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"LAVENDER TOWN SYNDROME" CREEPYPASTA: A RATIONAL NARRATION OF THE SUPERNATURAL

Abstract: *Creepypastas* are horror-related legends spread on the Internet from anonymous or identified sources. Haunted or bewitched technologies are one of the key themes of creepypastas and can be encountered, for example, in stories such as the "Lavender Town Syndrome" creepypastas according to which a specific and early version of *Pokémon Green* and *Red* video games led children to suicide. *Creepypastas* are always told as true; they use specific markers of the journalistic discourse and references to textual, visual, or sound documents to authenticate themselves. The focus of this paper will be on the different strategies creepypastas use to gain their readers' trust, get them to believe the unbelievable by rational means and create stories in which the mysterious mechanisms and flaws of video games and social media are explored and amplified, creating powerful myths in the forms of memes which are collectively rewritten.

Keywords: creepypasta, video games, haunted media, technophobia, binaural beats, *Pokémon Red* and *Blue*, rational narration, horror

Creepypastas are horror-related legends spread on the Internet from anonymous or identified sources. Like urban legends, creepypastas are always told as true and use specific narrative techniques to convince their readers: they often mimic the specific markers of the journalistic discourse. They refer, in particular, to a set of textual, visual, and audio documents to authenticate themselves and aggregate direct speech quotations from these documents or characters from different professional, social, or scientific fields. Creepypastas are also collective stories rather than stories told by individuals; they are often recreated, extended by the addition of a new approach or materials.

The events documented by these materials are always horrific and, more or less, paranormal or even supernatural. Traditional figures, such as ghosts or the Bogeyman, are often integrated into stories which take place in the digital space. This surprising association can, of course, be explained by the fact that creepypastas were born and spread on the Web; but they can also be read as an expression of a certain disillusion about technology, expressed in stories where all its possible failures are amplified. This disillusion can be encountered in popular shows like *Black Mirror* which are, paradoxically, aimed at the audiences of these technologies' users and rely on "insider" knowledge. In creepypastas, the failures of technologies, such as video game glitches,[1] are an open gate to the ghost world and to manipulations of the human mind. Haunted technologies and the capacity of inert or virtual media such as audio, video files, or video games to manipulate or curse their listeners and viewers are also a common literary motif in creepypastas. In the following chapter, the focus will be on the different strategies creepypastas use to gain their readers' trust, get them to believe the unbelievable, and provoke fear by creating stories where haunted or bewitched media can take control of their readers, listeners, or players (Cooley and Milligan 2018: 197), at a time marked by the progression of rational thought. The "Lavender Town Syndrome" creepypasta example, a set of stories involving *Pokémon Green* and *Red*[2] video games, will be particularly developed.

1. THE "LAVENDER TOWN SYNDROME" CREEPYPASTA

The "Lavender Town Syndrome" (often abbreviated "LTS") is a popular belief amongst the Pokémon players of the first versions of *Pokémon Green* and *Red* video games, released in Japan in 1996. It is said to have triggered severe neurological, psychological, and physical symptoms, and led hundreds of children to suicide. This belief is supported by a series of creepypastas, which appeared in 2010 (New Age Retro Hippie and Tibbets 2010).

[1] A glitch is "a small problem or fault that prevents something from being successful or working as well as it should" (*Cambridge Dictionary* online). Applied to video games, glitches can distort the graphics of the game and create strange playing experiences, such as Glitch City in *Pokémon* first generation of video games.

[2] *Pokémon Green* and *Pokémon Red* are the names of the first Pokémon video games released in Japan in 1996. In the rest of the world, the game was released under the name of *Pokémon Blue* and *Pokémon Red* in 1999. There are only minor changes between each "color," mainly in the Pokémon species present in each game; the aim was to stimulate Pokémon trade between players, one of the mechanisms that contributed to the game's popularity and novelty.

The first one appeared on Pastebin on February 21, 2010 (DannoW 2010) and on 4chan's paranormal board on March 3, 2010. Entitled "Come Follow Me," this long and complex creepypasta argues that a rare glitch, secretly inserted by a programmer absent from the game's credits, allows a wild Pokémon to attack the player in the first steps of the early versions of *Pokémon Green* and *Red*, when the player does not have any Pokémon to defend himself. This glitch would also have triggered the mass children's suicides in Japan in 1996. Right after he played with one of the cartridges that contained it, the detective who investigated this conspiracy came into contact with his deceased wife and son through the game, and saw all the players the game had murdered as ghosts. He ended up killing himself. According to the creepypasta, all the corrupted cartridges were destroyed, but "the code was said to have survived and was even passed on to other language versions of the games."

Unlike "Come Follow Me," all the other "Lavender Town Syndrome" creepypastas link the children's suicides directly to one music piece of the game: the Lavender Town tone. Lavender Town is one of the cities the player has to explore during their quest. Its gloomy atmosphere and the fact that it is the only place where death is openly discussed in the game sets Lavender Town apart from the rest of the first Pokémon versions' towns, intended for a young audience. The Pokémon Tower, which dominates the city, is a huge mausoleum, the only place where the player can find ghost-type Pokémon. The Lavender Town music is also very different from the rest of the soundtrack: it has its own theme, monotonous and sad. The early version of this song supposedly contained special "frequencies," "binaural beats" or "high-pitched frequencies" only audible to children that, intently or not, would have caused several psychological disturbances and/or have led them to suicide.

According to "Lavender Town and Pokémon 731" (originally known as "Decoding the Mystery of 'Lavender Town Syndrome' and the 'Lavender Tone'"), the mass children suicides were triggered by a *Pokémon* programmer, who secretly sought to "program" young players' minds for military purposes and failed to reach his goal. Appearing in July 11, 2010 ("Decoding the Mystery of 'Lavender Town Syndrome' and the 'Lavender Tone'" 2010), this creepypasta also described a special and creepy Pokémon, Pokémon 731, which would have appeared in the corrupt cartridges. This special Pokémon inspired fans' art (graphic designs or videos with text) and the creation of the three new creatures linked to the Lavender Town Syndrome: White Hand, Buried Alive, and the Ghost Animation or Haunting.swf, whose description resembles the

description of Pokémon 731. The "Lavender Town and Pokémon 731" and these 3 creations are, in some versions, mixed together (Nukem 2011).

Appearing on July 26, 2010 on Pastebin, "Lavender Town Red" argues, this time, that the *Pokémon* creator Satoshi Taijiri is responsible for the children's suicides ("Lavender Town Red" 2010). The Lavender Town tone's harmful version would only be present in the Red version of the game and linked to the *Pokémon* creator's childhood traumas, all involving the red color.

"The Missing Frequencies" is a creepypasta posted on blogs and YouTube with a video or an audio file called "lavender.wav." Its earliest version is dated to August 25, 2010 (Inunah 2010). Unlike other "Lavender Town Syndrome" creepypastas, "The Missing Frequencies" is not focused on the Lavender Town tone origins, but on the story of an aspiring sound designer who reconstructed the Lavender Town tone as it had been originally designed and died after listening to the result. We can assume that after its spreading as a written story, the Lavender Town Syndrome creepypastas have invested the audio, video, and video game mediums, trying to reconstruct the gaming experiences of the original creepypastas.

According to Google Trends, the interest in the "Lavender Town Syndrome" reached its peak in July 2012, and the Lavender Town name is now linked to these stories ("'Lavender Town Syndrome' on Google Trends" 2020). Lavender Town's *Wikipedia* page mentions the "LTS" almost from the moment of its creation in December 2016 ("Lavender Town" 2020), and the research interest's curves for "Lavender Town" and "Lavender Town Syndrome" in Google trends follow a similar trajectory as the "Lavender Town Syndrome" has become one of the most popular *Pokémon* "urban legends."

Apart from the true Lavender Town creepy music and the city's atmosphere, a true event probably fed into the "Lavender Town Syndrome" belief: after the broadcasting of a *Pokémon* TV cartoon in 1997, "up to 12,000 Japanese children reported illnesses ranging from nausea to seizures" (Radford 2001), including 700 requiring hospitalizations. The symptoms were, firstly, interpreted as the cases of photosensitive epilepsy (PSE) induced by a flashing light segment in the episode, during a fight between Pokémon Pikachu and Porygon. As noted by Benjamin Radford in a *Skeptical Inquirer* article, this event took place gradually and was probably amplified by the first cases' strong media coverage. This mediatization caused the second wave of the reported symptoms amongst children and new incidents as the television rebroadcast the flashing light extract. According to Radford, the most commonly reported symptoms were closer to those described in the cases of

collective hysteria than photosensitive epilepsy (PSE). The low epidemiology of PSE, however, led Radford to conclude that most of the affected children had suffered from mass hysteria rather than epilepsy. The impact of what we know as the "Pokémon Shock" was international, and led to parodies in popular TV shows, such as *The Simpsons*. In "30 Minutes Over Tokyo" (1999), the Simpson family starts to convulse while watching a TV program called *Battling Seizure Robots* during their trip to Japan.

2. A RATIONAL NARRATION

Creepypastas are often described as "horror-related legends that have been copied and pasted around the Internet" ("Creepypasta" 2020), or "short horror fictions and urban legends mainly distributed through word of mouth via online message boards or e-mail" (New Age Retro Hippie and Tibbets 2010). Like urban legends and rumours, these creepy Internet stories are always told as true, and they use *attributions* to authenticate the message.

As Michel-Louis Rouquette says, rumours "refer to a fact which is not immediate and concomitant to its transmission: its object is shifted in time and, often, in space in relation to the receiver. Therefore, the content of rumours is unverifiable directly. … [This] unverifiability is compensated by the *attribution*, which is the addition of a source's indication to the message (translated by the author)" (1990).

Rouquette distinguishes between two types of attribution in rumours: undetermined attribution ("I heard that") and determined attribution, often to a high-placed source ("My brother knows somebody close to the President, and the President said to this person that …"). "The fundamental trait of these two modes is the absence of the immediate link between the original source and the person who relays the information" (Rouquette 1975: 84).

More direct attributions can be observed in *hoaxes*, or Internet rumors, where the information is shared in a document copied and pasted, and directly attributed to a high-placed source or institution (Campion-Vincent and Manzinali 2020). Originally, creepypastas were close to this phenomenon. The word "creepypasta" appeared in 2007 as an Internet slang expression derived from "copypasta" which designates "any block of text that gets copied and pasted over and over again, typically disseminated by individuals through online discussion forums and social networking sites," according to *Know Your Memes* ("Creepypasta" 2009). "Creepypasta" is a portmanteau of the words "creepy" and "copypasta." Creepypastas were anonymously shared

in online communities such as 4chan, before the appearance of structured communities and websites dedicated to this genre,[3] where the users can post new stories under pseudonyms.

However, if urban legends and rumors are mostly attributed to a single source, creepypastas, as we know them today, are based on a complex intertext. They use, for example, direct speech quotations to authenticate a story, which keeps them away from urban legends. Some of the Lavender Town stories are, thus, presented as informative articles or posts ("Come Follow Me," "Lavender Town and Pokémon 731," "Lavender Town Red"), sometimes accompanying a video document ("Pocket Monsters Green Beta: Lavender Town Music").

These specific creepypastas use the markers of journalistic discourse. As rumors, the pieces of information relayed by the media are unverifiable directly, they are reconstructed by a journalist who questions and confronts different witnesses of an event, or examines documents to answer to the traditional Five Ws and How (Who, What, When, Where, Why, How) questions. The intensive use of quotation marks aims to remove the reporter's presence, to advance the elements that support evidence, or to present the conflicting points of view; clear distinction between facts and opinion, the presence of factual data throughout the text, and the prioritization of sources characterizes journalistic writing, as crystallized in the 19th century (Tuchman 1972: 660–679; Neveu 2019: 63–78). These sets of rules mark journalistic discourse as *objective* for its readers and suggest that "it's the facts that speak and not the subjectivity of the narrator (translated by the author)" (Neveu 2019: 65). It also acts as a protection ritual against the risks of journalists' trade, where the speed of the information processing collides with the fact-checking necessity (Tuchman 1972: 675–678).

The rich intertextuality of some Lavender Town creepypastas (especially "Lavender Town and Pokémon 731," "Come Follow Me," and "Lavender Town Red"), the interconnecting of multiple sources, mimics the polyphonic discourse of journalistic stories which aggregates direct speech quotations from different professional, social, or scientific fields.

As some other creepypastas, "Come Follow Me" begins with the "LTS" description, mentioning the victims' age range or symptoms with the coldness and impersonality of medical records:

[3] See for example: https://creepypasta.fandom.com/wiki/Creepypasta_Wiki (English); https://creepypastafromthecrypt.blogspot.com/ (French).

> During the first few days of the release of *Pokémon Red* and *Green* in Japan, back in February 27, 1996, a peak of deaths appeared in the age group of 10–15.
>
> The children were usually found dead by suicide, usually by hanging or jumping from heights. However, some were odder. A few cases recorded children who had begun sawing off their limbs, others sticking their faces inside the ovens, and choking themselves on their own fists, shoving their own arms down their throats.
>
> The few children who were saved before killing themselves showed sporadic behavior.

"Lavender Town and Pokémon 731" attributes similar information to an internal report "made in June 1996 by the company Game Freak Inc. (株式会社ゲームフリーク), which was then leaked by one of its former employees, Ms. Satou Harue. In it, an employee gives a list of names, dates, and symptoms—the records of the children between the ages of seven and twelve who had suffered various medical problems as a result of playing Pocket Monsters Red and Green versions…" An extract of this supposed document is cited:

> 京极勝女; April 12, 1996 (11)
>
> Obstructive sleep apnea, severe migraines, otorrhagia, tinnitus. Attacked a police officer near a government building, and was killed.

We can guess that the creepypastas' full and precise symptoms description seems to mimic similar descriptions which could have been read in the press articles during the "Pokémon Shock" mentioned in the first part of this chapter, such as in the issue of *New York Times* from December 18, 1997*:*

> Victims said they got headaches or felt nauseated. Others said they felt groggy or carsick. Some victims recovered within an hour, while others were put in intensive care with breathing difficulties. Most victims were children, but some adults were also affected and some spent the night in the hospital. (Wudunn 1997)

The Game Freak internal report is presented as one of the key sources of the "Lavender Town and Pokémon 731" creepypasta, followed by an interview with Satou Harue. This meeting allowed the narrator to access a personal letter which proved the involvement of Ms. Harue's husband, named Ken Nakamura, in the Lavender Town Conspiracy and explained his motivation.

In "Come Follow Me," this attachment to a story grounded in sourced facts goes deeper. To switch to a direct-speech dialogue without being suspected of having invented the exact words, the narrator introduces the sequence of the meeting with Sousuke Tamada as an "unedited" transcription from "a voice recorder sitting on the table in front of the two detectives." Throughout the sequence, the listeners are reminded of the materiality of this medium:

> A shot could be heard, loud enough to distort the audio. Sounds of screaming, murmuring could be heard. The table the recorder was on crashed. Ear shattering distortions. Silence. Then laughing. Sousuke was laughing, and then words. "Come follow me … Come follow me …" And then nothing.

Thanks to this strategy, the narration maintains its fluidity without renouncing to the external point of view. As one of the leading French websites on creepypastas, *Creepypastas from the crypt*, notes in its FAQ, the omniscient point of view is very rare in creepypastas and would obviously threaten their plausibility ("Creepypasta from the Crypt: FAQ" n.d.). If the creepypasta sticks to this external point of view, the end of the story is, however, characterized by a rupture in the narration alongside the descriptions of ghosts seen by the detective; as if the omniscient point of view is only possible in this altered version of reality.

As in journalistic stories, a source can sometimes lead to wrong tracks or be questioned by the narrator:

> The article[4] also mentions a "Ghost Animation" which appears throughout the tower. […] While the rest of the paragraph itself is fiction (No such "Games Commission Board" ever held the programmers on trial) there is some truth behind this "Ghost Animation". In the recalled first edition of the games in which the Lavender Town Tone was present, hidden in the game's code is an unnamed Pokémon only identified by its assigned number – 731. ("Lavender Town and Pokémon 731")

This distance reminds the investigator of a journalist's duty: to contextualize every piece of information, check its reliability, and use it to complete the puzzle.

These fictitious quotations, beyond serving to authenticate and document the different elements of a story, and presenting the narrator as a serious and conscientious investigator, can produce a similar effect of an argumentative mille-feuille on the reader, whose mechanisms are well-described by Gérald

[4] It is not known if the article commented by this creepypasta truly exists since there is no external link or reference that would have helped to find it.

Bronner in *La Démocratie des crédules* (Bronner 2013: 87–113). According to the sociologist, conspiracy theories have become participatory stories with the development of the Internet: thanks to the Web's memory, each Internet user can provide an element of proof to a collective story potentially containing an unlimited number of elements, each one supporting a given belief. The superposition of these elements makes conspiracy theories harder to debunk, as well as it gives the impression of a beam of evidence to the reader.

Creepypastas are also collective stories, based on a complex set of sources or clues. Their participatory aspect works in the following way: the fictitious documents cited in a story are materially created in another one. The "Lavender Tone, which is supposed to be responsible for the *Pokémon* players' suicides, can be played as an audio file in "The missing frequencies." This last creepypasta is centered on the story of an aspiring sound engineer who had found "a rare rip[5] of the music from the first distributed batch of the Japanese-exclusive Green version," and the missing frequencies the Lavender music had been supposed to be mixed with: "binaural tones" as he had written in the "lavender.wav" (the name of the supposed file) metadata before being found dead. Like a never-ending circle, other videos posted on YouTube have recreated the "lavender.wav" spectrogram, which looks like a ghost (mintraw 2011).

These fictitious quotations are mixed with true background elements, often based on "insider" knowledge or video game players' collective memory or experiences (Crawford 2018: 86–88). "Lavender Town Red" is based, for example, on a true element of the *Pokémon*'s creator biography: the fact that Satoshi Taijiri was passionate about insects as a child, a piece of information known by many *Pokémon* fans.

"Come Follow Me" contains a video game description echoing every *Pokémon* players' experience, and "Lavender Town and Pokémon 731" mentions a glitch which is also known by many players. In the true *Pokémon* game, this glitch allows the players to capture high-level Pokémon near Cinnabar Island. But the creepypasta adds a tip which is supposed to help him or her see a hidden Pokémon which looks like a "ghost sprite" (the generic appearance of all the ghost-type Pokémon in the real game, before the player finds the "Silph Scope," an object used to identify and catch them). This "Ghost Sprite" animation, however, contains some disturbing flashing pictures. One of these pictures represents the Imperial Japanese flag with

[5] A "rip" designates the extraction of an audio or video content as a digital file.

the two kanji symbols that mean "Emperor"—a significant element when we know Ken Nakurama's intention to "program" young players, turn them into warriors and create a "Great Imperial Japanese Nation."

Creepypastas use these usual game experiences and well-known glitches to introduce disturbing elements and question the fallibility of digital technologies. The pleasure of playing video games lies in the immersive universes they create. But here also lie all the fears we have about them: fears of addiction, violent behaviour, epileptic seizures, changes in personality induced by the simple act of playing. These fears are grounded in the disenchantment of technologies in Western societies. We understand that science and progress are not always compatible with the common good. In the case of video games, we also see and understand only the surface but not the code, these magical words that create the universes we interact with. What if a programmer or a ghost corrupts or uses this code to control our minds, surreptitiously?

3. BEWITCHED TECHNOLOGIES AND THE MIND CONTROL FEAR

Like many other video game creepypastas, the "Lavender Town Syndrome" stories are based on an old *Pokémon* version rather than a new one and contain details which are only understandable to the *Pokémon Green* (or *Blue*) and *Red* player. Since the first versions of the game were released 15 years before these stories, we can guess that the intended reader of the "Lavender Town Syndrome" creepypastas is the older *Pokémon* player, now a young adult. "The Missing Frequencies" plays, in particular, with this older player's nostalgia by introducing the two main characters as childhood friends who grew up with the successive *Pokémon* versions. Now a young adult, the narrator's friend tries to convince his childhood mate to play their old *Pokémon Red* cartridges before becoming obsessed with Lavender Town and its music; an obsession that will lead him to death.

Even though the *Pokémon* franchise is still active—in 2010, it was already in its fifth generation of video games; eighth in 2020, and a successful smartphone app, *Pokémon Go*, a billion times downloaded on stores, the first generation represented by *Pokémon Blue/Green* and *Red* is more prone to inspire Internet legends. With technological acceleration, its graphics already seems to belong to a distant past, and the games, edited on an outdated system, have long been inaccessible on new devices;[6] they continued to exist

[6] First generation *Pokémon* games have been available for download on the penultimate Nintendo game console, Nintendo 3DS, since 2016. Before that, the games were

mainly in the fans' childhood memories and are considered now as cult and nostalgic objects.

Creepypastas create an unpleasant contrast between joyful childhood memories, encapsulated in these artefacts, and the danger it supposedly hides which the players never perceived as children (Cooley and Milligan 2018: 193–211). This extreme contrast is close to an urban legend motif highlighted by the sociologist Jean-Bruno Renard (Campion-Vincent and Renard 1992: 202), the "danger hidden in everyday objects," where a seemingly harmless object, used by children or innocent people, contains a mortal danger. According to the sociologist, "the effect is all the more spectacular [since] the two juxtaposed terms belong to opposite universes of meaning." Video games such as *Pokémon*, which provide immersive experiences, are perceived as possible ways for a malevolent programmer or entity to control our minds and lead us to madness or suicide.

3.1. Mind Control

This view is present in the *Polybius* urban legend, which surfaced in late 1990s on the Web, and it is now considered to be a creepypastas' precursor. *Polybius* is an arcade game whose existence has never been proven. According to the legend, the video game caused amnesia and terrible nightmares in players, and its installation in arcades allegedly corresponded to the arrival of men in black in Portland in 1981. These men were supposedly governmental agents testing mind control techniques on video game players. Brian Dunning (2013) links this legend to the two events that occurred in Portland in 1981 and were reported by the press: the discomfort and headache of the teenagers who stayed for hours playing in the same arcade, followed by the visit, ten days later, of FBI agents investigating a gambling affair. These events happened at a time when epileptic seizures induced by video games were highly mediatized and fed into a general debate about the negative effects of video games.

The mind control fear is a conspiracy theories' classic theme. Many of these theories mention the existence of MK-Ultra (1953–1964), a program developed by the CIA to experiment mind control and brainwashing techniques, particularly by the use of LSD doses on guinea pigs. If the objectives were worthy of a conspiracy theory (weaken the individuals to force confessions or lead them to act against their will, etc.), Véronique Campion-

only accessible in ripped and hacked versions playable on computers, or thanks to secondhand Game Boy cartridges which, unfortunately, could not save the player's progress because of their obsolete backup batteries.

Vincent observes that the results were very limited and unpredictable, making mind control impossible to achieve on individuals. Many aspects of this program are, still today, highly fantasized, especially the idea that the CIA can program murderers through mind control (Campion-Vincent 2007: 113–125). This idea is present in "Lavender Town and Pokémon 731" where the Lavender Town music is used by one of the game's programmers to turn children into warriors.

However, other "Lavender Town Syndrome" stories are further from the universe of conspiracy theories. Mind control techniques are used by single and unstable programmers, in order to take revenge on their childhood traumas ("Lavender Town Red") or for no specific reason. They always act against the will of their development studio, which ignores their intentions and only intervenes afterwards to cover up the scandal. We never face mega-conspiracies, conspiracies involving institutions or linking different circles of power, three elements common in the conspiracy theories of today (Tangherlini et al. 2020; Campion-Vincent 2007: 7–25).

"Lavender Town Syndrome" stories seem, instead, closer to the rumors like "Momo Challenge" or "Blue Whale Challenge" which illustrate the fallibility of new technologies and their possible misappropriation. In the "Blue Whale" story, mediatized in 2016:

> Curators induced teenagers to commit suicide using special techniques of "psychological manipulation" – forcing them to wake up at 4.20 in the morning, to watch scary videos that contain an encoded call for suicide, and to listen to dark music. As a result of these techniques, a teenager allegedly will lose his or her will and become an obedient puppet of these "curators," and then commit suicide. (Arkhipova and Kirziuk 2020)

In these two challenges, WhatsApp private messaging app or social network groups are used by the "curators" to reach digital native users who do not perceive the dangers hidden in virtual spaces. What turned out to be an unfounded rumor was, contrary to "Lavender Town Syndrome" creepypastas, partly spread by panicked parents or school institutions who do not understand and control what their children do and who they talk to through these social media.

In Lavender Town stories, malevolent programmers do not come directly into contact with their young victims, but they use two powerful means to control or make them lose their minds: the Lavender Town music in itself and/or a hidden code inserted in the video game's code, which sometimes has a specific name:

This song is labeled as "hidoi" in the coding, which is the Romanization of "ひどい" (meaning "horrible" or "cruel"), only can be heard in the very early Japanese release of Pocket Monsters Red. ("Lavender Town Red")

3.2. The Hidden Powers of Music

Five "Lavender Town Syndrome" stories presented in this paper out of six are, indeed, focused on the supposed powers of the Lavender Town music. As it has already been stated, Lavender Town music stands out in the *Pokémon* soundtrack by its monotonous and sad theme, while all the other *Pokémon* songs are joyful and epic. These five stories mention "binaural beats" or "high pitched-frequencies," only audible to children and secretly hidden on purpose.

According to *Wikipedia*, "binaural beat is an auditory illusion perceived when two different pure-tone sine waves, both with frequencies lower than 1500 Hz, with less than a 40 Hz difference between them, are presented to a listener dichotically (one through each ear) ("Beat (Acoustics)" 2020)". By the end of the 2000s, binaural beats became a phenomenon thanks to *I-Doser*, an application which still sells audio files called "doses" with evocative drug names such as "cocaine," "alcohol," or "hand of God". *I-Doser* promises mind or mental improvement and experiences close to drug consumption, depending on the chosen "dose." This phenomenon led to numerous articles in the press wondering about the effects of this so-called "legal drug." In France, most of these articles were published in 2010, and bear evocative titles such as "Les 'drogues numériques' sous surveillance" [Electronic drugs under surveillance] in *Aujourd'hui en France*, "Inquiétudes sur de supposées drogues numériques" [Concerns about the so-called numerical drugs] in *Le Figaro*, or "Des ondes stupéfiantes" [Stupefying[7] sound-waves] in *L'Express*. The question has also been referred to on the French National Drug Information Center website since 2013 (Drogues Info Service 2013). According to the website's FAQ, there is no scientific evidence on the effects of binaural beats although these "digital drugs" have been under the Interministerial mission on drug and toxicomania's surveillance since 2008. This conclusion is shared by a *Medical News Today* review on the potential binaural beats therapeutic effects (Gonzales 2019).

[7] A word play on "stupéfiant," which means "stupefying" as an adjective, and "illegal drugs" as a noun in French.

This concern about binaural beats is reminiscent of the 1970–1980 back-masking panic in the USA. Popularized in the 1960s, the technique of back-masking in music, the recording of a sound or a message backward onto a track led some American Christian fundamentalists to alert the public on the danger of hidden subliminal satanic messages in pop and rock music in the 1970s, 1980s, and later (Blecha 2004: 39–58). According to these fundamentalists, these messages would infiltrate insidious ideas and messages into the listeners' minds, only perceptible by their subconscious, influencing their behavior and attracting them to Satan's path.

The hidden power of music is a recurring theme in myths and folktales. In the famous *Pied Piper of Hamelin* (Germany), a piper gets rid of Hamelin's rats by playing his pipe to lure them in the river, where they all drown. As the mayor of the city refuses to give the promised reward, the piper returns later and plays his pipe to attract children into a cave where they disappear forever.

Subliminal satanic messages would, however, not be hidden only in music but also in advertising images, logos, bar codes (Campion-Vincent and Renard 1992: 293–301). As Jean-Bruno Renard and Véronique Campion-Vincent said, "The subliminal images belief—perceived only by our subconscious mind, and influencing our behavior without our knowing—is the modern and technological form of the bewitchment belief. The search of satanic symbols is close to the old satanic clues' quest, the Devil's marks" (translated by the author).

3.3. Haunted and Bewitched Media

At this point, it is interesting to note that numerous video creepypastas which can be watched on YouTube and which appeared after the abovementioned stories, argue that a ghost figure is hidden in Lavender Town tone musical spectrum. Interestingly, the word "spectre" designates, in English, the musical spectrum but also a ghost. This double-meaning exists in French; "Spectrum" is, otherwise, the French name of one of the three ghost-type Pokémon in the first video game generation.

These videos exist now almost independently of the original creepypastas and circulate on the Web as bewitched or haunted artefacts that the Internet users are challenged to watch, as the numerous audio files which are supposed to be the original Lavender Town music. Shared on YouTube, they often include warnings in their title or descriptions: "WARNING This video is potentially DANGEROUS!!", "Lavender town syndrome … (potentially Dangerous Music warning!!!)", etc.

This haunted or bewitched media motif is very common in creepypastas. In the dematerialized world of the Internet, there exists a certain fetish for creepy music, images, or videos which are supposed to have an occult power, and many creepypastas take this simple form without narrative content. "Smile.jpg" is the best example: this photoshopped picture of a dog is supposed to be haunted, and to drive its viewers insane (Saboooom and 13acab12 2010).

This power is attributed to ghosts in many creepypasta. "Ben Drowned," which appeared in 2010, tells, for example, the story of a *Zelda* player who bought an old *Zelda Majora's Mask* cartridge which turned out to be haunted by the ghost of its previous player, a boy called Ben ("BEN Drowned" 2010).

Ring (1998) is often cited as one of the main inspirations for these Internet ghost legends. In this horror movie, a videotape haunted by a ghost kills its viewers within seven days. During her investigation, a journalist follows the tracks of the girl who now uses her powers to take revenge on the world as a ghost. She thinks she has appeased her spirit when she finds her body and breaks the curse. Nevertheless, her ex-husband who, has also seen the haunted videotape, dies of a heart attack when the ghost girl appears and comes out his television set. *Ring* ends when the curse spreads all over the world: the journalist understands that she saved her life when she copied and showed the videotape to someone else, and the haunted movie turns into a death chain.

The haunted media is older than this famous horror movie. In one of their urban legends studies anthology, Véronique Campion-Vincent and Jean-Bruno Renard remind that the spirit photography, representing ghosts and spiritual phenomena, is almost as old as the photographic medium itself.

> In the 1860–1880, numerous stories about the deceased or dying persons whose image appeared miraculously on a window or a mirror after a thunderstorm lightning circulated. The American folklorist Barbara Allen explains these legends by the conjunction between a new and misunderstood technology, the photography, and ghosts belief. The symbolic thinking has established an equivalence between photographic plates and windows or mirrors, and between magnesium and the lightning flash (translated by the author). (Campion-Vincent and Renard 2002: 346–350)

The haunted television motif is present in a 1954 story where the television fog forms the picture of a dead man on his bed and stays when the family and the owner of the television set try to change the channel (Neubourg 1957, cited by Campion-Vincent and Renard 2002: 350–351). The

man appears to be the grandfather, who died in a car accident. The image disappeared after a few months.

In "Lavender Town Syndrome" stories, many elements refer to the *Ring* movie or haunted media motif even though the occult powers are not attributed to a ghost. One of the scariest elements in *Ring* is the videotape itself, composed of low quality black & white or color movie shots representing floating kanji, a man seen from the bottom of a well, a girl straightening her hair in an oval frame, etc., and also the TVs which dysfunction and turn on by themselves (Crawford 2018: 78). These nightmarish pictures have no apparent meaning before the journalist's investigation. This video seems to have inspired Pokémon 731's descriptions, in the eponymous story:

> The Pokémon itself is strange in nature. It does indeed use the ghost sprite, along with some flashing static. However, about twenty frames in it becomes a flashing series of low-quality pictures. Two of the clearest ones have been included, figures 2, 3, and 4. Figure 2 appears to be a man standing over a table upon which something hard to identify – a corpse perhaps – rests. He has his hands on this unknown object and also has what may be a surgical mask over his mouth. This strengthens the theory that it is a body in the frame. Figure 3 appears to be a low-resolution image of a building, the significance of which will be explained later. Figure 4 is possibly one of the strangest images, a picture of the Imperial Japanese flag with the two kanji symbols that mean "Emperor" in the bottom right corner. Other frames of the animation that can be made out include more images of doctors, corpses, and buildings. The theme from Lavender Town plays the whole time during the battle, although accelerated 3x.

As in *Ring*, the frames have a meaning only revealed by investigation,[8] and the Pokémon 731 animation causes the players' Game Boy to dysfunction:

> If one attempts to catch the Pokémon, the game will freeze. After restarting, the title screen of the game will have been modified, displaying only static and the tone accelerated to the blistering pace of 10x.

"Come Follow Me," the "LTS" creepypasta that most closely resembles a ghost story, shares its open end with *Ring*. As in the horror movie, ghosts cross the border between the virtual world where they were circumscribed

[8] See part 3.1. of this chapter.

and the "real" world: after communicating with his deceased family through the video game dialog box, the detective saw the ghosts of all the persons killed by the "bewitched" *Pokémon* cartridge in his room and ended up killing himself. Just when we think this death and the destruction of the "bewitched" cartridges closes the story, we learn that "the code was said to have survived and was even passed on to other language versions of the games." The code became an independent entity and the story can, possibly, reach the reader, like *Ring*'s death chain:

> If you have an old *Pokémon* game, you can place the cartridge in the back of the classic Game Boy, turn on the system, and roll the wheel. Who knows, maybe you'll learn the secret for yourself.

4. CONCLUSION

With their bewitched or haunted objects, creepypastas create powerful contemporary myths which take the form of memes and videos widely shared on social platforms by thrill-lovers, or long stories which insert these objects in a complex background. Creepy memes or videos are usually based on the aesthetic inspired by video or video game glitches, old graphics, and strange noises to create discomfort for its viewer. The belief in their uniqueness, occult power, or special effects on the viewers is based on this disrupted aesthetic but also, and paradoxically, on a story that speaks to the viewers' rational minds.

An event unlikely to happen and arousing a strong interest will need, for a rational mind, a highly plausible proof. To convince their readers, creepypastas will refer to a complex system of true and fake documents, audio or video files assembled in a story that mimic the objectivity of the journalistic discourse and are grounded in the intended reader's video games experiences and knowledge. These stories are sometimes extended with the addition of a new story or a document linked to a previous story or reference. This practice increases, of course, their verisimilitude by giving the illusion that numerous proofs or stories converge in the same direction. Moreover, it builds up their mythical aspect, since the figures are created and recreated in collective stories that express collective fears surrounding the development of digital technologies.

In "Lavender Town Syndrome," two fears can be identified: the flaws of video games and social media, and their exploitation by ill-intentioned individuals have been particularly accentuated in the paper. These individuals

would target children through applications they perceive as harmless and of which they have an immoderate use caused by the immersive and interactive experiences these virtual technologies provide. The user's addiction to these applications can also be created thanks to the mastering, by some of their developers, some specific aspects of human psychology such as the reward system. The mind control fear can, otherwise, be rooted in the rationalization of production and social organization, alongside the development of a globalized mass culture (Campion-Vincent 2007: 135), often accused in conspiracy theories to relay propaganda elements and use brainwashing techniques to turn people into sheep. This political aspect is, however, absent from the "Lavender Town Syndrome" where mind control is established on a more individual scale, as a more ancestral fear of being hypnotized or bewitched and losing control over oneself under the influence of a haunted object.

Paradoxically, the "Lavender Town Syndrome" creepypastas can also be read as an attempt to re-enchant objects at a time of mass production by stating that among millions of *Pokémon Green/Blue* and *Red* copies sold to children all around the world, some of them are special and provide frightening gaming experiences. This motif can be found in other creepypastas where the bewitched cartridge is found in a flea market ("Pokémon Black" 2010) or bought from a strange old man ("Ben Drowned") and has an individual story which explains its obscure power. The video games' programming code in itself can be compared to a magical language: it is a structured language which has the power to create universes and sensory experiences in which video game players are immersed. This language is, otherwise, inaccessible since most of the video game companies choose to keep it secret. Mastering programming languages is, finally, reserved for a few trained people. In the creepypasta community, these characteristics are fantasized, and they lead to the idea that the code can, by extension, have a power over the player and the real world.

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