

## Creating True Horror

If your goal as a writer of horror is to scare people, most of you are doing it wrong. I've gone through my fair share of horror works in my life, yet very few have managed to get to me at all. Those that did didn't do it by making a really scary monster or really gruesome description or anything like that – no, rather, they undermined me.

I wasn't always so fearless. When I was little, I was terrified of anything remotely scary. Scary movies, scary trailers (I was actually even terrified of the troll in the first Harry Potter movie) – I covered my ears and looked away. I ended up watching Jeepers Creepers 2 somehow, and the movie scarred me for months. I was terrified that the creeper might come through my window. I would have nightmares of Frankenstein's monster, bulky pig-like creatures, giant ticks, and so on. I wouldn't dare touch a scary video game; I was scared of the Street Fighter II opening!

All this fear died down a bit as I entered my teen years; I hadn't really encountered too much that was scary in a while, but I hadn't gone looking for it either. But being an avid video game fan, I wanted to play what were considered the greatest games ever, and one of those games was Resident Evil 4 – one of the scary games. So, after getting it for Christmas, I popped the disc into my Wii and summed up all the courage I could muster. Turns out I didn't need it at all. I think the only time I was remotely frightened was during a jump scare – but hey, even big blockbuster hits like The Dark Knight have those.

I wasn't disappointed by Resident Evil 4 (I think it's a great game), but I was very surprised I didn't find it scary at all, especially since I was such a wimp (or so I thought). Perhaps the fourth game was just too action oriented to be scary, I thought. People did say that it strayed quite far from its roots in the series. So to test my limits, I picked up Resident Evil on the GameCube and prepared for some fear.

Again though, no fear was to be found. I wasn't scared even once. It was strange in a way – somehow I had gone from being afraid of everything to being afraid of nothing, and I had never felt a transition anywhere along the way. I tried watching movies I wouldn't have dared to watch as a kid: Halloween, Child's Play, The Blair Witch Project – but I didn't feel fear. The threats on screen – witches, murderous dolls – weren't real in two of those films, yet even Halloween, which was based in reality, didn't scare me. I don't know why, but I assume it had something to do with becoming a more empirical, rational person into my teens. I knew that just because you can imagine something existing doesn't make it more likely to occur. Nothing can smell fear, unlike how Jeepers Creepers 2 purported.

Over the years I continued to play horror video games – Silent Hill 2, Fatal Frame II, Alone in the Dark, Doom 3, Dead Space – I didn't find any of them scary. Minecraft scared me a little with jump scares (effing Creepers), Amnesia and Slender got me a little with being pursued by an unknown enemy, but only one game scared me by undermining me.

A freeware game called 7Days, made by an independent French studio, came to my attention one dark summer night. I downloaded it, began playing it, and found it amusing, so I played it to completion. Its ending though was actually terrifying – but somehow, in a good way. I felt frightened – really frightened – by a game for the first time, tingles all along my body, straight down from my head to my toes, and I enjoyed it (if you experience ASMR, it was essentially that feeling, everywhere). How did 7Days do this? Well, I won't say exactly, and I'm sure many people found the ending stupid and unoriginal, but basically they took a simple creepypasta paragraph and changed it so that it would relate directly to the player. Any defense mechanisms the player had against the text (“this isn't real”) only

managed to reinforce the text.

Let me try to make this a little more clear with another, more specific example. In one of the endings for The Stanley Parable, the narrator attempts to undermine the player by saying that his entire quest outside of the office isn't real. Stanley never left his office to go on a quest, he was there the whole time. And he was so bored with his job that he invented a game called The Stanley Parable and imagined himself playing the game and going on a quest where he would go through some doors and so on. What the narrator is trying to do here, is to paint Stanley as delusional, and to make him as similar to you as possible, to plant a seed in the player's head so they ask, "Could Stanley be me?" Once that seed of doubt is there, any defense to escape can have a more horrifying explanation. "I'm playing a game I downloaded off the Internet" – but Stanley probably thinks that too. "But I have a life outside The Stanley Parable" – but Stanley could have fabricated that life as part of the delusion. And so on. The Stanley Parable undermined the player by relating them to a delusional character.

"Where is this all going?" you may ask, thinking this is just a tutorial on how to write scarier stories. Well, here's where my horror comes in. A few months ago, fear came crashing back into my life. I never found life itself scary, but after one dentist approved drug trip on nitrous oxide, I found true horror in the very act of existing.

Existentialism terrified me. I couldn't get it out of my head. What was I? What was this consciousness inside my head? Why could I only be me, and how could I know that anyone else truly even had a consciousness? Somehow, the nitrous oxide had undermined me; it had broken down my defenses, and the fear came gushing in. But I could not escape – there was no movie to look away from, no game to turn off, existence was every moment. It was inescapable.

My first terrors were completely unexplainable. They were a direct memory of the drug trip I had in the dentist's chair, and it had to do with life being a looping asymptote, and nothing else. The second terrors came after some intense thinking while skiing on a weekend off from school. I adopted solipsism and Jean Paul Sartre's absurdism. I couldn't prove that any other human had a consciousness, so I became scared that all there ever could be in the Universe was inside my head. But the thoughts, the experiences I was having, the actions I took, were all meaningless. All my life, I thought I was building toward something. I was going to school for a reason, I was playing video games for a reason, learning piano for a reason, yet, when I looked to the future, I saw nothing. I was going to school so later down the line I could have a job, and then what? Where was the fulfillment from that? So I could have a life where I worked all day, went home, had a bit of leisure, then repeat?

Suddenly my day felt so patterned. I was scared of doing things I had done many times before because I was afraid this was all part of some grand repeating pattern that I was unaware of. I became afraid of falling asleep. I became afraid to be alone. I watched the clock fly by everyday, thinking, "It's already 7:08?" Then later, "It's already 10:23?" My life felt like it was slipping away and I was wasting it. The problem became though that everything seemed to be a waste.

Why is that? Because a human lifespan is a mere eighty years, and we've been around for tens of thousands. Today, there are seven billion of us. Those are absurd numbers to compete with, making it impossible to rise to the top, to feel your effect on the world. You watch as people younger than you with the same circumstances start making an effect on you, and you start to have regrets. You realize the mistakes you made and wish that you had done something just a little differently.

But even an influential human is a blip on the world scale. Only a handful of people do we still

remember that are older than a few centuries. For every Marco Polo, there's many more Floris V's, forgotten in the common minds over the years. But the human race is only a fraction of a blink of an eye on the scale of time in the Universe. A few tens of thousands of years is nothing compared to the nearly 14 billion of the Universe itself. And the human race is confined to one planet, orbiting a star in the vast sea of billions of stars in the billions of galaxies in the Universe. And even if you somehow could affect something on a Universal scale, why would that matter in the end?

You see, when I came out of my laughing gas induced drug trip, I thought I got a taste of what death feels like to the conscious mind. While I was under, I thought I was dying. I thought I was in my final moments, and I was horrified. All my accomplishments, all the things I did and experienced, they all disappeared into a void of blackness. It didn't matter if I was leaving anything behind, because to me, it was all gone, and that was all that mattered.

That's part of what disturbed me, and part of what I couldn't stop thinking about. But there was another part of the true horror that I felt that I also couldn't get out of my head: how could I exist at all? Consciousness only seemed to make any sense from one point of view – there was only one consciousness, my own, and everything else was an illusion created by it. Essentially, I began to think of life like one thinks of dreams. The people and things in dreams only exist in the dreamer's head, yet the dreamer believes them to be real. To the dreamer, the things that happen appear to have meaning, yet they are just random neurons firing in the brain. Sure, things seem to make more logical sense in real life, but what is this logic and sense you talk about, and why would it ever matter on a Universal scale? The only difference between real life and dreams, to me, seemed to be that real life just had nothing to wake up to.

And believe me, I tried to wake up. I couldn't understand how it was possible for me to experience such true horror when it first happened. Everything felt like a dream, yet I knew it wasn't. I was the most terrified I had ever been in my life.

The seed is still there. The terror can never go away. My point is that true horror is not a creation of the writer's mind, but a property of the Universe itself. We just normally have ways of combating the Universal terror that surrounds us all. If you want to write something truly scary, then it is your job as a writer not to create, but to destroy. Destroy the hardened barriers surrounding the reader, blocking the fear from getting in. For if you undermine the fortress, the whole structure collapses under its own weight.