My abstract for this paper promised an examination of interactive Gothic storytelling in YouTube content. Due to the vast amount of content uploaded to YouTube every day, I have chosen to focus solely on the work of two content creators: Mark Fischbach and Sean McCloughlin, known by their channel names Markiplier and Jacksepticeye. I have chosen to focus on these two creators specifically as they are both amongst the most subscribed channels on the platform, work together collaboratively, and because of the unique ways in which they both respond to and draw influence from their audiences via the interactive nature of the platform.

Both channels are primarily comprised of Let’s Play content, in which creators film themselves playing video games. Very often, this is horror gameplay, featuring franchises such as *Five Nights At Freddy’s*\(^1\), the most popular series on the Markiplier channel and a major influence on the work I am soon to discuss. Both channels also feature other popular YouTube content such as vlogs, comedy sketches and short films, and both creators regularly interact with their audiences through charity livestreams and online Q&A sessions.

Elements of Gothic storytelling have been evident since the inception of both channels, primarily through horror Let’s Plays. However, beginning with Fischbach’s early shorts ‘Don’t Blink’\(^2\) and ‘Don’t Move’\(^3\), both only seconds in length, we often begin to see another mystery figure stalking Fischbach in the shadows, occasionally breaking through to address the audience.

Fans, taking inspiration from other comedy characters played by Fischbach such as Wilford Warfstache, Dr Iplier and Googleplier, quickly named this menacing figure Darkiplier, and soon began to develop the figure in fan art and fiction. Curiously, the character of Antisepticeye, the similarly evil presence played by McLoughlin, did not emerge from the Jacksepticeye channel itself, but as an extension of the Darkiplier fandom. Amongst the YouTube community, the two channels are inextricably linked, due in part to the close friendship and frequent collaborations between the two, and their sizeable shipping community known as Septiplier. Antisepticeye was created by fans as a partner in crime or an erotic possibility for Darkiplier, although the official content created by Fischbach and McLoughlin such as ‘Darkiplier vs Antisepticeye’\(^4\) has their relationship as purely adversarial. This was a conscious decision on behalf of the creators, who in reclaiming the characters, chose to emphasise them as irredeemable abominations rather than characters with erotic potential.

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\(^1\) Cawthon, Scott, *Five Nights At Freddy’s* (USA: Scott Cawthon, 2014)
\(^3\) Fischbach, Mark, *Don’t Move*, 2012 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ubzl18m6d8> [Accessed 30 April 2018]
Before progressing on to how Fischbach and McLoughlin utilise Gothic tropes and interactive techniques in their narratives, I would first like to note a number of key influences on what I am calling ‘YouTube Horror’. The genre of the found footage horror film, such as The Blair Witch Project\(^5\) and Paranormal Activity\(^6\), undoubtedly had an effect on Gothic storytelling in YouTube content. The idea of the video itself being an artifact in a much bigger mystery is utilised in early YouTube horror content such as the ‘Save Marina Joyce’ phenomenon and the increasingly sinister vlogs of lonelygirl15, both of which included fictional Gothic narratives presented as non-fiction content and encouraging audience interaction. Eventually, the medium of YouTube and other such programmes or social media sites returned to traditional horror cinema, with films such as Unfriended\(^7\) or Cyberbully\(^8\) that feature a malevolent presence haunting Skype and manipulating the social media of the protagonists. In the case of Unfriended, the entire film takes place as a recording of the protagonist’s computer screen. Aesthetically, the gimmick of Unfriended bears some similarities with YouTube content, specifically the sub-genre of Let’s Plays, which features a recording of the creator’s computer screen as they play games, with a small webcam recording of the content creator in the corner.

Despite the aesthetic link between found footage horror and YouTube content, specifically vlogs or Let’s Plays, Fischbach and McLoughlin’s work seems more directly inspired by the horror games that made them famous. Five Nights At Freddy’s uses a first person viewpoint that is utilised in much of Fischbach’s fictional content, and McLoughlin even voices a character in another first-person viewpoint horror game, Bendy and the Ink Machine\(^9\). In The Blair Witch Project, the students may address the camera directly, but at no point is the viewer expected to be an active participant in the story. This is not the case with works surrounding Darkiplier and Antisepticeye. In ‘Say Goodbye’\(^10\), Antisepticeye breaks through McLoughlin’s vlog on how to carve a pumpkin and addresses the audience directly, telling them that their YouTube comments discussing Antisepticeye brought him into being. ‘A Date With Markiplier’\(^11\) functions as a real game, with each video segment ending with a choice on which route to pursue, directing the viewer to different videos depending on their choice. Other video game examples with a perhaps more direct thematic and aesthetic influence include Sara Is Missing\(^12\) and Simulacra\(^13\), both of which feature the player interacting with ‘haunted’ technology, in this case a cell phone, and both of which have featured in Let’s Plays on the Markiplier and Jacksepticeye YouTube channels.

One element that separates these works from traditional horror or Gothic storytelling is the ability to incorporate vastly different genres within each episode of the same narrative structure. The story of Darkiplier uses an Agatha Christie-inspired murder mystery in ‘Who Killed Markiplier?’\(^14\), a choose-your-own-adventure tale in ‘A Date With Markiplier’, and an unsettling media satire in

\(^{5}\) Sanchez, Eduardo, and Daniel Myrick, The Blair Witch Project (USA: Haxan, 1999)  
\(^{6}\) Peli, Oren, Paranormal Activity (USA: Blumhouse, 2007)  
\(^{7}\) Gabriadze, Leo, Unfriended (USA: Blumhouse, 2014)  
\(^{8}\) Chanan, Ben, Cyberbully (UK: Channel 4, 2015)  
\(^{9}\) theMeaty et al., Bendy and the Ink Machine (USA: Joey Drew Studios, 2017)  
\(^{10}\) McLoughlin, Sean, SAY GOODBYE.mp4, 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CcGpACOXxMo> [Accessed 30 April 2018]  
\(^{11}\) Fischbach, Mark, A Date With Markiplier, 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yyU_1JD2wuA> [Accessed 30 April 2018]  
\(^{12}\) W., Tim, Sara Is Missing (Malaysia: Kaigan Games, 2015)  
\(^{13}\) W., Tim, Simulacra (Malaysia: Kaigan Games, 2017)  
'Markiplier TV'\textsuperscript{15} which closely mimics the creepy viral hit of Adult Swim’s ‘Too Many Cooks’\textsuperscript{16}. Equally, episodes relating to Antisepticeye include vlogs/instructional videos in ‘Say Goodbye’, Let’s Plays in ‘KILL JACKSEPTICEYE | Bio IRC Redemp ѣôn’\textsuperscript{17} and even Chaplin-esque comedy in ‘Jacksepticeye: The Silent Movie’\textsuperscript{18}. The ability to switch between such disparate genres without jolting the audience out of the narrative is something unique to a medium in which the creators can talk directly to their audience, as during livestreams, the creators regularly discuss their creative decisions with their audience and respond to feedback in real time.

The physical appearance of the characters of Darkiplier and Antisepticeye exploit the medium in which they appear, by warping the video files themselves to create their Gothic image. Without applying these video effects, the characters look fairly mundane: Darkiplier is simply Mark Fischbach wearing eyeliner and a suit, while Antisepticeye is even more simple: a smearing of fake blood across McLoughlin’s neck. Visual and audio effects are then added to have the characters fit the mythology and appearance created by fandom.

Antisepticeye’s presentation is the most straightforward. His name is a play on the YouTube channel name Jacksepticeye. At first, it brings to mind an “antiseptic”, a treatment to prevent infection. Equally, anti could stand for “antivirus”, preventing a major computer error or hack. As such, Antisepticeye is presented visually as both a physical parasite or virus taking over McLoughlin’s body, and a computer virus hacking his YouTube channel and other social media, such as using a rendering named Zalgo, designed to make text resemble broken code, in his tweets and video titles. The word virus also connotes the concept of ‘going viral’, which Neal Kirk discusses in relation to digital ghosts as ‘haunting [becoming] conflated with endemic, apocalyptic contagion.’\textsuperscript{19} Although Antisepticeye is not characterised as a ghost, the threat becomes the sheer size of McLoughlin’s audience, and the collective theorising and belief of 19 million viewers bringing him to life.

When Antisepticeye appears, the screen is awash with a green hue. Not only is green a colour associated with Jacksepticeye through his ‘Septic Eye Sam’ logo, Irish nationality and sometimes green hair, it is also a colour associated with illness and infection, for example the expression "turning green" when someone is feeling sick. Green is also a colour associated with computers due to the overwhelmingly green colour schemes of influential, technology-focused films such as The Matrix\textsuperscript{20}. The screen also glitches whenever Antisepticeye appears, as if there is an error preventing a programme from running properly. In his first official appearance in ‘Say Goodbye’, Antisepticeye is a virus infecting McLoughlin, eventually taking over his mind and compelling him to slit his throat before inhabiting his body. This also invokes a possession or demonic narrative, reinforced by Antisepticeye’s eyes turning black. McLoughlin also manipulates his voice to sound higher and more frantic, as if to mimic a whirring hard-drive struggling to cope with a running programme. Antisepticeye’s appearances are also closely linked with existing horror iconography. In both ‘Say Goodbye’ and ‘Jacksepticeye: The Silent Movie’, he interrupts a Halloween-themed

\textsuperscript{15} Fischbach, Mark, Markiplier TV, 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qv9cv3WRqbA> [Accessed 30 April 2018]
\textsuperscript{16} Kelly, Caspar, Too Many Cooks | Adult Swim, 2014 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QrGrOK8oZG8> [Accessed 22 May 2018]
\textsuperscript{17} McLoughlin, Sean, KILL JACKSEPTICEYE | Bio IRC Redemp ѣôn, 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_AWO1Fryw_Y&t=536s> [Accessed 30 April 2018]
\textsuperscript{20} Wachowski, Lana, and Lilly Wachowski, The Matrix (USA: Warner Bros, 1999)
pumpkin-carving vlog, while in the Let’s Play ‘KILL JACKSEPTICEYE | Bio INC Redemp Şen’, he appears when McLoughlin (performing as another comedy character, Dr. Schneepelsteen) fails to keep the character of Jacksepticeye alive in an emergency room-themed video game. In this instance, Antisepticeye possesses Dr. Schneepelsteen to become the recognisable ‘Mad Scientist’.

Darkiplier’s origin and nature is much more complex, and therefore his appearance is much less linked to established connotations of colour or visual effect in horror. The fact that audiences cannot categorise him as a specific creature, unlike Antisepticeye’s virus narrative, allowed fans to project their own interpretations onto the character, many of which were romantic or sexual in nature. Prior to ‘Who Killed Markiplier?’, Darkiplier’s physical appearance was based on how fans had depicted Darkiplier in fan art (such as the use of eyeliner), along with a direct copy of the suit worn by Fischbach for the “date” in ‘A Date With Markiplier’ designed to make the character appear sexually alluring. Darkiplier is a monochrome figure, who manipulates the RGB layers of the video around him, so that his outline has a blue and red hue and his face is somewhat out of focus. In some appearances, he is towered over by a large, red recreation of himself, created by scaling up the red layer. In ‘A Date With Markiplier’, Fischbach recognises Darkiplier’s reputation in fandom as a desirable figure and makes him one of the options to date. It is only when the viewer/player selects Darkiplier as an option that expectations are subverted. He is not a romantic anti-hero but a figure of pure evil and torment, described by Fischbach in a livestream commentary as ‘this weird interdimensional person that seems human but is obviously not, and doesn’t obey by the laws of physics, and is just this shell of a person that’s in a suit, not a [clothes] suit but literally a human suit, and is trying to figure out how to puppet it right so that you believe him.’

Fischbach also clarified that he used Darkiplier in this series specifically to put a stop to his romanticism in the fandom, by making him as evil as it is possible to be, stating ‘I wanted this to come across in a seductive way while also masking this burning rage inside that breaks through the suave nature of it. That was my clue to reveal he is not your friend, he’s not here to help you, he’s here to use you […] he seems like someone you can trust, and he will manipulate you and take advantage of you, and literally use you. To me, that’s terrifying.’

‘Who Killed Markiplier?’ provides the answers not only to Darkiplier’s origins, but the reason for his appearance. In the series, the character Markiplier, as opposed to Fischbach himself, is revealed to be an immortal figure. When his body dies, his soul possesses another, trapping the soul of the possessed person in a black void known as ‘the spirit of the house’. The house in question is a typical haunted mansion of Gothic origin complete with a groundskeeper who warns of ever entering the building, set in a secluded location on a dark and stormy night, and the mystery pulls from the stereotypes of generic detective narratives found in games like Cluedo, with characters such as The Butler, The Chef, The Mayor, The Colonel and The Detective. The series is also filmed from the perspective of the viewer, with the actors addressing the camera directly, although unlike ‘A Date With Markiplier’, there are no choices for the viewer to make. In this series, Fischbach plays three characters: Mark, the Mayor Damien, and the Colonel, who is revealed to be the younger version of Fischbach’s other murderous alter-ego, Wilford Warfstache. Doppelgangers are present in many of Fischbach’s sketches due to his array of characters created across his career, and also a lack of resources meaning that he often has to play multiple roles in his own work. In the sketch ‘Markiplier TV’, all of these alter-egos, including Darkiplier, appear together as board members of the production company headed by Warfstache, all used for comic effect. However, in ‘Who Killed

21 Fischbach, Mark, Markiplier’s February 2017 Charity Livestream!!, 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_mlW_fP76s&t=14860s> [Accessed 30 April 2018]
22 Ibid.
Markiplier?’, the Gothic possibilities of the doppelganger are fully exploited. The Doppelganger ‘describes a duality of the self in which a shadow, or an alter-ego, manifests itself to the original subject, and the subject has a simultaneous consciousness of being both his present self and the external other observing himself.’ When Mark is murdered, he takes possession of the body of Damien, trapping his spirit in the void. During the investigation into his murder, the spirit of Celine, a Seer who is Mark’s ex and the Colonel’s current lover, is also trapped. The viewer, who remains unseen, is later accidentally killed by the Colonel, also trapping his spirit. Within the void, we see the reason for Darkiplier’s manipulation of RGB layers in the video image. Damien’s soul is coloured blue, while Celine’s is red. With Damien’s body stolen by Mark, he and Celine have the idea to, along with the viewer, share possession of the viewer’s body to exact their revenge, as unlike Mark, they do not singularly possess the strength to escape the void. The viewer agrees and wakes up in his own body.

When he looks in the mirror, we see for the first time that the viewer is another doppelganger of Mark, surrounded by a red and blue aura symbolising the possession by Damien and Celine. Unknown to them, the evil spirit of the house has also possessed the viewer. This, combined with Damien’s and Celine’s thirst for revenge, corrupts the soul and forms a being of pure evil. The innocent spirit of the viewer is pushed out and trapped in the mirror. This strips the physical body of its colour, creating the monochrome figure with separated red and blue layers that then comes to be known as Darkiplier. By taking possession of another of Mark’s doubles, Darkiplier has ‘manifest itself to the original subject’ but unlike dualities of good and evil often seen in doppelganger narratives, the four figures of Markiplier, Darkiplier, the corrupted Damien and the Colonel/Wilford Warfstache are all figures of evil to different extents. Again, the horror of the doppelganger ‘is produced at the recognition of seeing oneself from an external position, in the realization that a tragic figure that the subject has been observing is actually that of his own.’ The perspective character, represented by the camera, is horrified to realise that he is another of Mark’s doubles, and for the viewer, the climactic shock of the series is that the character they have been observing and participating as has been Darkiplier all along. From this revelation, we are to assume that the Mark Fischbach we see in his regular content is Markiplier in Damien’s body, and that Darkiplier is Damien, Celine and the house spirit seeking to destroy him. Meanwhile, the viewer’s body rising again convinces the Colonel that death is not permanent, turning him into the psychopathic Wilford Warfstache who kills with no remorse. We are also led to believe that Mark has stolen a number of bodies before, and that these may have all been further doppelgangers.

One of the key techniques used by both creators is the idea of interactive storytelling across a variety of media platforms. The arrival of Antisepticeye in a video is signposted through McLoughlin’s twitter. Text is manipulated using the Zalgo rendering, and the content of the tweets includes veiled threats such as ‘STILL WATCHING’. Additionally, McLoughlin changes his profile image to resemble a glitch. Twitter users are encouraged to respond to and interact with the Antisepticeye character on the twitter account. This fits into the established mythology that Antisepticeye is brought into existence by the audience believing in him and saying his name. The continuing use of the character in McLoughlin’s work is directly influenced by the theories being discussed by his fans on social media platforms. At his appearance at the convention PAX East in 2017, McLoughlin proceeded his panel with a video asking the attending audience to simultaneously

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24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.
take a photo on their phones. Once again, this direct action by the gathered audience brings out Antisepticeye, reminding the audience that he is always there and using McLoughlin as his puppet.

While McLoughlin uses social media as a form of interactive storytelling, Fischbach is more ambitious and inspired by video games and choice-based narratives. In 'A Date With Markiplier', the viewer enters into a choose-your-own-adventure narrative, with each video ending in a choice as to which story route to pursue next. The series has ten separate endings, with two relating to Darkiplier: one in which he is temporarily defeated and the player continues their date with Mark, and another in which the player is trapped with Darkiplier forever. Equally, Fischbach uses social media as a way of continuing his narrative, such as the example of the tumblr post on the screen in which he blames his audience for bringing Darkiplier into being, stating, 'For the people picking Darkiplier as their favorite character of mine... I don’t know who Darkiplier is. He is not a “character” I play. I don’t even know when you all started calling him by that name. You made him real. And now he knows who you are. Why did you do this...'

These are possibly the only instances of true interactive storytelling concerning the character of Darkiplier. His other major appearances include 'Markiplier TV' and 'Darkiplier vs Antisepticeye', which are both sketches with no breaking of the fourth wall or addressing the audience. However, 'Who Killed Markiplier?' creates the illusion of interactivity. Like 'A Date With Markiplier', the viewer is made a character in the story, as the actors address the camera directly as if it were a person. Still, in this instance, there is no element of choice - the viewer passively watches the events unfold with no opportunity to influence the narrative. This may reflect the viewer character's ultimate fate: trapped in a mirror with no way to warn Mark or the Colonel of Darkiplier's oncoming rampage of revenge.

There are many avenues still to be explored through this research, such as the later acknowledgement by the creators that these characters are fictional, the overt use of gothic parody in 'Darkiplier vs Antisepticeye', and the influence of the works on both other YouTube creators and on fans, who have developed their own extensions of these narratives with fangames that have later been played on the Markiplier and Jacksepticeye channels. However, in this presentation I hope to have introduced the aesthetic and interactive elements that separate YouTube horror from more traditional forms of Gothic storytelling.