Digital Literature and Critical Theory

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3   Participatory Storytelling

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3 Participatory Storytelling

One feature that is particular to reading on screen – at least in its extent – is that it can in some of its forms be simultaneously a private, isolated and a shared, public experience. The isolating aspects are pragmatic and therefore presumably uncontroversial. Just as every reader of a novel has an individual artefact that – bought or borrowed – is for the time being theirs alone to peruse in silence, the reader of a digitally published text will generally receive this text on the screen of their own device, in physical isolation from other readers and from its creator. In such a solitary situation, the expected flow of communication is generally unidirectional: there is a sender (the author[1]), a message (contained in the text), and a receiver (each individual reader). As long as the author is still alive to receive them, verbal or nonverbal messages can of course be sent from the reader to almost any author in the form of letters, reviews, boycotts, or prizes. However, they will be individual communications that do not appear alongside the original message, i.e. the artefact of the text, itself. Even if such responses are included in subsequent editions (praise and reference to awarded prizes on the dust jacket, for instance), they are thereby turned into messages from the author/publisher to future readers rather than those from past readers to the author or to other readers; their function, i.e. their signification, is largely controlled by the author (indirectly via the publisher). In the less static setting of online publication, this dynamic can shift, particularly away from the monopoly of author/publisher on the presentation of a text. This chapter will explore the added dimension of online comment sections as a paratextual space for narrative exchange with particular attention to how this changed dynamic challenges various notions of the respective roles of author and reader.

It might appear cumbersome to return to the debate on authorial intent now that we are well into the twenty-first century. After all, has the topic not been discussed at length in the twentieth century, which has left us with the convenient shorthand of invoking Roland Barthes's "Death of the Author"[2] to ensure the literary critic's and scholar's objectivity and focus on the text and its effect on the reader rather than an attempted

analysis of the author's psyche? In fact, it would likely be more expedient and expeditious at this point to call upon the idea of such an 'established' dynamic and swiftly move on to the purportedly new from there. However, the roles that author, reader, and text play in literary theory are of course far from clear or undisputed, and changing production and publication conditions can shift these dynamics and thereby exacerbate existing tensions. Essentially, the debate surrounding authorial intent needs to be raised before entering a context in which the author can and does reply to readers' reactions and speculations. These theoretical preliminaries will also not only help identify the contours of the issues that literary scholars might encounter in the process of analysing participatory digital (and other) texts, but also facilitate closer examination and recontextualisation of related concepts from traditional literary theory. Much in the spirit of endless signification, additional meanings might be extracted from Barthes' text, for instance, to that for which it is commonly used as a shorthand. Hence, this chapter will begin not with the digital, but with some theoretical groundwork to determine and describe certain tensions within the author-reader-text-constellation as-is, before proceeding to analyse an example that not only finds new forms of expressions for those tensions, but also alters some of them. This excursion into more traditional literature and literary theory will enable a contextualisation of digital literature within that tradition, thereby showing that phenomena such as those encountered in online comment sections are hardly entirely new ones, but rather the expression of conflicts and drives that have existed for a long time, now brought unavoidably to our attention through the possibilities afforded by technologically new forms of writing.

At the core of many questions concerning the processes of meaning-making between author and reader lies that of communication. This communication between sender and receiver is not limited to the text itself, but always also occurs in and is guided by the paratext. Therefore, the second part of this chapter will turn to storytelling on the campfire-horror subreddit /r/nosleep as an example where paratext plays a significant role in the communicative exchange. Building on the theoretical foundation constructed in the first section, this subsequent part will examine different types of textual and peritextual elements that guide and control the framework for authors, readers, and readers-as-participants (particularly those which encourage or manage participation). I will highlight the role of each entity in the process – author, reader, platform, in the broadest strokes – as that of an active agent capable of influencing the entire dynamic and thus shaping the communicative narrative discourse. The second part will also serve to test the theories outlined in the first through several instances of close reading. Ultimately, the hypothesis posited by this chapter is that participatory readers in a digital, online context can constitute themselves as subjects in connection to and active

communicative exchange with society, that is, with other subjects, rather than merely consuming an objectified Other.

Dead Authors, Lonely Readers, Isolating Texts

The written word has always been a solitary affair. Walter Ong's 1982 statement that "[w]riting and print isolate" (72) is a notion that harkens back to the Socrates of Plato's *Phaedrus*, who worries that written texts, like paintings, "if you ask them a question . . . preserve a solemn silence" (275e).[3] While this holds true for writing and print generally, the novel seems to have developed as a particularly lonely form. In his 1936 essay "The Storyteller", Walter Benjamin observes that "[t]he novelist has isolated himself" (87), and that each of the novel's recipients likewise "is isolated, more so than any other reader" (100). The novel is written to be read alone and mostly in silence, and has developed alongside domestic individualism and individual property, including commodification and ownership of the artefact of the book itself.

The reader is isolated in two directions. The isolation from other readers is, as Ong points out, reflected in a linguistic obstacle when we try to grasp this concept of readerly community:

> There is no collective noun or concept for readers corresponding to "audience". The collective "readership" . . . is a far-gone abstraction. To think of readers as a united group, we have to fall back on calling them an "audience", as though they were in fact listeners.
>
> (Ong 72)

Of course, they are not listeners, and they are not by default surrounded by other simultaneous recipients of the work as for instance theatre-goers are. And while editions of poetry are also regularly read in isolation and silence, they have about them the air of potential recitation. Even if that never happens, and also considering that some poems, e.g. shape poems, have features that presuppose visual, not auditory reception, the poem has palpably developed from that direct, spoken root. As Benjamin points out, while "even the reader of a poem is ready to utter the words, for the benefit of the listener" (100), the novel "neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it" (87).

Of course, the reader is not in a vacuum – the self of the reader develops in a social exchange, and every reading is, as Jameson puts it, received "through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or – if the text is brand-new – through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretive traditions" (*The Political Unconscious* ix–x).[4] However, this is indirect: There is no actual contact, the instant of reading and primary processing is solitary, and these "sedimented layers" are called up from and combined in the reader's own mind.

The other direction in which the individual reader is isolated is that of the author. The recording and distribution of script in any form by necessity comes at the cost of a temporal and spatial distance between writer and reader, where the text itself is the primary or even sole bearer of a potential message and all other communication is indirect. Of course, the reader is conscious of the fact that someone must have written the text they are currently reading, and that that person exists outside of the storyworld and might have very different opinions from the narrator or characters in the novel. This implied author, however, is an "intermediate construct . . . in the text, which invents it upon each reading" (Chatman 76). While the imagined persona is inferred from clues in the text, it mainly emerges from the reader's mind, influenced by that reader's background, and is thus not a subject but an object that is constructed mostly out of the reader's self and does not constitute or facilitate actual intersubjectivity. The author can in turn conjure up the idea of a reader while writing the text or receiving reviews, but this is likewise essentially intra-, not intersubjective.

In itself, this is simply a factual statement, not a conundrum. However, a conflict emerges out of this isolation when we consider narrative as a communicative act. Martin McQuillan postulates that "[t]he desire which motivates narrative is . . . the desire for the Other" (15–16). This is an argument developed from Lacan's hypothesis that anyone's "first object(ive) is to be recognized by the other"[5] ("Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis" 222) and that "[w]hat I seek in speech is a response from the other" (ibid. 247). In Lacan, the notion comes up in a discussion of psychoanalytic transference, but with some abstraction, it is a useful idea for the author-reader-relationship as well. While both McQuillan and Lacan are mainly concerned with the active speaker – McQuillan with the writer, Lacan with the patient in a psychoanalytic situation – a similar assumption can be made about the reader's reasons for engaging in the reception of a narrative: the desire to find an aspect of the self confirmed in an utterance by or representation of the other, which gives reading an attribute of searching for the other's response to an unspoken plea. If, however, all points of contact are constructs in the subject's mind based on the subject's own experiences, with only the text as intermediary, fulfilment of this desire is ultimately impossible; the subject cannot "break out of the circle of the *Innenwelt* into the *Umwelt*" (Lacan, "Mirror-Phase" 74). The illusion of contact might still persist, though, if for instance the reader automatically and unconsciously conflates the implied author with the actual person of the writer. When Plato's Socrates addresses the "solemn silence" (*Phaedrus* 275d) of text and paintings, he adds that yet they "have the attitude of life"; that of written texts, one might "imagine that they had intelligence" (ibid.) – but the text is primarily a static artefact which has no life or attitude of its own that does not have its source in the writer or the reader. Likewise,

the implied author can "have the attitude of life", but cannot provide true contact and resonance. Benjamin proposes that "[i]n this solitude of his, the reader of a novel seizes upon his material more jealously than anyone else. He is ready to make it completely his own, to devour it, as it were" (100). As the implied author is inferred from the text, by consuming the material in this subject-specific, possessive manner, the reader is doing the same to the (implied) author, making him an internalised object that is a fragment of the reader's self, rather than an external object that is simultaneously a subject of its own.

Again this is not necessarily problematic, at least not on the surface. Disregarding the person and thereby the authority of the author might also be seen as an act of empowerment for the individual reader. After all, William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley rightly pointed out as early as 1946 that "[t]he poem is not the critic's own and not the author's", but that rather it "belongs to the public" (470). However, there is a difference between emancipation and isolation, which I will now explore through a closer examination of Barthes' "Death of the Author".

One of that text's central – and relatively easy to pinpoint – statements is this: Literary criticism,

> by refusing to assign to the text (and to the world-as-text) a "secret", i.e., an ultimate meaning, liberates an activity we may call counter-theological, properly revolutionary, for to refuse to halt meaning is finally to refuse God and his hypostases, reason, science, the law.
>
> (54)

This "ultimate meaning" is to Barthes what readers look for when they try to uncover authorial intent, "the 'message' of the Author-God" (52–3), in the process implying the existence of "a final signified" (53). From the viewpoint of ideology and that of literary scholarship, the distancing of the author from the text and from interpretation makes sense. The infinite multidimensionality of a text is far more interesting than the singular authority of its creator, which automatically and irrefutably subordinates all recipients.

However, there is a small but decisive distinction to be made at the root of Barthes' argument: The author himself has little or nothing to do with it. The "Author-God" whose "empire is still very powerful" (50) and who "thinks, suffers, lives for" his book (52) in fact has little relation to the author as a person – instead, this is the author that "we believe in" (52). Throughout his essay, Barthes comments on how literary critics, scholars, and general readers do and ought to examine a text and its meanings, and position that and themselves in relation to the creator of the text – but this is solely in reference to how the recipients of a text interact with the *idea* of an author that they have constructed themselves. At no point does Barthes mention an actual, flesh-and-blood author who

enters the interpretive scene to declare the true meaning of his text. The closest that Barthes gets to the real person of the author is in this passage:

> The *author* still reigns in manuals of literary history, in biographies of writers, magazine interviews, and in the very consciousness of lit-terateurs eager to unite, by means of private journals, their person and their work; the image of literature to be found in contemporary culture is tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his history, his tastes, his passions.
>
> (50)

But even here, the focus is not on the author, but on the presumed actions of these "litterateurs" whose desire it is to tie the author to and locate them in their work.[6] Barthes' author is thus depersonalised from the start – this is also evident when Barthes states that "Surrealism helped desacral-ize the image of the Author" (51), since superimposing the regalia of sacralised Author-God over the author-as-person creates a concept which fulfils a function for the reader, but leaves no room for the author as a subject. The statement that "[t]o assign an Author to a text is to impose a brake on it, to furnish it with a final signified, to close writing" (53) only holds true if the "Author" is seen purely in the sense of the sacralised object-fragment without the characteristics of a multi-dimensional, him-self fragmented, subject – essentially, the idea of an authorial meaning is only singular if we assume that the author possesses just one meaning.

Barthes locates the endlessness of potential meanings in language and with that in the text itself, which is "a multi-dimensional space in which are married and contested several writings" (53) and which "constantly posits meaning, but always in order to evaporate it" (54). This way of phrasing the argument already factors out both the author and the reader. As a verb, 'to write' requires a subject if only in linguistic terms, and a text does not "constantly [posit] meaning" to a void, but only to a person who receives it. Barthes addresses both of these implications by stating that "linguistically, the author is nothing but the one who writes" (51), and that the reader is the "site where this multiplicity [of writings] is collected" (54). Crucially, Barthes frames both writer *and* reader not as subjects in their own right, but as functions at the service of text and writings. The "modern *scriptor* [i.e. writer] is born *at the same time* as his text; he is not furnished with a being which precedes or exceeds his writ-ing, he is not the subject of which his book would be the predicate" (52), and the reader "is a man without history, without biography, without psychology: he is only that *someone* who holds collected into one and the same field all of the traces from which writing is constituted" (54). This condition means that Barthes' argument really only works on a theoreti-cal level, since no reader is entirely devoid of personal qualities, and no author is either, and both of these entities in actuality play a significant

role in the process of making and finding any of a multitude of meanings. With this in mind, Barthes' theoretical proposition cannot and should not be transferred to practical reality, as this focus on the text as the sole bearer of meaning diffuses and decentralises the respective subject to, again, a point of isolation.

The problem with reading and interpretation as Barthes outlines it does not in fact lie with the authority and power of the author, but with the reader who looks for a single, simple truth as word-of-God. For this, the death of the author is not quite the right solution, though: Deicide is not the same as emancipation. Positing that "the birth of the reader must be requited by the death of the Author" (55) raises the implication that without the death of the author, the birth of the reader is not possible – instead, what the process actually requires is a shrinking of Author to author, and a simultaneous acceptance of the author-as-person as a subject.

The concept of authorial intent is of course undebatably objectionable. For one, looking for authorial intent poses a question for an absolute truth that cannot be answered absolutely. As Wimsatt and Beardsley note, the critic will generally not "get an answer to the question about intention" (469) from the author. This unavailability of an answer is a pragmatic concern; but additionally and more importantly, authorial intent as an absolute truth is also irrelevant and uninteresting for analysis. If we went along certain branches of psychoanalytic literary criticism and tried to reconstruct the author's unconscious from a text, even if that yielded reliable answers, we would have ultimately learned little about the world or ourselves, and only have gained a bit of speculation about a single author's unconscious. If, on the other hand, we read a text to find resonance and thus look to the (implied) author as a mirror for a fragment of our selves, but then also deny that author a personality that seeks expression, we are essentially renouncing our own ability to express.

The writer wants to express through writing, else he would not write – this proposition is sufficiently tautological to serve as a basic axiom, and it is important for the intersubjective aspects of reading. However, what precisely the author wanted to express, consciously or unconsciously, does not matter for the text's reception. When Barthes states that looking for the authorial truth in a text is "to furnish it with a final signified, to close writing" (53), he juxtaposes that against the possibility of "multiple writing" where "everything is to be *disentangled*, but nothing *deciphered* . . .; there is no end to it, no bottom; the space of writing is to be traversed, not pierced" (53–4). Wimsatt and Beardsley similarly contrast poetry to "practical messages" (469), which are successful "if and only if we correctly infer the intention" (470) – a message such as "the train is delayed" or "pass the salt", for instance, has little practical use if we dissect it for the many layers of meaning and evocation we might look for in a poem and disregard the information conveyed on the surface – if, in other

words, we traverse rather than pierce it.[7] In turn, trying to "correctly infer the intention" of a literary text reduces the work of art to pragmatic information. Benjamin makes a similar distinction between "information" and "intelligence"[8] (89) and observes a general development in an increasingly technologically networked world where "[e]very morning brings us the news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories" (ibid.). The reason for this is that every event that is recounted comes "shot through with explanation" (ibid.), reduced to fixed, accurate information rather than the breadth of meaning afforded by a story. Plato's Socrates voices a related concern about the written word:

> The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.
>
> (Plato, *Phaedrus* 275a–b)

When Phaedrus in his reply only comments on the fact that Socrates "can easily invent tales of Egypt" (Plato, *Phaedrus* 275b), where the myth about the origin of writing that he recounted was set, Socrates counters that Phaedrus seems to "consider not whether a thing is or is not true, but who the speaker is and from what country the tale comes" (Plato, *Phaedrus* 275c). Essentially, Socrates is already bemoaning the fact that Phaedrus is only concerned with the pragmatic information of his utterance, not with the lore and the wisdom it contains.

This is not to say that information is irrelevant – in a world that is increasingly called 'postfactual', this seems an important point to stress. Rather, information is only one part of what makes up meaning. Benjamin, discussing the rise of the novel over the art of storytelling, comments that the latter "is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out" (87). Storytelling is by no means *l'art pour l'art*, but can and does teach the listener or reader "openly or covertly, something useful. The usefulness may, in one case, consist in a moral; in another, in some practical advice; in a third, in a proverb or maxim" (Benjamin 86). On the one hand, we have precise, factual information that can be validated, and on the other concepts like wisdom, lore, and intelligence, whose effectiveness is rooted in their vague, ambiguous, and unfixable nature. In a similar vein, Plato's Socrates asserts that it is much easier to have a shared signified for the names of material substances such as iron or gold than it is to agree on the meaning of moral concepts such as justice or goodness (*Phaedrus* 263a).

Because human nature is ambiguous, and language itself is unsuitable to adequately represent the complexity of our inner worlds, we need to abstract to express, which makes wisdom and lore less precise

than factual information, but also infinitely more transferable. Benjamin makes this point by recounting a story written down by Herodotus about an Egyptian king. Outlining various meanings that might be inferred from this tale, he concludes that a story differs from practical information in that "Herodotus offers no explanations. His report is the driest. That is why this story from ancient Egypt is still capable after thousands of years of arousing astonishment and thoughtfulness" (90). Since Herodotus does not supply "a final signified" (Barthes 53) for his tale, thereby turning it into solely practical information, it instead can be traversed and experienced in a more lasting manner. As Samuel Johnson says about Shakespeare's writing, another instance of literature which has persisted over centuries, "[i]t is from this wide extension of design that so much instruction is derived" (394).

The differentiation between the singular truth of factual, verifiable information and the breadth of abstracted wisdom once more brings us back to the matter of communication and isolation. Describing research into the efficiency of signal transmission on a telephone line, Lacan reports that "a substantial portion of the phonetic medium is superfluous for the communication actually sought to be achieved", that is, it is not needed for communicating practical information ("The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis" 247). From this, he concludes that "what is redundant as far as information is concerned is precisely what plays the part of resonance in speech" (ibid.). This is a critical point regarding the importance of intersubjectivity for communication. Even though Lacan is exclusively commenting on the spoken word in this instance, the hypothesis can be applied to written texts as well – not on a phonetic level, of course, but in regards to the mediation of story through discourse, which is entirely superfluous for the transmission of a practical message. But just as "the function of language in speech is not to inform but to evoke" (ibid.), the primary purpose of a novel is also not merely to provide practical information; that generally distinguishes it from a manual. And so one effect of these additional qualities – phonetically or narratologically – is that they can enable intersubjectivity.

Benjamin outlines the benefits of lore over information thus:

> Actually, it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it. . . . The most extraordinary things, marvelous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude[9] that information lacks.
>
> (89)

By allowing the reader to come to an interpretative conclusion independently, the story's potential impact can be greater and also more multi-faceted. It is interesting that Benjamin uses the word

amplitude/*Schwingungsbreite*, which is semantically situated so near Lacan's *résonance*. Resonance only occurs if one of the frequencies of excitation (i.e. one of the writer's multitudes of expression) matches one of the natural frequencies of its recipient (one of the aspects of the self that the reader is looking to confirm through the writer's words). In acoustic resonance, a sound box such as the wooden body of a guitar can further amplify and enrich the resonating frequencies – and this, in the loosest terms of this allegory, is the semantic space that a reader can traverse in all its obscurity and ambiguity.

In *Moon Palace*, Paul Auster's homodiegetic narrator Stanley Fogg explains how he describes the material world to his blind employer Thomas Effing:

> I discovered that the more air I left around a thing, the happier the results, for that allowed Effing to do the crucial work on his own: to construct an image on the basis of a few hints, to feel his own mind traveling toward the thing I was describing for him.
>
> (123)

We can of course draw a straightforward analogy of Fogg as the writer and Effing as the reader, for whom a story resonates most fully and most strongly if it comes with the right amount of space, that is vagueness, within which he can construct his own meaning. That this space actually does have the right size and is neither too narrow – reduced to practical information – nor too broad – unreadable in its obscurity – is crucial. H. Porter Abbott argues that stories are, to an extent, "at the mercy of the reader and how diligently he or she reads" (19), but that "most stories, if they succeed – that is, if they enjoy an audience or readership – do so because they successfully control the process of story construction" (ibid.), i.e. they guide readers appropriately in their reception. Notably, when inspected with some care, this sentence reads "most stories succeed because they successfully control the process of story construction", which implies a certain degree of circularity that results from the complete exclusion of the author from the theoretical process. This depersonalisation is not just the death of the author, but borders on a *damnatio memoriae*. At the same time, we as readers always implicitly assume that someone has constructed a narrative when we receive it, looking for symbolisms and patterns as literary scholars, or as general readers simply expecting certain conventions such as foreshadowing to be fulfilled. In *The Invention of Solitude*, for instance, Auster considers the perception of small coincidences, which in real life are merely of passing interest, but in a formalised narrative are seen as indicators of meaning:

> If a novelist had used these little incidents, the reader would be forced to take note, to assume the novelist was trying to make some

point about his characters or the world. One could speak of symbolic meanings, of subtext, or simply of formal devices (for as soon as a thing happens more than once, even if it is arbitrary, a pattern takes shape, a form begins to emerge). In a work of fiction, one assumes there is a conscious mind behind the words on the page. In the presence of happenings in the so-called real world, one assumes nothing. The made-up story consists entirely of meanings, whereas the story of fact is devoid of any significance beyond itself.

(146)

We assume that what is narrated, unlike that which occurs in our own daily lives, has been constructed and that therefore, building on the Aristotelian principle of unity of plot according to which everything presented in a narrative is a necessary "part of the whole" (*Poetics* 42), every element found within a story potentially bears significance either for the plot or for resonance on a symbolic level. What is recounted and thereby assigned significance is of course a matter of discourse. Stanley Fogg's description of his quasi-authorial process in *Moon Palace*, during which "[d]isgusted by my early performances, I took to practicing when I was alone [. . . and t]he harder I worked, the more serious I became about what I was doing" (123), indicates an important point: it is the reader's task to traverse a narrative space, to construct their own image from the hints suggested by the text. But it is the author's task to first of all construct this space, and not merely for the benefit of the reader: If we keep in mind the axiom that the author wants to express, and if we are going to accept the author as a subject, we need to also consider that he has some agency in the process of story mediation. The author is an individual who wants to express, and desires resonance from his imagined reader for at least some of the frequencies he is sending.

   In contrast to Abbott, Jameson foregrounds the author's perspective on this issue of controlling communication and guiding reception for a passage in *The Political Unconscious*:

> Genres are essentially literary *institutions*, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact. The speech acts of daily life are themselves marked with indications and signals (intonation, gesturality, contextual deictics and pragmatics) which ensure their appropriate reception. In the mediated situation of a more complicated social life . . . perceptual signals must be replaced by conventions if the text in question is not to be abandoned to a drifting multiplicity of uses.
>
> (92–3)

Highlighting, among others, intonation and gesturality as among the guiding rails which ensure that the intended expression is transmitted

is reminiscent of Lacan's superfluous elements of speech that are necessary for intersubjective resonance. It also, however, recalls a concern of Socrates in *Phaedrus*, who, akin to Jameson's "drifting multiplicity of uses", warns that once texts are written down, they might be distributed "anywhere among those who may or may not understand them" (Plato, *Phaedrus* 275e), the words on the page "maltreated or abused" (ibid.). Like Plato, Jameson connects this tetherless drifting of meaning to writing, which he at least correlates to the "more complicated social life" (93). It is important to note, however, that Jameson is by no means advocating for a singular, true reading of a text; he is merely describing the author's desire for that, but at the same time recognises the inherent futility of the endeavour: "No small part of the art of writing, indeed, is absorbed by this (impossible) attempt to devise a foolproof mechanism for the automatic exclusion of undesirable responses to a given literary utterance" (*The Political Unconscious* 93). This applies even more strongly in the respective isolated situation that both the novelist and the novel's reader, according to Benjamin, find themselves in, since "as texts free themselves more and more from an immediate performance situation, it becomes ever more difficult to enforce a given generic rule on their readers" (ibid.).

Regardless of the author's possible success in this endeavour of determining signification, Abbott, Jameson, and even Wimsatt and Beardsley are in agreement on one thing: While ultimately readers are in control of what they find in a text, the author at least tries to guide their reception and has various strategies for that. One of these is discourse in a narratological sense – point of view, story structuring, temporal distance, multiperspectivity, etc. Another is to be found in everything that is not story or discourse, but still belongs to the work, that is, its accompanying paratext. After all, Genette describes the paratextual fringe as a zone of influence which is "at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it (more pertinent, of course, in the eyes of the author and his allies)" (*Paratexts* 2) – in other words, a framework which can guide reception and interpretation even after the text has left the author's hands and has been "tumbled about anywhere" (Plato, *Phaedrus* 275e).

Through traversing this ambiguous resonance space, the reader plays a considerable role in the process of meaning-making. As Abbott points out, readers "are always called upon to be active participants in narrative, because receiving the story depends on how we construct it from the discourse" (19). Though that already holds true for traditional publications in general, the extent to which readers can participate in online contexts such as Reddit differs in quite a radical way from that of general, individual story construction: While the participatory act itself occurs in private, its expression is shared publicly, as part of the presentation for all future readers and thus, as I will argue, part of the paratextual framework over

which the author has lost some of his control in exchange for increased intersubjectivity.

Participation in a way that fosters intersubjectivity only works if the platform allows for it, if the readers want to make use of this possibility, and if the author also wants to reach into that participatory space. In the following, I will examine various paratextual elements of the storytelling subreddit /r/nosleep to analyse how different aspects of the reader-author-dynamic are foregrounded and possibly shifted in a context where the reader can participate and enter into a direct exchange with the author and other readers. Several peculiarities of the platform have already been outlined in Chapter 1. However, some key parameters bear repeating at this point. The subreddit /r/nosleep is a space where horror stories are posted – often in serialised format – by their authors under pseudonymous account names, and readers can comment directly underneath a story instalment and up- or downvote posts and comments. The core maxim is that "everything is true here, even if it's not" ("Posting Guidelines" n.p.), which means that reader comments take the form of utterances by peripheral characters in the storyworld. Reddit is particularly well suited for this case study because its inherent anonymity means that we cannot attempt to construct the persona of the author from, for instance, biographical details, because those are simply not available. All authorial utterances we have are text or peritext, so we can avoid the investigative obsession with deciphering the singular intention of the Author-God and instead look towards the author who, with their desire for expression as a subject, is very much part of the mediative setting.[10] So while the reader of a digitally published text is physically as isolated as the reader of a novel, neither the author nor other participatory readers are as easily ignored, and with them, the intersubjective component is foregrounded with much stronger emphasis.

Why (Not) Paratext?

Reader commentary itself is not new, and neither is its communication to the author or the reading public – whether it takes the form of letters to the editor or published reviews. Even the invitation of contributions to the further development of a story is hardly innovative, with prizes for the best submitted ending to a movie series as early as 1914, or a phone survey to decide on Robin's fate in the *Batman* comics in the 1980s (Kelleter, "Populäre Serialität" 24). But, as already indicated earlier, these types of commentary are initiated or at the very least selected for publication by the author and/or publisher if they are to be presented in association with the text itself to the same audience. In a digital context with different technological possibilities, however, reader commentary can appear immediately and publicly alongside the story.

Crucially, this includes the "undesirable responses to a given literary utterance" (Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* 93) which can now not only occur, but might also enter the paratext and thus influence the reception by future readers. After all, the participatory reader is not the only possible and presumably not even the most common one. Rather, the number of readers who actively engage with the narrative in a textually productive way likely make up a fraction of the total readership; the vast majority are passive recipients of both the authorial main text and reader comments. The first instalment of "Infected Town" (III.1 in the *Mold* Saga), for instance, has a score of 860 points with 98% upvotes (so roughly 880 total votes) but only 212 comments – and this ratio of 4:1 still only takes those readers into account who are signed in and have given the story an up- or downvote. On a different platform, the Samuel Pepys Twitter account has 70.9k followers (as of early 2022) on whose timelines the diary tweets would regularly appear. A tweet posted by this account generally gets double or triple digit likes, but only single digit replies or retweets – unless the content of a tweet is particularly contentious or innuendo-laden. So while there is no way of saying how many users actually see the tweets, there is a similar indication as to the ratio of recognition (via a like or a vote) to active participation. On Reddit, users cannot participate at all anymore six months after the story instalment has been posted, as it is then closed to voting and replies, though all content, including comments, can still be read.

Jameson states that authorial guidance of particular readings becomes increasingly difficult "as texts free themselves more and more from an immediate performance situation" (*The Political Unconscious* 93). Arguably, the narrative situation that a platform such as Reddit facilitates, particularly with serialised stories, is a performance context, albeit an asynchronous one tied only to a virtual, not a physical space. But as much as it brings the author closer to the audience, thus enabling immediate authorial reaction to reader commentary, it also brings individual members of the audience closer to one another and to an extent has the effect of flattening hierarchies between author and readers. If the author wants to work towards ensuring that his expression finds resonance, he needs to find different strategies of shaping the frame in synchronicity with the text itself and without alienating those readers who are engaged in co-producing this frame. The social contract that Jameson mentions in regards to genre is still very much in place here. Now, however, it is noticeably not an abstract agreement between the authorial entity and the general idea of a reader, but rather a very concrete and tangible tension of narrative authority among a group of actual people. More than with non-digital publications, the question of whether readers allow themselves to be guided needs to be considered as a factor – one that can be continuously renegotiated throughout the narrative.

While reading participatory comments as paratext is potentially fruitful and tempting in its straightforwardness, I first want to examine a possible counterargument against the applicability of the term. After all, a term that can be applied to anything ultimately signifies nothing, and since 'paratext' is a fairly broad concept, Genette himself cautions against its universal application:

> [O]ne of the methodological hazards attendant on a subject as multiform and tentacular as the paratext, it seems to me, is the imperialist temptation to annex to this subject everything that comes within its reach or seems possibly to pertain to it. . . . [T]he sounder and methodologically better course seems to be to react in the reverse way and . . . to apply the Occamian principle of economy, which deters us from multiplying 'theoretical objects' unless the reason for doing so is of the utmost importance.
>
> (*Paratexts* 407)

In fact, there is a strong and unambiguous argument against reading participation as paratext in Genette's own definition, since he makes an explicit point that "the author and the publisher are (legally and in other ways) the two people responsible for the text and the paratext" (*Paratexts* 9). While certain tasks, such as cover design or the writing of a preface, can be delegated to an external party, this delegation would still happen at the direction of the author or the publisher, and either of the two would still retain ultimate authority over the implementation and publication of such externally produced paratextual elements. This is a factor which makes the entire approach of participation through paratext inherently contradictory: Reddit users and other commenters are, it can be assumed, generally not approached by anyone and tasked with writing a comment – much less one of a specific nature. If Genette is to be interpreted very puristically, any argument that concerns loss of authorial control over paratext is paradoxical.

Still, even Genette's blanket statement that "[b]y definition, something is not a paratext unless the author or one of his associates accepts responsibility for it" (*Paratexts* 9) does not categorically and intentionally exclude an element like reader comments. Rather, at the time of his writing, there was no reason why Genette should have accounted for them. Even in 1987, he could hardly have foreseen the possibilities afforded by online publication and communication and their democratising potential for literary production. Genette makes no provisions for non-authorial paratext, because there was quite literally no way in which anyone not authorised by author or publisher could have produced peritext, i.e. how anyone else's words or commentary would have entered the published volume.[11] The closest equivalent, notes scribbled in the margins, even

in those of a widely circulated library book, are hardly the same as that peritext which is included in every reader's instance of a certain edition of a text. Manually added notes in and other modifications to printed books are tied to one individual artefact and generally take place on an individual and mostly private level; comments underneath a story that is published online are equally visible for every reader and thus as universally available as the text itself – akin to the peritext printed in an edition of a novel. Since we can assume that Genette did not wilfully discount reader participation as paratext, his exclusion of it in the definition should by no means be a deterrent. Instead, it presents an ideal opportunity to adapt Genette's approach to a new context: As paratextual elements literally and figuratively surround the main (authorial) text, they constitute a framework which provides a certain degree of guidance to the reception and interpretation of the text (see e.g. *Paratexts* 2, 221, 408) – or, to put it plainly, to exert control over the reader. In a participatory online context, paratext still has the same function and potential effect, but the control over its production and thus over the reception of the text is diffused. Because this digital paratext is similar in form and function to traditional paratext, similar techniques can be used for its analysis; but because it is also different, especially in regards to agency and control, exploring the paratextual elements of participatory contexts can yield insight into certain strategies of both dynamics.

Genette himself leaves room for the nature of paratext to change alongside more general cultural and technological developments (see *Paratexts* 3, 16, etc.), and the slight adaptation of the concept necessitated by these changes need in no way be detrimental to Genette's theory. Rather, by applying it to a new type of reception setting and thereby recontextualising the concept itself, certain paratextual mechanics can be viewed through a different lens and the theory possibly developed further. While some elements of a story on the /r/nosleep-subreddit can be mapped to traditional paratextual elements with relative ease – and will be at a later point in this chapter – applying the concept to actual participation in the form of reader comments brings to light some pragmatic as well as functional shifts compared to the paratext of traditional publications: Who makes paratextual statements, where, and how clear are the borders between story and discourse, frame and centre, and sender and receiver?

Of course, this participatory paratext is not created in a vacuum. Though reader comments are the most obviously innovative element of publications on a storytelling subreddit, there is a larger paratextual structure that constructs an at times literal frame in which participation takes place. Since this frame governs the participatory exchange by directing expectations for form and content and guiding textual production on the fringe, closer analysis of these overarching elements will aid a better understanding of the participation itself. Thus, two different categories of paratext[12] will be examined in the following subchapters:

first, that paratext which manages the participatory situation – rules and conventions – and secondly the actually participatory paratext in the form of comments, and the narrative exchange between authors and readers that takes place within this framework and in turn influences the reception (and potentially even future production) of the text itself.

Paratextual Management of Participation on /r/nosleep

Paratext, that much is made explicitly clear in Genette's original text, need not by definition be textual, but can also be material (e.g. format of a book, *Paratexts* 17 ff.) or factual (*Paratexts* 7). In the same way that the materiality of a book, for example, can raise expectations about its contents, so can familiarity with a platform such as Reddit invoke certain conventions regarding the communicative situation and general conduct. The anonymity ingrained into Reddit's principal core (as outlined in Chapter 1) facilitates the confessional question-answer and advice-giving formats that it is known for (cf. e.g. /r/AskReddit), which in turn fosters the willingness of strangers to contribute to a discussion and work towards solving an issue. The way in which this encourages participation in a storytelling context is clear: Posts on Reddit are published not simply to be declamatory, but to elicit an expression of resonance in the form of comments and votes. After all, "[w]hat I seek in speech is a response from the other" (Lacan, "Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis" 247). Of course, not every single post, fiction or nonfiction, will receive a reaction. There are posts that obtain no or only scattered comments and there are stories that do not utilise the right markers and mechanisms and thus draw no participation, especially non-serialised stories that are contained within one instalment. However, this chapter argues that Reddit provides a framework that enables participation in an organic way, and that stories that accept this premise can and do make use of it in narratologically original ways.

Continuing from the platform itself to the /r/nosleep subreddit, the first paratextual feature that any visitor – writers and active and passive readers alike – will encounter is its name. Akin to the "series emblem" that Genette describes as raising certain expectations, the subreddit title will "immediately indicat[e] to the potential reader the type of work, if not the genre, he is dealing with" (*Paratexts* 22). /r/nosleep, also spelled NoSleep, already promises a type of gripping pre-bedtime reading that has the potential to be sufficiently terrifying to keep the reader from falling asleep. This suggestion of the horror genre is further emphasised by the Cascading Style Sheet (CSS)[13] used on this subreddit to produce a distinctive "community theme". Control over CSS generally rests with subreddit moderators (i.e. this is not centrally prescribed by Reddit) and allows for a certain degree of control over the look of a page. In this case, the default light grey background colour has been replaced by a more

ominous, darker grey. The blue of sidebar elements is changed to black on /r/nosleep, and the header features a grainy image of the subreddit title and Reddit's logo. This logo has also been modified to match the theme: the background is dark blue rather than orange, and the stylised alien's oval face is black instead of white, the smile gone, and its eyes glowing eerily white. These visual elements can be likened to the paratextual characteristics of page format (*Paratexts* 17 ff.), certain elements of a book's cover (23 ff.), and the textual materiality of typesetting and printing (34 f.). Though Genette's discussion of options concerning typography and layout is rather brief, he does remark that in some cases, these choices are "inseparable from the literary intention" and that they "may provide indirect commentary on the texts they affect" (34). That they do in this case invoke a genre is hardly contentious. The variety of utilised channels ensures that every visitor to this subreddit will understand the paratextual message: that they are agreeing to entering a context in which horror stories are told.

While the subreddit title and its digital textual materiality already raise implicit genre expectations, these are made explicit in the subreddit guidelines, a section of publisher's paratext. These supply straightforward instructions for genre aesthetics: "All NoSleep posts must be horror. For NoSleep, horror stories have a primary purpose to frighten, scare, or startle readers by inducing feelings of horror and terror" ("Posting Guidelines" n.p.). As the subreddit rules are enforced by a team of volunteer moderators, they very pragmatically set the boundaries within which the narrative exchange between authors and readers can take place. Equally visible to any visitor to the subreddit, they also provide a certain context for the reception of this exchange: knowing which rules underlie the posting of stories sets certain expectations towards the product. In addition to genre-aesthetic prescriptions, certain narrative conventions are also codified for authors: "Your post must be a story. This means it has to have a plot – something must happen, and then something else must happen as a result. Stories should be narratives that have a beginning, middle, and ending" ("Posting Guidelines" n.p.). Additionally, for series, the guidelines state that "each part must have meaningful plot/character progression and meaningful horror content. It cannot be merely an introductory post or filler" ("Posting Guidelines" n.p.). For all the apparent directness of these instructions, the specifics of what precisely counts as "meaningful" are, of course, left open to interpretation. Nonetheless, readers can expect stories presented in this context to adhere to certain narrative conventions – especially if those stories are sanctioned by the community, i.e. receive a large number of upvotes and comments.

Apart from ensuring conventions regarding genre and story structure, the subreddit guidelines also regulate the basis for reader comments. In a context where the authorial narrative "must be believable within reason", meaning that "the narrator must be physically and mentally

capable of posting and that the events of the story cannot be proven to be false on a large scale" ("Nosleep: Believability" n.p.), commenting readers are expected to suspend their disbelief upon entry. The central rule for comments, restated at various points throughout the subreddit, is that

> [e]verything is true here, even if it's not. Users are to act as though everything is true on r/nosleep and treat it as such in posts and comments. No debunking, disbelief, or criticism (constructive or otherwise). If the formatting is off, report the post and mods will address it. Do not ask for proof or tl;dr's.[14]
>
> ("Comment Guidelines & Reader FAQs" n.p.)

There is a roleplaying element to this which cannot be explored at length here. For the present study, the relevant aspect of this guideline is that participation on a narrative level is not only possible, it is really the only accepted type of participation – though there remains of course the grey area of "this story gave me chills", a comment through which a reader neither enters nor refutes the constructed reality of the storyworld.

These slightly longer, explanatory guidelines are located between peri- and epitext in that they are published on the same subreddit, so they are part of the same context, but on a different page to that on which the story is presented. The posting and comment guidelines, along with other epitext such as the NoSleep podcast and out-of-character (OOC) discussion pages, are linked to from the sidebar on /r/nosleep. A narrow column to the right of the main content, the sidebar includes information about the subreddit such as title, number of subscribers, a brief mission statement ("Nosleep is a subreddit for realistic horror stories. Everything is true here, even if it's not"), short versions of the ten most important rules, links to archives, related epitextual websites, and a list of moderators' usernames. This sidebar is static in the sense that it stays the same on both the subreddit main page – where short previews of the most recently posted stories are displayed in the form of a feed – and each individual story page. In combination with the Reddit header bar at the top and the comments underneath a post, the sidebar forms a literal frame of paratextual elements around each story.

At the top of this frame, between the Reddit header bar and the story itself, lies another cluster of paratext. Already part of the story's presentation space (within a light grey box set apart from the darker background) but in a fixed position above the text, the posting author's username, the story title, and the point score resulting from up- and downvotes for this story instalment indicating to a reader the level of popularity and community validation of a story are displayed. Title and author's username share the very particular feature that they are the only peritextual elements exclusively under the author's control – barring pragmatic restrictions such as username availability and maximum length. As Genette

says, a pseudonymous author's name "may have been chosen with an eye to the particular effect" of that name (*Paratexts* 49).[15] Connotations of for instance "archaism, Wagnerianism, exoticism" (*Paratexts* 48) might be conjured up by an author's chosen name. Since a username on Reddit does not need to pose as a given name – in fact, that noticeably defies platform conventions – the connotation need not be as vague. Of course, not all authors utilise their username as part of the story. There are usernames such as beigecurtains, GoldenPixl, ThatOneKid420, or Superpixelboss, which have no clear connection to form, genre, or content of the subreddit. Others choose a name that references their activity as a writer of horror fiction, for instance LightHouseHorror, AuthorJoJo, girl_from_the_crypt, or MasterfulHorror. An author can choose to use their main account, i.e. one that they also use to post on other subreddits, or create a new account to post NoSleep stories, or one particular story. Reddit has no restrictions against a single person having multiple user accounts. Whatever the choice, though, the username invariably becomes peritext to the story, and the user's account page with an overview over their activity of posts and comments becomes epitext.

In the case of the *Mold* Saga, the author chose to create a new account for each of the three series – suggesting within the storyworld that each is written and posted by a different person. Each account was created on the same day that the first instalment of that respective series was posted, and the two accounts involved in publishing the first two series never had any activity outside the posts in this saga. It can therefore be assumed that the accounts were created for this single purpose and are thus not only an incidental paratextual element, but also part of the narrative construct. Of the three usernames, the most interesting one in terms of guiding participation is that from which the first series was posted: /u/helpmenosleep. This not only signals awareness of the publication context, but also opens a channel for a participatory exchange even before the start of the story. Since this first series is later explicitly linked with its sequels by the author, the narrative mode that it establishes also sets up the expectations for subsequent instalments. A similar effect is achieved by the titles[16] of the first two series: "My friend hasn't been in contact since this series of weird text messages. I don't know what to think . . ." (I.1) and "Woke Up with Amnesia in Chicago. Any ideas?" (II.1). This echoes the conventions of advice-giving subreddits like /r/relationships, /r/careerguidance, /r/fitness, or /r/personalfinance, in which users pose a question or report on a problematic situation, and others, assuming varying degrees of self-ascribed expert status in the field, provide answers and advice in the comments. In this type of exchange, it is common to briefly summarise the problem in the title – this being what people see and click on when they decide to read a post – and then elaborate in the post itself. The third series, posted by /u/vainercupid, takes a slightly more reporting stance from the start with its title "Infected Town" (III.1). As will be

shown in the following chapter, this third series also utilises strategies of authorial control far more frequently than the other two.

Comments and Negotiating Paratextual Control

As a counterpart to the story title and the author's pseudonym at the top of the page, the reader comments are situated at the fringe below the main text of each story instalment. As on most other platforms, comments are organised in reply threads, a practice that has been in place since the early days of message boards. A comment can be posted in reply either to the original post (in this case the story text) or to a previous comment by any user and will be displayed below the prior utterance it is referring to, and at a level of indentation that indicates the degree of separation from the original post, that is, whether it is a reply or a reply to a reply, and so on. A comment and its replies constitute a unit in the form of a comment thread. Overall and within these threads, comments that are on the same structural level (i.e. not replies to one another but replies to the same prior comment) can be sorted in different ways, including by newest or oldest comment, simply by total points, or by those threads which involve replies by the Original Poster (OP). The default sorting mechanism is by "best". Reddit determines what the best comment is by an algorithm that takes several aspects of the scoring system into account, such as the ratio between up- and downvotes and the temporal distribution of received votes. The mechanic of voting, as has been pointed out before, is in place throughout the entire platform. By making it the basis of the default order in which comments are displayed, the democratising factor is prioritised over for example the temporal one, or that of authorial control and authority: comments that appear higher up have in some way been sanctioned by the community of readers.

At the same time, users still retain the option to specifically seek out authorial statements (if they sort the comment section by "Q&A"), and those comments posted by the user who submitted the original post, in this case the story, are also visually set apart from reader comments through a small blue microphone next to the OP's username. While the mere existence of a comment section – over whose content the author ultimately has no direct control – as well as the voting system and the default presentation of comments suggest a loss of authorial command, such mechanisms indicate a sustained interest in the idea of the author and his or her narrative authority. Readers are clearly not satisfied with fully submitting to that authority and taking an entirely silent, passively receptive stance, but there still are implied roles for readers and author which are quite distinct from one another. As will become clear over the course of this chapter, these are tested and negotiated throughout the course of the narrative and become more firmly and in some ways more traditionally fixed by its end.

I will first explore different communicative actions performed by readers and then subsequently analyse some authorial strategies for regulating reader control, but also seeking out intersubjective connections over the reception of the narrative. Though of course to an extent all communication is intersubjective in that it generally takes place between two or more individual subjects, I want to investigate strategies that specifically have the potential to create a sense of community, facilitate an intersubjective exchange, or signal resonance from and to either side.

The most common and most basic form of comment is to express a subjective reaction to a story. Examples of this are countless and can be found under almost every chapter,[17] and include statements such as "Im scared.:("[18] (I.2, /u/ILoveToSing1), "Oh my goodness! This is seriously the scariest thing I have ever heard. I am so sorry you are going through this" (II.8, /u/ajlposh), and "Wow this give me the chills . . . I mean . . . I really dunno what to say! Can't wait for the next update!" (III.11, /u/SleepySpirit). In their extreme subjectivity, these comments are of course very egocentric and leave little room for acts of intersubjective exchange. However, there are some ways in which they still contribute to a conducive atmosphere. For instance, sharing such reactions can create a sense of community among readers, participatory and silent ones. The experience becomes a shared one, similar to being part of a very vocal theatre audience, only asynchronously and in physical isolation. In the sense of paratextual framing, such comments can also shape other readers' reception of the narrative: If many people react to a story in a positive or particularly affective way, future readers might be more inclined to lean towards a similar response. And since the comments are made visible not only to the author (as feedback) but publicly, other readers can also react to them, by responding or by upvoting (which generally signals agreement or sympathy in the sense of "I feel the same") – or downvoting.

In a similar vein, readers can also urge the author to post more content by posting comments such as "This story is really intriguing. I really hope your friends are okay, and you are too . . . Please update soon!" (I.1, /u/ashleyDRUNK). While these pleas occur throughout, following the laws of logic and probability they are far more frequent whenever there is a longer wait between updates. The top comment under I.9, the final chapter of that series, is "I know youre dead, its just I need more updates" (/u/ILoveToSing1), to which a now-deleted user replied "BITCH GET RESURRECTED, I NEED CLOSURE." Underneath II.7, that series' final instalment, various commenters speculate that Liz must have died: "You're dead aren't you" (/u/sexposable), "Is it safe to assume everyone died?" (/u/Ihaveaphdinhorrible), and "Everyone died" (/u/MyPetShark-WillEatYou). Other users are more direct in voicing their desire for narrative completion, as in this comment: "I need closure . . . oh god" (II.7, /u/calamitycurls). Though such comments are made at the end of series I and II, they are particularly noticeable throughout series III, "Infected

Town". While the nine chapters of the first series were posted over five days, and the second series' seven chapters over 36 days, the third series with its 18 chapters took 1082 days, almost three years, to complete. This is an average of 0.55 days per post for I, 5.14 for II, and 57.11 for III, which of course means that readers had far more time to wait and ask for new content between chapters in the final series. These requests generally signal commitment to the narrative, which is reinforced through praise and cheers when a new chapter is finally posted (see comments under III.13–16).

Comments like "YES! YOU'RE BACK! Real mold!" (III.10, /u/Grapetattoo) and the reply "He have the comment from /u/helpmenosleep and all so is the real shit. The good shit" (/u/patlagica) indicate that there are also false continuations in contrast to the "real" ones, which is why an update to the right story by the right person is particularly celebrated. Having the account from which the original series was posted commenting under a story validates this story as one of those which belong to the authorial canon instead of being an unauthorised copycat. Readers are of course free to write and post their own stories as authors and could, during one of those months-long waits, continue the story along their own lines of speculation, not just in the comments but in a separate story-post. This does, in fact, seem to have happened at several points over the course of the narrative. Especially as the story gained more popularity, "piggybacking", as it is called (see comment by /u/BashfulHandful under III.10: "It's been removed because it wasn't connected to the above stories and was clearly 'piggybacking'") happened more frequently. This is also facilitated by the anonymous setting and the fact that each series in the saga is posted from a different account, and the link between them is not made immediately obvious in the first chapter. Additionally, the story has very clear markers, mould and typos, that can be easily integrated into any other narrative as implicit clues. However, these copycat-stories only *seem to* have occurred, as essentially none of them remain. For the average reader, it is impossible to trace what exactly happened to them, especially years after the fact – whether their disappearance is due to downvotes and subsequent deletion, private messages between authors, or moderator interference. As Genette says, "paratexts without texts do exist" (*Paratexts* 3), and all that is left in the context of the present saga are reader comments that refer to these other stories and sometimes their deletion.

In terms of the reader-author-dynamic, it is quite interesting to see how some commenters react to other readers' attempts at claiming narrative authority. There is a comment thread under III.13 which is somewhat hard to decipher, since the replies by one user involved in it – likely /u/lanfaer, the offending party in this case, have been deleted. In this exchange, /u/Agressive_Elegance and /u/awkwardstate wonder why the mould has not spread to other cities. /u/awkwardstate points out that it might already

have, according to a story by /u/lanfaer, to which /u/Agressive_Elegance replies: "is /u/lanfaer confirmed for being the real deal?" This prompts a negative response from /u/BashfulHandful, and what seems to have been a response from /u/lanfaer, now deleted. To this deleted message, the reply by /u/Agressive_Elegance reads: "What I meant was, has it been confirmed that you are associated with Clayton, his organization, and/or the events we have been reading about here on nosleep? Basically: has Clayton outright said that you're someone we can trust for information?" Within the storyworld, of course, "someone we can trust for information" means someone who is an ally and not connected with the mould, Liz, or the Entity. Outside the storyworld and in the context of narrative mediation, it means someone who has narrative authority and has been validated by the author – or is in fact the author posting under a different account. This thread ends with /u/lanfaer conceding and confirming the separation of narrative realities:

> good news! The infestation I dealt with had no relation to this mold at all. Merely a copycat, who is currently in a prison cell. It seems that this mold has spawned many 'lookalikes' as evil attempts to bank off of the fear generated by it. So, it seems, in this case I must withdraw my statements regarding the Mold spreading here to Ohio. I am sure this makes several of you happy.

A similar, albeit much briefer exchange takes place in the comments under III.10, which was posted after a long wait. /u/neuronwake comments that "[f]or once in four months, it is okay to blame the mold again", to which another user responds: "100% imitation mold free" (/u/Disastermath) – implying, of course, that there has been "imitation mold" elsewhere. This insistence of other readers on authorisation points towards a certain degree of loyalty towards the author and that specific authorial narrative, particularly once the author has proven capable. Such reactions are also an indicator for a certain distribution of roles. Readers can share different aspects of themselves in the comments with the author and a community of other readers, but cannot claim the story as their own, and cannot put themselves into the same spot as the author without being rejected by the community. There are some grey areas when this is done in the comments, where some readers, for instance, mention that they have had outbreaks of mould in their homes recently, or misspell words to indicate that they have been infected,[19] and still get a response from other readers and sometimes even from the author/OP account. Intertextual references to overarching NoSleep lore, such as allusions to organisations from other stories, seem to be particularly popular in the earlier instalments. Ultimately, however, even comments that infringe on narrative authority are too egocentric to be conducive to intersubjectivity, and they wane as the story progresses.

In fact, some of the comments that receive most reactions have very little to do with the narrative layer at all. Joking around is very popular, both in terms of upvotes and replies. Under II.2, the top comment is a reference to the protagonists' survival plan in *Shaun of the Dead*, a 2004 zombie comedy: "Listen to me very carefully. Go to the pub, have a pint, and wait for this all to blow over" (/u/SoloDolo_aka_MrRager); under I.3, the top comment reads "Plot twist: Dean and Samantha have been planning a kick-ass surprise party for OP" (deleted user); and under III.2, "Y'all motherfuckers need bleach" (/u/Scherzkeks). Similarly, comments that simply express a subjective reaction (as mentioned earlier) such as joy over an update, fear, eagerness to continue reading, often receive upvotes and replies. In other instances, readers do discuss the narrative layer, but among themselves, not with the author and not in a way that inserts them into the story – by asking questions about details in the narrative and answering either through pointing to previous chapters, or through speculation. Under III.12, for instance, /u/Broken_Slinky asks a question about Alan's identity and the events narrated in II.7, which prompts more than a dozen replies, some of them lengthy theories. Under III.10, several people start speculating that Heather is actually Elizabeth, all of whom receive several replies by other readers (see threads started by /u/Maelalove, /u/Kiwi2424, /u/calamitycurls). As with the requests for updates, such comments are of course more likely when there is a long wait between updates and there is time for readers to develop their own theories.[20]

While joking around and communal speculation allow for a connection between readers particularly in the author's or narrator's absence, there are also ways in which readers can provide resonance for the author. As is very immediately apparent in the first chapters of the saga, readers respond to intertextual cues provided by the text. After Jess chooses names from the TV show *Supernatural* as aliases for her friends, mentions the title several times in her first post, and points out that she, Alan, and Liz are fans of the show, readers react with even more enthusiasm in the comments, talking about other characters from the show (see e.g. I.1, /u/alexstoner420; I.2, /u/Pangs), advising Jess to bring "gun, salt, and a vial of holy water" (I.5, /u/tyken9609), *Supernatural*'s go-to arsenal, and suspecting ghosts or demons (see e.g. I.2, /u/broomball99), the show's most common antagonists. At first, this is still encouraged by Jess, as for instance here:

> [T]aking what I know from my favorite show, when I got into town I immediately stole my mother's big container of salt and grabbed a wrought iron poker from her fireplace. You should've seen the look on her face when I explained I was going ghost hunting.
>
> (I.2)

After a while, however, the back-and-forth of exchanging references between readers and narrator seems to be getting too much for the narrator and possibly the author. When Alex rejects his *Supernatural* pseudonym, Jess states that "It's kind of a relief, anyway. Giving all these people aliases based off of *Supernatural* is starting to make me feel like I'm writing some fucked up fanfiction or something" (I.5), and Alex very explicitly asks the readers to "stop getting in her [Jess's] head with all your salt and holy water nonsense. . . . She says you're helping. I don't think so" (I.6). Alan initially rejects anything paranormal or supernatural and does not reference *Supernatural* himself at all – and the reader references to the show likewise cease. By responding to such cues even though they are not explicit prompts, readers can signal to the author, not just the narrator, that their expression is finding resonance.

Readers also analyse the dark and often blurry photos that are very occasionally posted alongside the story. Here, the narrator usually points out that he or she "took a picture for you" (III.11), i.e. the readers, or photographed a scene "[t]hinking of you guys" (I.7). In response, readers try to find hidden clues in the pictures by brightening or otherwise editing them (see e.g. I.3, /u/suckitifly), and discuss the possible contents of photos in the comments (see especially comments under I.4). A similar effect is achieved when readers respond to questions posed by the narrator in the main text and give advice on how the narrating character should proceed. However, since this is often prompted directly by the narrator, it will be examined together with other authorial strategies at a later point in this chapter.

If any preliminary conclusion can be drawn from this wide array of reader comments, it is that many readers do want to communicate with the author and with other readers and seek out intersubjectivity. Looking towards the author for some authority seems to be the common course of action even in this very dynamic, democratised, and communicative setting, and traditional narrative power structures are also retained in other ways: While participatory readers have a lot of freedom in what they write in their comments, they can almost exclusively only react to the authorial main text. Any new story impulses given by readers will be lost unless the author decides to specifically pick up on them. The author, meanwhile, can shift the direction of the story, kill off a character/narrator, or supply new background information, and generally acts rather than reacts. Additionally, as the author is one individual with agency rather than a group of individuals with potentially conflicting motivations, the main text can be more coherent and somewhat more easily analysed.

Though the author, from all we know and can deduce, is a single person, switching between a total of seven narrators over the course of the saga (Jess and Alex in I; Alan and Liz in II; Claire, Clayton, and Blake in III) allows for shifts in narrative voice and style, and different approaches to the platform. This means that some of the ways in which

the narrator engages with the readers change over time, which makes for particularly interesting comparisons. I will now analyse different ways in which participation can be encouraged or discouraged – or at least shifted from the narrator's responsibility and thus removed from authorial authentification – through the main text. All of these are strategies or techniques that can have an effect on regulating intersubjectivity, but do not have to be used in any way intentionally or consciously by the author. This, of course, neither literary scholars nor participating readers can know, nor does it matter.

One of the most straightforward tools an author has at their disposal for creating a sense of communality to the reader for the duration of the narrative is that of direct address. This technique was barely new when Dante used it, nor was it new for Fielding or Sterne in the eighteenth century, and it certainly was not new for Joyce, though each of these authors of course had their own style of utilising it (see Cahalan 308–9). In the context of this series of stories on Reddit, direct address is frequently employed in very traditional ways, too. One instance of this is Blake's description of the paralysis he experienced under Elizabeth's control, which he supplies as the narrator in the final chapter of the *Mold* saga:

> But that wasn't the bad part. The bad part was knowing that Liz and the thing that lurked under her skin were around. And the worst part was being unable to turn and look at Them. Here, I'll give you an example of what it's like.
>
> Keep your eyes on this screen – whatever it is you're reading this on, a computer, a tablet, a phone. Whatever. Keep your eyes glued to these words. Do not look away. Don't look behind you, not even out of the corner of your eye. Just keep reading. Stay on this page, in these words. Stay with me.
>
> Now bring to mind a nightmare. A monster. A shadow. A killer. What scares you. But keep your eyes on these words. That thing, well, now it's in the room with you, just out of sight. But don't look away from the screen. You can't look away. The shadow is approaching you now. From behind. From just outside of your periphery. Keep your eyes here. It's coming, moving towards you, slowly and silently. You can smell it. Just don't look away. You can hear its wheezing breath. You can feel its long fingers stretch towards your neck. Don't look away from this screen. Don't check behind you, even as it gets closer and closer. Even as its long finger gets so close to brushing your skin. Keep your eyes here.
>
> That's an inkling of what it's like. Did you check behind you? Imagine not being able to. And imagine knowing that your conjured shade, or monster, or nightmare, or whatever the fuck you thought about – imagine knowing it was real.
>
> (III.18)

This can easily be compared to an excerpt from Dante's *Divine Comedy*:

> Remember, reader, if you've ever been
> caught in the mountains by a mist through which
> you only saw as moles see through their skin,
>
> how, when the thick, damp vapors once begin
> to thin, the sun's sphere passes feebly through them,
> then your imagination will be quick
>
> to reach the point where it can see how I
> first came to see the sun again – when it
> was almost at the point at which it sets.
>   (Purgatorio, Canto 17 ll. 1–9)

In both descriptions, the reader is directly addressed and explicitly tasked with imagining a specific scenario and to access subjective memories, experiences, or fears to develop sympathy with the narrator's sensations. Instead of simply giving a description, the author asks readers to insert themselves into the scene and to experience rather than simply receive it. While this can be a very effective tool for enhancing immersion or creating a connection between reader and narrative, it is clearly not an innovative one.

There are other throwaway mentions of the readerly "you" that could likewise appear in a novel in a very similar way and to similar effect. These come up throughout the saga and include Jess's "I didn't want to, guys. Who in their right mind would? But I did" (I.4), Alan's "So, in case you're not keeping up, my friend Jessica wrote a series of weird nosleep posts about her experiences shortly after I blacked out and apparently disappeared" (II.2), Claire's "For me, and I'm sure you guys can appreciate this sentiment, it's always been 'the creepier, the better'" (III.1), and Blake's "I didn't stay to help. Couldn't. Could you?" (III.18). As Ong explains, "[w]hen a speaker is addressing an audience, the members of the audience normally become a unity, with themselves and with the speaker" (72). Though Ong specifically states that it is the spoken word which "forms human beings into close-knit groups" (ibid.), the effect in writing here is undeniably a comparable one, not least because the communication situation that is innate to the setting is a direct, but written one. However, the mere act of uniting the readers into a community does not necessarily establish an intersubjective exchange. In *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael accuses the narratee of claiming that "[t]he whale has no famous author, and whaling no famous chronicler, you will say" (94); in the *Mold* saga, Clayton supposes that "[y]ou're going to think I'm fucking crazy, so I'll just come out and say it" (III.14) and later inserts "Don't get that look on your face" (III.17) into his narrative about how he liked

to have Jess around despite – or even because of – her infected state, pre-empting the readers' judgement. Such statements indicate how this direct address can actually be a very unidirectional device: They make assumptions about and impose these on the person of the reader rather than allowing readers to form and possibly even express their own subjective stance. In very rough, categorical terms, these remarks address the implied rather than the actual reader, and in that sense might even alienate individual readers. As Walker Gibson argues, the "mock reader" is a role that any actual reader needs to assume when reading a text in order to align themselves with the author's implied or rather projected reader. Gibson goes on to state that "[a] bad book, then, is a book in whose mock reader we discover a person we refuse to become, a mask we refuse to put on, a role we will not play" (268). Hence, depending on how open or closed direct address is, what assumptions it imposes on the reader, and into what context it is embedded, it can also be detrimental to the intersubjective situation. At the very least, while direct address might open or maintain a communicative channel, on its own it is not what primarily drives participation – and, again, the technique is neither new nor unique to the online storytelling context.

In other contexts, instances of direct address are justifiably regarded as fourth-wall-breaking with the accompanying effect of defamiliarisation. A reader, by being addressed as such, is made acutely aware of the fact that he or she is currently reading a book and thereby pulled out of the immersion into the storyworld. This is avoided in the *Mold* saga by shifting the fourth wall backwards and making that version of the readers that they perform while reading – since, according to Gibson, we are almost always performing at least partly as a work's expected mock reader (267) – part of the storyworld. One way in which the narrator can contribute to that is through signalling platform awareness, which minimises the gap between reader and narratee, but also between narrator and narratee, thus creating a community of recipients within the storyworld that can include the narrator. Throughout the saga, the readers are only ever addressed collectively, and often grouped together as "nosleep". This starts with the initial OP's username /u/ helpmenosleep and continues from there. In the very beginning, Jess states that "[n]one of us believe in ghosts or other supernatural things (sorry, nosleep), but we all loved the idea of it" (I.1). All posts that contain Clayton's own narrative – that is, excluding the ones where he transcribes Claire's journals – begin with some variation of "Hello, NoSleep. Clayton here" (III.13–17 respectively), and the very final post, narrated by Blake, opens with "Hey NoSleep. You ready for the end? I am" (III.18).

Not only is the immediate context of NoSleep referenced, several of the narrators also explicitly mention Reddit, and identify themselves as users of the platform. Alan, for instance, mentions that "[a]s a redditor, I know

what Nosleep is but I'm not a frequent visitor" (II.1), while Claire in her first post explains that she is an urban explorer and that the Reddit users reading her story on NoSleep have "probably seen some of my material on /r/abandonedporn or /r/urbanexploration, but I'm not linking them. I'm using this throwaway account to tell my story, so no one I know can call me crazy" (III.1). Accounts and passwords are also mentioned when they are passed on from one narrator to another within one of the three series – Elizabeth mentions Alan giving her the password to the /u/AlanPWtf account when she starts posting in II.5, Clayton states that Claire gave him her login details to the /u/vainercupid account in III.10, and Blake says that he "logged in to Claire's account" (III.18) to post the final update. Sticking to the conventions of platform terminology and referring to chapters as "posts", "parts", or "updates", and mentioning PMs[21] (e.g. III.4, III.16), comment notifications (II.6), and the 24-hour limit between instalments in a series (III.16; "Posting Guidelines" n.p.) all serve as constant reminders to the readers that they are, in fact, reading posts on the /r/nosleep subreddit. By including the subreddit in the story-world so explicitly, making readers aware of the fact that they are readers by no means shatters the illusion of the narrative – after all, reading this story is exactly what they are supposed to be doing as participants in the narrative. Direct address is thus not a strategy of defamiliarisation, but rather one of familiarisation, since readers are established as part of the story as narratees from the start.

The multitude of narrators, all of whom are by definition also Reddit users, means that characters in the story can perform as each other's readers as well. As several of the narrators are initially clueless, they rely on the chapters posted to /r/nosleep for information. Jess mentions that Alex "read through these posts for a second time, then a third. Again, as skeptical as the rest of us" (I.5), making him a reader and signalling communality between herself and the readers through the first-person plural pronoun. When Alan makes his first post, he is still unaware of Jess's narrative, and so has to wait for other readers to provide him with the reference, amending his original post to add:

> Someone gave me a link to what my friend, Jessica, apparently wrote on here. I'll keep reading and see if I get any answers. You guys are quick. Thank you. . . . I'm including the links to Jessica's original posts, as I'm reading them.
>
> (II.1)

In the next chapter, he states that he "spent today and last night reading through Jessica's posts and most of the comments" (II.2). Likewise, Claire has to read up on the previous narratives to be on the same level as readers of the first two series: "Apparently a place that closely resembles

the town I explored is mentioned in a previous series of stories. After reading about what happened to Jess, Liz and Alan, I'm getting a bit worried" (III.2). Clayton, too, explains how he came across the story: "In August of 2013 I found Alan's NoSleep posts. He'd linked to the thread on his Facebook with no explanation, and I'd clicked it. I hadn't even known he and most of the people in that town were missing. I read the whole thing, starting with Jess's tale and on to his" (III.17). This is not limited to each narrator only initially catching up with the story, either. Clayton also mentions that he kept following the narrative "to track Claire and Elizabeth's movements" (III.13) and that Elizabeth reads it to keep track of him (III.15). The narrators, it is implied, are themselves recipients of the previous narrators' stories; they react to them with shock, worry, disbelief, speculation – in the main text as well as in the comments (see e.g. comments by AlanPWtf under II.1). The first-person plural pronoun is also invoked several times – as Jess's "us" – in a way that clearly indicates a group which contains the current narrator and all readers. In 1.7, Jess asks "Are we sure mold can grow this fast?"; Claire wonders whether the traces of life she has seen under the bridge are from "transients or someone we know – Jess, Liz, Alan?" (III.5), though neither she nor any of the readers actually know Jess or Alan by merely reading their brief stories; and Blake skips a few of Elizabeth's journal entries at the end because "they don't say much we don't already know" (III.18). All of this reinforces the sense that narrators and readers are part of the same group – which is, of course, an illusion, but can be conducive to flattening hierarchies and encouraging active participation.

One very straightforward way of encouraging participation is asking direct questions. However, it bears noting that not every sentence that ends in a question mark is equally inviting, especially not when it comes to facilitating intersubjective exchange. I will exclude those questions from this analysis which are obviously rhetorical, since they neither require nor prompt a response. But even then, there is a marked difference between earlier, open, and later, closed, questions. The very first chapter ends with "I don't know what to do. What is this? Any idea? Help!" (I.1), and the second one with "One thing's for sure, something's not right. I need to figure this out. Any ideas?" (I.2). The same question, "Any ideas?", is part of the title of II.1, which includes similarly open questions like "Do you guys know what's going on?" (II.1) and ends with Alan pleading "I'm overwhelmed and confused. What the hell is happening? Does anyone have any answers?" (II.1). The placement of such very open questions near the end of a chapter in particular can point readers towards commenting as soon as they have reached the bottom of the page where the comment section lies, and they do elicit quite a few advice-giving reactions, such as "Go there, and be ready to confront

whatever was ducking with him. (Some salt, holy water, the works)"
(I.1, /u/raltz21);

> Have you tried contacting his work yet? . . . Maybe you should grab
> another friend and go back to the apartment and look everywhere to
> see if theres anything wrong (i.e. a mess, writing, his cell phone, or
> maybe a suitcase missing), but dont forget the salt and cross!
>
> <div align="right">(I.2, /u/j4wolfe)</div>

"Creeped the fuck out. I'd ditch both phones and get yourself a new
phone and number" (I.3, /u/Swarvester); "No idea how you got there
or what items you have with you, but check your pockets, dresser, clos-
ets, anything for any clues. Ask the people at the front desk about you
entering last night, like if there was anything unusual" (II.1, /u/Papa-
Bear12); and

> Well if I were in this situation I would email the guy [Z] and ask what
> is going on. Have him not to leave out any details, ask what the stuff
> in the bag is for, what to do next, if there is a way to reverse or stop
> it, and what this fungus does as well as an antidote.
>
> <div align="right">(II.2, /u/HotelSoap1)</div>

Of course, some questions are not as open as they appear at first glance.
Alan's initial plea, for instance, ends with "What the hell is happening?
Does anyone have any answers? Help me, nosleep" (II.1). This question
is a prompt for readers to make and point out the connection to Jess's
story on their own – as they subsequently do – and the invocation of the
username under which the original story ways posted, /u/helpmenosleep,
is a very strong push in that direction. Similarly, Claire ends her first post
like this:

> I googled ghost towns in Oregon, but nothing fit the description.
> Does anyone who lives around there have any idea about the history
> of this place? Sorry I can't give you a name. But maybe you've come
> across a creepy little village, too. One that seems abandoned and
> smells like mold.
>
> <div align="right">(III.1)</div>

If the connection at this point was not clear enough yet, a comment by /u/
helpmenosleep on the chapter twelve minutes after it was posted defini-
tively establishes the link to the original series. Several readers respond to
this authorial prompting and give the narratively expected response, for
example /u/SevereInfatuation:

> Please don't return to the town . . . ! There's a story, "My friend
> hasn't been in contact since this series of weird text messages. I don't

know what to think . . ." and, well, I'm sure plenty of us think that you may have arrived at the remnants of the town in question.

(III.1)

Other questions are more clearly closed, such as Jess's yes/no question towards the end of I.2, where she states that "my friends seem to be missing. I have no idea what to do about that. . . . Should I call the cops?" In line with the subreddit rules of treating everything as though it were real, the replies are almost unanimously sensible: "Of course you have to call the cops! What reason do you have not to??" (/u/Larry_Waldon), "You should put the phone in a plastic bag and call the police. Report your friends missing and see if they can pull some prints from her phone" (/u/MM3tzger), "Call the dang cops GODDAMNIT" (/u/totallynotscared), "Call the popo, OP. At least get in on the record that they have been missing for a few days. Maybe put up pictures of them with your contact information, just in case anybody has seen them. Good luck!:/" (/u/antibiotiics), and others.

For I and most of II, the implication is that the narrator knows as much as readers do about what is going on, which is why the readers are potentially in a position to help while performing as part of the story. This is very definitely no longer the case in particularly the second half of III, where there is a very large gap between the backstory available to the narrator and the information at the reader's disposal – so there is no reason why the narrator should ask the readers anything. In fact, Clayton at one point states that "it's not like you people can help, anyway. Might as well take you for a ride" (III.15), emphasising the passive role the reader now has. Thus, there are generally far fewer non-rhetorical questions in the third than in the first two series, so instead of addressing the narrator with advice, readers speculate among themselves, as has been pointed out earlier. One point after III.1 where replies by readers are prompted is when Claire posts a riddle that she received via Reddit PM from /u/help-menosleep, prefacing it with "Here is the PM I got, in case you can make any more sense of it" (III.4). After posting the riddle, which includes an excerpt from "Despair" by H. P. Lovecraft and a series of numerals like V:15, Claire continues:

> Seems our moldy friend is a poet. I am so not English-Lit Girl. The streaming hair bit immediately made me think of the lady under the bridge, and the forest imagery made me think of the woods around the town – except that there are no swamps or moors nearby, to my knowledge. And what's with the letters and numbers underneath the verse? Some kind of code? I've tried to match them up as lines:words in the verse but the result is gibberish (I thought II:2 would mean line 2, word 2 . . . only it doesn't). Also, obviously none of the lines have 35 words. Must be something else.

(III.4)

This being a riddle, there is quite obviously one correct answer which, readers can assume, the author already knows even if the narrator does not. Unlike questions such as "any ideas?" or even "should I call the cops?", solving a riddle has no potential to manipulate the story into a different direction. The answer is predetermined – the readers' only task is to perform it for the benefit of the narrator. Not only that, but Claire also already gives quite a few clues through her own speculations, ensuring that it can be solved with ease and in the desired way. Undeterred by this obvious authorial guidance, while some commenters continue with their regular advice-giving (e.g. warning Claire against returning), others do engage with the riddle with some fervour.[22]

Something similar happens in the first series, when Alex posts pictures of the symbols Lisa has drawn into a notebook, prompting readers to "put your brilliant collective mind to work on that journal. I'm curious as to what language it's in" (I.6). In the comments to that chapter, readers identify the symbols as Enochian (e.g. /u/perskes), decode them as a summoning ritual (e.g. /u/hart0), and post research on the demon that might have been summoned (e.g. /u/Tora121). With the intertextual references to *Supernatural* still fresh in I.6, expecting readers to recognise the Enochian alphabet is not a stretch, since it is mentioned frequently in the TV show. Hence, this, too, is an easy task and one that has one specific right solution. However, while the riddle posted by Claire at least reveals the name Clayton uses, "the Voyager", the journal turns out to be of absolutely no consequence whatsoever to the story and is quickly explained away by Alan in II.2. Such incidences highlight very distinctly how the hierarchy between author and reader still exists, even if it is somewhat flattened by the context. Ultimately, it is the author who decides what is true within the storyworld, and which parts of the narrative are relevant for its continuation. In these specific cases, readers might be granted the illusion of having participated as and alongside characters in the story, but this participation only takes place on the fictional level. At other points, there is the possibility of not only influencing the narrator, but also the author in the continuation of the story, for which some examples will follow later.

The author can, of course, do more to foster intersubjectivity than simply exert direct power over the readers. Just as participatory readers can signal resonance to the author, the author can do the same in return. In some ways, this already happens through direct address – by acknowledging that the readers exist, their presence in the comment sections is validated. Also, frequent assurances that "I'll update if I find something" (I.2), "We'll keep you posted" (II.2), "I'll update you if anything else happens" (II.4), and "I'll update you if anything happens in the meantime" (III.4) signal an awareness of the active, ongoing narrative situation and its waiting readers, and help keep the communicative channel open. Another, more direct way of reaching out to readers that

is frequently employed in this saga is thanking them – not just for their advice, but also for the community and resonance that they provide. This is done consistently throughout almost the entire saga. Jess starts her second post with "Hey nosleep. Thanks for all your help and advice" (I.2) and her third with "you've all been so helpful and compassionate and you seem to want to know what's going on" (I.3 start), and remarks that the NoSleep readers "make Alex and I feel like we're not alone" (I.5). Alan, after being pointed towards Jess's story by commenters, states that "I underestimated how big a deal this was to you guys. I have to say, I appreciate it. It makes me feel less alone – at least someone fucking cares. Thank you, all of you" (II.2). When Claire receives links to Jess's and Alan's posts, she responds to this at the start of her next chapter with "Thank you so much, you brilliant detectives!" (III.2) and, like Alan, occasionally remarks that "[a]s always, your thoughts and advice are more than appreciated" (III.4). The saga ends with an almost forceful reiteration of that sentiment by Blake: "So thanks. Thanks for reading, and thanks for helping, NoSleep. Thanks for being part of their stories, these people who didn't deserve the hell their lives became. These regular people, barely more than kids" (III.18). Even Clayton, in whose chapters gratitude is rare and who mostly operates alone, at one point says that he keeps posting "[p]artly because, for whatever reason, you're still reading this. And I guess I like the sense of solidarity" (III.15).

In addition to these general and generic words of thanks, more concrete content of comments is also picked up by the narrator in subsequent chapters of the main text, signalling the authorial reception and acknowledgment of reader participation. Perhaps the most prominent example of this back-and-forth amplification between author and readers is the matter of Alan's cat. This cat is first mentioned in I.1, when Jess posts a picture that Alan sent in their group chat. It is immediately picked up in the comments, where readers express concern for the pet's wellbeing: "Y'all should check on the cat. Like catsit for dean [Alan]. I dont think he'd like it if he got back and boom his cats dead" (I.1, /u/MisterMonster2025). To one of the comments that mention the cat, Jess replies: "Fuck I hadn't even considered the cat . . . Hopefully it's okay" (I.1, /u/helpmenosleep). The cat, specifically its absence, is subsequently mentioned in the main text (e.g. I.2, I.3) and occasionally by readers, especially in addenda such as "Btw wheres the cat?" (I.5, /u/ILoveToSing1) at the end of a comment.

It is not until Alan's narrative begins that the comments about the cat start in earnest. Without Alan ever mentioning the cat in the main text, commenters keep pestering him with questions like "What happened to your cat!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!?!" (II.1, /u/xoccerplaya), "Aaaaaaand the cat?" (II.2, /u/C_Eberhard), or "I know you're all freaked out about your human friends, but I'm just going to ask again, have you seen your cat?" (II.3, /u/C_Eberhard). Alan occasionally replies to these comments directly (i.e. in the comment section, not in the text itself), with remarks

like "I haven't seen my cat" (II.2, /u/AlanPWtf) and "No, I haven't seen her. I will let you know if I do" (II.3, /u/AlanPWtf). By the end of the second series, readers are increasingly worried about the cat's survival, leaving comments like "i just really hope the cat isnt dead. i'll be devastated D:" (II.6, /u/sexposable) and "I've been wondering that since they mentioned the cat. Give us a fucking answer already! D: The cat better not be like Alex or Jess on a laptop typing up typos" (II.6, /u/ILove-ToSing1). Though the third series is narrated by Claire, who has never met Alan or his cat, readers still refuse to let the matter go. The top comment under Claire's first chapter, as has already been mentioned, is /u/helpmenosleep's "FOUND YOU come again soon" (III.1), which confirms this series' link to the previous two. One reply to this is: "Come and find the ninja cat you bitch creature. I'll take you all on" (/u/PatTheNin-jaCat), in response to which users again start theorising about the cat's whereabouts. Whenever someone brings up the possibility of the cat's demise, another reader will invariably reply with a comment along the lines of "NOOOOO! I want the cat to live!" (/u/MewCat).

Finally, in III.5, when Claire, Blake and Heather drive through the town, Blake grabs the steering wheel from Claire, causing her to abruptly step on the brakes. When she asks him what happened, he replies that "'A fucking cat just shot across the road'. . . . He argued that without his excellent reflexes we would have hit the kitty. I was very glad we hadn't. Heather, half-joking, asked if the cat looked moldy or weird-looking. Blake said no, he was pretty sure it was just a regular cat" (III.5). The top comment under this chapter is "Yay the kitty's still alive!" (III.5, /u/maureen0999), to which Claire's reply reads "We also want to think it's Alan's cat, haha! Of course, there's no saying for sure, but I thought you guys would like to know we saw a kitty" (/u/vainercupid). With Alan, Jess, and Lisa dead and Elizabeth presumed missing, this is as close as the author via the narrator can get to giving the readers closure on the cat at this point. Even more importantly, it is a way to acknowledge the readers' continued interest in this aspect of the storyworld, while simultaneously strengthening a sense of community between readers and narrator: Claire, like other readers, has read Jess's and Alan's stories as well as the comments beneath their posts – so she, Blake, and Heather ("we") have shared the concern over Alan's cat.

The fate of the cat is a very specific example in which interest from readers is sustained over a long time and ultimately rewarded through being echoed by the narrator. In other posts, the narrator reacts more directly to comments under the immediately preceding chapter. Especially in the first series, where Jess frequently asks for advice, she also responds to the advice given in the comments, for instance by remarking that "[t]he most advised course of action was to go to [Alan's] apartment and check it out" (I.2), or that Liz's mother "also urged me to call the cops, like many of you" (I.3). Interestingly, individual readers are never

mentioned by their username – all of these reactions group commenters together in a generalising way. After readers have analysed the picture Jess posted in I.4, she summarises their remarks and concludes that "[i]t's pretty much been agreed that that second picture in my last post was of an art piece in Chicago" (I.5), also pointing out that "[t]he first picture, someone else mentioned, might be from a mechanic's shop" (ibid.). This is in line with addressing readers collectively as "NoSleep", "you all", or "you guys" and is likewise employed consistently throughout the saga. This vagueness puts the narrator and the author into a position of power over the reader, as they can cherry-pick those comments which align best with their own desires for the narrative, and frame them as though they were a collective majority opinion. By never mentioning readers' usernames, even in those cases where many actually did comment along similar lines, the narrator is spared the necessity of backing up such claims in other instances, where perhaps the popularity of a specific course of action is overstated. Most importantly though, this control allows the author to not only ignore unwanted comments – which could be done simply by continuing with the authorial narrative without reacting to any comments at all – but to indirectly lower their priority by privileging other, more welcome comments.

Though this holds true for the entire saga, there is again a gradual shift from the first to the third series. While Jess provides quite a lot of resonance for reader commentary throughout her chapters, by the end of the saga, these narrator reactions are generally dealt with at the start or end of a chapter without interrupting the narrative flow. At the beginning of his final chapter, Clayton notes that he wants to "start by addressing some issues brought up in the comments" (III.17). He goes on to elaborate on four different points from comments to the preceding chapters, and then concludes this preamble with "Okay. Let's get back into it" (III.17) before continuing with his own narrative. All of this is posted as part of the same chapter, but there is a marked separation between the story that Clayton is telling and his response to the comments. While the first series allows the paratext to bleed into the text itself fairly frequently – though in a controlled manner – by the end of the third series, the influence of the paratext is itself relegated to the textual fringe and thus separated from the authorial narrative text. This more conservative handling of reader comments echoes Genette's idea that paratext is an assisting accessory to the main text (*Paratexts* 410) rather than the more experimental shared narrative space of the first two series.

The third series is not disinterested in the relationship between narrator and reader. Claire asks questions and thanks commenters profusely for their answers; Blake expresses deep, solemn gratitude for the community; and even Clayton addresses readers in the second person and is glad for the sense of solidarity. In contrast particularly to the first series, however, it is noticeable that the third one seems to be more about mediating

a narrative than about sharing the exploration of a story. While the very direct exchange in the paratext of the comment section or the resonance that author and readers can signal to one another might be very conducive to intersubjectivity, the comments themselves are also outside the author's control, and might point out inconsistencies in the story or possibilities that the author had not considered but now needs to adapt to or else risk breaking the immersion. Likewise, readers might pre-empt plot twists through their speculation. As early as III.4, still in the middle of Claire's narration, some readers (/u/Geek_reformed, /u/SpiffyMcAwesome) voice suspicion about Heather and speculate that she might be Elizabeth – which turns out to be true in a somewhat dramatic reveal in III.12. Under Clayton's penultimate chapter, a comment by /u/killmonday suggests that Clayton is Elizabeth's half-brother (III.16; see also /u/Aurora-Stark, /u/CookieJam236, /u/dea-dandburied and many others under III.17), which is hinted at before, but not addressed or confirmed until III.18. Clayton as the narrator never responds to either of these theories – neither in the comments nor in the main text.

Several narrative techniques which are utilised in the third series allow Clayton to remain distant and relatively disengaged without this seeming artificial in the moment. For one, he is characterised as a somewhat odd loner (see e.g. III.15, 17), living in the town on his own for months, insisting on a considerable amount of subterfuge before ever making direct contact with Claire, and going on the run and later on the hunt for Elizabeth on his own – he is the only narrating character who is not specifically part of a group and never actually teams up with anyone. But on the discourse level, it is also interesting to examine the development of temporal closeness or distance between the events narrated in each chapter and their mediation to the readers. Though the story (in the real-time of its original performance) was ongoing almost until the very end, this does not mean that each chapter tells the events of its immediate time frame. As pointed out earlier, the original narration of the third series took much longer per post than the first (57.11 vs. 0.55 days per post on average). Additionally, of its eighteen chapters, twelve are spent in marked retrospection: The beginning of Claire's story, which she tells after she has arrived in San Francisco (III.1–3); Clayton's transcription of Claire's journal (III.10–12); Clayton's own backstory (III.13–17); and Blake's version of events and his description of the finale, which he posts months after it happened in the storyworld (III.18).

The first series frequently makes it a point to highlight immediacy. In the opening chapter, Jess explains that the group chat that she transcribes occurred "two nights ago" (I.1), and that Alan "hasn't been in contact since, more than 48 hours" (ibid.). Not only does she mention that she is summarising the events of "[t]oday" (I.3), she also edits her post after putting it online to add that Alan sent her a text message at that precise moment (ibid.), which happens again at a later point: Alan texts her "as

I'm writing this. . . . Like, not two seconds ago" (I.5). Because Jess often talks about events from "this evening" (I.7) or "[t]onight" (I.8), readers – particularly those following along the original publication in real time – can develop a stronger sense of being part of the story. Their questions and suggestions can influence the narrator and have an impact on the narrative if readers are up-to-date with the events of the story. This is decidedly different in the third series,[23] where Claire explains that she "can't take all your advice about not returning to Infected Town. I did all of this last week, before heading into California. I'm currently safe in San Francisco with no signs of moldiness" (III.2). This also marks Claire's insistence on a chronological narration. Even though "[t]here are a lot of pressing things going on right now, and most of them seem connected to Nosleep and the Infected Town" (III.3) and Claire is "dying to share these new experiences and possible clues with you" (ibid.), she has "decided you need the story in chronological order, at the very least to avoid confusion" (ibid.). This idea of avoiding anachronic narration keeps coming up; Clayton later apologises: "Also, sorry for always being so fucking cryptic. Chronological, remember? As per Claire" (III.15). Though Claire claims that this ordered narrative will "avoid confusion", the switch between prolepsis and analepsis actually rather causes confusion when she starts a chapter by announcing that "[t]hings are crazy here. Blake is in the hospital, quarantined and injured. . . . A lot has happened since I last posted, but, as always, we'll keep it chronological" (III.8) – we only find out in the transcription from her diary in III.10 that Blake was hospitalised after being shot. Without supplying any additional information, dropping mentions of Blake's injury at the start of Chapters 8 and 9 mainly indicates to readers that they are not caught up with the actual events of the story, lest they forget that during Claire's narration of her and Blake's exploration of the school building.

Clayton's posts are often clearly marked as referencing a time frame that lies well before the narrative time. When he starts posting Claire's journal, he prefaces this by saying that "Claire requested I transcribe the journal entries she wrote during her experience in the Infected Town four months ago and post them here, as she is no longer able to do so herself" (III.10), and once he is done with that and actually begins his own narration, he states that he is "going back to the beginning here. My beginning, I should stress. . . . Not all that long ago, actually. Only about 15 years. Back to the summer of 2000" (III.14). From there, he tells his backstory – and that of Alan, Lisa, Liz, and Jess from his point of view – continuing from the year 2000 through 2009 (III.15) to 2013 (III.17). With the events being narrated having happened such a long time ago, the readers can of course speculate, as we have seen, but there is no point in them giving advice to the narrator, which means that participatory readers turn to addressing one another much more than the narrator/OP in their comments. This, in turn, means that the narrator (and through

him the author) is somewhat freed from the expectation of reacting to reader utterances – if they are not directed at him, he is not the one whose response is primarily desired. The final chapter, narrated by Blake, already signals closure: If the story is wrapped up, there is no need to give advice. And yet, he still makes a point to mention that he is writing these events down "months later" (III.18).

Even when the narration is closer in time to the events, such as the exploration of the school (III.7–9), one story segment can be spread over several chapters. Such traditional cliffhangers – III.7 ends with "I'm out of space here. I'll post about what we found behind that door tomorrow. Sorry about that. There actually were some answers" – indicate to readers that the events that have occurred have not been narrated in their entirety yet, which strengthens the authorial position over reader speculation. Where the first two series still posit that the narrator knows as much as ("I have no answers", I.7) or even less than the readers do ("I think you guys might know what happened to me", II.1), the third series for the most part suggests that the narrator has far more information and decides whether and when to divulge it to the waiting readers. This authorial avoidance of inconvenient reader comments can indicate a lessened degree of intersubjectivity, and for the author-reader-relationship, that is likely true at this point, though the increased intersubjectivity between readers through for instance questions and answers or communal speculation as it has been discussed earlier should not be discounted either. Still, the use of these narrative strategies to supply invariable narration such as the town's history or the backstory for Clayton, Liz, and the Entity foregrounds the authorial command over the narrative over the meaningful impact of reader participation.

The way in which usage of these different strategies shifts aligns in essence precisely with Vilém Flusser's distinction between discursive and dialogical communication, which has already been outlined in the previous section. Dialogue between two parties who have a similar amount of information can generate new information, approaches, and insights. Discourse from one party to another, where the former has significantly more information than the latter, shares, stores, and preserves information. One is not superior to the other; rather, there needs to be a "balance between dialogical and discursive communication", which is "exceptionally difficult" to maintain[24] (*Kommunikologie* 40). "If discursive communication is the norm", as it can for instance be in authoritarian regimes, "information is soon used up and obsolete; culture rapidly becomes impoverished"[25] (ibid.). A single source of authoritative – including authorial – information runs the risk of becoming isolating in terms of what and how it communicates. It does not allow for differing points of view, dissent, or any additional input, and so it can only stagnate. This is not to say that all narratives which are not participatory are inherently

solipsistic; there are other ways in which authors can be in exchange with society, and readers can communicate with one another. However, a narrative situation as it is utilised in the earlier parts of the *Mold* saga conversely very explicitly explores opportunities of breaking out of the isolation of discursive communication.

On the other hand, "dialogue as the predominant mode of communication soon leads to the establishment of elites, and halts the flow of information to the masses"[26] (*Kommunikologie* 39). This, too, finds parallels in storytelling situations that are not traditionally hierarchical and unidirectional – strictly discursive, that is. Robert Simanowski posits that "collaborative writing is more about the process of collaboration than it is about the outcome. Someone not *in* the game might not enjoy the story, unless he or she approaches it for other reasons, such as researching the dynamics of the group, the 'social aesthetics' behind the text itself" (Simanowski, "Death of the Author? Death of the Reader!" 89). This also has implications for potential literary analysis: Studies on topics such as the dynamics of collaborative groups are suited more to the field of social psychology than literary or cultural studies. The development of a story in quasi-non-hierarchical dialogue between participants within a group can make the resulting narrative so exclusive (elitist, in Flusser's terms) that its trajectory, appeal, and coherence are not necessarily discernible for a reader outside the group. Relating this back to stories told in a participatory setting, there is no question that the reading experience is different for those readers who followed the story as it was written (and maybe participated in the comment section), during essentially the initial performance, and those who read it at some later point. If the story is to be comprehensible and aesthetically evaluable years later – and potentially meaningfully analysed by literary critics – then it needs to have discursive elements too, ways in which the story and to some extent the intersubjective exchange are communicated to the mass of non-participating readers. The *Mold* saga achieves this through, among other strategies, the combination of open questions and extended passages of backstory, all the while addressing the readers directly.

Participatory Readers in the Text

Many of the themes discussed in this chapter – intersubjectivity, expression, deification of an individual author – are not only present in the mode of communication between author and readers in text and paratext, but can also be found in an analysis of the text itself, on the story level. One symptom of the infection seems to be an urge to belong to the community of Liz's followers, to be part of a "we" rather than an individual subject. When Claire is already infected but still in San Francisco, she notes that she felt a strong urge to return, "like it was calling

me. . . . There was laughter and the people felt like family" (III.5). Blake calls it a "drugged, hypnotized, confused kind of love" (III.18) and explains how all the infected people in town were

> operating on some hive-mind network. At one with each other and Liz and the mold on the walls. There was something wonderful about it, something I'd miss if I let myself. Something powerful and safe. We all knew and saw and thought the same thing, like a chant echoing at the back of our minds.
>
> (ibid.)

The loss of individual, subjective perception in favour of a shared, externally controlled, communal vision is further underscored by the fact that over the course of the infection, all of the "Ascended" seem to end up with "fused eyelids" (III.18) or "eyes . . . swollen shut" (III.11), depriving them of their own sight. Regardless of their actual emotional state, they are also "grinning. Just fucking smiling, really wide" (II.4), the smile "stretching up all the way to what would be its cheekbones" (I.8). When Claire is in the final stages of her infection, she, too, realises that "[m]y face feels stiff, and when I touch it I realize I'm smiling. Grinning, ear to ear. Even as tears roll from eyes, I smile" (III.12). The forced smiles seem to come with "fused teeth" (III.17), which means that they cannot speak; Jess, for instance, can only utter a "tiny, high pitched, animal whine" (ibid.) to communicate with Clayton. The physical disintegration also makes it difficult for them to type, which is how the frequent misspellings are explained: "As the virus rages through the human body, not only do muscles degrade, but flesh in the digits of the hands and feet becomes fused. This makes it extremely difficult for those possessed by the Entity to type or text" (III.10). Deprived of all common means of expression – writing, speaking, eye contact – and even perception, and physically altered beyond recognition, infected individuals are entirely stripped of their subjectivity and assimilated into a hive-like collective. In the process, they also lose control over their motor functions and generally their agency. When Alan sees an old man in town, he notices that his movements are "really jerky like he'd forgotten how to work his body" (II.4). Blake, like Claire, frequently blacks out, and finds that he cannot "consciously move for a few minutes when I woke up. It only happened when Liz was around. Like my body was still waiting for executive control from its real boss, since she was so close by" (III.18). Not only do the Infected lose their own agency; they are also prone to manipulation by Liz and the Entity, who control them for their purposes.

  With the theoretical approaches from the start of this chapter in mind, the relationship between Liz and the Ascended can easily be read as an allegory to the traditional, non-participatory author-reader-dynamic. There is no intersubjectivity, and for the mass of readers, no expression,

which means that they cannot constitute themselves as subjects. As Elizabeth's power grows, the mutations also change and become more varied. Instead of "drain[ing] Its victims" (III.13), who "wasted away into nothing and their bodies died and molded" (ibid.), they are now growing "weird bony hooks or spikes protrud[ing] from the ends of arms" (ibid.). Blake's description of one Ascended "whose spine had burst from its back in a series of vicious spikes" (III.18) in particular is reminiscent of Lacan's description of the "fragmented body" of the incomplete mirror stage and thus the unstable *ego*, which in dreams "appears in the form of disconnected limbs or of organs exoscopically represented, growing wings and taking up arms for internal persecutions that the visionary Hieronymus Bosch fixed for all time in painting" (Lacan, "Mirror-Phase" 75). The gallery of Liz's experimental modifications would not seem entirely out of place in a Hieronymus Bosch painting. Unable to find their own self and their agency, these fragmented creatures have to be guided by Liz's authority and see and feel collectively, and die and wither away as soon as Liz is shot.

To say that all readers are controlled and fully manipulated by the author and have neither a sense of self nor the ability to express would, of course, be unnecessarily pessimistic and not sustainable even within the *Mold* saga itself. Claire and Jess, having taken an active role in the narrative, both resist the infection to an extent until the very end,[27] and both of them retain some motor function – Jess follows Clayton around town for weeks (III.17) – and sight in one eye (III.13, 17) as well as some ability to express: Claire continues to write her journal (III.10–13) and can "still move her jaw enough to speak, in slurred and jolting sentences" (III.13), while Jess "weakly raised her hand out of my grasp and gestured behind" Clayton (III.17). Both of them also retain some agency, and choose their respective death over submitting to the infection and becoming part of the collective hive (III.13, 17).

Elizabeth's role as the vessel to a being that "wants to be the only thing to love you, the only thing you love" (III.18), tasked with spreading its influence over the world, leaves her isolated and lonely: "Friends were fleeting, suspicious things for Elizabeth Hadwell" (ibid.). In her narcissism, she herself develops a longing to be universally loved and admired, but cannot fathom a way to fulfil this desire through genuine intersubjective contact, so she forces others under her control. As this is unfulfilling, she wants to use Clayton as a vessel for the Entity, so that she can have an intersubjective (rather than intrasubjective) relationship with it. Clayton, meanwhile, is similarly isolated, which weakens him and damages others, as he himself admits: "I was being overly cautious, and it ended up fucking them over. I'm so sorry, Claire. I should have told you immediately. I should have helped you get out" (III.12); "I'd fucked myself and too many others over by playing it safe" (III.17). Elizabeth represents the traditional author in this allegory, and Clayton of all narrators is the one

who uses the most traditional strategies of providing discursive information rather than engaging in a dialogue. And of both, the reader is made wary. Elizabeth is clearly established as the villain of the story, with her disregard for human life and her cruelty towards her supposed friends. When Claire first mentions Clayton, she indicates that "[t]rusting him was just another mistake, . . . [a]nd now, thanks to me, Blake is injured" (III.8). Even if Clayton later explains his position to the readers, the series still ends with Blake reaffirming Clayton's subjectivity and unreliability: "Clayton told a lot of lies and half-truths, swinging the story to fit his view. Most of what he posted here is factually accurate, but take it with a grain of salt" (III.18). The narrative, thus, explicitly tells the reader not to blindly follow one authorial voice, but to engage with different points of view and form an individual position.

   Blake, finally, is neither turned into an unseeing, mutated creature like the other Infected, nor does he act against Elizabeth or the Entity, nor does he really tell his own story until the very end. As soon as Elizabeth has been killed, Blake emerges from his dazed state:

> That's how it was. That snap into real control, real consciousness, all the more jarring because I'd thought only seconds before that I was conscious. It was like a haze suddenly lifted. I was myself again. I could talk and move without any kind of resistance. I had no orders, no goals that weren't my own. The tether I'd had to the Entity had snapped. I couldn't feel It in my head anymore. That's how I knew It was really dead.
>
> (III.18)

With this in mind, Blake might be read as the non-participatory reader in a participatory narrative – along for the ride and ultimately unscathed, but also with no agency throughout the story. Unable to act himself, he benefits from the actions of other 'readers' – Claire and Jess – and authorial figures – Elizabeth, who purposely keeps him alive and whom he sympathises with, and Clayton, who kills her and frees him from the Entity's control – alike. In short, Blake's survival is made possible by the allegorical equivalent of a balance between discursive and dialogical communication.

   The *Mold* saga is not the epitome of intersubjective narration. The fairly conservative authorial narrative of the third series, for instance, indicates a return to a traditional hierarchy where the author is set clearly apart from the readers, and, as has been shown here, even though control over the paratext is diffused and can be negotiated, the author always controls the main text, which in turn can be used to frame the paratext. However, precisely because parts of it are so similar to traditional narrative forms, those aspects that are different stand out more clearly. Though the author retains control over the narrative and the reader, this

hierarchy now hinges on the communal readerly acceptance of author and narrator. Narrative authority is no longer the author's birthright, but granted by the community of readers. If, for instance, many readers voice their concern about a cat one of the narrators mentioned in passing, the author will ultimately pick that thread up again. And if a sizeable group of readers decided to disregard this singular authority, to make the narrative their own, and to support other 'piggybacking' writers, there is no pragmatic reason why they should be controlled by the author's wishes. The hierarchical dynamic between author and readers in a participatory setting only works if both sides contribute and compromise, and the fact that it does in this case already indicates a relationship that fosters this exchange. Jameson's "social contracts between a writer and a specific public" (*The Political Unconscious* 92) persist, but now with the readers in a much stronger bargaining position.

Because it offers insight into so many different strategies and narrative techniques of opening or closing a story for intersubjective exchange, it also lends itself as a basis of comparison to other texts. In /u/bloodstain's *correspondence*, another popular saga on /r/nosleep, email messages which – as far as we can tell – were sent by readers to addresses posted in the story are included in the text itself, to which readers react by signalling shock and, performing their role as mock reader, concern over whether they now carry the curse within the storyworld (correspondence: revelations, 4.5). In the *Mold* saga, on the other hand, the narrator never brings readers directly into the main text. They are always mentioned as a group or as "someone", but never individually named by the narrator, and no reader messages are included in the text itself. Though Alan does post Z's email address and later mention that Z "changed his email address, due to all the messages from you guys (we think that's hilarious)" (II.5), the messages themselves are not posted. Later, Clayton's email address which is posted is one on GuerillaMail, an email provider which supplies "random addresses that are temporary and disposable" (III.9), making it clear to the readers that the person behind it "did not want a response" (ibid.). By not unexpectedly including individual readers in the performance, the *Mold* saga lacks the uncertain, anxiety-inducing effects of audience participation in the real world, because it is entirely voluntary. Both author and readers remain safe and anonymous, with the full extent of the story world between them. The vagueness of identity-definition in this narrative performance allows for a space in which author and readers alike can safely and freely choose and adapt their means of expression.

The extent of the participatory exchange in this story becomes even more evident when it is compared to a different context. The Samuel Pepys Twitter account, for instance, offers readers a platform to receive the tweets and reply to them, but there is never any narratorial or editorial response; the author himself, of course, cannot reply as he has been dead for 320 years. Since the diaries were not written for this kind of

reception, readers are also never actively encouraged to post responses, and they are never made part of the storyworld. Samuel Pepys' diaries are much more readily available – published in their entirety – in book form or, indeed, on the website (pepysdiary.com) linked to from the Twitter profile. There, any entry can be selected and read in full at any time, but they are also posted day by day as though in a blog format. This indicates that people who follow the Twitter account do not seek it out exclusively to read the diary – there are easier ways for doing that. Apart from the segmentation and serialisation – bite-sized and delivered to the user's feed – the recontextualisation also supplies the participatory paratext, which offers readers a chance for expression and a sense of shared reception of the diaries by reading other readers' reactions alongside the excerpts. The individual Twitter user might be isolated behind a screen, but in the replies to Sam Pepys' tweets, there is a crowd. These readers rarely reply to one another though, so while there is a shared experience of reception, the content of these messages is generally subject-centred, not intersubjective. What is particular about the *Mold* series by comparison is not initially what the readers do, but what the author does. Through actively encouraging and engaging with the comments from the start and pulling the comment section into the narrative by legitimising it on a story level, acknowledging that these comments definitely exist within the story world, the author opens the door towards an actual exchange. It is through this opening of the text towards the paratext, but also through the authorial entering of the paratext, that the negotiation of control and intersubjectivity begins. Other stories on /r/nosleep where authors also respond to comments still do not necessarily have the same type of exchange. In another short series titled *The Whistlers*, for instance, the narrator transcribes and posts entries from a diary found in an old backpack to the /r/nosleep platform, which means that the intradiegetic narrator is entirely unavailable, and the events in the narrative have already taken place and are unchangeable. Since the narrator/fictional author of that series is extradiegetic and not part of the story, neither are the readers. They still speculate and ask for updates, but do not engage as directly with the narrator as they do in the *Mold* saga, and are ultimately distant spectators observing an authorial narrative in a very traditional way.

Why is the intersubjective exchange between author and readers, but also among readers, so important? Jameson argues that a "gap between . . . society and the 'individual' . . . maims our existence as individual subjects and paralyzes our thinking about time and change just as surely as it alienates us from our speech itself" (*The Political Unconscious* 4). In order to constitute ourselves as individual, emancipated subjects, we have to recognise that everyone else is also a subject, and that we have the same ability to act and effect change as them. Accepting the author's ability and desire to express goes hand in hand with accepting the same qualities

in ourselves. Appreciating, finding, and providing resonance includes traversing that space of amplification opened up by storytelling with its vagueness of expressions – assuming that there is something the other wants, figuring out what that is, and finding a way to signal resonance includes a lot of perspective-taking and intersubjective, social effort.

The perpetual authorial struggle between allowing the reader some control over the paratextual framing for the sake of intersubjectivity, and retaining narrative authority over the development of the story also points towards another aspect that warrants attention. Genette says of paratext that it is "characterized by an authorial intention" (*Paratexts* 3) and returns to this point in his conclusion: "the effect of the paratext lies very often in the realm of influence – indeed, manipulation – experienced subconsciously" (ibid. 409). When the paratext is actually removed from the author's control, the author, as has been shown, uses the main text to influence the production of the paratext – through asking questions, encouraging certain types of replies, providing tonal cues, and indicating temporal distance. Since the comments that form the paratext are in fact to varying degrees expressions of the readers' inner worlds, it is well worth paying attention to how the author manipulates the framing of the paratextual space and thereby the readers' scope of expression. As Genette notes, when it comes to unconscious authorial manipulation, "one is better off perceiving it fully and clearly" (*Paratexts* 409). Blind consumption – of text but also of the idea of the author and the generalisation of fellow readers – makes readers susceptible to unconscious manipulation, turning them metaphorically into the blind, smiling, infected creatures of the *Mold* saga. However, if reading through the comment sections of a participatory narrative on Reddit reveals anything at all, it is that each reader is a distinct individual. In the earlier stages of this analysis, I have found it tempting to identify overarching trends and patterns or to come to a statement that can be applied to all readers so that a clear and straightforward point might be concluded about the behaviour of readers in general. This, however, is decidedly impossible, and that is the point. These readers are not a homogenous, uniform mass of people, but rather a group of individual, emancipated (or emancipating) subjects – and that makes it all the more interesting.

Walter Benjamin, looking for causes for the decline of storytelling and the connected sharing of experiences and counsel, states that

> [b]oredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience. A rustling in the leaves drives him away. His nesting places – the activities that are intimately associated with boredom – are already extinct in the cities and are declining in the country as well. With this the gift for listening is lost and the community of listeners [to storytelling] disappears.
>
> (91)

One might assume that in the oversaturated environment of any online context, there is nothing but distraction. In an endless forest of constantly rustling leaves, this bird of boredom would never even find time to sit on a branch, not to mention build a nest or lay and hatch an egg. And yet, the environment seems to be conducive to allow the mind enough rest to share an experience of storytelling and reception: participatory settings such as that of the *Mold* saga reproduce the dynamic between storyteller (the narrator or fictional writer) and listeners (the readers who react in the comments) with dialogical elements from which social and emotional resonance can emerge and through which author and readers can influence one another, but also discursive elements, which mediate information and backstory as well as stabilise a response to the dialogue for future readers. One advantage of online storytelling is certainly its potential asynchronicity – storyteller and recipients need not be physically present and mentally available at the same time. Additionally, the anonymity afforded by a platform like Reddit enables all parties to slip into and out of different roles relatively seamlessly, which allows for a different exploration of the resonance space built by the story. Mostly, however, the fact that in spite of an abundance of distractions, readers and writers alike seek out narrative contexts that allow for intersubjective exchange through performance indicates that storytelling is not a consequence of boredom, but rather fulfills a human need for that shared experience.

Notes

1. The term "author" is used very generally here, as broad strokes suffice at this point. In the following subsection of this chapter, the concept of the author as a person and as an idea or construct will be elaborated on and differentiated more clearly. For this present section, I will briefly follow the functional partial conflation of author and publisher Gérard Genette employs at times (cf. e.g. *Paratexts* 9) for ease of reading and because the points made here really only concern the producing entity as a whole as contrasted to the recipient.
2. Unless otherwise noted, references to the texts of Benjamin, Barthes, Genette, and Lacan will be to the page number of the English edition. Where I have consulted the French or German version of a text and cited from it in that language, the page number refers to the non-English edition listed in the bibliography.
3. For citations from *Phaedrus*, I will refer to the paragraph numbers which are consistent across editions and translations rather than page numbers.
4. Stanley Fish similarly argues that "interpreters act as extensions of an institutional community" through shared and inherited ways of reading (*Is There a Text in This Class* 321).
5. The original French "son premier objet est d'être reconnu par l'autre" (268) carries more strongly the connotation of not only "first" in a temporal sense, but also 'primary' in the sense of prioritised.
6. I cannot say with certainty – neither from the English nor from the French version of the text – whether by "litterateurs", Barthes is referring to someone active in literary circles who is looking at the works and journals of other

authors, or to authors trying to unite themselves with their own work. But even if it is the latter, this is an assumption that Barthes would be making about the authorial intent for writing a private journal. The "private journal" ("journal intime", 62) also implies a certain confidentiality that would oppose the idea that the author is trying to use the journal to "unite [. . .] their person and their work" in a way that is relevant enough to influence the image of literature in contemporary culture.

7. Such practical messages can also be successfully read as poetic despite and beyond their intended meaning, of course – see e.g. examples of computer-generated poetry in Chapter 5.
8. The German original for "intelligence" is "*Kunde*" (108), which is at another point more suitably translated into English as "lore" (85). "Intelligence" is in connotation rather closer to the rational factuality of "information", against which it is supposed to be contrasted. I will preserve Zohn's translation in direct quotations but will use the concept of "Kunde" with its connoted uncertainty, vagueness, and unverifiability.
9. "*Schwingungsbreite*" (109)
10. It is important to note at this point that there is a difference between real person and persona here for authors and readers, as everyone is performing a role the entire time in this context, where lines between factual and fictional are blurred. However, the existence of the other is undeniable regardless of the extent to which they are performing; furthermore, it can be assumed that a desire for expression would be part of the performed persona. The author as far as readers can grasp him remains the implied author that Chatman describes, but now one to whom we can not only attribute agency, but who can actively claim it through the dialogical paratextual discourse.
11. The issue with epitext is a different one; while only accepting those statements made and authenticated by the author is doubtless a useful way to limit what counts as epitext, it also betrays a certain degree of arbitrariness in demarcation. After all, other non-authorised textual encounters such as reviews can frame and influence reception of a text to an equal degree as an interview with the author.
12. Most of the paratextual elements analysed here can be classified as peritext. However, because of the particular publishing format, the boundary between peri- and epitext is far less distinct than in traditional print publications, where the textual artefact is clearly defined. For simplicity's sake, I will generally use the term "paratext", unless an argument necessitates a distinction between peritext and epitext.
13. While HTML generally defines the content of a website, CSS controls what that content looks like, i.e. its style.
14. The term "tl;dr" stands for "too long, didn't read".
15. What Genette calls the pseudonym-effect, the reader's knowledge of "the fact of the pseudonym" (49), can be presumed as self-evident in this context, since usernames are so obviously pseudonymous.
16. The titles analysed here are the peritextual titles given to each of the series by the author. The overarching title under which all three series are brought together, "The *Mold* Saga", does not come from the peritext, but from the epitext of the subreddit /r/NoSleepIndex (see Chapter 1).
17. Though individual story instalments are generally referred to as "updates" or "parts", I will mostly opt for the traditional term "chapter" in the following, as they do operate as such. In the performance of the narrative, the differentiation is important to maintain the illusion of factuality/non-fictionality, but in analysis, this degree of distancing is in no way detrimental.
18. I have preserved the comments in their original form, which often includes spelling or grammatical mistakes, linguistic simplifications, and profanities.

I will not add a [sic] after every single preserved error, as that would impede the flow of reading and alter the appearance of these comments.

19. See e.g. /u/Icanhelpyoualan under II.1, who AlanPWtf engages with briefly; /u/OmegaX123 under III.2

20. As Hughes and Lund point out regarding Victorian periodical publications, "[t]he time between installments in serial literature gave people the opportunity to review events with each other, to speculate about plot and characters, and to deepen ties to their imagined world" (10). The effect here is very similar, though altered slightly through the irregularity of updates and the uncertainty of whether the story will ever be continued or finished, and because the comments are fixed in writing and still visible to other readers even after a new instalment has been posted.

21. "Private Messages" between Reddit users.

22. As with generally all comments, it could be argued that no readers actually respond to the prompt and that instead it is the author who, on yet another account, comments pretending to be a reader who wants to solve this riddle. However, a few things indicate that this is not the case here. For one, the top comment under this chapter (/u/Iowa_Lawyer) is one which works at and ultimately succeeds at decoding the message, and it is rated with 70 points. Additionally, at least eight other users engage in this comment thread alone. While it is not unlikely that the author would create another account to post a comment under their own story anonymously, it does not seem feasible that they would create enough accounts to keep up a conversation over a dozen messages, and upvote a comment 70 times.

23. The second series is very much a transition piece regarding this mechanic, starting out with "[y]esterday, I woke up in a hotel room in Chicago" (II.1) and descriptions of "today and last night" (II.2), but moving on to phrases like "[i]t's been ten days since Alan last posted and we both feel guilty for leaving you hanging like this" (II.5) and "[i]t's been two weeks since the last post" (II.7), which indicate temporal distance. The first and third series utilise this strategy much more significantly.

24. My translation; original German: "Das außerordentlich schwierige Gleichgewicht zwischen Dialog und Diskurs" (Flusser, *Kommunikologie* 40).

25. Original German: "Wenn der Diskurs vorherrscht, wie zum Beispiel zur Zeit des Nazismus oder des Stalinismus, verbrauchen sich die Informationen sehr schnell und verfallen. Bei der Vorherrschaft des Diskurses verarmt die Kultur rapide" (Flusser, *Kommunikologie* 40).

26. Original German: "Überwiegt der Dialog, dann entstehen sehr schnell Eliten. Die Masse wird immer weniger informiert" (Flusser, *Kommunikologie* 39).

27. This is not merely because they function as narrators and the reader has an emotional investment in these characters. Neither Alan nor Alex, both of whom also narrate portions of the story, are shown to drag out their submission to the infection.