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## ‘Playable Nightmares’:

Gen Z audiences and their experiences of horror through children’s media and entertainment settings in *Five Nights at Freddy’s* and *Poppy Playtime*.

**AMBER HASSAN**



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## ABSTRACT

*This dissertation aims to critically examine how Gen Z audiences' experiences of horror are shaped by children's media and entertainment settings in two popular horror games: Five Nights at Freddy's and Poppy Playtime. Both Scott Cawthon and Mob Entertainment situate their narratives within commercial children's spaces, which are traditionally associated with the production of childlike "joy", namely, a family-themed pizzeria and an interactive toy factory. To investigate such, this study utilises semi-structured, qualitative focus groups to explore how Gen Z's experiences of horror are shaped by the subversion of childlike settings, and crucially, how their existence as entertainment sites define 'horror' as a concept for the audience. The specific focus on Gen Z as the audience, with their cultural proximity to digital cultures throughout childhood, will reveal how their embodied experiences and subjective positionalities shape emotional and ideologically encoded responses to horror. In addition, this study closely analyses the auditory and visual elements present within both games, such as environmental objects, lighting and sound design. By engaging audiences with this process, this inquiry ultimately seeks to understand how the interplay between visual, audio and interactivity contributes to the constructions and understandings of horror for Gen Z audiences. As a result, through thematic analysis, this paper indicates three key themes or mechanisms through which children's media and entertainment settings cultivate horror experiences: 'atmosphere', 'corruption of children's entertainment' and 'monsters'.*

## INTRODUCTION

*Sometimes, I really wish I could go back... to being a kid I mean. And it's weird, 'cause adults are just kids but older! I don't think anyone really feels like an adult. But your body just gets older and older... and then you die.*

— Mob Entertainment, *Poppy Playtime*, 2025

The intersection of children and horror in contemporary media, as well as its effects on audiences, is not a new discovery for the academic world. However, the emergence of independent video games which explore childhood, children's media and entertainment settings represent a distinct evolution in how horror media constructs fear through ideological processes. Influential titles like Scott Cawthon's *Five Nights at Freddy's* (2014) and Mob Entertainment's *Poppy Playtime* (2021) have transformed children's spaces of pizzerias and interactive toy factories into sites of horror, receiving immense recognition in popular culture and extensive fan communities. However, to focus exclusively on these spaces would overlook other crucial aspects which 'set' and 'frame' the presence of children's media and entertainment in both games. Therefore, 'setting' will take a much broader definition within this dissertation encompassing elements both in the foreground and background of both games, including jumpscares, gameplay mechanics, narrative tools and audiovisual elements. These elements are what define video games as a rich and transformative medium, through which the genre of 'horror' can be communicated; allowing audiences to not just witness their fears 'animated', but interact, make choices and affect what they see on the screen. Drawing focus from game and media studies, video games will simultaneously be understood as digital simulations, cultural objects and artistic expressions (Aarseth, 1997; Frasca, 1999; McAllister, 2004: 8; Murray, 2016: 19). Fundamentally, these qualities define video games as products of "hybridisation", between "audiovisual media forms" and "game cultures" which curate "aesthetic pleasure" through interactivity, gameplay mechanics and narrative (Roig *et al.*, 2009: 89-90). Thus, the 'video game' exists as an intersection of media and communications and other disciplines across the social sciences as a digital medium, but also as a cultural phenomenon.

There are two primary focuses within this study, and the relationship between these topics will heighten the discussion of this paper. Firstly, cultivating, observing and analysing Gen Z audiences' experiences of horror, whilst also paying attention to 'stigmatised' subjects often less discussed in academic literature. Most prominently, this dissertation interrogates a developing subgenre, known as 'mascot horror', recently coined by Tegan Pyke and Ida Rysjedal (2025). This subgenre presents a distinctive lens through which to examine audiences' experiences surrounding horror video games. Characterised by "cartoonish antagonists," and set within liminal spaces often relating to children, 'mascot horror' games explicitly demonstrate themes of childhood, but also function ideology. The second primary focus of this study centres on Generation Z audiences and their unique relationship with digital horror culture. Growing up in cultural proximity to modern technology and the internet, Gen Z have been involved with what Jenkins (2006) describes as a "participatory culture," of various subjects within media. Gen Z have also been a predominant audience of *FNAF* and *PP*, extending beyond gameplay itself to consumption through watching playthroughs, fan art, fan theories and forum discussions. Therefore the concept of the 'audience' understood in this dissertation is complex and multifaceted, including players but also spectators watching from 'remediated' positions.

Ultimately, this study principally aims to understand what role children's media and entertainment settings in both video games play in shaping Gen Z audiences' experiences of horror. This paper enriches its exploration through theoretical literature, drawing from Althusser's (2016) concept of ideological interpellation to examine how both games position audiences in relation to ideological constructions of childhood. To enrich this approach, it utilises Davies and Harré's (1990) conceptualisations surrounding 'subject-positioning', to explore how Gen Z audiences' embodied experiences and subjectivity affect their positionality, which through ideological interpellation, will become the 'child' itself.

Accordingly, this dissertation encompasses three main chapters. First, a theoretical chapter containing a thorough literature review, a conceptual framework and an explanation of the research question and objectives of this study. Subsequently, this dissertation moves into a methodological chapter, detailing the design, rationale and ethical considerations of using qualitative, semi-structured focus groups within this study. Finally, this dissertation synthesises the previous chapters to discuss and analyse the findings of this study by interpreting Gen Z participants' thoughts, feelings

and experiences of horror when engaging with *FNAF* and *PP*. This dissertation concludes by addressing what role children's media and entertainment settings played in shaping participants' experiences of horror.

## **THEORETICAL CHAPTER**

The first chapter of this dissertation aims to encompass and critically reflect on the relevant literature across multiple disciplines, including media and communications, culture studies, sociology and game studies. The theoretical background will summarise key discourse surrounding childhood, horror and audiences, as well as debates within game studies. By establishing a research background, this chapter will then highlight the key concepts relevant to this dissertation, including ideological interpellation and subject-positioning. These will be connected and further elaborated as a conceptual framework, before detailing the research objectives and questions of this study.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Childhood, Ideology and Horror Media**

May it be literature, cinema or video games, 'horror media' is fundamentally intertwined with children. The intersection of childhood and horror media has cultivated potent products of cultural anxiety, from tropes of 'monsters under the bed,' 'haunted dolls', or even the 'possessed child,' (McCort, 2016; Humphreys, 2021). Numerous films, video games and media scholars have interrogated the relationship between childhood and horror media, to question why themes of childhood is so prevalent within horror media. However, before discussing such, this section must refer to pre-existing literature surrounding children's media to define 'childhood' itself and its parameters of discourse within this dissertation. As academics like Shakuntala Banaji indicate, 'childhood' has often been simplistically understood as a "straightforward descriptor of a biological and intellectual stage," for decades (Banaji, 2017: 7). Emma Reay has also indicated in "popular consciousness," childhood is understood as a "straightforward descriptor of a biological and intellectual stage," for decades (Reay, 2024: 6). Even at the time of writing this dissertation, readily available definitions of childhood on 'Britannica' or 'American Psychological Association' websites define childhood as a "period of the human lifespan between infancy and adolescence," involving the "end of infancy" and the "onset of puberty," (Tikkanen, 2025; APA Editors, 2018). However, as

Reay indicates, this framing of childhood as a “natural, essential, universal and ahistorical identity marker,” does not consider how childhood functions as a “politically contentious social status,” (Reay, 2024: 6). Furthermore, it ignores how “accounts” of childhood are deeply “encoded with ideological values,” (Banaji, 2017: 7). Banaji’s term ‘accounts’, can include ‘representations’ of children within fictional contexts. As Stuart Hanson identifies, “representations” of children and “social constructions” of childhood include, “the child as enroute to adulthood, the so-called ‘incomplete adult’; the child as vulnerable and in need of protection,” and “the condition of children and childhood as a comment on contemporary society,” (Hanson, 2000: 146). Hanson’s ideas echo Stella Hockenhull’s proposal that children are often represented in media as being “seen but not heard,” with no “voices to express... fears and concerns,” (Hockenhull, 2012: 75). As she indicates, these realities are symptoms of children being understood as ‘the other’. Conceptualisations of ‘otherness’ and childhood are a focal point for Karen Lury, who indicates how cinema positions the “child” as the transgressive “other”; dehumanised and viewed as incomplete, “weak” or “irrational” to juxtapose the rational, civilised, “grown up” adult (Lury, 2010: 109). Hockenhull further develops this notion of otherness, highlighting the “liminal” states in which children exist, “between childhood and adult existence,” (Hockenhull, 2012: 41). This incomplete stage of existence denotes the child as incomplete, almost half-human or childhood as a fragmented state of life (Hassan, 2025).

Hanson, Hockenhull and Lury’s ideas surrounding childhood representations are exemplifications of the possible encoded ideologies within accounts of children which Banaji (2017) describes. Therefore, it is crucial to define ‘ideology’ within the parameters of this study. Game studies scholars concerned with ideology, such as Justin Keever (2022), reject Marxian approaches to ideology. Rather, as Keever indicates, ideology should be defined as “technology which constitutes individual subjects.” Therefore, ideology will not be understood as the various representations of the child as indicated in the previous paragraph, but rather, as a structured system producing real-world effects. Keever’s ideas draw from crucial media theory, especially Althusser’s concept of “ideological interpellation,” (Althusser, 2014: 1860). His theoretical approach, as defined in *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (2017), defines ideology as “materialist” and practical rather than intangible and abstract (Ryder, 2016; Hassan, 2025). Combining Keever and Althusser’s perspectives with Kazmi (1999), video games thus exist as technical systems, or ‘ideological apparatuses,’ in which their audiences are “hailed” and “constituted” as subjects through interactions, thus functions ideology.

This framework positions the depictions identified by Hanson (2000), Hockenhull (2012) and Lury (2010) of the child as “vulnerable,” “liminal” or “transgressive” as mechanisms which ideology operates within. As Reay (2012) explicitly states, “game designers” hold the potential to “exploit ideologies about childhood,” for the purposes of “elicit[ing] intended player experiences.” Therefore, these representations of childhood and otherness are not simply *reflections* of cultural anxieties surrounding childhood, but rather active depictions to *position* players and subsequently *shape* video game audiences’ understandings of childhood. These ideas are reminiscent of Stuart Hall’s (1980) famous encoding/decoding model, as the “encoder” or ‘video game developer’, will produce media within their own “framework of knowledge”, which “decoders” or the ‘audience’ will comprehend and interpret from their own positionality (Xie *et al.*, 2022: 190). The notion of ‘positionality’ is developed by Davies and Harré who highlight how “subjectivity” is “discursive[ly]” produced through “positioning” (Davies & Harré, 1990: 43, 61). Both scholars reject the rigidity of “role theory” to indicate how “positions” function as temporary, shifting places in conversations, which impact how individuals “orient” and perceive themselves and others, (43, 61). Therefore, representations of childhood exist as ‘resources’, encoded by game developers with ideological values to shift audiences’ subject-positions. In turn, players’ own self-positioning, based on their embodied experiences, will affect whether they become ‘interpellated’ by the ideological constructions, like childhood, curated by the game developers.

Having established childhood as an ideologically encoded resource for audience subject-positioning, the genre of ‘horror’ functions as a site of exploration to interrogate this process. Film and media scholars have debated the meaning of ‘genre’ for decades, with 1980s research being especially crucial. This study will partially reject the definition of genre as “specific variations of the interplay of codes,” cultivated by “processes of systemization,” involving “repetition” and “difference”, as defined by Stephen Neale (Neale, 1980: 19-20). This theoretical approach fails to stress genre as a deeply ideological concept, and thus, this dissertation will follow Rick Altman’s (1984) approach. Writing in the context of Hollywood, he criticises ‘ritual’ approaches claiming genre choices respond to “societal pressure,” and “audience desires,” (Altman, 1984: 8-9). Altman highlights how these approaches fail to consider how the Hollywood industry capitalises on “spectator energy and psychic investment... to lure audiences,” into specific positions (Altman, 1984: 9; Davies & Harré, 1990).

Outside of Hollywood, the links between genre, positioning and ideology can be recontextualised to other media forms like video games, as Bernard Perron (2009) has done.

When applying Altman's ideas, it is crucial to first define the genre of 'horror' itself. From as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, 'horror' has been intertwined with the 'body' by novelists like Ann Radcliffe (1826) when discussing the differences between genres of 'gothic' and 'horror'. Radcliffe famously distinguished concepts of "terror" and "horror" as "so far opposite... the first expands the soul... awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes and nearly annihilates them," (Storey & Shapiro, 2022: 2). In this case, 'horror' is seen as a lesser form, invoking visceral sensations and responses, compared to 'terror', concerning the intellectual mind. As American Horror critics Mark Storey and Stephen Shapiro emphasise, her statements reduce horror to purely "mindless shock" and perpetuate stereotypes of horror as the "Gothic's' embarrassing twin," (Storey & Shapiro, 2022: 2). Both scholars pinpoint how horror was thus previously dismissed by popular culture and academic thought, stigmatised as a 'lesser' genre. However, influential works like Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993) have seeped from the academia to even mainstream consciousness. Whilst Creed focuses precisely on women's bodies, her discussion is still relevant to this theoretical chapter when conceptualising the 'monster'. In comparison to other prominent horror critics, like Robin Wood (2018) who draws from Marxian thought when approaching horror, Creed focuses on connecting the 'monstrous' to the 'body'. She proposes that all "human societies" have "conception[s]" about what is "shocking, terrifying, horrifying," or "abject" (Creed, 1993: 14). The notion of the 'abject' draws from Julia Kristeva, who coins this term to express the opposite of the 'sublime', where neither the "subject nor object" can be distinguished to provoke 'horrifying' repulsion, (Kristeva, 1982: 1). It is important to note that the 'abject' must not be recognised as merely an aesthetic or narrative concept, but also ideological, indicating boundaries of what is considered socially acceptable or human. By provoking unease, fear, disgust or even fascination, horror media positions audience in relation to these boundaries through 'interpellation'.

### **'Indie' Video Games and Mascot Horror**

Whilst 'children', 'childhood' and 'horror' have been explored through wider literature regarding other media forms, such as film, this theoretical chapter must also consider specific scholarship pertaining to the video game landscape and its connections to the aforementioned themes. Emma

Reay's (2021) study of mainstream titles found that only 19% of video games feature featured children as significant characters. Reay proposes that this statistic reflects "children's exclusion" from "social, public and professional spheres in contemporary Anglo-American society." She also concludes that integrated childhood studies and game studies research is thus necessary to develop the field. Her study's conclusion draws important points for the academic world, however, its deliberate focus on mainstream titles thus excludes the independent or 'indie' horror industry; offering a contrasting and developed space for exploring childhood in media. The increasing popularity of indie games has been widely documented by articles, online blogs and forums, detailing the 'Rise of Indie Games' or 'Solo Indie Developers Changing the World of Gaming', and explaining how the industry has drawn enormous audiences from its numerous successful titles, (Wu, 2025; 80 Level Editorial Team, 2024; Foley, 2025; McDonald, 2022). A few of the most successful video games include the two case studies for this dissertation – Scott Cawthon's *Five Nights at Freddy's* (2014) and Mob Entertainment's *Poppy Playtime* (2021) – as well as Toby Fox's *Undertale* (2015), ConcernedApe's *Stardew Valley* (2016) and Studio MHR's *Cuphead* (2017). Despite spanning various genres across the indie landscape, from farming simulators to platformers, all previous titles listed, and many more in the industry, engage with themes of childhood or feature children as characters.

A crucial subgenre of indie video games which often feature children is 'survival horror'. Whilst many video games utilise "stay[ing] alive" as a crucial game mechanic, Bernard Perron describes survival horror as the "video game genre *par excellence*," with its capacity to "convert" fears into "dreadful monsters," through ideas of survival (Perron, 2009: 9). In addition, Perron illustrates ideas similar to wider film critics, of "horror" as a "body genre" due to its visceral and "ecstatic excess," which positions the body of a spectator to "mimic" the "emotion" or "sensations" being evoked on the screen. Perron extends these ideas to the "survival horror" genre, proposing the uniqueness of video games in their capacity to encapsulate and expand sensations on a screen, through the need to "act" in decision-making and game mechanics, (Perron, 2009: 10). To corroborate these ideas, scholars Tegan Pyke and Ida Rysjedal define 'survival horror' as a gaming genre "originally informed by cinematic horror," but which modifies the "experiences of fear, fight and flight," by requiring players to "avoid combat, run or hide from threatening antagonists or monsters," (Pyke & Rysjedal, 2025: 3). However, this dissertation will propose that Perron, Pyke and Rysjedal's ideas of 'bodily' horror or

the notion of 'action,' are not utilised by game developers to purely excite or entrance audiences, but also as 'resources' encoded with ideological concepts of bodily control and agency (Brey, 2020).

However, *FNAF* and *PP* uniquely expand 'survival horror' to form another subgenre of 'mascot horror'. According to Pyke and Rysjedal, 'mascot horror' is defined as a "subsection of survival horror games," specifically denoting "cartoonish antagonists," and frequently produced by independent game developers (Pyke & Rysjedal, 2015: 2). The idea of these cartoonish characters within the genre also echo Masahiro Mori's concept of the 'uncanny valley', originally theorised in 1970 (Mori *et al.*, 2012). Mori's term encompasses the "eerie sensation," cultivated by artificial entities which are humanoid in form (3). Through a graphical representation, he illustrates how creatures can be too artificial to be human, but too humanoid to be purely artificial (see Appendix A). The use of the term 'artificial' over 'robotic' within this dissertation is a deliberate choice to include the non-robotic, but artificial and 'uncanny' entities present in *PP*. Across the mascot horror genre, these entities are often anthropomorphic, animalistic and non-humanoid creatures, falling into the graphical dip of the 'uncanny valley'. In addition to uncanny cartoonish mascots, Pyke and Rysjedal's foundational work outlines parameters in which a video game can be defined within this genre, namely "(1) their accepted mascot horror status online; (2) their popularity within associated indie horror communities; (3) their engagement in emergent mascot horror genre conventions," (Pyke & Rysjedal, 2015: 2). Both scholars not only identify *FNAF* and *PP* as examples of these games but also underscore their notoriety within the genre.

Mascot horror games often incorporate children's entertainment and commercialization into their depictions, particularly in terms of setting. Pyke and Rysjedal identify a key "common trait" of utilising "children's entertainment spaces," which are "popular amongst children" in games like *PP* and *FNAF* (Pyke & Rysjedal, 2015: 4). Yet, as the critics highlight, these spaces are "abandoned" becoming "dark, dreary and dilapidated," due to "horrifying business misconduct," (4-5). These tropes of mascot horror require further theoretical interrogation regarding the interplay between children, entertainment and commercialization. For instance, David Buckingham's discussion of toy-related animation series of the 1980s and their "programme-length commercials," (Buckingham, 1995: 20). Buckingham describes a process of the "commercialisation of childhood," where children have become the target marketing audience for "selling merchandise" relating to media, such as television

shows or films (23). The critic reports on television and film critics' concerns, who believe these commercialisation processes result in a "cultural decline", (23, 31). For instance, Buckingham rejects Stephen Kline's proposal that commercialisation corrupts the "purity," "imagination" and "innocence" of childhood culture, (Kline, 1993: 25). However, Buckingham also criticises views of children's audiences as "passive victims," to easily be manipulated by advertisers or "creative consumers using the market for their own self-realizations," (Buckingham, 1995: 38).

### **Interactive Horror Mechanics and Narrative**

The distinctive ability of video games is their capacity for interactive gameplay mechanics as well as unique narrative tools to shape audience experiences of horror (Villarreal, 2020). In particular, horror games are not inherently passive forms of media consumption for players. As critics like Karen Collins indicate, media forms like film can restrict audiences as a "passive receiver of sound signal," with no active control over what sounds they hear (Collins, 2008: 105). Rather, in video games, sound is a crucial component which is triggered by player actions and decisions. In the same vein, Budhaditya Chattopadhyay argues that the "sound" and the "site" are constantly intertwined in video games, where "spatial environments" are "recorded, mediated and reconstructed by sound practice," (Chattopadhyay, 2017: 352). In this case, sound is constantly tied to visual elements which players can see and engage with. Therefore, as Michel Chion pinpoints, the purpose of audio and visual elements is not to complement one another, but to formulate a "special mode of perception," for the audience, which engages a "trans sensory whole," (Chion & Gorbman, 2019). This 'trans sensory whole' is further developed when interactivity is introduced.

The concept of 'interactivity' differentiating video games from other media forms is something 'ludologists' of game studies scholarship have indicated (Veloja, 2023: 2-3). Perhaps one of the earliest and most influential academic interventions is from Espen Aarseth, who proposes that games are a different category, and not simply a replication of other cultural objects like the novel or film, (Aarseth, 1997: 30). His work, alongside others like Gonzalo Frasca (1999), have critically challenged stereotypes of video games as a "new form" or "expansion of traditional narrative or drama." The aim of 'ludology' is to treat video games as "simulations" with "rules" of play, rather than "static labyrinths," needing "narrative" structure to be understood, (Aarseth, 2001: 1). The term 'narrative' is key here, as both Aarseth and Frasca, alongside Markku Eskelinen (2001) and Jesper Juul (2005),

have indicated that video games are “radically different” to other mediums, which cannot be “read” like texts or “listened to” like music. Rather, Aarseth (2001) and his fellow ludologists emphasise video games as “objects” and “processes,” which require the player’s direct input as a “necessary ingredient” for the simulation to function. In this case, the experiences of audiences are not solely dependent on the creator like other cultural forms, but rather, is also affected by the player’s “luck, skill and creativity”, (Aarseth, 2021: 1). To corroborate this approach, Perron highlights how game developers grant audience agency through interactivity, to “trigger” certain “sound effects in the game... including dialogue, ambient sounds, sound effects and even musical events, (Perron, 2009: 3). This interactivity is fundamental to gameplay mechanics where sound becomes not simply atmospheric, but also gameplay hints. As YouTube creator Scruffy contends, mascot horror games like *FNAF* are “nightmare scenario game[s]” which is built on two pillars – the “absence of information” and the “absence of action”, (Scruffy, 2022: 01:29). Due to the player’s inability to make precalculated choices, or at times, movement is restricted, the audience relies upon “visual signals” and “audiovisual clues,” for information (01:55). Scruffy’s ideas surrounding interactivity link to ludological understandings of player input as a fundamental component for gameplay progression.

On the other hand, other critics like Janet H. Murray (1997) propose that audience experiences of video games are shaped through narrative (Veloya, 2023: 2). Murray criticises ludological approaches to video games as “abstract systems independent of... the cultural and narrative dimensions of representations (emotions, ideology, identification with characters,” (Murray, 2016: 19).<sup>1</sup> As McManus and Feinstein describe, narratologists argue that “gaming” and “simulation” is fundamentally intertwined with storytelling, and consequently, the development from ‘meaning’ is derived from narrative elements (McManus & Feinstein, 2006: 363). This definition is corroborated by narratologist Barry Atkins who defines ‘narratology’ as the study of “how stories are told,” where video games should be “read” as “fiction” and regarded as “texts... no more and no less,” (Atkins, 2003: 9). According to narratologists like Bruner, this is because human beings “organise” their “experience” and “memory” predominantly through narrative, (Bruner, 1991: 4; McManus & Feinstein, 2006: 364). As he states, there are numerous objects of study within narratology, extending to both the obvious and seemingly banal; “stories, excuses myths.” (Bruner, 1991: 3-4). Bruner utilises

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<sup>1</sup> See (Murray, 2016: 19). Murray notes that she does not consider herself a narratologist in the “European sense” however, she acknowledges her book has been used for the ludology-narratology debate.

these examples to illustrate how narrative is “transmitted culturally” and is different to “logical and scientific procedures,” (4-5). Thus, according to narratologists, video games are understood by audiences through the same lens as the cultural objects before it, as ‘texts’. Similarly, though perhaps unintentionally, Murray utilises a narratological approach to emphasise how video games should be considered “seriously,” (Murray, 2016: 53). She exemplifies their unique “potential” for “powerful moments of revelation” and “dramatic storytelling” through their non-linear, “multiform” and “participatory nature,” (Murray, 2016: 53-55; Velaya, 2023: 2). For instance, as Murray describes, puzzle mechanics “slow” the “pace of engagement” to “offer a richer level of story satisfaction, (53). In this sense, players directly contribute to the pace of storytelling, with more freedom to customise the speed of the game.

### **Gen Z Audiences and Digital Horror Culture**

This dissertation focuses specifically on Generation Z audiences due to their unique proximity to digital horror cultures and video games like *FNAF* and *PP*. As numerous critics have described, Gen Z (born between 1997 and 2012) are considered “digital natives” due to their cultural proximity as well as “reliance” on digital technologies and the internet as children (Dimock, 2019; Chang & Chang, 2023: 1; Eldridge, 2025). Therefore, perhaps it is unsurprising that many studies have revealed Gen Z as the predominant audience for video game sales. For example, Jasrotia and colleagues revealed that members of Gen Z in India particularly enjoy “game personalisation” and “social interaction,” (Jasrotia *et al.*, 2022: 64). Similarly, Elena Shilakhovchuk and colleagues’ survey on video game preferences emphasise that Gen Z are attracted to “genre, characters and in-game elements and features,” but also “creativity” during video gameplay (Shilakhovchuk *et al.*, 2021: 208). Consumption of YouTube content surrounding *FNAF* and *PP*, as well as online spectator activities of fan art, fanfiction and fan theories, has largely been conducted by Gen Z as children and young adults (Doherty, 2020; Hunting, 2019: 93). To support this claim, writers Smriti Sinha and Earnest Pettie (2024) writes for ‘Google Business’ that “86% of Gen Z... describe themselves as a fan of something,” and Lucina O’Brien (2025) describes that “fandoms” have provided a “sense of belonging, helping Gen Z “shape” their “identities.” Similarly, in a recent ‘BuzzFeed’ interview, Gen Z children and adults described their experiences growing up close to the internet, with many individuals describing being “raised by technology,” with insufficient monitoring from adults and unfettered access to media content geared for older audiences, (Valko, 2025). As a generation deeply entangled with the

rise of the internet and technology, Gen Z are a necessary focal point when unpacking video games with large, diverse and digital communities.

The cultural significance of video games like *FNAF* and *PP* cannot be understood without examining the digital cultures which curated them, and they continued to perpetuate. As critic Ken McAllister describes, “computer games, gamers and the gaming industry” have and continue to “contribute to the evolution of mass culture,” (McAllister, 2004: 13). But *what* creates this culture? The sociologist Georg Simmel emphasises that society and meaning can be found in the seemingly “insignificant interactions,” and that its research requires “finding each of life’s details in the totality of its meaning,” (Simmel, 2004: 126; McDonald, 2020). If the banal aspects of everyday life is where academics can draw meaning and understanding about culture, it is crucial to turn to Mark P. Orbe and Anastacia Kurylo, who highlight how media is intertwined, and thus affects, a “person’s everyday life,” (Orbe & Kurylo, 2013: 243). Similarly, Mikko Meriläinen and colleagues emphasise how video games are played for a “variety of reasons,” may this be “socialising,” “competition” or to simply cure “boredom,” and are subsequently part of an individual’s “mundane... everyday life,” rather than a “separate, disconnected sphere,” (Meriläinen *et al.*, 2023: 1, 8). Therefore, video games “embody some of the most important aspects of wider society,” echoing a “pervasive digital culture... the emergence of participatory culture... [and] the rise of new modes of meaning construction,” (Meriläinen *et al.*, 2023: 3, 4 8; Jenkins, 2006; Muriel & Crawford, 2018). These ideas link to a term coined by Muriel and Crawford, called “videoludification,” utilised to describe how video games not only reflect, but also “shape social matters and drive social transformation,” as social reality becomes increasingly “gamified” (Muriel & Crawford, 2018: 5). Therefore, the process of the video game, as a media form, and its transformation into a “video game culture” continues to ricochet and reflect back, reproducing media of its own, may that be print “video game magazines,” or digital “blogs, reviews, message boards,” or videos on social media platforms like ‘YouTube’ or ‘Twitch,’ (Muriel & Crawford, 2018: 9).

The ‘audience’ is the essential structure of this inquiry, with the primary focus of this study to cultivate, understand and reflect on Gen Z’s embodied experiences, perceptions and interpretations when consuming *FNAF* and *PP*. As illustrated previously in this literature review, video games have been theorised not only as complex media forms, but also as digital simulations which require

audience engagement to function (Aarseth, 1997; Frasca, 1999; McAllister, 2004: 8; Murray, 2016: 19; Roig *et al.*, 2009: 89-90). Similarly, as cultural objects, video games are integrated within society, yet also reflect and shape the audience around them (Muriel & Crawford, 2018). Therefore, direct consideration of the audiences which both engage and transform video games is required. Scholars have long emphasised that media cannot be understood in isolation from the audience which consumes it. As Orbe and Kurylo indicate, research from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century surrounding 'Direct Effects Theory', where "media images entered naïve viewers' consciousness and had immediate consequences," (Orbe & Kurylo, 2013: 244). However, the wider history of Effects Studies is very useful to this inquiry, especially pertaining to film, with *The Payne Studies* published in 1930, (Jowett, 1971: 70). Whilst this research has faced criticism from Lowery and De Fleur (1995) for technical limitations and sampling problems, the researchers found that movies had impacted children in multiple ways: "learning," "attitude changes to emotional stimulation" and "behavioural influence," (Ash, 1999). This pioneering work has laid the foundation for further audience research, that media can fulfill "different needs," for "different viewers," titled 'uses and gratifications theory,' (Orbe & Kurylo, 2013: 248). Whilst originating from the 1960s and 70s, scholars like Thomas E. Ruggiero have highlighted its importance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the rise of "computer-mediated communications," (Ruggiero, 2009: 3). The "chief tenet" of uses and gratifications theory shifts understanding audiences from "passive" to "active" watchers, (18).

These ideas of 'active audiences' is fundamentally connected to the interactive and participatory nature of video game audiences. Beyond active play, Gen Z and wider video game audiences' activity involves spectatorship on platforms like YouTube, Twitch or TikTok. These platforms have revolutionized the consumption and experience for Gen Z video game audiences to not just be 'active', but also 'interactive', consuming and reproducing media throughout processes such as fanart, fanfiction and fan theories (Hellekson & Busse, 2014: 1-18; Amo & García -Roca, 2021). Through this approach, this dissertation connects game studies with prominent audience scholars, most crucially Henry Jenkins. Jenkins and his focus on fan communities highlight how digital technologies have made "the once invisible... media spectatorship," now "visible," (Jenkins, 2006: 135). His precise focus on how digital "tools" have enabled consumers to "archive, annotate, appropriate and recirculate media content," is crucial in cultivating a "new participatory culture," (135-6). However, it is also important to note the concerns of scholars, including Betsy Brey, who

discuss “fan labour,” (Brey, 2020: 73). According to Brey, the notion refers to the (often unpaid) “passion” and creative work of audiences surrounding “media texts,” which in the case *FNAF*, consists not only of walkthrough videos or commentary clips, but also “fan games” – direct spin offs of the indie franchise (73-4). As of 2019, when Brey writes her article, she reports over 7800 *FNAF* fan games on ‘GameJolt’, a “hobby-focused indie publishing platform,” (74, 84).

## **Conceptual Framework**

As demonstrated in the literature review, the theoretical background for this dissertation is drawn from numerous areas of research, both within the media and communications field and externally across multiple disciplines. In addition, the dissertation question of this paper is both complex and multi-faceted. Therefore, to explain this topic thoroughly, this dissertation will present a conceptual framework which synthesises the selected theoretical approaches in a logical manner, ultimately to conduct and present a successful audience study.

The central conceptual framework employed in this dissertation is grounded in Althusser’s concept of ideological ‘interpellation’, to propose how video game audiences identify themselves with the media they consume (Althusser, 2014: 186). Drawing from Banaji (2017) and Reay (2014), this framework will define childhood as an ideological encoded construction, functioning as a ‘resource’ by game developers to position players through interactions with childhood representations. Therefore, this study will propose that to experience horror in *Five Nights at Freddy’s* and *Poppy Playtime* is to undergo ‘interpellation,’ may these be sensations of discomfort (e.g. fear, unease disgust) or fascination (e.g. intrigue, curiosity).

A secondary, but interlinked portion of this conceptual framework will be Davies and Harré’s (1990) Subject Positioning Theory, which will be utilised to explore how Gen Z audiences’ embodied experiences and subjectivity affect their positioning. Furthermore, this framework will synthesise with Althusser (2014) to indicate how Gen Z audiences are positioned as the ‘child’.

This inquiry will also draw from previously mentioned scholarship in the literature review, using ludology-narratology discourse to question whether video games exist as digital simulations with systems of rules, or narrative, storytelling texts, (Aarseth, 1997; Frasca, 1999; Murray, 1997; Atkins,

2003). By analysing audiences' interpretations and experiences of *FNAF* and *PP*, this study investigates video games as both digital simulations and narrative texts. In addition, this debate will enrich discussions of ideological interpellation by highlighting the internal methods in which Cawthon and Mob Entertainment's respective games enact horror for audiences.

## **Research Question And Objectives**

The core objective of this dissertation is to explore, identify, analyse and report on Gen Z audiences' experiences of horror. More precisely, this work attempts to understand how children's media and entertainment elements 'set' and 'frame' horror and subsequently cultivate these experiences, through the medium of mascot horror games *Five Nights at Freddy's* and *Poppy Playtime*. Therefore, the term 'setting' itself will take a much broader definition than its traditional references to 'background' elements, rather, encompassing elements in the 'foreground' as well, so long as they 'set' and 'frame' horror. To analyse how this framing affects Gen Z audience,s the research question will be constructed as: **What role do children's media and entertainment settings in *Five Nights at Freddy's* and *Poppy Playitme* play in shaping Gen Z audiences' experiences of horror?**

The research for this theoretical chapter identified gaps in literature surrounding children and childhood in video game scholarship, as well as the predominant focus on mainstream titles when discussed. Moreover, there was a clear lack of theoretical discourse surrounding independent horror games, with significantly limited research regarding the two focal video games of this study. Therefore, this dissertation's primary objective is to address these gaps in academic thought and provide additional research, especially regarding children and childhood within 'mascot horror', due to their reoccurring presence across the genre and wider indie video games.

However, the rationale behind this objective is concerned with addressing the notion of 'stigma', both externally and internally within academia. As Storey and Shapiro highlight the misconceptions of 'horror' as the "Gothic's embarrassing twin," video game studies are often placed behind more established fields, including Media and Communications (Storey & Shapiro, 2022: 2). However, even within game, media and related fields, *Five Nights at Freddy's* and *Poppy Playtime's* lack of academic attention is surprising, considering their "notoriety" within YouTube and indie video game culture (Pyke & Rysjedal, 2025: 2).

## METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The second chapter aims to illustrate the methodological approaches undertaken in this study, detailing the rationale which prompted data collection through qualitative, semi-structured focus groups, as well as the research design of this project, encompassing sampling strategies and thematic analysis. After addressing these details, this dissertation will crucially focus on ethics and reflexivity.

### Methodological Rationale

Having established the framework of this investigation as an audience study surrounding Gen Z's experiences, it is crucial that the data collection cultivates varied interpretations and perspectives. In addition, it is important that the method chosen provides opportunities for participants to engage with *Five Nights at Freddy's* and *Poppy Playtime* in a comfortable, individual space. In addressing the first aim, qualitative over quantitative data collection was chosen, with intentions to capture the embodied experiences, sensations and feelings evoked for participants more descriptively. To corroborate this decision, Leung and Savithiri propose the key advantage behind qualitative research is its capacity to derive "meaning" from "rich" and "textured" output data, to "introduce new theories" and "illuminate various perspectives," (Leung & Savithiri, 2009: 218-9). Collecting and then processing these interpretations requires a 'double hermeneutic' approach, coined by social theorist Anthony Giddens in 1984, (Schwandt, 2007). Therefore, as participants make sense of *FNAF* and *PP* based on their own embodied positions and spectatorial subjectivities, myself, as the researcher, would interpret their meaning-making based on my own positionality. Such a process thus requires a qualitative, interview-based method, rather than quantitative research based on factual or numerical data.

The selection of focus groups as the methodological approach for this audience study was grounded by an objective to cultivate miniature communities and mirror fan discussions. The 'group discussion' aspect cultivated in a focus group was thus necessary to explore the "range" of "attitudes, opinions and behaviours," whilst also encouraging debate and mutual discussions (Gaskell, 2004: 13). Similarly, as Montague and colleagues argue, unlike one-on-one interviews, focus groups' capacity for discussion "stimulates participants' deeper experimental reflections," allowing for "individual, personal accounts" to be enriched by group dynamics, (Montague *et al.*, 2020: 28). For this reason, a semi-structured focus group was specifically chosen, as Gaskell indicates, to function questions as

“invitation[s],” allowing participants to “talk at length, in their own terms, and with time to reflect,” (Gaskell, 2000: 9). Furthermore, this provided an opportunity for the researcher, to “appropriate[ly] probe,” tailor discussion, and ask follow-up questions. Therefore, the ‘meanings’ which participants draw from their experiences can be clarified or expanded upon by other participants or the researcher. The ‘digital’ nature of these online focus groups was chosen to allow for sufficient separation, so audience members could engage with the video games from their own personal and comfortable spaces. As will be discussed later in the ‘research design’ segment of this chapter, this study’s focus groups contained two breaks in which participants would watch clips from both *FNAF* and *PP*. The importance of these breaks in personal solitude was absolutely paramount. Therefore, the limitations of in-person focus groups was not only scheduling or its geographical location, but also “eye-to-eye contact between everyone,” (Gaskell, 2000: 14). For instance, as Flayelle and colleagues observe, a significant advantage of online interviewing is allowing participants to “turn their video [cameras] off,” (Flayelle *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, as Stewart and Shamdasani highlight, online focus groups are “especially appropriate venues” for reaching audiences of “young people”, including Gen Z, who are “generally quite comfortable... in the online world,” and are often “difficult to reach” without such, (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2016: 52). In a more practical sense, the online focus groups also provided advantages of technological tools for the researcher to “record”, review and process their data with more convenience (Flayelle *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, an online focus group was decided on the basis of comfortability and accessibility of Gen Z audiences, as well as the practical technological advantages of this method.

## **Research Design**

### **Sampling Strategy**

This dissertation utilises nonprobability and purposive sampling with regards to the focal video games chosen as well as participant recruitment. As describes by Guest and colleagues, nonpropabilitiy and purposive sampling requires selection according to “predetermined criteria,” which relates to a particular “research objective,”(Guest *et al.*, 2006: 61). The first consideration when selecting the chosen video games for this inquiry, was related to children’s media and entertainment settings. With ‘setting’ taking a broader definition in this inquiry to encompass the ways video games frame or ‘set’ children’s media and

entertainment elements, *FNAF* and *PP* become fascinating sites of exploration for audiences. As described throughout the literature review, both games utilise horror elements relating to children, including jumpscare with screaming children, child-like characterisations, advertisements, as well as background audiovisual elements, including writing on the walls, newspaper articles of missing and murdered children, (Cawthon, 2014; Mob Entertainment, 2021). Thus, both games function as crucial sites of exploration for participants to pick out and interpret their own meanings.

Furthermore, when *FNAF* and *PP* was chosen for this study, another criteria developed, based upon Pyke and Rysjedal's standard for a video game to be considered 'mascot horror'. Namely, a video game which possesses an "accepted mascot horror status online... popularity within associated indie horror communities and... engagement in emergent mascot horror conventions," (Pyke & Rysjedal, 2025: 2). *FNAF* and *PP*'s notoriety is unquestionable, with numerous periodical articles discussing the multimillion franchises, including 'How the FNAF Universe Took Over The Gaming Industries', or 'Poppy playtime: One of the Best Indie Horror Games This Year' or 'Huggy Wuggy's Reign: How Poppy Playtime Became a Global Phenomenon,' (Bolton, 2025; USA Today & Mob Entertainment, 2025). Regarding communities, both *FNAF* and *PP* have over 641K and 59K participants in their dedicated forums (subreddits) retrospectively, (*r/fivenightsatfreddys*, 2025; *r/PoppyPlaytime*, 2025). The subreddits are exemplifications of 'participatory cultures', with fan communities constantly remediating the games in reddit threads, through fan theories, fan art and memes (Jenkins, 2006). Therefore, both games' popularity and notoriety functioned as crucial criteria points for purposive sampling.

In the same vein, purposive sampling was also necessary when considering what a 'full' experience of *FNAF* and *PP* entailed for the purposes of this audience study. Rather than relying on complete playthrough videos or participants playing the games themselves, which would have been impractical due to time and financial constraints, I curated tailored compilations and published these as unlisted videos on YouTube. These compilations

contained non-commentated clips depicting gameplay mechanics depicting gameplay mechanics, audiovisual elements and narrative storytelling, (Amberchu, 2025).<sup>2</sup> The intention of clips absent of commentary was to provide participants a less mediated experience of the video games, allowing them to focus on specific elements which interested them. However, when curating these compilations, I recognised the importance of including commentary-based clips from influential content creators within the indie horror game space, namely Markiplier (2014) and Caseoh (2023). The inclusion of their clips aimed to also reflect the mediated ways in which Gen Z audiences may encounter these games, thus providing a more balanced experience of horror in a broader, cultural sense.

Participant recruitment was also conducted through nonprobability and purposive sampling. As Palinkas and colleagues highlight, purposeful sampling with participants involves “identifying” and “selecting” groups of individuals who are “especially knowledgeable” or ‘experienced with a phenomenon of interest,” (Palinkas *et al*, 2016: 533). Fortunately, the ‘expertise’ required for this audience study simplified the sampling process, as knowledgeable experts of ‘Gen Z’ simply required recruiting members of the generation themselves. Participants’ knowledge of either or both video games was welcomed but not necessary, with the intention of cultivating a diverse sample with varying experiences of the video games. To achieve this sample selection, recruitments was facilitated through networking with Gen Z individuals on social media platforms. According to the 2025 Sproud Social Index, 89% of Gen Z social media users utilise ‘Instagram’ as of 2025, prompting the decision to use this platform for outreach (Schaefer, 2025). Instagram Stories featured a concise recruitment message, directly inviting interested individuals with a link to a Google Form. This form provided a detailed overview of the study’s aims, subject matter, participant age requirement and focus group structure. It also emphasised that participants with any level of experience with video games or horror media were welcomed, and included a short questionnaire regarding prior familiarity with *FNAF* and *PP* to support later interpretation of

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<sup>2</sup> Please see the Bibliography section of this paper to find the clip compilations for this dissertation, with all clips utilise also cited there, as well as the YouTube videos’ descriptions.

results. During this recruitment process, I remained conscious of the potential limitations to this approach, most prominently, that individuals who chosen to engage with Instagram Stories were likely to already hold some interest in *FNAF* and *PP*. Nevertheless, I determined that any range of prior experience, whether minimal or extensive, would be equally valuable to the aims of this inquiry. Ultimately, this outreach process resulted in a volunteer sample of eleven participants, but due to scheduling conflicts, the final study included contributions from ten individuals.

### **Focus Groups**

To fully utilise focus groups' capacity to stimulate group discussions and enhance participant interpretations, it was necessary to divide the volunteer sample into two smaller focus groups. Participants were separated into an 'afternoon' and 'evening' group based on their availability, especially to accommodate participants in different time zones. Group chats on Whatsapp were established for each group to schedule a precise time using 'When2meet.com'. The decision to facilitate two separate focus groups was initially based on the number of interested participants, scheduling and the comfortability of participants. In a different article, Guest and colleagues' examine that "two to three" focus groups reveal more than "80%" of the themes the researchers made discoverable, (Guest *et al.*, 2016: 3). From this research, having two focus groups was decided upon, with the objective to provide a broader range of perspectives whilst also observing consistency and points of contention between groups.

A semi-structured topic guide was developed throughout the recruitment process, allowing participants to pursue themes of personal interest whilst also keeping conversations focused and relevant (see Appendix D). Drawing on Pollock and Wilson, this guide was organised into distinct sections: introductory warm up questions to build rapport, a presentation of key background information about the games, and breaks for participants to engage with the video clip compilations for each game. As a result, there were two breaks and subsequent discussion periods, specifically focusing on *FNAF* and then *PP*. Participants were invited to notice immediate emotional responses, sensory experiences of the games, and the particular elements which cultivated feelings of tension or horror. Participants were also asked to reflect on elements or settings associated with children or childhood specifically. The final part of the topic guide encouraged a comparative discussion of both

games, prompting participants to consider themes of nostalgia as well as mechanics of player agency pertaining to horror. The contents of this topic guide was filled with various questions for each heading, with the understanding that some may not be answered to allow for a semi-structured flow of discussion. Further inspired by McGrath, this topic guide was designed flexibly, with the intention of “fine-tun[ing]” and readjustment throughout the “interview process,” (McGrath, 2019: 1004-6). For instance, as previous interviews for a former pilot study indicated that questions sometimes “turn out to be misunderstood,” it was important the researcher entered focus groups with a clear topic guide, with flexibility to change sentences or add clarifying statements (Hassan, 2025). Designing this topic guide and the structure of the focus groups indicated that each session would provide two hours.

### **Thematic Analysis**

This audience study utilises thematic analysis to process the qualitative data collected from the semi-structured focus groups. This method was chosen due to the flexible lens it provides for identification and analysis of “patterns” and “themes” within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 79). As a result, thematic analysis is considerably useful for capturing and investigating “experiences,” “meanings” and the “reality of participants,” (81). This approach is a critical component of the study, aligning with its core objective to explore, identify, analyse and report on Gen Z audiences’ experiences of horror. By generating codes, or “features of the data,” thematic analysis allows crucial organisation of themes, may these codes be “keywords” or phrases (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 88; Naeem *et al.*, 2023: 9). Drawing from Braun and Clarke, after focus groups, I curated transcripts to help determine codes and subsequently highlight themes. Initially, I had intended to utilise Google Meet to seamlessly record my focus groups, however, at the commencement of my first focus group, I realised that ‘recording’ was a paid feature. This oversight in my prior research led to a last-minute change of platforms to Whatsapp Web and recording via OBS; a method I tested and effectively utilized throughout my pilot study (Hassan, 2025). Subsequently, the transcription process involved listening to the OBS screen recordings and ensuring that not only sentences, but participants’ long and short pauses, self-corrections and unique phrasing were all depicted. Having overcome challenges and produced successful transcriptions, this study followed a combined thematic approach inspired by Braun and Clarke and Attride-Stirling’s notion of “thematic networks”, involving a six-stage process of

familiarisation, coding, finding themes, reviewing themes and lastly defining themes to build a thematic map (see Appendix B) (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Attride-Stirling, 2001).

## **Ethics And Reflexivity**

Whilst ethics and reflexivity function as a fundamental component of any research project, it was particularly relevant throughout the research and designing stages of this audience study. Firstly, when deciding upon online focus groups as a method, I recognised the numerous potential risks associated with it. To secure informed consent, all participants within this study received a consent form prior to the focus group, detailing its purpose, the nature of their involvement (including confidentiality and anonymity in analysis) and their rights to withdraw at any point. All signatures were obtained prior to the sessions, however, participants were reminded that they could leave and withdraw consent at any time during the study. In addition, when this dissertation underwent ethics review in accordance with the LSE Research Ethics Policy and Procedure, the Research Ethics Committee advised on the practicalities of 'withdrawing data', which informed my decision that if an individual chose to leave the study, their specific quotes would be omitted from analysis. I also ensured that all recordings were safely stored in my personal hard drive and destroyed after anonymised transcripts were created.

Cultivating a comfortable spaces was extremely important to both this study, but also myself in a personal capacity. The reality of many topics surrounding 'horror' especially *FNAF* and *PP*, is that they involve triggering subjects. As a result, the consent form provided a clear, bullet-point list of triggering subjects which discussion could involve, and all participants were informed verbally of their rights to refuse answering any questions they felt uncomfortable (see Appendix C). I also recognised how 'group dynamics' could affect participants in the focus groups regarding comfortability and safety. Therefore, I consulted relevant literature, including Luke and Goodrich, who indicate how formulation of "roles" can facilitate and function group discussion, such as an "initiator," "encourager," "elaborator/clarifier," but also impede these processes, with dysfunctional roles including a "dominator/monopoliser," "blocker" or "deserter," (Luke & Goodrich, 2019: 77-8). From their work, I recognised that participants' prior familiarity with the media content of this study may impact or determine group roles. Whilst I acknowledged that role formulation is often inevitable, as the researcher and moderator, I wanted to encourage healthy "roles" and found explicitly addressing the familiarity imbalances was most appropriate. As a result, in the introduction to both

focus groups, I encouraged participants to utilise their familiarity, or lack of such, to their advantages, whilst also being mindful of all individuals' varying understandings of the games.

The other key ethical consideration of this dissertation is myself, as the researcher, and the influence of my preconceptions, ideologies, identity and experiences affecting all research stages of this audience study. I have been consistently aware of my own positionality impacting the results and conclusions of this work, particularly through selection bias. The selected relevant literature, core concepts, sampling decisions and thematic analysis approaches are all permeated by my own embodied experiences. Furthermore as a member of Gen Z myself, and a 'fan' who regularly engages with *FNAF* and *PP*, I recognised the necessity to constantly reflect on my own positionality throughout the research process. As a result, I consulted a key piece of scholarship utilized throughout my pilot study, Supriya Subramani's approach to practicing reflexivity through the notion of "reflexive moments," (Subramani, 2019: 2-5; Hassan, 2025). As Subramani notes, these moments are "significant experiences" which "reconstruct the researcher's [reflexive] journey," (2). A key reflexive moment within this research process was understanding how my own biases and preconceptions strongly impacted the compilations of *FNAF* and *PP* watched in the focus groups (Amberchu, 2025). To address this, I adopted strategies to mitigate my own biases, including cross-checking forums to identify scenes and clips that fans found important. In addition, I also ensured that I did not limit discussions to themes of children and childhood, but let participants identify all elements which cultivated experiences of horror. However, through this reflexive process, I also recognised the power of taking a 'double hermeneutic' approach throughout this study (Giddens, 1984; Schwandt, 2007). By encouraging participants to draw interpretations from *FNAF* and *PP* based on their subjective, personal perspectives, I realised this study could also take advantage of my positionality to interpret their meaning-making. By doing so in conversation with one another, I felt connected with my participants; something I believed would not have occurred if I was not also Gen Z. As a result, this study intends to productively enrich discussion from my own positionality in a conscious and reflexive manner.

## **FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS**

This chapter presents the findings obtained from the semi-structured, qualitative focus groups derived from the research question and objectives of this study. By utilising thematic analysis, this

section will review three key, overarching themes which participants outlined as ‘ways’ children’s media and entertainment settings cultivated, or failed to cultivate their experiences of horror. This section also tests the conceptual framework utilised for this study, namely that *Five Nights at Freddy’s* and *Poppy Playtime* operate as sites which ‘hail’ players into positions of childlike vulnerability and innocence by cultivating visceral, bodily responses to horror. The thematic analysis for this chapter will assess to what extent these responses can be cultivated by children’s media and entertainment settings within both games. Therefore, by consulting the theoretical chapter’s relevant literature to analyse findings, this chapter offers a synthesis of all discussion within this dissertation.

## Atmosphere

### A. Background Sounds

According to the focus groups, when asked about what elements of the games or specific scenes participants found disturbing or scary, ‘sound’ was both organically brought up and elaborated on through specific questioning. In particular, prolonged discussions, especially in Focus Group 2 [E-J], focused on the impact of background sounds building an eerie or disturbing environment. In addition when asked at the conclusion of the session, ‘*In your opinion, what makes both these games horrifying?*’ numerous individuals mentioned the use of sound, especially regarding *FNAF*. A selection of quotations regarding background sounds include:

*For me, it’s the sound, definitely. That’s like the number one thing that I get like freaked out on. With FNAF, it’s like the constant like buzzing, the old video camera, like the fan in the back of the telephone randomly ringing. I mean, Poppy Playtime, it’s like the lack of sound, the fact that it’s just you in this big area, and you can hear like your footsteps and echoing, and like machines just starting up, like when you like read loudly. I think for me, that’s like one of the main horror elements [...] Yeah, just the way they sound in general is what I think is very important in a horror game. (Participant A)*

*[...] obviously, the laughter for like Golden Freddy, like to signal that he’s coming. You can hear children laughing. And then also the lullaby music box kind of jukebox thing. Also, for me, it’s when the night ends. And [...] when you win. There’s like cheering. It’s to me a signalling of like; you’ve maintained this childlike*

*innocence. You've actually succeeded! Whereas if you die, then there's no cheering. There's no nothing. You don't hear anymore children anymore. (Participant C)*

*[...] One thing that really was really unsettling to me about the actual game itself was almost the echo throughout the actual factory. When you're walking around, you're pressing buttons, there's something so unsettling about an empty space that's empty enough, but quiet enough, to echo everything that you're doing.*

*It makes you almost feel like 'what else is in here?' And, 'am I really alone?' (Participant H)*

The above quotations corroborate Chattopadhyay's proposal that "sound" and the "site" are constantly intertwined, forming "spatial environments" which "record," mediate and reconstruct experiences of horror through "sound practice" (Chattopadhyay, 2017: 352). These excerpts also highlight the relationships between sounds and visuals in mediating experiences of horror, where, as Chion indicates, engages a "trans sensory whole," (Chion, 2019: 22). For instance, Participant A and H use the word "echo" to draw similar conclusions from the visuals of the game, namely its "big" and "empty" nature.

At the same time, these discussions reflect Hanson's argument surrounding the "representations" of childhood as "vulnerable and in need of protection," (Hanson, 2000: 146). Participant A's admission of being "freaked out" or Participant H's rhetorical questioning of being "really alone" illustrates how the games position players into states of heightened unease, reflecting their own ideological perspectives and subjectivities surrounding children's vulnerability (Davies & Harré, 1990).

## **B. Colour Imagery**

Another sub-theme often referenced in both focus groups, but especially Focus Group 1 [A-D] was 'colour imagery'. These discussions occurred at various stages, but participants tended to build upon each other's ideas and engage in direct dialogue with one another surrounding this theme. These interpretations were most often related to *PP*, where participants cited bright, primary colours:

*[...] Stella's interview and then also the lighting going up to Poppy's case, they're such, like, vivid colours.*

*Like, obviously, with Poppy, it's like a red room. It kind of reminded me of, like, you know in horror films where, like, the room just instantly becomes red like when an incident happens [...] And in Stella's interview,*

*the, what do you call it? It's like, the cassette player. It's bright pink [...] why is it that colour? And you truly wonder why because it's like, oh, but it reminds you that you're in a toy factory. (Participant B)*

*[...] In Poppy Playtime, it was the colour scheme [...] very intense primary colours. And I feel like maybe I just haven't been in a kid's space like that for awhile. But I feel like the world just isn't that colourful anymore. (Participant D)*

*[...] There's blood splatters and things broken everywhere. But then at the same time, it's within a colourful, childlike setting. So [...] I was like, this is bad. (Participant A)*

These responses surrounding colour imagery indicate the way horror media plays upon the visual atmospheric codes of environments. The exaggerated use of primary colours which Participant D refers to, or the bright “pink” Participant B indicates, echo the aesthetics of nurseries and classrooms. Yet, the contents of the game involve threat and violence, providing a disturbing dissonance which the participants seem to sense and indicate. Their statements also reflect Hockenhill’s description of the child often being “seen, but not heard,” where colour imagery is meant to represent the ‘child’ (Hockenhill, 2012).

## **Corruption Of Children’s Entertainment**

### **C. Liminal Spaces**

Participants often utilised the term ‘liminal’ or phrasing to suggest the liminal nature of the abandoned entertainment spaces in both games, namely a family pizzeria and a toy factory. Through complex discussions, findings reveal that corruption of spaces normally associated as childhood play areas produced experiences of ‘horror’ for Gen Z individuals within this study. Participants detailed varying perspectives regarding how ‘child-friendly’ both spaces should have been:

*I think for me, like, a lot of the scenes had starts, like the pizzeria had little stars. And there were, like, kid pictures pinned up on the wall. And I think it just added like... the eeriness of horror and such, like innocent magical place for kids [...] (Participant F)*

*[...] Why are these newspaper articles on the walls of a pizzeria saying, you shouldn't be at this pizzeria [...] because your kids might die. Like, it doesn't make any sense. [...] It's like the walls almost speaking.*

*(Participant J)*

*[...] When you first meet Huggy Wuggy, like, that scene was quite impactful. So, you walk in and the place already feels like a kid's soft play. Like, the floor is so colourful. It's like, different tilings and bricks. It feels like you're in... almost like a theme park, but more like soft play. The factory feels like a theme park [...] You've been put back in a childhood space. But it's not like a liminal space because it's all like, abandoned.*

*(Participant I)*

*[...] A space that's usually full of life and either something that's passed through temporarily [...] people don't live their permanently. I would argue, like, a restaurant could be a liminal space but a factory as well. Yeah, this liminal eeriness is, I think, the best way to describe it and I think this contrast of, like, the colours and the lighting and the, like, this almost vivacious element versus the eerie silence, like, captures this really, really well [...] (Participant D)*

These reflections highlight how the notion of liminality is central to their responses. Drawing from Pyke and Rysjedal, a key theme of 'mascot horror' includes references to "children's media or entertainment," which has become "dark, dreary and dilapidated," due to "horrifying business misconduct," (Pyke & Rysjedal, 2025: 4-5). These settings reflect Stephen Kline's proposal that commercialization corrupts the "purity", "imagination" and "innocence of childhood culture, (Kline, 1933). These three words are all ideological framings of children, which are encoded into the liminal spaces of both games by the developers. Drawing from Hasnon, this could be interpreted as Cawthon and Mob Entertainment's "comment[s] on contemporary society," surrounding the corruption within business and entertainment spaces, especially regarding children (Hanson, 2000: 146). With Participant F's reference to the "little stars" or Participant J's interpretation of the "walls speaking", Gen Z individuals seemed to sense the presence of childhood innocence, within these spaces, even if deteriorated.

### C. Commercialised Media

Discussions of commercialised media predominantly referred to the advertisement clip in *PP*, which depicted a toy commercial for a doll called 'Poppy'. Participant E and A, as well as others, referenced this clip as a particular source of fascination, but also discomfort. Some participants also included reference to popular toys:

*Poppy Playtime was very explicit [...] about its themes of loss of childhood innocence [...] it's just weird to want to show children a toy being made in such like broken up stages. Like I know we have Build-A-Bear [...] but like with doll heads and like the arms and stuff, it's usually the kids that kind of breathe life into the toys. And to see that corporate magnet behind it, it kind of strips it of a lot of its magical soul. It's kind very weird and hollow to advertise that you want people to see a note behind the magic almost. (Participant E)*

*The advert, in my opinion. Yeah, that was... no. Something's wrong... [...] the advert was trying to appeal to kids more than their parents because it was very, like, simple language. Very like, "oh, look what this doll can do!" And I feel like [...] it's kind of like, enticing and inviting children like entrancing them [...] to like wanting to buy the doll and like talking about it and owning one and stuff like that. .Like, it just feels a bit off. (Participant A)*

*About the toys and stuff, I really don't understand the hype around Labubus. I think they look very weird and creepy [...] Literally, when I saw Huggy Wuggy and some of these random characters in this game, it genuinely reminded me of Labubus. [...] If we push that boundary, just a little bit further, made their smiles a little bit wider, made their eyes a little bit bigger, they could be so, so creepy. And it's weird why, not just kids, but grown adults, like my cousin was telling me she saw a grown woman with 20 Labubus on her bag. [...] (Participant H)*

Participant A and E's description of the advertisement clip highlight their uneasiness being cultivated through intersections of commerce and childhood. Both participants emphasise how the adverts reflect devious business intentions to "entrance children" and directly reflect David Buckingham's work on the commercialisation of childhood culture. His reference to a toy-related animation series having "programme-length commercials," is deliberate to position children as the target marketing audiences for "selling merchandise" relating to children's media (Buckingham, 1995). Similarly,

Participant H and E's reference to real life toys and consumerism, further highlights this commercialised culture. These are interesting parallels to other discussions within the focus groups, of game studios like Mob Entertainment having their own merchandise stores to sell toys.

In addition, Participant E's connections between "life" and inanimate objects such as children's "dolls", or Participant H's discussion of exaggerating features of toys to intensify horror, echo Mori's concept of the 'uncanny valley', (Mori *et al.*, 2012). The scholar's concept of entities being too artificial to be human, but too humoid to be artificial, blurs the lines between the 'animate' and 'inanimate'; a dissonance which Poppy's advertisement utilises to heighten experiences of horror.

## Monsters

### E. Jumpscares

Jumpscares are one of the most prominent and iconic mechanics of 'mascot horror' games like *FNAF* and *PP*. However, they were a key point of contention between the two focus groups. Whilst Focus Group 1 shared sentiments of intense fear and shock by the jumpscares, with Participant C even stating this mechanic as the most horrifying aspect of the games, Focus Group 2 were disappointed and sceptical of their effectiveness as a horror mechanic.

*[...] Yeah, Golden Freddy was the one that took me out. I was like yeah, that one is bit scary, I'm not gonna lie. (Participant B)*

*[...] But I think for me, obviously, the first thing I think of is the jumpscare. Knowing that, especially with FNAF, knowing that someone is going to jumpscare me, but I really can't do anything about it [...]*  
*(Participant C)*

*[...] Like, the anticipation of a jumpscare is far more intimidating than an actual jumpscare. [...] But like, the jumpscares aren't actually that scary, or like, what they're threatening you with isn't that scary. But by putting you in positions where you have a lot of muddled information, like, everything in that video was very audially muddled and very visually muddled. (Participant J)*

*[...] I can't really watch scary movies by myself, like, I get terrified, but they didn't scare me. What was really scary was the muffling whenever it went into the cameras and came back out [...] I kept trying to look away because I was always expecting something. But that kind of surprised me as a big scaredy cat. (Participant E).*

These ideas are reminiscent of Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, as discussed in the literature review. As Cawthon and Mob Entertainment function as the 'encoders', attempting to curate experiences of horror through sudden shock, the 'decoders' – the Gen Z participants of this study – understood and interpreted them from their own positionalities. These responses also indicate that participants of Focus Group 2 were not 'interpellated' by jumpscare, thus not placed into feelings of stress or unease like Focus Group 1.

### **E. The Monstrous Child**

At a chosen stage in both focus groups, participants were provided by the researcher more contextual information surrounding both games, precisely that the monstrous 'mascot horror' antagonists were manifestations of children. Mostly, participants who were unaware of the games reacted in a physical manner, expressing a shocked expression or seemingly gasing, aside from Participant I:

*I KNEW IT! Sorry to interject, but like I had to. I knew they were, like, getting up to some dodgy stuff! There's always some kind of f\*\*ked up experimentation going on with children in these sort of games [...] (Participant I)*

*[...] Well, like, with what you said earlier... I feel sorta bad for them now. [...] (Participant E).*

*[...] The people say we're [kids] but we're just older. And I was like, this is like, not cultish, but I was like, this is kind of freaky. Like there has to be a distinction between kids and adults, like mentally as well but she's just like, nope. There is no distinction. And I'm like, okay, great. (Participant A)*

These reflections echo Kristeva's notion of the abject, where neither the "subject nor object" can be distinguished, to provoke "horrifying" repulsion. The contextual information surrounding the

'monstrous child' collapses stereotypical associations of childhood with innocence, innocence versus monstrosity, or the victim and the antagonist. The blurring of these boundaries positions the monstrous child as a liminal figure, simultaneously the 'child' yet also the 'monster', producing horror through the destabilisation of these cultural categories.

Therefore, this section directly links to the broader conceptual framework of this paper, where the 'monstorous child' directly enforces a process of ideological encoding. Drawing from Davies and Harré, children are positioned by Gen Z audiences through ideologies of vulnerability and victimisation, but are then reconfigured as dangerous antagonists, (Davies & Harre, 1990). This process clashes with the reverse, where the 'monster' becomes the 'child'. This reframing unsettled participants, but also 'interpellated them, to simultaneously experience horror and pity.

## CONCLUSION

This dissertation set out to question the role of children's media and entertainment settings in *Five Nights at Freddy's* and *Poppy Playtime* in shaping Gen Z audiences' experiences of horror. Through semi-structured, qualitative focus groups, theoretical research and a conceptual framework grounded in ideological interpellation and subject positioning, this paper highlights how children and childhood are mobilised as powerful affective and ideological resources in both games. These resources position Gen Z audiences into states of horror, encompassing sensations ranging from discomfort to even fascination. In particular, the focus groups have further developed this understanding of Gen Z's experiences of fear as deeply individual, anchored in their subjective memories and experiences of childhood and loss.

Through in-depth thematic analysis, coding participants' responses revealed three interlinking mechanisms through which horror is cultivated in both games: atmosphere, the corruption of children's entertainment, and monsters. The findings of this dissertation indicate that these mechanisms operatete through various methods, especially audiovisual sensory engagement. Sound, silence, echo and mechanical whirrs were often described as producing unease, especially when fused with colour and spatial design which evoked visual references to childhood, while simultaneously indicating its corruption. The focus groups highlight that these are not passive effects, but rather actively drawing on participants' subjective cultural associations with safety, play and vulnerability.

Horror becomes a transensory experience felt at every level of the body, being seen, heard and most importantly, felt.

The most crucial concluding point of this dissertation is how these experiences of horror are temporally complex. Gen Z did not experience horror as purely adults, but rather, approached these games with memories of being children online. With references to watching Let's Plays and YouTubers, other online games or films they consumed, Gen Z participants learned fear through their time on screens. Children's media and entertainment settings within both games thus resonate for participant as echoes of their own mediated childhoods. In this sense, mascot horror not only interpellates the audience as a "child", but actively positions them as simultaneously the adult and the child, an observer and their remembered younger selves. Whether participants had prior experiences with the games as children or not, it seems that all participants' understandings of online culture heightened the friction between these two positions of the adult and the child, interlinking horror with memory and nostalgia. The ideology within this horror is thus negotiated through the same reflexive awareness, where participants recognised 'where' and 'when' they should be scared and 'whether' they felt the effects.

Overall, this dissertation has contributed to the media, communications and game studies through three important ways. Firstly, it has addressed the absence of indie and mascot horror within academic discourse, whilst demonstrating their cultural and theoretical significance. Secondly, it has advanced audience research by centering the embodied experiences and voices of Gen Z when discussing the digital horror cultures which permeated their childhood. Thirdly, it reframes childhood and horror in video games as not static symbols or purely textual phenomena, but rather ideological, emotional and temporal structures which continue to shape young adults beyond childhood. However, it is important to acknowledge the several limitations to this study. For instance, the purposive sampling strategy has limited the generalisability of the findings. The reliance on curated video compilations rather than direct gameplay also influenced participants' responses and experiences, however, this approach accommodated practical constraints. To combat these limitations, future research could involve different video games outside of the Western indie horror space, to illuminate the culturally varying ideologies surrounding childhood, and its impacts on constructing and experiencing horror.

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