UCLA

Title

cyber!Gothic: The Gothic Future from *Frankenstein* to Text-based Online Gaming

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5n60309z

Author

Lusher, Samantha

Publication Date

2014-04-01

Undergraduate

Samantha Lusher

Reflective Essay

UCLA Library Essay Contest

March 21, 2014

<center>cyber!Gothic: a reflection</center>

I spend an inordinate amount of time online.

I am (in a sense) dematerializing not out of any kind of antagonism or ennui for our physical reality, but because I am academically, passionately interested in the digital humanities. I am interested in how the Internet changes us. Because of the Internet, we increasingly engage with each other and the world around us through text—and so we, in an age wherein the book is thought to be dying, ourselves become bodies of literature.

Because my academic gaze is necessarily fixed on a cybernetic future, my enrollment in Professor Alice Boone's senior capstone seminar, *Legacies of the Gothic*, may seem odd. Primarily, I was excited to experience the William A. Clark Library before I graduated. I had heard the Clark was somewhere "way out" in the hinterlands of midtown, and bizarrely housed in a mansion. At the beginning of the class, I already had an idea that I wanted my final capstone project to somehow incorporate my passion for the 'Net, but was concerned any such attempt would be tax plausibility.

However, thanks to the invaluable guidance of Professor Boone, a fellow at the Clark Library, and the Clark's Reader Services Librarian, Shannon K. Supple, I was exposed to a wealth of primary, secondary, and tertiary literature that, as my paper hopefully demonstrates, coheres well with our 21st century cybertextual selves. Each week, Professor Boone and Ms. Supple would present a curated selection of bibliographic

material found, amidst UCLA's vast resources and multiple research libraries, only at the Clark. One week we might examine Clark materials relating to the life and antiquarian collection of Horace Walpole, such as a very rare quote-based game created by Walpole, *The Impenetrable Secret*. Another week we might examine art books. Each week's display selection might relate obviously back to our assigned readings for that week, or Professor Boone might challenge us to make connections between Durs Grünbein's *26 57.3' N, 142 16.8' E*, an inscrutable art book about the first recorded sighting of a live giant squid, and *The Castle of Otranto*.

The net effect of Professor Boone's challenge was that I received a very broad exposure to the different kinds of texts and preservation work done at the Clark, and also that I was able to incorporate my own understandings of the Internet into our class discussions in a viable, productive manner. Because the presentations were texts on *display*, what I saw at the Clark were texts whose narratives and importance were utterly grounded in a physicality I could not readily access. These were books that had been lived through, books actually falling apart due to over-stimulus of human touch, and I could only look at them. Instead of understanding them as material objects, I began to think of them as *im*material objects—much like objects and texts online.

I began thinking through the "immaterial" Clark material through various Internet-related lenses, such as online fandoms and fan products, online role-playing games, and social media platforms. I began to refer to Clark material that more readily engaged with "Internet" issues in discussions with Professor Boone, Ms. Supple, and other students in the class as I continued to incorporate my Internet studies, and in this way began casually compiling the bibliography of my research paper.

Also significant to my research process was the Clark itself. I enjoyed my time amongst the vibrant and close-knit community at the Clark, engaging with other researchers in the casual comfort of the library's break-room, sharing interests, and trading insights. Even the class tour of the Clark and its the grounds benefitted my research—it was then that I realized the twisting, rhizomatic, and at times outright Gothic architectural layout of the Clark was an informational pattern not unlike an insular, esoteric online community.

My paper would have been impossible without the Clark Library, for its marvelous physicality, and its unique brand of immateriality. As my paper navigates tensions between our physical selves, our modern inclinations, and our Gothic fears, so too does the Clark Library. The Clark is a synthesizing force. At the Clark we witness the gathering, uniting, and navigating between 'ghostly' books, modern methods and technologies, and researchers—and for that I am very, very grateful[1].

---

[1] Not to mention, thanks for getting me off the Internet, if only for a little while.

Samantha Lusher

Professor Boone

English 184.2

March 20, 2014

cyber!Gothic
The Gothic Future from *Frankenstein* to Text-based Online Gaming

The year is 1899. Your name is Lionel Brewer—you are a brilliant, if eccentric academic at the newly founded London School of Economics. Your lectures on psychopathy and the criminal mind, as well as your critiques of Francis Galton and Cesare Lombroso are wildly popular among the wildly wealthy. You are handsome, you are charming, you are moving up in the world—and rapidly.

You are also a werewolf.

Lionel Brewer is a fictional character—*my* fictional character, on *Crypsis Supernaturalis*, a self-professed "unsettling Victorian RP." *Crypsis* is an online role-playing game that is mainly text-based. Players control one or more fictional characters, who are put through a rigorous application process in which site moderators vet them for suitability on the site. Once accepted, players engage in long-form storytelling where they control a fraction of the site's dynamic, ever-developing plot through the point of view (pov) of their character. Players guide the game's overall plot through "threading," or exchanging multiple paragraphs of pov with other player's characters. This process necessarily creates a Frankenstinian narrative, where bits and pieces of various povs are sewn together to form an essentially cohesive, yet visibly disparate story.

As a player on *Crypsis*, I am unpertubed by the implications this form of narrative entails—but I am not inured to them. *Crypsis* and other text-based RPGs raise questions about our experiences on the Internet: what are the dimensions of our experiences online? What happens to our physical reality, our bodies, when we "act" online? Must we qualify and/or devalue online action with quotation marks? Regarding the text-based gaming content, who owns these stories? And overall, are these authentic experiences? Can online gaming be a healthy part of an authentic existence? I see these anxieties as unfounded, but understandable: text-based gaming and online literature in general represent the next evolution of the Gothic book. We worry about issues of authenticity and possible infringements of technology against the integrity of the human experience. Yet these worries simply come with the territory of the cyber!Gothic.

In this paper, I seek to trace the origins of cyber!Gothic from the very Gothic birth of science fiction in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, to my own experimentations of adapting *Frankenstein* for the Internet, and finally into the domain of text-based online gaming. My hope is to highlight the Gothic mode's sensitivity to issues of embodiment and representation. Further, I aim to demonstrate how Gothic sensitivity renders the genre highly plastic to developments in technology and shifts in socialization. The recursive activity of plasticity yielding shifts, and then yielding worries culminates in the cyber!Gothic mode we see today. The future of the Gothic is already here.

However, to locate Gothic anxieties of embodiment and representing the human body, we must look further past *Frankenstein,* back to the early Enlightenment period. *The anatomy of humane bodies*, William Cowper's 1698 English-language adaptation of Govard Bidloo's *Anatomia* is an early-Enlightenment medical text. While the purpose of

the text itself is to "explicat[e]… many new anatomical discoveries, and chirurgical observations, [and] the animal oeconomy," the book's engravings suggest a key philosophy of embodiment as experience. The book offers a curious visual leitmotif of classical imagery, best exemplified by the engraving on the title page, which focally depicts a seated female figure. She is arrayed modestly yet elegantly, heralded by a horn-blowing angel and attended to by a naked infant whose head is obscured by a cloth. In her right hand she holds what appears to be a scalpel, and in her left she balances a stack of sheets. The angel and infant, along with her arraignment are visually reminiscent of the Virgin Mary, yet her objects are reminiscent of Classical Greco-Roman iconography, particular iconography regarding the Muses. While no Muse ever held a scalpel, her stack of sheets evoke the writing tablet of Calliope (epic poetry) or the scrolls of Clio (history)—thus the seated female figure unifies Judeo-Christian ideals with a Greco-Roman heritage, and likewise unifies scientific activity with its humanistic counterparts.

This act of unification represents a very bold claim for a book on medical anatomy; especially considering this artistic leitmotif is juxtaposed with very gruesome exposures of the physical human interior. Paging through the appendices alone, the viewer is treated to flayed, dismembered, essentially brutalized bodies—all portrayed in a lightly charming artistic affect. The clash between content and mood seems bizarre, as if the artist was not aware they were portraying partially flayed people like Greco-Roman statuary, complete with Classical styles of posture and Mediterranean background dressing. Yet we might understand the classical/Judeo-Christian leitmotif as a counter-balance, most pointedly represented in the title page's wedding of science with the arts in its presiding female figure. Visually, *The anatomy of humane bodies* (*Anatomy*) grounds

the human experience in its physical reality. Cultural products such as epic poetry, written history, or Judeo-Christian/Greco-Roman ideals are crucial to the lived human experience. Yet they are intrinsically connected to human physicality. The book's visual thesis proposes that to truly understand humanity, we must understand life as being embodied within the flesh. We use our scalpel to "dig deeper" below the levels of flesh, but like cultural products these investigative endeavors only deepen our physicality. In Cowper's text, the body—and the book—are physical objects, and an authentic human existence can be understood as a cohesive physical harmony of various components. *Anatomy* does us a favor by illuminating the inner workings of the body, but the constant Classical leitmotif serves to remind us that it is the body as a *whole,* and the art that it is capable of, that is worthy of celebration.

The experience of physical *presence—*being able to touch and see the body and its cultural products—is crucial to an authentic human experience. While we may seek to investigate and master the interior components of our bodies or our cultural products, their importance arises out of their sheer physicality. Returning to the title engraving, we see the importance of physicality in the visual drama: the seated woman is the focal point of the piece, but an observant viewer will notice the cherubs playing with a human skull at her feet, and the conversing skeletons lurking behind her in the shadows. Art and scientific inquiry both arise out of the ever-present body. There is nothing horrifying about skulls or dismembered parts, because *Anatomy* asserts that they all come together in the end to create a beautiful whole. In this worldview, human experience utterly depends on physical reality.

120 years later, however, we see Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein* questioning the physical basis of the human experience. What *Anatomy* proposes as humanistic and elevating, *Frankenstein* finds horrifying. Shelley's text questions physicality by drawing attention to how disjointed and disconnected the reading, and thus human experience can be. Where Cowper's *Anatomy* assumes ultimate physical cohesion, Shelley instead fashions a body and a book out of wildly different parts that refuse to completely, neatly cohere. Beginning with Shelley's treatment of the body, we see a horror of disconnect in Frankenstein's creature. The creature is composed of disparate "bones from charnel-houses (Shelley 55), and looks hideous with

> yellow skin [that] scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries
>
> beneath… …watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the
>
> dun-white sockets in which they [are] set, his shriveled complexion and
>
> straight black lips. (Shelley 58)

Where Cowper's *Anatomy* proposed to elevate a cohesive human form out of its inner workings, Shelley's creature is a non-cohesive form whose inner workings are readily apparent, no scientific inquiry required. No scalpel is necessary to witness the inner biology of Frankenstein's creature—instead he is "barely" held together, and those who view him are *forced* to see the separate, disjointed workings of blood, muscle, and bone come together underneath his translucent skin. Critic N. Katherine Hayles discusses the implications of textual translucency in her monograph, *How We Became Posthuman*, claiming

> [t]he displacement of presence by pattern thins the tissue of textuality,
>
> making it a semi-permeable membrane that allows awareness of the text as

an informational pattern to infuse into the space of representation. (Hayles

40)

We may apply her theory regarding representation in texts to the body of Frankenstein's

creature, where we can see tensions arising out of an increasing importance of pattern

over physical presence. Through this lens, the creature is monstrous because he seems

less physically present in the normal sense—instead, those who witness him are subjected

to the patterns that compose his body. Instead of one cohesive, physical presence he's a

tangle of muscle, of veins, of bone. His overall biology is an informational pattern that

upsets the regular space of representation—a regular space like that of *Anatomy*, which

makes pattern subordinate absolute presence. Yet the creature does not have a normal

presence, as a singular living creature composed out of different deaths. Through the

creature, Shelley questions the supposed cohesiveness of our physical presence, as the

creature is only a more horrible version of us: Shelley gives our own patterned-ness

physical form in the creature. While we our bodies look more physically cohesive, more

normally present than the creature's, our lives would lack meaning where it not for the

incorporation of "other" bodies (some dead) to compose the informational pattern of our

lived narratives. We do not live our lives solely as fully cohesive, fully distinct physical

bodies—much of the meaning integral to our lived human experiences come from our

permeability. We are necessarily shaped by encounters with others, and like Frankenstein

creatures we hold within us "pieces" of those around us.

The tension between informational patterns of narrative and physical presence is

readily apparent in the creature's own process of socialization, itself mirrored in the

novel's overall narrative composition. The creature learns speech, value, and normative

modes of behavior purely through watching the De Lacey family: the De Lacey's "day[s] [are] passed in the same routine as that which preceded [them]" (Shelley 128). The creature days "were spent in close attention" (139) to the De Lacey's repetitive routine of living from season to season. Here, we should note three key elements: that the De Lacey's lives form an easily recognizable pattern, that this pattern occurs regularly over time, and that the creature comes to a better understanding of himself as a *subject* through witnessing the De Lacey's lived pattern. Hayles notes the importance of patterns, temporality, and subjectivity, asserting,

> Narrative becomes possible when this spatiality is given a temporal
> dimension by the pov's movement through it. The pov is *located* in space,
> but it *exists* in time. Through the track it weaves, the desires, repressions,
> and obsessions of subjectivity can be expressed. (Hayles 39)

Not only does the creature learn to social behavior and techniques through the De Lacey's, but he also comes to a better understanding of his own living experience. Ideas of personal narrative, identity, wants, needs, and indeed *obsessions* are made possible through the De Lacey's informational pattern. He supplements his newfound narrative sense with other informational patterns: texts like *Paradise Lost, Plutarch's Lives,* and *The Sorrows of Werther*, amplifying the patchwork quality of his own body with a patchwork quality to his narrative. There is no essential cohesion, only inclusion of more and more patterns. Significantly, all this is done *without* physical contact: the De Lacey's are less important for their physical presence than the regular, idyllic patterns they present. Likewise, the creature constructs his identity in the absence of physical presence—he does not have to be *among* the De Lacey's to incorporate their lives into

his. Rather, this happy point of his life relies on the fact that he has *no* visible presence to those around him. In this, Shelley seems to suggest that physical presences are less important than personal narrative, and that these narratives depend on informational patterns. It is only when the monster reveals his physical presence that the De Lacey's behold him with "horror and consternation" (161), and he is driven from them.

The technical construction of the novel *Frankenstein* itself suggests the importance of informational pattern. The novel's construction is as Frankenstinian as the creature's: it is a frame novel with a frame novel, a multiple-epistolary narrative with letters firing off from all directions. The story is told through a series of letters to one Mrs. Saville, which recounts the experiences of Robert Walton, who is listening to Victor Frankenstein, who directly quotes (to great length) the creature. Like the creature there is a lack of essential cohesion: the novel *Frankenstein* exposes all its disparate parts, and in fact does not seem interested at all in becoming cohesive. This is horrifying in the sense that, physically, we can see the breaks in narrative, the places where the "bones" of the book come from a different narrative body than its "blood." Yet the book is more significant as an informational pattern—in our reading experience we grow to ignore the monstrosity of the book's "physical" presence, and instead pay attention to the narrative supplied through the book's pattern.

Returning to our cyber!Gothic concerns, what becomes of knowledge and knowledge production as we move away from physicality and presence, and instead turn to patterning? My own experiences at the Clark mirror the creature's experiences with the De Laceys. Like the creature, I was frequently exposed to *physical* bodies, albeit of text, while at the Clark. My exposure to those books occurred in a regular pattern, but they

were De Lacey-ian specters; my understanding of them was largely observational. Handling the books as physical entities was less important than looking at them—thus like the creature I began understand the Clark texts as patterns of information. Their physical presence meant little in comparison to what narrative patterns I was able to observe of them. Because my understanding of them was not rooted in physicality but rather pattern, I was able to draw upon other pattern-based experiences, such as my extensive interests in the Internet, particularly online game—just as the creature draws upon the narrative patterns of *Werther*, *Paradise Lost*, and *Plutarch*. In effect, my limited physical exposure to Clark material was transcribed to pattern, allowing me to synthesize existing domains of knowledge and experience that, had my approach been purely physicality- and presence-based, might never have intersected. Just as the creature grows into a fuller personal subjectivity, so I grew into a fuller academic understanding.

All this boils down to a central concern of the lived human experience that Hayles delineates in her monograph: we are increasingly subject to tension between the importance of presence versus pattern. What Hayles calls the question of the posthuman, I see as a question of the Gothic. In *Frankenstein*, we see Shelley questioning the importance of the Enlightenment's physical experience, as exemplified in Cowper. Instead of celebrating the human body, *Frankenstein* screams at the horror of it, and then asks us to look beyond it. Instead of understanding authentic experiences as rooted in physicality, the creature and the novel ask us to understand authentic experience in the informational patterning of narrative.

Patterns of information do no necessarily have to be narratives. Hayles considers binary code a kind of informational pattern through which we construct meaning. In

Natalie Chudnovsky's and my adaptation of *Frankenstein*, we attempt to create a

narrative pattern on top of binary patterns. The adaptation came about as result of an

assignment for a UCLA English department senior seminar, taught by Alice Boone and

titled *Legacies of the Gothic*. The core of the assignment asked that we adapt

Frankenstein into a new media—Ms. Chudnovsky and I agreed that adapting

Frankenstein onto Tumblr, a Web 2.0 social platform, would retain and simultaneously

update many elements of the book, including its epistolary mode and theme of body

horror. Although I am sure that Ms. Chudnovsky has titled our project something

different, for the purposes of this paper I will refer to our project as *The Haunting of Elisa*

Morrow (*Morrow*).

The premise of *Morrow* is fairly simple. The text imagines that the events of

Frankenstein were real, but incorrectly recorded. The De Lacey episode instead involved

a romance between the creature and Agatha, who was trapped in an incestuous

relationship with Felix that passed unnoticed by their blind father. The creature attempted

to escape with Agatha, but the attempt went horribly awry, culminating in the death of

Agatha at the hands of Felix. In the present day, a young Clark Library academic named

Elisa Morrow discovers a paper clipping detailing the discovery of Agatha's body. Elisa,

operating under the false assumption that *Frankenstein*, and thus Agatha De Lacey are

works of fiction, unknowingly resurrects Agatha's ghost. Her discovery and subsequent

invocation mirror how scholastic activity at the Clark Library effectively resurrects

textual "ghosts" from literature and history. Agatha haunts Elisa through Tumblr, sending

increasingly disturbing messages to Elisa's personal blog. Finally, Agatha possess Elisa,

represented by disconcerting blog posts to each of their Tumblrs. Elisa, now a cyber-

presence on Agatha's Tumblr, bemoans the now ever-present darkness of her new reality, while Agatha posts a static-ridden music video onto Elisa's blog, reveling in her new bodily existence.

In *Morrow*, we hope to retain the epistolary mode of *Frankenstein* through Tumblr's ask and reblog features. Tumblr allows users to send questions to other users, called "asks," which the receiving user can then publicly answer. The original asker can then reblog that entry with another response of their own—we felt Tumblr's ask function was analogous to an exchange of letters. That Tumblr enables users to make their correspondences public mirrors the conventions of the epistolary mode. Although the conversational threads between two Tumblr users are solely between the two of them, the public format allows those who are not in the conversation to "eavesdrop," as readers of epistolary novels eavesdrop on the conversations of the characters. What complicates this "new" epistolary mode is that readers are forced to move back and forth between two different blogs. Readers are also subject to a reversed chronology. Whereas in general, an epistolary novel will progress in an ordinary, linear sense of time, Tumblr publishes the most previous entries first. Readers of *Morrow* must work backwards through time and across various blogs in order to uncover the unifying narrative. In fact, the narrative of *Morrow* is buried beneath blogging paraphernalia—in order to create "realistic" blogs, Natalie and I flooded both Elisa and Agatha's Tumblrs with pictures, quotes, and animated images that communicate the particular personalities and interests of each woman, but did not directly contribute to the overall plot.

The excess of data—the pictures, quotes, animated images—that each woman reblogged, and the meta-data present in their tags mirror excesses of information that

Clark researchers must deal with when handling forgeries or decaying texts. Data excess

is especially salient regarding damaged texts, such as James Boevey's *The Art of*

Decerning [sic] a Man's Selfe as to His Abilities for Action with considerable insectoid

or mammalian bite-marks in its pages, or *Plot upon Plot, a Comedy*, which appears to

have been partially submerged at some point in its history. The physical state of these

books is itself data that yields digital meta-data. Librarians attach information regarding

each book's physicality onto their online listings: like a Tumblr reblog, *The Art of*

Decerning is "tagged" with "Insect or rodent damage at head," and *Plot upon Plot, a*

Comedy is likewise tagged with "Tidelines on title page." Both the data of physical

presence and non-present digital data come together to form an overall cohesive

informational pattern regarding each book. Similarly, the excess of data and meta-data on

Elisa's and Agatha's blogs draw from both non-present digital material, and their own

physical experiences (as Elisa *has* a body and Agatha *desires* one). Like Clark

researchers, readers of *Morrow* have to sift through excess, confusion regarding time, and

confusion regarding location in order to uncover the narrative's overall informational

pattern.

The primary critical idea that we are attempting to engage with in *Morrow* is Jay

Bolter and Richard Grusin's *hypermediacy*. In "Remediation[2]," Bolter and Grusin define

hypermediacy as proliferating remediation: "[t]he logic of hypermediacy calls for

representations of the real that in fact multiply the signs of mediation and in this way try

to reproduce the rich sensorium of human experience" (Bolter and Grusin 329-30).That

---

[2] Remediation refers to a reinterpretation or remaking of one object (physical, textual, or otherwise) into a different medium. For example, *Morrow* might be defined as a remediation of *Frankenstein*.

Agatha and Elisa's blog are so choked with visual representations of their various interests and concerns is meant to evoke a kind of sensory overload. Especially regarding Elisa's blog, which I "handled" throughout the project, her blog contains such a sheer amount of pictures, quotes, fun facts, and clips relating to her interest in the 19th century that it is in fact difficult to find entries that relate directly to *Morrow*'s narrative. That does not mean Elisa's "excess" is unimportant to *Morrow*. One advantage of updating the Gothic epistolary onto Tumblr is that we felt it allowed us to better capture—or remediate—life. An individual's lived experience is necessarily filled with a lot of "excess" that to the critical observer seems unimportant to an objective narrative. Yet the critical observer is actually fashioning a narrative out of what they observe. Those who view Elisa's Tumblr feel they must make sense of it; yet to Elisa it makes perfect sense. Nothing is excess to her, because all of it represents her personal subjectivity, her *own* lived experience.

Through the maintenance of Elisa and Agatha's personal subjectivities, we attempt to take *Frankenstein* a step further. Where the monster fashioned his own subjectivity out of the model pattern of the De Lacey's, and the informational patterns of found text, Elisa and Agatha's personal subjectivity resist the narrative fashioning of the reader. The hypermediacy of their blogs affords them protection; like a firewall, the hypermediacy of links and pictures and reblogs and meta-tags obscures their personal patterns of identity, protecting them from the kinds of investigative scalpels we might see in *Anatomy*. Part of the horror of *Morrow* is meta-horror, in that the text itself seems alive in a stubborn inscrutability.

Another, perhaps more pressing horror of *Morrow* enabled by its Tumblr medium is how it draws the reader into its fictional world. A reader may feel engaged with a book, and may feel as if the book is so seamlessly written that it "feels real," but a reader cannot directly engage with the characters in a book. The reader does not directly witness the landscapes described, and cannot directly partake in the book's action. A narrative on Tumblr, however, can successfully erodes at the boundaries between fictional reality and lived reality. Bolter and Grusin discuss boundary erosion in videogames, claiming,

> [in the videogame *Myst*] the idea is that the players become characters in a cinematic narrative. They have some control over both the narrative itself and the stylistic realization of it, in the sense that they can decide where to go and what to do…They can also decide where to look, where to direct their graphically realized points of view, so that in interactive film, the player is often both actor and director. (Bolter and Grusin 341)

In video games, the players are *part* of the game's narrative, and shape its ultimate course. The integrative nature of video game narrative is taken further in *Morrow*, as the Tumblr platform is more often used for real blogs. Those readers of *Morrow* can engage with the text just as Elisa and Agatha do—they can reblog any of Elisa or Agatha's posts and add their own meta-tags. They can send their own asks to Elisa and Agatha, or intrude upon the womens' conversation by reblogging an ask Elisa sent to Agatha, or vice versa. The reader does not have to be remediated as a character in a video game—they do not have to filter their actions through the fictional world of *Myst*. Rather, simply staying themselves and operating out of their own lived realities, they can become a part of *Morrow*. The reader's actions, interests, and questions enter the same binary matrix that

creates Elisa and Agatha. In a way, the reader recreates Elisa's possession and remediation into a cyber ghost through their own navigation of the narrative.

In a sense, there are no boundaries between the reader and the fictionality of *Morrow*. *Morrow*'s Internet platform allows the reader to directly engage without having to suppose themselves fictional. Hayles cites this direct engagement, these eroding boundaries between real and unreal, as a central concern of posthumanism: "like the landscapes they negotiate, the subjectivities who operate within cyberspace also become patterns rather than physical entities: (Hayles 36). Hayles argues that as social interactions increasingly take place online, as we increasingly dematerialize onto the Internet, we might define ourselves as becoming increasingly posthuman. This construction depends on the supposition that an authentic human experience is necessarily physical—as I have discussed previously, however, the necessity of physicality was already being questioned in the early 19th century by Mary Shelley. Posthuman concerns of the Internet are in fact just updated concerns of science. Hayles posthumans represent body horrors due to transgressions of cybertechnology of the 21st century, just as Shelley's creature represents body horrors due to transgressions of scientific development in the 19th century. Our questioning of authenticity and embodiment is a Gothic concern.

Authenticity and embodiment come into play once more in Internet text-based RPGs (ItRPG). On *Crypsis*, I interact with others as a cyber body. Because *I* am the medium of narration, *Crypsis* and other ItRPGs involve a collapse between reader and narrator, just as they collapse the boundaries of fiction and reality. I encounter other characters and plot events at the same time my character encounters them—although my

identity is mediated through Lionel, we experience and react as one. He is not separate from me, but effectively an extension of my own lived narrative. This involves the same kind of erosion between fictional and real present in *Morrow*, an evolution of the same kind of narrative identities in *Frankenstein*, and an absolute transgression of the *physically* authentic reality proposed in *Anatomy*. All ItRPG players are creating a Frankenstinian text, and are Frankenstinian themselves—their "real-world" identities mesh with their fictional identities, and they incorporate real-world experiences with experiences enjoyed in the game and in meta-discussion with role-playing partners. ItRPGs are participatory and draw you into a world of cyber text, but though they occur online, they are no less real. As Bolter and Grusin assert, "the reality of digital graphics and the World Wide Web is attested to by the web of economic and cultural relationships" (349). ItRPGs lack physical presence, but their binary and narrative patterns elicit real emotional involvement within and between players. ItRPGs offer an answer to Shelley's questions in *Frankenstein*—ItRPGs propose a Gothic future wherein authentic texts and an authentic human experience are no longer rooted to physical presence. The Gothic future of ItRPGs offer us pattern.

And yet the Gothic future of ItRPGs is dependent on the past. ItRPGs commonly use free message boards as their gaming platform. The message board is an archaic social media platform, considerably pre-dating Web 2.0 platforms such as Tumblr. Even before I started playing ItRPGs in 2009, the underlying coding architecture of each ItRPG site I have been on has remained the same. The *bones* of ItRPG—what we might call the gaming genre's *body*—are in Internet terms ancient. Message boards, as ancient structures, suggest a kind of physicality that savvy ItRPG administrators can only dress

up with newer understandings of coding and design. ItRPGs constitute a kind of physical preservation work similar to preservation efforts at the Clark. While the cyber!Gothic future moves towards pattern over presence, it has subsumed the body. In a very classically Gothic haunting, old bodies may yet remain with us.

Cowper's *Anatomy* proposes that patterns create physical presence, and it is through physical presence that texts and human experience are deemed authentic. The detailed anatomical engravings of *Anatomy* represent a commitment to physicality that then becomes warped in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, where pattern, as narrative, begins to supplant the power of presence. In *The Haunting of Elisa Morrow*, pattern becomes more powerful than presence, and readers are encouraged to allow themselves to join the pattern of narrative, through non-physical interactions with the text itself. Internet text-based RPGs, as collaborative and intrinsically Frankenstinian affairs, operate on the premise that physicality is not at all important to authentic text or authentic lived experience. Throughout this paper, I have traced the Gothic evolution of text *and* the understanding of the body. Katherine Hayles concludes her monograph with the comforting assertion that, "the posthuman does not really mean the end of humanity" (286). As we leave our bodies behind, so to speak, we are not losing ourselves. As this paper has hopefully shown, authenticity based on physical means is no richer or more meaningful than authenticity rooted in narrative. Texts and bodies that rely on patterns, rather than physical presence are just as enjoyable, engaging, and thought-provoking as physical books. Traditional constructions of narration and traditional reading experiences need not be the only ones. We should begin moving towards a perspective that sees informational pattern-based approaches just as authentic as presence-based

understandings. Instead of Cowperian scalpel-work, we might consider moving to

embrace what is not embodied. As *Morrow* and ItRPGs synthesize physical presence and

bodiless informational pattern, our academic work should synthesize not only readings of

the body, but also bodiless information. The Gothic genre has always voiced our

concerns regarding ourselves and the world around us, but we survived *Frankenstein*. We

will survive the cyber!Gothic.

Works Cited

Boevey, James. *The art of decerning [sic] a man's selfe as to his abilities for action*.

London: 1666?. Print.

Bolter, J. David, and Richard A Grusin. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*.

Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000. Print.

Chudnovsky, Natalie, and Samantha Lusher. "The Haunting of Elisa Morrow."

http://isleofdrmorrow.tumblr.com/ and http://agitated-lace.tumblr.com/. 2014.

Online.

Cowper, William. *The Anatomy of Humane Bodies with Figures Drawn after the Life by*

Some of the Best Masters in Europe and Curiously Engraven in One Hundred and

Fourteen Copper Plates: Illustrated with Large Explications Containing Many New

Anatomical Discoveries and Chirurgical Observations : To Which Is Added an

Introduction Explaining the Animal Œconomy : With a Copious Index. Oxford:

Printed at the Theater for Sam. Smith and Benj. Walford ... London, 1698. Print.

Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics,*

Lterature, and Informatics. Chicago, Ill. ; London: University of Chicago press,

1999. Print.

Plot upon a plot: a comedy. 17--?

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. Planet eBook, 1818. Pdf.