walsh, *Rhetoric of Fictionality*

14). However, this general conception of narrative does little to explain the fact that factual narratives make very different truth claims than their fictional counterparts and therefore ask audiences to use different sets of interpretive assumptions to make sense of the narratives. Thus, without disputing that “all narrative is artifice, and in that very restricted sense fictive,” Walsh maintains fictional narrative serves cultural and communicative roles that are distinct from factual narratives, and that it is best explained through a rhetorical conception of fictionality (*Rhetoric of Fictionality* 15).

For Walsh, then, one of the main characteristics of rhetorical fictionality is how an utterance moves an audience. He argues that when an audience recognizes fictionality, it changes the way that audience “seeks to realise the relevance of the communication” (Walsh, “Fictionality as Rhetoric,” 412). The expectation that the information conveyed will be directly relevant (i.e., literally true or possessing a referent in reality) is diminished; instead, audiences will look for more abstract ways of understanding the “point” of the communication (Walsh, “Fictionality as Rhetoric” 412).

This project favors Walsh’s conception of rhetorical fictionality because it allows for a more nuanced understanding of the importance of the context that frames communication and of the effects fictionality ultimately has on audiences. Both, I argue, are necessary to explain Nosleep, although it is important to point out that, in this case, fictionality is deployed not only in the original narrative but in audiences’ responses. As discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, commenters are not allowed to make comments that tend to point out or imply a narrative’s fictional status, such as praising the style or mechanics of the writing or making reference to a “plot.” Kiene et al.

documented this phenomenon in their interviews with Nosleep moderators, one of whom described having to be “a real jerk” in suppressing comments that express sentiments like “that [story] was really great” (1154). Put another way, Nosleep readers may recognize that authors are utilizing fictionality and interpret the posts accordingly, but if they want to comply with the community’s rules they, too, must fictionalize their comments so as to suggest that they believe the narrative is “true.”

Sometimes, commenters use these techniques to skirt the rules about praising posts, finding ways to offer authors feedback without breaking immersion. To return to the comments on “I’m a Search and Rescue Officer,” for instance, u/BeigePhD writes, “[. . .] these average person, extraordinary experiences stories really freak me out. Reading this with complete cold chills, ALMOST makes me regret reading alone. Please post more!” In this case, the commenter has carefully framed their response to avoid any implication that the story is fictional while still offering feedback on the style of the post. Their description of the post as concerning an “average person” with an “extraordinary experience” could easily be interpreted as a commentary on the style of the narration or the author’s use of characterization, particularly given that Nosleep community members list a “strong character voice” as among the elements that make for the best posts (Kiene et al. 1154). However, by avoiding language that frames the post as a fictional discourse, u/BeigePhD toes the line between praising the post and breaking immersion.

In other cases, commenters’ intentions are more ambiguous, muddying the ontological status of the stories still further. Many of the comments on “I’m a Search and Rescue Officer” contained the readers’ own experiences with mysterious phenomena,

particularly the staircases. u/stogiethesailor shared their experience growing up in the “boonies of eastern nevada [sic],” claiming that they have “seen the stair cases [sic]” mentioned in the original post. The commenter claims they “grew up just knowing it was normal” to come across apparently isolated or abandoned staircases and concludes their comment with the evocative question: “has no one on here seen them?” Without further context, it is impossible to ascertain whether u/stogiethesailor is employing fictionality and participating in the story as listeners might add on to and participate in a ghost story or urban legend or whether they intend for their comment to be understood a factual. We cannot discern their communicative intent any more than we can the sincerity of their belief in the staircases.

Fact and Fiction Beyond Nosleep

In a self-reflexive moment in the fifth installment of the “Search and Rescue Officer” series, the narrator shares a story they report hearing from a friend. “She said it was true” the narrator reflects, “but then again, every ghost story told around a campfire is true” (“I’m a Search and Rescue Officer...[Part 5!]”).

The same principle applies to Nosleep, where the “truth” of narratives is not only established by a communicative agreement between storyteller and audience, but through a number of formalized rules that are actively enforced by the community. The result of these rules is a community that deliberately and often self-consciously challenges the ontological status of fiction. While this treatment of fiction and fictionality as they pertain to Nosleep has been, in many respects, fairly superficial it nonetheless introduces the complexities of attempting to categorize Nosleep according to conventional generic or

ontological definitions of fiction. Walsh's model of rhetorical fictionality offers a more nuanced view, allowing us to largely bypass questions of ontology in favor of a focus on communicative intent and the effects of fictionality on audiences. The fact remains, however, that readers are often concerned with and confounded by the truth value of Nosleep stories.

Generally speaking the "epistemological confusion" (Duncan 86) induced by Nosleep stories is part of their entertainment value—likely a means of adding to the affective response of the narratives' horrific or supernatural content. However, the murky ontological status of Nosleep stories is not without real-world implications. As Schaeffer rightly notes, whatever our theoretical or interpretive attitudes towards fiction and fictionality, in "real-life situations," "mistaking a fictional narrative for a factual one (or vice versa) can have dramatic consequences." Peck points to a tragic example of this very phenomenon: the 2014 stabbing of a twelve-year-old girl in Wisconsin by two classmates who apparently believed that the act of violence would win the favor of the Slenderman, a fictional monster created in online forums not unlike Nosleep. Peck argues that the Slenderman legend's relative obscurity among the general public prior to the incident coupled with the "decontextualized association with the Wisconsin stabbing" in news coverage created a "moral panic narrative" ("The Cowl of Cthulhu" 51). Within a few months, Peck observed that national news outlets had linked Slenderman with "nearly a half-dozen cases of violence" ("The Cowl of Cthulhu" 52). Peck rightly points out that many of these media accounts were sensationalized and decontextualized; however, the public response nevertheless suggests that there is a real concern about access to

potentially confusing or disturbing information online, particularly for younger audiences.

Outside the realm of the fantastic, this concern underlies the issue of “fake news,” “alternative facts” and disinformation found online. As a space primarily designed for entertainment that does not purport to be a reliable source of news, Nosleep is not a perfect analogy for these phenomena, however it does raise certain questions about how we might teach information literacy for new and evolving digital contexts. Consider, for instance, the fact that many comments on the original “I’m a Search and Rescue Officer” post were quick to point out overlap between the stories it contained and the work of conspiracy theorist David Paulides.⁹ A former police officer who has eked out an online following through his series of self-published books titled *Missing 411*, Paulides’s works claim to document mysterious disappearances in national parks across the US and Canada. Despite the lack of any substantive evidence to support his claims—not to mention the charges of charity fraud (Gonzales) that ultimately ended his law enforcement career—many readers still accept him as a credible authority. When his work is invoked or, effectively, “cited” on Nosleep—where “everything is true” (“Posting Guidelines”)—there is a risk that the same “epistemological confusion” (Duncan 86) that attends to Nosleep narratives will apply to Paulides’s theories. While it

⁹ Perhaps unsurprisingly, Paulides resists the label of conspiracy theorist (see @canammissing, “I Don’t Appreciate Getting Grouped in with Conspiracy Theorists. . .”). I have labeled him as such here less for his belief in the paranormal and more for his contribution to the dangerous spread of disinformation about COVID-19 vaccines (again, see @canammissing, “Are We Being Told the Truth About Vaccines? . . .”).

may be relatively harmless if readers choose to believe Paulides's theories about Bigfoot, as a public figure Paulides also espouses views about more politicized topics, such as his unfounded doubts about the safety of COVID-19 vaccines.

While this chapter has been largely exploratory, my hope is that it demonstrates the importance of considering the contextual, social factors of narrative and its implications for audiences' perception. Though in many ways it critiques traditional conceptions of fact and fiction as binary opposites, I hope also to stress the degree to which this common-sense understanding of the distinction bears on audience reception, and consider the ways in which a rhetorical definition, as per Walsh, allows for a more rigorous understanding of the cases where our "common-sense" definitions are not so clear cut.

CHAPTER III

NOSLEEP AND UNNATURAL NARRATOLOGY

Of the many reasons that fictional texts appeal to readers, one is surely their ability to move beyond mimesis and replication of everyday events into places and scenarios that could not exist in actuality. This, at least, is one of the major claims underpinning the work of Jan Alber, one of the foremost names in the subfield of unnatural narratology. Alber argued in 2009 that “even though many narrative texts teem with unnatural”—which he defines as “physically or logically impossible scenarios”—narrative theory has not yet done justice to these cases of unnaturalness or the question of how readers can come to terms with them” (“Impossible Storyworlds” 79). Since then, Alber and others have contributed to a large and growing body of scholarship on so-called unnatural narratology which addresses precisely these concerns. This chapter briefly explores some of the major concepts and controversies within unnatural narratology and consider their applicability to *Nosleep*, which, because it features horror stories, frequently includes texts with unnatural, fantastic, or otherwise logically impossible elements. Having established a framework and terminology, I then read a popular *Nosleep* post—and the subsequent reader commentary—against Alber’s cognitive model of naturalization strategies.

Defining the Unnatural

Despite the burgeoning popularity of unnatural narratology as a concept and approach to narrative, there are many available explanations as to what constitutes “the

unnatural”—conflicting definitions that can sometimes be a source of controversy (Shang ch. 1). In part, this multiplicity of definitions arises from the fact that unnatural narratology is “not a homogenous school of thought” (Alber and Heinze). Moreover, Alber and Heinze argue that this heteroglossic conception of the unnatural is a necessary one because understandings of the unnatural must reflect cultural context (8-9). Just as fact and fiction are often defined in binary contrast with one another, the unnatural, by virtue of the term's very etymology, is necessarily “measured against the foil of” the natural (Alber, “Unnatural Narrative”). However, to do so “presupposes a common understanding” of what is or is not natural (Hansen 162; Shang ch. 1). Broadly, we might say that the natural fits within “natural laws and logical principles as well as standard human limitations of knowledge” (Alber, “Unnatural Narrative”). However, we cannot assume that all individuals or even all cultures share the same understandings of these principles and limitations. Not only must we remain open to the possibility that different cultures have different ontologies and epistemologies, but we must also consider that any binary description of the natural and unnatural cannot account for every narrative.¹⁰ In part for this reason, Biwu Shang calls for a comparative,

¹⁰ Despite Alber and Heinze’s calls to prevent the “hemispheric blindness” caused by failing to account for cultural context, Alber lists *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and the Old Testament as examples of narratives with unnatural features in his entry on unnatural narrative in the *Living Handbook of Narratology*. While many would agree that each text contains “physical, logical, or epistemic impossibilities,” both also fit the definition of myth discussed in Chapter II, which would suggest that they cannot be neatly characterized as factual or fictional. However, Alber is clear that unnatural narratives are a “subset of fictional narrative.” Thus, trying to apply the label of unnatural narrative to myths—which operate according to different truth programs than secular discourse—

transnational approach to narratology that “decolonize[s] and subvert[s] the hegemony of Western narrative theory” (ch. 1).¹¹

Not only must unnatural narratology contend with the threat of “hemispheric blindness” posed by a eurocentric conception of the natural, but there is also the issue of the terms’ moralistic connotations. In her landmark book *Towards a “Natural” Narratology* (1996), Monika Fludernik takes care distance her use of *natural* from its moralistic uses, explaining in a 2012 essay that she did not want “natural” narratology to be contrasted with the “unnatural,” noting that this sort of binary opposition evokes “the moralistic, phallogocentric, heterosexual and generally conservative ideologies of the natural their rejection, if not demonization, of the (unnatural, perverse) Other” (357).¹² However, in the introduction to *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative*, Alber and his collaborators forestall objections to the term on these grounds, arguing that *unnatural*’s “cultural baggage” is entirely divorced from its use in narratology, which is concerned only with its “socio-linguistic” dimensions in narrative (4). Alber et al. go still further,

enters the ethically murky territory of applying an outsider’s ontology to another culture’s myth.

¹¹ Shang’s *Unnatural Narrative Across Borders: Transnational and Comparative Perspectives* does precisely this through his examination of both contemporary Chinese time travel fiction and traditional *zhiguai* tales.

¹² In *Towards a “Natural” Narratology*, Fludernik goes so far as to suggest employing the term “non-natural” in those cases when dichotomization is a helpful tool, reasoning that “non-natural” is a “less loaded” alternative to “unnatural” (“How Natural is ‘Unnatural Narratology’” 4). However, this suggestion had no effect in dampening the popularity of the term “unnatural narratology” to describe non- or antimimetic narrative. An account of these terms’ use and development can be traced through Fludernik’s essay and Alber et al.’s subsequent response: “What is Unnatural About Unnatural Narratology? A response to Monika Fludernik” (2012).

noting that while the term “will inevitably cause a certain amount of confusion among the uninformed,” “[u]nnatural narratology has no position on the nature/culture debate and does not designate any social practices or behavior as natural or unnatural” (“What Is Unnatural” 4). Though I am willing to accept Alber et al.’s assurances that there is no intent to carry the word “unnatural’s” cultural connotations into the field of narratology, I doubt very much that any term so evaluatively loaded can truly be separated from its broader cultural applications—an uncomfortable truth proven, ironically, by the authors’ haste to distance themselves from the word’s moralistic connotations.

As this brief introduction to the field suggests, the growing interest in unnatural narratology is not without certain controversies and weighty theoretical questions. As Shang notes, there is still work to be done to move unnatural narratology beyond the bounds of primarily American and Western European texts. In addition, Alber himself calls for the “fusion of the study of the unnatural with feminist, queer, and/or postcolonial approaches” (“Unnatural Narrative”), which, with respect to queer narratology in particular, remains a complex task.¹³

In the interim, Alber and Heinze are right to suggest that multiple definitions of the unnatural allow for a fuller understanding of the phenomenon. They outline three major definitions at use in the field: (1) “narratives that have a defamiliarizing effect

¹³ Florian Zitzelsberger, for one, expresses doubt that unnatural narratology and queer narratology “can be effectively ‘fused’” in part because the term “‘unnatural’ echoes the naturalized status of heteronormativity in narrative (69, 70). See both “Metalepsis and/as Queer Desire: Queer Narratology and the ‘Unnatural’” and “On the Queer Rhetoric of Metalepsis” for a full explication of the limitations of applying the natural/unnatural binary in queer approaches to narratology.

because they are experimental, extreme, transgressive, unconventional, non-conformist or out of the ordinary,” (2) anti-mimetic texts that move beyond the conventions of natural narratives or which otherwise “violate the ‘mimetic contract’” (Richardson, Introduction, 1) which ordinarily governs fictional narratives, and (3) narratives that describe scenarios or events that are impossible according to the known laws of the physical world or which violate accepted principles of logic (2-5). Notably, the unnatural descriptor can refer both to the content of narrative (i.e., to characters or elements of the plot) and to more formal or structural elements (i.e., omniscient second person narration or narrative metalepsis).

Nosleep stories are far more likely to fall into the former category not only because of the forum's horror theme but because its rules about plausibility expressly forbid certain unnatural narrative forms and structures. In fact, most of Nosleep's posting guidelines focus on setting the parameters for how a story can be narrated: “your narrator cannot die at or before the end of the story, unless there is a plausible explanation for how the post was submitted to r/nosleep;” “your narrator cannot be a deity or deity-like figure;” “your narrator cannot be a baby, doll, animal, or inanimate object.,” “2nd person POV stories . . . are not allowed unless they are addressed to a named character.” Taken together, these parameters encourage authors to structure their stories as if they were “ordinary” Reddit posts—that is conversational, factual narratives rather than a carefully constructed fictional text. As discussed in Chapter II of this thesis, Nosleep stories, particularly those that mimic the linguistic and structural choices of other types of Reddit posts, often lead to “epistemological confusion” (Duncan 86) when encountered by outsiders. Often, these narratives seem carefully constructed to be just plausible enough

to make readers second-guess the text's ontological status. This degree of plausibility is a defining generic characteristic, both of Nosleep stories (Kiene et al. 1154) and of creepypasta writ large (Balenzategui 190).

However, this sense of plausibility counterbalances but does not preclude the inclusion of unnatural plot elements. Nosleep stories regularly include any number of unnatural elements, ranging from time travel, fantastic monsters or entities, and parallel or alternative realities. The inclusion of these elements is not particularly remarkable given that Nosleep stories fall broadly within the genre of horror, which, in turn, is a subset of speculative fiction. What makes Nosleep unique however is that the community rules about plausibility also serve to formalize and make explicit techniques for “naturalizing” unnatural narrative.

According to Alber, naturalization is a process through which readers “make sense of” unnatural scenarios (“Impossible Storyworlds” 80). How—and, in fact, when and whether—readers undertake this process remains a central question within unnatural narratology. In fact, within the article “What is Unnatural about Unnatural Narratology,” co-authors Alber, Stefan Iversen, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Brian Richardson each offer competing views on the question of naturalization, with Nielsen arguing that readers face a choice when they encounter unnatural narratives: they can attempt to naturalize them, or they can apply “unnaturalizing reading strategies” (377). Broadly, unnaturalizing reading strategies “leave open the possibility that unnatural narratives contain or produce effects and emotions that are not easily (if at all) explainable or resolvable with reference to everyday phenomena or the rules of the presented storyworld” (Alber et al., “What Is

Unnatural” 377). For Nielsen, these strategies “resist the application of real-world limitations” to all narratives, meaning that unnatural interpretations differ fundamentally from the interpretation of natural narratives and, consequently, unnatural narratology studies the “interpretational consequences” of their employment. (“What Is Unnatural” 377-8). On the other hand, Stefan Iversen and Brian Richardson follow in the tradition of H. Porter Abbott who, in an analogous discussion of “unreadable minds,” argues that the unreadable should be “accepted as unreadable” (“Unreadable Minds” 448; Alber et al., “What Is Unnatural” 377). For Iversen and Richardson, this means accepting anti-mimetic elements of narrative as such (Alber et al. 377) and—as Richardson argues elsewhere—“resist[ing] impulses to deny its protean essence and unexpected effects” (“What is Unnatural Narrative Theory,” 33). This view is in contrast to Alber’s, who maintains not only that readers use naturalizing strategies, but has outlined at least five specific strategies that they might employ.

For Alber, unnatural narratives fundamentally challenge the human mind’s “sense-making capabilities” (“Impossible Storyworlds 80). He argues that our understanding is necessarily constrained by the limitations of human cognition and therefore proposes a cognitive-narratological approach to account for readers’ sense-making efforts (“Impossible Storyworlds,” 80). Alber’s model hinges on the concept of “frames.” For Alber, a frame is a kind of script or schema based on “real-world experience and exposure to literature” (“Impossible Storyworlds,” 81). He uses, as an example, talking animals that appear frequently in both fables and cartoons. Though generally a talking animal would be understood as “unnatural” in a Western model of

ontology, Alber argues that the popularity of this frame has already led to its naturalization. This naturalization allows readers to make sense of the unnatural element or understand its significance to the narrative, such as understanding the talking animals as a critique of “the thoughtlessness, arrogance, and ignorance with which humans treat animals” (“Impossible Storyworlds,” 89, 94). According to Alber, readers are able to draw on these frames as they read, combining and recombining them as needed to “make sense” of unnatural or otherwise impossible elements of a narrative.

In particular, he outlines five types of naturalizing strategies readers frequently employ: (1) reading unnatural events as “internal states” such as dreams or hallucinations; (2) “foregrounding the thematic” by choosing to read unnatural elements as expressions of literary themes or symbols; (3) “reading allegorically” by choosing to understand unnatural elements as referring to “something about the world in general rather than specific individuals;” (4) “blending scripts” or combining frames in new ways, and finally, (5) the process of “frame enrichment” wherein readers “considerably stretch” existing frames so as to account for unnatural elements of a narrative (Alber, “Impossible Storyworlds,” 82).

Naturalization Strategies on Nosleep

While I am hesitant to speculate broadly on the applicability of Alber’s strategies to readers of all kinds of fiction, in the relatively narrow case of *Nosleep*, naturalization is almost a prerequisite of the community in that all events described are to be treated as “true.” With this stipulation in place, readers must then find ways to naturalize or otherwise “makes sense” of a narrative’s unnatural elements in order to participate in the

community. Because of this participatory element and the community's formalized rules about plausibility, readers' attempts at naturalization are often highly visible, usually unfolding in the comments, sometimes in conjunction with direct conversation with the story's author.¹⁴ The public, visible nature of the naturalization process therefore means that the forum offers us a unique opportunity to observe not only how authors negotiate the balance between affective horror elements and plausibility, but also how readers "naturalize" the fantastic accounts posted there.

As an example, I turn now to another of Nosleep's most popular posts titled, "My Dead Girlfriend Keeps Messaging Me on Facebook. I've Got the Screenshots. I Don't Know What to Do." Originally posted on July 1, 2014 by u/natesw, Duncan describes the post as a "masterpiece of the creepypasta genre" (86), in part because it draws on "our deepest fears" about death and the afterlife, particularly in the digital age, though I contend that another factor in its popularity is the narrative's interactivity and the extent to which it asks readers to apply their own interpretations to the disturbing events the narrative describes.

In the post the narrator, evidently a man named "Nathan," documents a series of messages he received from the Facebook account of his late girlfriend, Emily. He

¹⁴ Nosleep's rules about the "truth" of stories and its preference for first person narration creates a certain amount of confusion and overlap between the concept of the author and the narrator. Within the relatively narrow context of the forum, the author and narrator can usually be treated as one and the same, with the result that commenters become active participants in the narrative when they interact directly with the narrator or protagonist, sometimes suggesting plot elements or details that are incorporated into subsequent installments of the narrative.

explains that Emily died horrifically in a car crash nearly two years prior to the posting, but that he could not bring himself to delete or memorialize her Facebook page. A little more than a year after her death, Nathan received a message from Emily’s Facebook page. While he initially assumed that the message came from Emily’s mother—who also had access to the page—the messages become both more frequent and more disturbing. Throughout the post, the narrator documents each one with a screenshot, allowing the narrative to unfold through both the linked images and Nathan’s text-based narration. The narrator quickly notices that the messages are disjointed and largely nonsensical, possessing a “word salad” quality (u/natesw), leading Nathan to realize that the messages contain “recycled” words and phrases from the couple’s chat history. In her analysis of the post, Duncan quotes this representative message, which Nathan received some seven months into his ordeal:

Emily [name redacted by OP]

We should make our own jam

jfc Samantha :/

nah different

no chance of passing

no chance of passing

how many?

garage side door

side

I*

no chance of passing (u/natesw)

Interestingly, Nathan offers very little in the way of speculation about who or what is messaging him, or why. Apart from his initial assumption that the messages were sent mistakenly by Emily's mother or maliciously by a hacker, Nathan offers no particular explanation for the narrative's events. However, the comment section of the post is rife with readers' explanations, many of which seem to employ the naturalizing strategies Alber describes.

For instance, many readers seemed to feel that the best explanation for Nathan's experience was that, consciously or otherwise, he logged into Emily's account and sent the messages himself, possibly while suffering from some degree of dissociation or other mental illness induced by grief. Interestingly, and perhaps owing to the stipulation that all Nosleep stories are "true," the overwhelming majority of comments that proposed this explanation did so with marked and apparently genuine compassion for Nathan. Consider this comment from u/MaryLane230:

PLEASE TALK TO SOMEONE. Dissociation is the very last thing I would want to admit to myself too, but it may be the very thing that also puts an end to this torture for you, OP. The least you can do is get evaluated. In this moment even if it is your doing, you are experiencing the same torture as if a stranger is doing this TO you. Our minds are so very complex.

That is, u/MaryLane230 reads the events of the narrative as an "internal state" (Alber, "Impossible Storyworlds" 82), specifically some form of dissociation. Arguably the most plausible explanation within a natural framework, the commenter nevertheless

recognizes that Nathan's subjective experience would be the same as if an external entity were sending the messages to him. As such, the "internal states" naturalization technique works well on Nosleep because it allows for the sincerity of a narrator's subjective experience of horrific or unnatural elements within an otherwise "natural" framework.

However, other commenters tended to favor more sinister or supernatural explanations. Many felt that the messages came from some Emily herself—or at least some version of her spirit or consciousness. Such understandings hinged on interpretations of "Emily's" messages. For example, in her analysis Duncan argues that the nonsensical content of the messages with "particularly lucid phrases" (87) such as "no chance of passing" in the above message, which many readers took to mean that Emily could not "pass" completely into the afterlife. Similarly, other commenters fixated on a message Nathan received shortly after the one quoted above, which contained the first original word in the exchange: "FRE EZIN G" (u/natesw). Many of the subsequent messages repeat the words "cold" or "freezing," which readers found particularly evocative. For instance, u/the_dark_half commented "I felt so awful for you reading this OP, however the part that really got me thinking was when 'emily' talked about being cold...what if that means something?" u/natesw, the original poster, responded by explaining that Emily "was always cold, regardless of the weather" but also that "Death is . . . associated with coldness," and if someone was sending the messages to deliberately hurt or upset Nathan, they could be playing on that imagery.

Nathan never says outright that Emily is messaging him and, in fact, never uses the words "ghost" or "spirit." However, many readers reached the conclusion that

Emily's ghost was contacting him by drawing on their past experiences with frames or "scripts" found in ghost stories. These frames guide readers to interpret Emily's message less literally and more thematically, understanding them "as exemplifications of themes rather than mimetically motivated occurrences" (Alber "Impossible Storyworlds" 85). That is, Emily's comments about being cold and having "no chance of passing" are reinterpreted thematically in line with common tropes about death and the afterlife. Readers' ability to draw on these frames to interpret a new text allows them a new means to interpret the story and recast Nathan's experience as a ghost story for the digital age.

The story's fundamental concerns about death and the afterlife in the digital age are what motivate Duncan's analysis of the amateur story alongside mass-media narratives with similar themes, such as an episode of the television series *Black Mirror* and Paul La Farge's 2017 novel *The Night Ocean*. Given that Duncan's analysis of "My Dead Girlfriend" is written and published outside the context of Nosleep, her critique is not constrained by the forum's rules. Put simply, she has no obligation to write as if the story is true, thereby opening up a broader set of interpretive possibilities and naturalization strategies, particularly Alber's strategy of "reading allegorically" ("Impossible Storyworlds" 82). Alber argues that this strategy allows us to look past the specific individuals and events described in a narrative and instead understand impossible elements as communicating something about the world generally ("Impossible Storyworlds" 82). For Duncan, this means understanding the post within a broader context of death, grieving, and death cultures in the digital era. Duncan seems inclined to read "Emily's" messages—which recycle words and phrases from previous

conversations—as an allegory for growing concerns about privacy, social media, and big data, particularly the “narrative agency of data itself” (87). Drawing on the work of N. Katherine Hayles, Duncan argues that the power of big data algorithms in shaping our online experiences means that what we see online is “increasingly . . . a calculated decision-making process that we have no access to” and that there is a “complete epistemological separation of our data from the scope of our awareness or control” (87-8). For Duncan, then, the supernatural manifestation of Emily’s spirit in “My Dead Girlfriend” is an allegory for the ways in which our online data exists independently of our selves and will “outlive” us, whether beyond our time spent online, our past our literal deaths.

While Alber’s model of “reading allegorically” is obviously a powerful naturalizing tool, as demonstrated in Duncan’s analysis, its applicability to Nosleep is somewhat limited. To read allegorically necessarily suggests a work is, to some extent, fictional, even if only in Walsh’s sense of fictionality as a rhetorical, communicative mode. For readers who want to respond directly to Nosleep stories in the comments, this overt allegorical reading is not an option, any more than is the language that so often frames literary or rhetorical analysis, like any mention of plot, voice, symbols, or motifs. This is not to suggest that readers do not find ways to provide feedback on a post’s formal or thematic elements. One of the more cynical comments on “My Dead Girlfriend” suggested that the original poster should contact Facebook co-founder Mark Zuckerberg about his messages with “Emily” because Zuckerberg would “want to know ASAP so he can buy the afterlife and figure out a way to display advertisements while you’re dying”

(u/a_drunk_Jon_Snow), echoing Duncan's interpretation of the story as an allegory for the growing cultural fears about big data and privacy. A full treatment of how commenters skirt, bend and, occasionally, flout community rules in order to provide feedback on a post's formal or thematic qualities is beyond the scope of this project; however such an analysis would tend to compliment and expand our understanding of how Nosleep readers employ naturalizing strategies to make sense of posts' fantastic, illogical or otherwise unnatural elements.

The two remaining strategies Alber describes are, to some degree, extensions of the first three. They are also likely to be more applicable to highly experimental, postmodernist narratives than they are to the typical Nosleep story which, because of the community's rules, must still follow certain formal and logical rules. That said, many readers seem to employ Alber's fourth strategy of "blending scripts" to the events described in "My Dead Girlfriend." While the three previous strategies offer serviceable explanations for the events described in the original post, "My Dead Girlfriend" also takes full advantage of the participatory nature of the community by continuing and complicating the narrative in the comment section. Namely, as the original poster, u/natesw (presumably one and the same as the protagonist "Nathan"), discussed his experience with other commenters, his comments began to take on the same "word salad" quality as "Emily's" messages. Many readers were quick to notice that u/natesw was reusing phrases he had already used in other comments in precisely the same way that "Emily" recycled words and phrases from the couples' chat history. For many readers this revelation threw the assumption of u/natesw's humanity into question, and many

resorted to “blending frames” to find an explanation for who or what had posted the story—including everything from the possibility that Nathan had died in a car accident and a deranged Emily was actually posting the story or that Nathan committed suicide and that his increasingly robotic comments were simply a byproduct of whatever force allowed “Emily” to message him in the first place. As Alber notes in his explication of the “blending scripts” reading strategy, this approach is particularly well-suited for narratives where the narrator is nonhuman or dead (“Impossible Storyworlds” 82, 89) and, clearly, many readers believed “Nathan” to be some combination of the two.

Alber stresses that his argument “does not depend on the strategies’ being broadly deployed by readers” but rather that his aim is to explore these strategies as a few among many options that readers can use when confronted with unnatural narrative (“Impossible Storyworlds” 83). Likewise, though reader commentary on “My Dead Girlfriend” displays at least four of Alber’s five proposed strategies, my argument is not necessarily that readers always use these strategies to naturalize and respond to Nosleep stories. Rather, this reading of “My Dead Girlfriend” seeks to demonstrate the interpretive options available to readers and community members and how those options are informed or constrained by community rules. Studying these how readings happen in a space like Nosleep, where readers must work within and around the highly formalized rules of the discourse community, offers a contrast to the comparatively abstract discussions of naturalizing strategies that have characterized scholarship in unnatural narratology to date. On Nosleep, naturalizing strategies are not merely a question of interpretation; they are also underpinned by more pragmatic concerns. If readers want to participate in the

community and remain in good standing, they must respond to all narratives as though they are true, which often necessitates naturalizing the events they describe at least to some extent. This does not necessarily preclude the claims of other unnatural narratologists like Richardson, Nielsen, and Iverson who suggest that readers may resist attempts to naturalize unnatural elements or else deploy “unnaturalizing strategies.” However, it does raise certain questions about how readers who favor these strategies navigate the social and communicative norms of the community. To restate the problem more generally, studying how naturalization techniques are used (or not) in an active discourse community tends to bring the study of unnatural narratology beyond the confines of literary interpretation, bringing it to bear instead on questions of pragmatics and discourse. This expansion of unnatural narratology’s traditional domain has the potential to substantially enrich both narratology as well as rhetoric or literacy studies in that it can tell us a great deal about how readers respond to fictional (or, in this case, unnatural) narratives within a particular discourse community

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

This thesis has been concerned primarily with two major tenets of narrative studies: the distinction (or lack thereof) between factual and fictional narratives and the subfield of unnatural narratology, and how each applies to the subreddit Nosleep. Though Nosleep is just one of many available online storytelling platforms, it is a unique discourse community complete with highly formalized rules, communicative norms, and a clear (albeit dynamic) sense of the characteristics that define the genre. As such, it offers a unique opportunity to apply these areas of narrative study beyond the traditional realm of print-based, literary narrative. In line with this and emphasizing the transmedial nature of narrative as a fundamental communicative mode, this thesis has borrowed wherever possible from traditions of rhetorical analysis so as to consider not only the texts themselves but the cultural context surrounding them.

Such a focus led to my prioritization of Walsh's model of rhetorical fictionality wherein fictionality is considered less a product of a narrative's truth value and more a mode of communication. Understanding fictionality in such a way allows us to consider more deeply the effects of fictionality in helping achieve particular communicative aims, an important dimension in a space so intensely communal and participatory as an online forum. This is not to suggest that narrative's ontological status is irrelevant. To the contrary, Nosleep demonstrates that how we respond to texts hinges largely on our

understanding of whether or not a narrative is “true.” Readers expect that news reports, horror stories, and folktales each tell us something about the world but also that each will communicate their messages in different ways and elicit different responses in their readers. Though Nosleep intentionally subverts our expectations about narratives’ ontological status and how that status is conveyed, it does not render the question of truth value wholly irrelevant. As the forum’s maxim declares, “everything is true [on Nosleep], even if it’s not” (“Posting Guidelines”). Though clearly tongue-in-cheek, the remark nevertheless suggests that even though *proving* the veracity of stories is irrelevant, the narratives’ status as true, even in this limited, provisional context, shapes our engagement with and response to texts. As discussed in my analysis of the popular series “I’m a Search and Rescue Officer” in Chapter II, this becomes even more evident when stories created for Nosleep are shared widely outside of it, as in the case of creepypasta, creating the digital equivalent of an urban legend.

This discussion of factual and fictional narrative hinges, in many ways, on readers’ interpretation of the text’s ontological status and what assumptions they might tend to make about narratives and the work they do based on their truth value. In much the same way, Chapter III considered the subfield of unnatural narratology and what interpretative strategies readers can deploy to naturalize physically or logically impossible events described in narratives. While the degree to which readers actually deploy these strategies is still contested, Alber for one has argued that there are particular frames and mental processes that characterize how readers might attempt to naturalize unnatural scenarios. This process of naturalization takes on new meaning in a space like

Nosleep where all narratives are to be treated as “true” no matter how seemingly unnatural their content. Furthermore the public, communal, and participatory aspects of the community necessarily influence readers’ responses to texts, but also make their interpretive process visible in a way that is fairly unique to Nosleep. As such, I argue that studying whether and how readers’ deploy naturalizing strategies on Nosleep offers the potential for new insight into exactly how this process might work. Further research in this line of inquiry could not only move unnatural narratology past literary interpretation into more pragmatic or rhetorical applications, but could also enrich the related fields of rhetoric and literacy studies.

Limitations and Future Research

This thesis has been primarily exploratory in nature and, as such, cannot possibly cover every relevant dimension of Nosleep, whether viewed as a discourse community or as a genre unto itself. The stories discussed in this project are not necessarily generalizable to patterns across the community as a whole, owing to the size and longevity of Nosleep, as well as the dynamic, evolving nature of its rules and norms. In this respect, research that uses corpus linguistic analysis or other forms of machine assisted reading could do much more to answer questions about general trends on Nosleep or the evolution of the community over time. Likewise, the topics I have addressed could certainly be explored in more depth or through alternative experimental or methodological approaches. For instance, the application of methods of discourse analysis to the posts and comments would almost certainly yield new insight into the communicative strategies users employ so as to conform to (or circumvent) the

community's rules. Similarly, direct interviews with community members—not unlike those conducted by Kiene et al.—could be profitable for projects interested in exploring Nosleep as a literacy sponsor or in determining how users learn and adapt to the norms of a particular discourse community. Indeed, there is considerable potential to use Nosleep as a site for research on the emergent literacy practices of participatory web cultures, or on the means through which new members join and become literate in the norms of discourse communities.

In part this potential arises from the fact Nosleep is primarily a space for amateur writers—average people who do not earn a living from their writing. Coupled with the highly public, communal nature of the space, this also means that Nosleep is a fascinating living cultural document that reflects its broader sociopolitical context. Horror fiction (and speculative fiction more broadly) is often closely linked to the societal concerns of the day, making it one tool in measuring the cultural or political zeitgeist.¹⁵ Drawing on these facts, future research could investigate whether and how Nosleep stories engage

¹⁵ The idea that science fiction—perhaps the most popular subgenre of speculative fiction—not only reflects social and political concerns but also provides fruitful ground for exploring alternative solutions is well documented. See, for example, *To Seek Out New Worlds: Exploring Links between Science Fiction and World Politics* (2003), edited by Jutta Welles or *Black and Brown Planets: The Politics of Race in Science Fiction* (2014), edited by Isiah Lavender III. With respect to horror fiction, there are no shortages of critical readings that link horror narrative to larger cultural, societal anxieties. Heather Duncan's *Human-Ish* "Human 'ish': Voices from Beyond the Grave in Contemporary Narratives," cited throughout this project is one such example. On the other hand, many critics have used horror media as a lens to study social and political issues like race, gender, or sexuality. For just two examples see Kinitra D. Brooks's "The Importance of Neglected Intersections: Race and Gender in Contemporary Zombie Texts and Theories" and Eleanor Beal and Jonathan Greenaway's *Horror and Religion: New Literary Approaches to Theology, Race and Sexuality* (2019).

with or reflect contemporary political issues. In the highly charged and polarized political landscape of contemporary U.S. politics, it may also be worth considering how the community's stipulation that "everything is true" shapes the discourse around these political topics. In some respects, this stipulation puts readers on common ground by default in ways that are increasingly uncommon in real-world political arenas. On the other hand, the highly contextual definition of "truth" almost inevitably invites comparisons to the political sphere in the era of "fake news" and "alternative facts." While Nosleep is not a perfect analogue to these real-world issues because it is a fictive space without an intent to deceive per se, the playful subversion of our usual assumptions about truth and evidence certainly invites us to think more critically about what it means for a narrative to be "true." Likewise, the potential for stories to spread widely outside the context of the Nosleep forum, where their ontological status becomes still more confused, invites comparisons to the spread of mis- and disinformation online. Though these are each complex topics unto themselves and well-beyond the scope of this project, researchers aiming to study these and related questions in future would do well to begin from the foundation this thesis attempts to lay: one that draws on many available theoretical tools across disciplines.

Thus, while this thesis is not an exhaustive treatment of Nosleep as a storytelling platform, it is, to my knowledge, among the first to examine the space through the dual lenses of narratology and rhetoric. I believe these perspectives are not only a complement to existing research on Nosleep from the fields of folklore and social computing but help examine more critically the community's most defining characteristic: its universal

insistence that “everything is true,” often despite the fact that the narratives in question contain unnatural elements that seem to defy common sense notions of what is possible, let alone true. This feature of the community positions it squarely in the midst of several major theoretical debates in narratology namely the distinction between factual and fictional narrative and the definition and role of unnatural narratology. While this thesis does not seek to offer definitive answers to any of these questions, it demonstrates the importance of considering broader contextual factors within these debates. As the field of narratology rightfully expands beyond its traditional domain of literary, print-based texts, my hope is that this thesis demonstrates one way that the theoretical tools and frameworks of the field can be applied to other kinds of texts and narratives and how it might profitably be used alongside and against related fields of inquiry like rhetoric and literacy studies. As we live more of our daily lives online and engage with narrative in increasingly diverse forms, media and context, I believe that this blurring of disciplinary boundaries and broadening of inquiries will become all the more important.

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