

Secured, Contained, Protected: Consensus Reality in the SCP Foundation



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Front Page of the SCP Wiki

The SCP wiki (<http://www.scpwiki.com/>) is a collaborative writing website in the form of the hypertext archive of a clandestine paragovernmental organisation known only as The Foundation. This archive originated in the tradition of creepypasta, a genre of internet-based writing that leveraged paranoia, urban fantasy, cosmic horror, and as a rule was anonymous. The seed of SCP was a post made in 2007 on the /x/ paranormal board on 4chan, describing a monstrous entity being rigorously contained. This comparatively innocuous anomaly was titled SCP-173, (<http://www.scp-wiki.net/scp-173>) but its power lay not in the elaborate structure in which it is now set, but rather in its act of positing such a structure, one whose allure was so great that it had to be created. This has shades of the global scholastic conspiracy imagined by Borges in *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, where a cosmopolitan group of scholars creates a fantastical world so thorough and compelling that this second world is willed into existence.

In order to participate, the writer/reader must step into the subject position circumscribed by the structure—in a sense the writer/reader is “spoken for” by SCP. One gets the sense that one has gained access to something that was meant to be hidden, that the fact of having accessed

it has led one to be marked or condemned. The bulk of this archive is in the form of SCP documents (standing for Special Containment Procedures), which are “summaries of anomalies and emergency procedures for maintaining or re-establishing safe containment in the case of a containment breach or other event”. (<http://www.scp-wiki.net/about-the-scp-foundation>) Each document relies on the place prepared for it by the others and also on the slow negotiation of canon formation among this community. Much of the content of SCP is in the form of Interview Logs, Addenda, Research Notes, and the other “secretions of an organism” that is the archive of a secretive corporation, complete with arbitrary redactions of names, dates, places, or anything else. Adherence to this formal apparatus is necessary for a sort of verisimilitude, and for a reader to reach what one may call the “story” told by a document one has to get past technical details written in a clinical style, drained of any affective response, dehumanized, and bureaucratized. By placing a rigid hierarchical structure over each one, the story squirms in its containment. The SCP archive refers to itself, it accumulates through references to itself, and consumes all sorts of writing in the formation of its archive. (tasha203)

The SCP wiki describes perfectly what Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. calls “[...] aestheticized cult-behavior, participation in an emotional community based in noncoercive structures, literal masquerade, and pleasurable stories—in short, a ludic cult”. (46)

The Reality of the Foundation

The Foundation is described as

[operating] beyond jurisdiction, empowered and entrusted by every major national government with the task of containing anomalous objects, entities, and phenomena. These anomalies pose a significant threat to global security by threatening either physical or psychological harm.

The Foundation operates to maintain normalcy, so that the worldwide civilian population can live and go on with their daily lives without fear, mistrust, or doubt in their personal beliefs, and to maintain human independence from extraterrestrial, extradimensional, and other extranormal influence. (<http://www.scpwiki.com/about-the-scp-foundation>)

There are extremely suggestive points raised in this short description. First is the question of the anomaly. An anomaly becomes, by definition or rather by circumscription, that which cannot be explained through publicly acknowledged scientific procedure. The objects considered anomalous may thus be as harmless as a vending machine that makes coins put into it vanish, or as devastating as a butter knife that can cut through dimensions. The harm being contained then is not only that of damage to life and property, but also to the tacit fabric of material and social reality that allows civilization to exist. The word civilization here is used advisedly, because the mission statement of SCP declares that its task is to guard the borders of the teeming sea of chaos that lies behind the apparent order of the universe. One fruitful comparison with worldly history may be the dawning of the atomic age characterized by scientific research by competing

technomilitary apparatuses into the possibility of nuclear warfare. The annihilating power of a potential weapon meant that inquiry into the atom could not be what we could naively call pure science, and any such inquiry would have results that would always already have been classified. This is illustrated in the incident of the publication of the story “Deadline” by Cleve Cartmill in *Astounding Science Fiction* a full year before the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The description of a fission bomb in the story prompted an investigation by the FBI, because nuclear knowledge was a state secret that one could arrive at without having to steal any documents. (Berger 125-137) In the working of the Foundation, we see a similar paranoiac attitude to anything that may test the boundaries of science.

Another extremely important word to note in this passage is “normalcy” as something to be imposed and jealously protected. For this an example may be in order—if a giant worm were to erupt through the ground while one of us were walking through a crowded square, causing havoc and terror, the Foundation would send teams to placate and contain the worm and cart it away, then detain everyone in the area, administer amnestics, delete any recordings of the incident on the internet, and create the evidence of a chemical leak and explosion to explain the damage. Thus, the terror does not come only from the idea that a worm may be tunneling under us as we speak, but rather from the worrying possibility that we have already witnessed such an irruption of terror into our reality, and crucially we do not remember it at all. Rather than being whole fabrics of lived experience on which we can rely failing all else, the archives of culture and our own memory become artficed ecologies at the mercy of powers outside our own.

Much of the authority that we may impute to the special containment procedures derives from their use of language. Objects are classed and categorised, their containment variables are specified rigorously, and the descriptions themselves are laconic, empirical, and amoral. The documents function in the tense of “is to be,” recusing themselves from any misgivings or argument. All these measures to one end—to convince the reader/writer of the possibility of the paranormal—and were the paranormal to exist, to convince the reader that there would be for them no option but to tacitly assent to the authority of that which would hide it away.

The extent of the disregard to principles of law or observances of human rights may be seen in the case of D-Class personnel who are disposable in the extreme, often prisoners condemned to die, abject people used as test subjects or tasked with extremely dangerous tasks that may end in death or worse. Worse perhaps is the fate of anomalous humans, who once catalogued by the Foundation are no longer part of human society; they are referred to not with personal pronouns but rather with their SCP designation. Interview logs may record their terror and passion but the authority the bureaucracy in overwriting them is paramount and indisputable.

An extremely interesting parallel may be drawn with the seminal work of Suzanne Briet called *What is Documentation?*, where she argues that a deer in a zoo is itself a document. (10) Analogously, we may begin to understand the scientific thrust of the Foundation—since it does not have the luxury of creating localised natures within laboratory settings as mundane science

does, each experiment log for an SCP is an attempt to describe the ways in which its anomaly thwarts material analysis. The epistemic venture of this organisation is apparent: it generates a corpus and a taxonomy, it mobilises the knowledge that it generates in order to engross itself—certain SCP documents cite in footnotes fictional research papers having to do with pataphysical debates and the engineering of reality.

Yet even these inexistent fields of science must have their own codes, their units of measurement, their accepted truisms and their blind spots. The unhomely sciences that are implemented to contain these various artifacts and phenomena are those that either skirt the edges of anomaly, or themselves grow out of it. There are SCPs that are used to contain others, and those that, in being analyzed, yield results that feed the abilities of the Foundation. In a more complex position are techniques and technologies used by the Foundation that are not explicitly anomalous, but are not available to the public at large. These most notably include amnestics. Amnestics are triggers, chemical or otherwise, that are able to erase or modify memories either with specific targets or for vast swathes of time. These may be used on individuals that stumble upon an anomaly, or may be disseminated widely in the case of a containment breach. Other means used by the Foundation include memetic agents, retroactive deletions of cultural artifacts, and in extreme cases even the wholesale falsification of astronomical or fossil records.

The position assumed by the Foundation may be productively read alongside Eric Wilson's work *The Republic of Cthulhu*, which likens Lovecraftian cosmic horror with the shadowy parapolitical workings of espionage and crime syndicates.

More specifically, the alterity of the monsters and what they signify “is raised to the extreme degree by a systematic emphasis on its complete and utter incompatibility with anything known by means of the senses or reason, understandable by logic, or expressible in discursive language.” The issue of the tactile sensibility, or the crypto-materialism of the grotesque (as opposed to the always immeasurable magnitude of the sublime), is essential for the aesthetic effect of cosmic horror. (110)

The crypto-materialism referred to here may be seen as the experience when piecing together a conspiracy theory—the positivist impulse toward the collation of the world as evidence, and the fog of secrecy that obscures and frustrates such a collation. The reader of SCP becomes a consummate conspiracy theorist, who has no choice but to piece together from their movement in a fragmentary corpus the roughly yoked organs and contradictory histories of an organization whose true nature remains out of grasp.

Fan Communities and Canon Formation

Anyone may become a member of the website in order to write, edit, or rate documents, or to participate in the forum. Any canon, as far as one exists, can only be construed by individuals or communities of readers from their necessarily limited knowledge of a vast text being woven and unwoven in each direction. There are somewhat more cohesive portions to this fluid canon, such

as names of researchers and test sites, of accepted procedures and parascientific terms that are part of a common pool that may be used to write or explain parts of this universe. There is thus another level at which the phrase consensus reality may be understood---the maintenance and further growth of the SCP archive is a matter of community contribution and management, and the direction taken by the growing archive reflects both the plasticity and elasticity of the aesthetic sensibilities of those who participate.

One's path through the corpus is not linear but labyrinthine. Navigating through SCP the previous pages that one has read are not closed off to the reader. This is encouraged by the structure, which on the face of it overwhelms any reader/writer with its sheer size. The reader, then, may be imagined as being in a flat circle, equidistant to all other points on the website. The possibility space does not need to be navigated in the unidirectional movement of a novel, nor does it constantly return to a center. All the documents, whose rhizomatic structure is the archive, coexist, and in fact rely on each other even when their literal content contradicts each other. Thus the ergodic path (as described in Espen Aarseth's work *Cybertext*, 1-24) described by the reader is what leads to the formation of their own idiosyncratic archive or headcanon.

“Headcanon” is a neologism used in the fanfiction community with a host of meanings, including a reader's personal interpretation of a corpus, the combination of parts of a corpus held canonical by a reader, or a reader's theory that may even be explicitly denied by the main corpus. The creation of one's headcanon is synonymous with reading this work, because to navigate the archive is to fill it out, to give each new text form by placing it within its place.

What takes shape is an autoreferential fandom that elaborates itself around its own obsessions. A folk mythology that coalesces, ad-hoc, around certain names, certain symbols or obsessions or attitudes. New pages are added and removed and deleted every day, and no one path can be said to have privilege over another—indeed we can imagine two consummate readers or writers of SCP, each of whom have read thousands of SCP articles without ever reading a single document in common. Both would have, through their reading, learned to use the specialized vocabulary of the SCP Foundation, be able to agree or disagree to any degree about the nature of the Foundation, and yet all this without ever being able to compare notes on any specific document. In being a work that by its nature is non-overlapping for any two given readers, this has extremely interesting implications for fields such as fan studies, by being a kind of fiction that gestures away from the tyranny of learned-ness, of textual competence.

Power and reality

The Foundation may be succinctly described as a horrific bureaucracy that functions as a sort of warehouse where every entry is a novum, where the rigid and procedural form of each document itself serves to domesticate and contain any horror and moral misgiving. The imaginary of this global conspiracy is one of a Cold War style world of generalized paranoia and simmering danger. The role of the Foundation is thus in the final analysis entirely necropolitical in the formulation of Achille Mbembe—it is a political organization oriented towards death. (34)

Luc Boltanski argues in his book *Enigmes et complots* that the anxieties to which the origin of the detective and the espionage novel is owed is a “utopian synthesis between state and nation. The state became an agency that ordered and guaranteed reality inasmuch as that reality was at once lived and instituted, in other words, simultaneously treated as already in existence and as requiring a supplementary effort to bring it into being.” (17) The state thus seems to have a power at once omnipotent and fatally lacking—in order to consummate its fantasy of control it must always second-guess itself and outrun its wildest paranoia. The anxieties that give rise to the SCP wiki are of a different order, and they no longer limit themselves to the human terror of war and carnage.

The cosmic stakes of this task place the working of the Foundation outside of the possibility of political discussion. The twinned progress of science and technology enables the containment of anomalies while simultaneously threatening imminent breach—thus the necessity for the Foundation to mobilise any resources and piggyback on any technical apparatus to modify the picture of reality available to the general public. The Foundation intertwines itself with all planetary networks of power and the production of actionable knowledge. Absent a canonical backstory, the Foundation arrogates to itself every possible history—it may be the full flowering of the ancient pretensions of world stewardship held by secret societies, or it may be the product of a modern clandestine effort to hold fast the gates to the uncanny in a world that increasingly makes containment impossible. When discussing the Foundation, a word that we return to time and again is “arbitrary,” this is because there is no power to which the Foundation submits outside of its own founding principles. It is not immoral but rather amoral, placing itself as a bulwark against a range of catastrophes, from social collapse and panic to the annihilation of the universe. The Foundation is thus a sort of necrotic ooze that feeds on the underside of reality, or a scab left by a wound on reality.

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