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open space

'The Backrooms': exploring the unconscious together through collective meaning making

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On 12 April 2018, an anonymous user posted a single image on 4chan's disquieting images thread. The image pictured an empty room and intersecting corridor, painted yellow with fluorescent lighting, taken from an odd angle. In a collaborative act, someone else replied, adding a narrative element to the image, naming it 'The Backrooms', a liminal space that could only be accessed once a person 'no clipped' (a video-game cheat that allows players to pass through walls and defy physics) out of reality (Lloyd, 2022). This post went on to join a modern form of collective online storytelling known as 'creepypasta', 'brief, user-generated, paranormal stories intended to scare readers' (Wikipedia, 2022). Since then, online followers have contributed to the modern mythos through numerous short narrative stories, indie video games and most recently several YouTube videos, including one listed as 'found footage', which received 18 million views (Pixels, 2022).

In the original post, The Backrooms are described as monotonous, damp, fluorescent and empty. Online contributors debate how large the space is but say it ranges from 600 million square miles to an infinite range. Additional lore has expanded this liminal space to have multiple levels, human colonies of lost people, sources of sustenance and a possible exit named the 'The Way Out'. The primary medium of lore expansion is generated by users in online forums posting as if they are currently in The Backrooms themselves and detailing their experience on the unique level that they are currently exploring. This expansion has led to thousands of levels being described, with other users corroborating or expanding on the new areas in extensive detail, describing smells, sounds, conversations and unique landmarks, often speaking to their own personal fears.

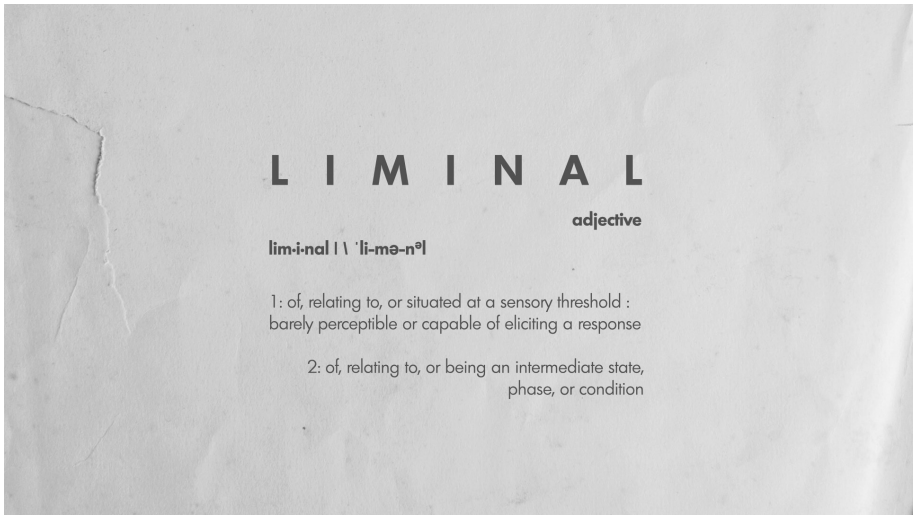
From a social-psychological perspective, the concept of The Backrooms holds some level of fascination, for several reasons. The unique collaborative act of building and exploring a virtual reality made by individuals, rather than marketing firms or companies, creates a social exchange of adult 'playing' that is 'crowd sourced'. It raises questions such as: How is playing utilised by collaborators in this space and what is its impact? How does psychoanalytic theory combine the idea of playing and liminal spaces? Another aspect is the idea that The Backrooms

could be a collective effort to explore and manifest the unconscious, not only through fear and its many manifestations, but also as a journey that individuals take to get to deeper, more complex 'levels'. What does the construction of the space itself tell us about the dream-like quality of different levels and the desire to share these dreams with each other, not only through communication but also as a form of traversal between unconsciousnesses? How does psychoanalytic work on dreams and the unconscious help us to examine what collaborators choose to fill each space with? And finally, what do psychoanalytical ideas have to say on the consistent themes that run through each level or described experience of The Backrooms? For example, how can Freud's work on 'the uncanny' help us understand the unique combination of nostalgia and loneliness that is consistently described by collaborators?

First introduced by Turner (1969) and Van Gennep (2019), liminality was used to describe transitions marked by ritual such as ageing, death and marriage. It has now expanded to include liminal spaces and emotional states (Zimmerman, 2008; Bell, 2021) (see Figure 1).

In order to understand how liminal space engages with 'playing', we first need to understand how we 'come to play', where 'play takes place' and how this can become something we engage in with others. Winnicott (2005: 4) describes transitional objects and phenomena, as used by infants, as external things recognised as simultaneously separate and not separate, transitional as in both/and, from the inner psychic world. For Winnicott, although these transitional objects do symbolise something else such as the mother's breast, the very fact that they are used in their stead shows the infant's ability to conceptualise fantasy and reality, creating their own substitute, which they attach meaning to. This ability to fantasise and play, particularly outside of dreams or the interpreting of dreams when awake, extends into adulthood as a creative 'reaching

Figure 1: When using liminality as defined, Mark Fisher's (2007: 1) work on Hauntology and spectral spaces maybe helpful in dovetailing with Freud's work on the uncanny, 'haunting happens when a space is invaded or otherwise disrupted by a time that is out-of-joint, a dyschromia.'



Source: Self-made

out' that facilitates communication beyond our attempts to categorise or organise, that is, organised chaos, organised nonsense (Winnicott, 2005: 56). This state of play facilitates a space of unity for the individual, allowing them to express ideas from a place of situated identity rather than defence mechanisms (Winnicott, 2005).

Examining the space in which play occurs, Winnicott (2005) establishes that it is a third area outside of both the inner psychic and objectively perceived world. As we communicate 'illusory experiences', social groups can form based on a shared understanding or similarity of these experiences and our desire to communicate them. What is specifically interesting in the context of these liminal spaces, as described in The Backrooms, is the playmaking that occurs when these 'non-spaces' encounter the creative space of cultural experience, making meaning out of spaces that have lost their original utility and human interaction (Augé, 1995). For example, Figures 2 and 3 show common shared spaces – a petrol station and a generic interior hallway – which are defined by their use and association with people. When people are no longer present, the spaces could be said to be haunted by the absence of their defining secondary part: human interaction. We begin to consider an alternative meaning and purpose for a space defined by human interaction as it reaches beyond anthropocentricism.

A consistent theme across the images and spaces that are created in The Backrooms is the liminality of each one, a space that is transitional, a moment on a journey, something in the middle rather than the destination. This idea of the liminal is extended in the build of The Backrooms, by highlighting a breaching of the threshold between a *real* and a *socially recognised* space that collaborators call 'The Frontrooms' – a mysterious intriguing area that is often experienced alone with no clear direction or meaning. There is a dream-like quality to the experience described on different levels, from the embodiments of fears or existential dread to nostalgic and familiar sights and smells.

Figure 2: A space normally defined by its function is made eerie and unusual when human interaction is left out and the space becomes something else

Source: Bryan Wan, Shutterstock

Figure 3: The narrow hallway would be unremarkable as a daylit public space but its emptiness and emergency lighting call for attention to a normally unseen transitional space

Source: Scarbor Sui, Unsplash (Sui, 2021)

Utilising Milner's (1989: 60–1) work, we can begin to see The Backrooms as a way to 'frame' our approach to the unconscious. Pajaczkowska (2008: 35) describes Milner's approach to the 'framed gap' saying, 'the blankness of the space allows the emergence of representational activity from the subjects own "blankness" or the amnesia that protects the ego from the repressed unconscious'. This also ties to Winnicott's (2005) understanding of play as a tertiary place distinct from the inner psychic and outward objective reality, creating a unique space to play and explore in without the constraints or need of order and organisation. However, to really understand the connection between dreams and the liminal rabbit warren of The Backrooms, it is best to look back to Freud's work on dreams. We can see that both Winnicott and Milner have built on Freud's ideas (by way of Klein) to explain how displacement is navigated as the constraints of consciousness are lowered and amnesias are filled (Craib, 2001; Freud, 2001). If this tertiary space enables an exploration of the unconscious from the place of 'I am', as contended by Winnicott, then this can also be linked to Freud's work on structures of the mind (the id, ego and superego) (Laufer, 2005).

After viewing hundreds of photos, videos and wiki world-building posts a consistent theme emerges, the twinning of nostalgia and a creeping uneasiness. Nostalgia in this immersive experience is different from how it presents in a Disney theme park, for example; here it twins with the uncanny rather than the saccharine commodification of childhood. Davis's (1979: 453) work explains that nostalgia is 'the mourning of displacement and temporal irreversibility' but instead of its wistfulness calling back to 'history without guilt', when combined with the uncanny it becomes something else (Kammen, 1993: 688). Ernst Jentsch (1906: 4) first wrote about the 'uncanny', explaining that it was founded in intellectual uncertainty and an encounter with 'new/foreign/hostile', which corresponds to a 'psychical association of "old/known/

familiar'". Building on this initial work, Freud cited the etymology of the German word *unheimlich*, which directly translates to *unhomely*, saying that 'the uncanny is that species of frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar', while *unheimlich* also ties into the unintentional revelation of secret and hidden things (Freud, 2003: 124). The Backrooms could be a *doppelgänger* for our own mundane liminal spaces, a concept that Freud (2003: 143) related to the uncanny through ideas on doubles, repetitions and regression, 'to times when the ego had not yet clearly set itself off against the world outside and from others', harkening to ideas on nostalgia again. However, within the uncanny, nostalgia is not quite history without guilt but, as Freud noted, rather the returning of an emotional impulse long repressed, which, although not always originally frightening, is uncanny when it reappears dimly perceived by us. The Backrooms are a unique experience of the uncanny due to their construction by those experiencing the uncanny while also engaging with other collaborators' own curated uncanny. This could allow for Freud's two distinct versions of the uncanny – repressed childhood complexes and magical thinking – to reassert themselves in a more logical 'realistic' environment. In turn colliding without what Freud describes as the feeling of betrayal we may often see in literature because in The Backrooms the reader is also often the author.

While these ideas can help us navigate the feelings invoked, their creation and the space they occur in, what they do not address is the collaborative world building that is present in The Backrooms. In his paper on the cultural psychology of creativity, Glăveanu (2010: 148) points out the tradition to assign creativity on an individual base rather than a 'We-paradigm' – 'ordinary individuals being creative only in their relation to one another'. The approach of a social and cultural understanding of creativity allows us to see the 'negotiation of meaning' that occurs between collaborators in society (Glăveanu, 2010: 154). Research is limited in the social-psychological analysis of collaborative creativity specifically relating to play. It may be that newer technology such as the internet and online video games allows for world building between creators on a much larger scale than previous types of play such as tabletop role-playing games like 'Dungeons and Dragons' or writers' circles of the early 1900s (Lesny, 2012; Daniau, 2016). We can, however, look to Glăveanu (2011: 483) and his use of a *common representational space* when understanding how groups creatively collaborate. He explains that, in this space, 'individuals use symbolic resources intrinsic to their particular system of knowledge, and through communication, generate new and useful artefacts (the creative outcome)' (Glăveanu, 2011: 483). The artefacts created in these spaces are a specific kind of narrative meaning making, which, when brought together, create storyworlds encompassing 'spatial, temporal, causal and ontological relations' (Thon, 2017). The storyworld presented as The Backrooms is also an example of internet folklore (Smith, 2018; Foulidi and Papakitsos, 2021), which, although relatively unstudied, allows us to relate discussions on folklore and fairytales to this newer iteration. Klein (1998: 52) points this out in her discussion of Grimm's fairytales and their usefulness in revealing latent fears within children, explaining that they are a tool allowing these fears to be more 'thoroughly dealt with by analysis'.

If we extend these ideas to The Backrooms by connecting collaborative creativity, storytelling and dreams, we can tie them into the idea of social dreaming. When analysing social dreams as liminal psychic space, Manley et al (2015) explain social dreaming as dreams relayed through a dream-sharing event – a social dreaming matrix (SDM) – allowing participants to build meaning and associations together

in a cumulative manner. In their work on social dreaming they explored utilising social media platforms as a way to share dreams and allow for this process to happen online rather than in person. They highlight that there was an absence of co-creation and feedback in these online spaces (present in in-person SDM sessions) as participants were unknown to each other and could not provide associations or linking observations (Manly et al, 2015). I believe that The Backrooms could be a manifestation of an SDM by bringing together people with a common interest into a liminal psychic space to share dream-like experiences that likely represent repressions and hazy renditions of emotional impulses. The cloying nature of the uncanny and nostalgia creates an intimate and personal experience that is also widely relatable to the millions of collaborators in these liminal spaces. This in turn allows for personal revelations through storytelling and level building while other collaborators have the ability to provide those previously absent associations or linking observations, creating an SDM that, if analysed, could be as productive online as in person.

This collective creativity, in the case of The Backrooms, is also a collective engagement with fear, producing 'internet folklore' that, similar to the Kleinian perspective on traditional folklore and fairytales, connects phantasies and anxiety.

The liminality present in The Backrooms is consistently presented with the uncanny (the familiar strange) and, as Freud (2003) noted, the uncanny occurs at the blurring of reality and fantasy, which is itself a liminal state. Perhaps these images evoke a feeling that our attachment to this reality and the people around us is not really as concrete as we would believe. What is missing in these images (us) is realised as less essential or assured than we presumed, the idea of us haunting the empty images as spectres in the liminal space (Biotti, 2019). By engaging in these ideas collectively, perhaps individual and collective fears are assuaged or at least less lonely in their exploration? And by creating shared spaces of meaning we can engage with each other in a deeply personal way, finding others who share our unconscious manifestations, and phantasies, and can help provide new ways to reflect through association and feedback.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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