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The NoSleep Podcast

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NoSleep: an interview with David Cummings, host and producer of *The NoSleep Podcast*

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Independent Scholar | Kitchener, Ontario, Canada

David Cummings hails from Toronto, Ontario, Canada, and is the host and producer of *The NoSleep Podcast*, the award-winning storytelling podcast of original horror stories for mature, adult audiences. This interview features discussion of the podcast's origins; ways in which stories, narrator(s), voice actors, soundtracks and sound design interconnect, creating immersion and engagement; production elements; and podcasting as a new form of media utilized to deliver original content and stories.

horror | storytelling | podcasting | new media

Jeffery Klaehn: How did *The NoSleep Podcast* initially come about and how would you describe it to someone who may not yet be familiar with it?

David Cummings: *The NoSleep Podcast* is an audio anthology series of original horror stories. I describe the show as an enhanced audiobook wherein we tell "campfire" stories – first-person stories describing frightening events, akin to those stories told around a campfire late at night.

I had done a little bit of voice work back in the 90s and wanted to start doing it again on a casual basis. When I heard some people were starting a podcast telling scary stories from [Reddit's Nosleep forum](#) I volunteered to be a narrator. The show was taking a long time getting off the ground so I offered to produce the first episode to get the ball rolling. When no one else stepped up to take over as producer I kept going. Before long it was my show to produce and run. It continues that way to today.

JK: How might you describe horror podcasting to someone who is entirely new to the scene?

DC: There are two types of horror podcasting. The first is shows which discuss the products of the horror genre in terms of movies, literature, and TV shows. The second is the shows which perform horror, either through storytelling, like our show, or via audio dramas with scripted full-cast productions. In terms of audio fiction, the productions can be as simple as an audiobook-style with one narrator reading an entirely unadorned story, or the tales can be enhanced with atmospheric music and sound effects to enhance the mood of the stories, which is our approach. Audio fiction storytelling has been growing quite a bit with not only podcasts proliferating but also narrators with YouTube channels performing stories from the various horror writing outlets like Reddit and "creepypasta" sites.

JK: *The NoSleep Podcast* presents audio adaptations of stories submitted to the *NoSleep* subreddit – can you please explain how this process works?

DC: The *Nosleep* subreddit focuses mostly on tales written in the first-person and which can be plausible in terms of believability. The goal is for stories to seem real even though it is understood they are fictional. In the past the narrators or I would choose stories which we found to be well-written, appropriate for audio adaptation, and which connected with us, thus allowing us to convey the story in an authentic manner. From there, the author is contacted for their permission and the story is recorded and produced for the show.

Currently we have a story editor/finder who reviews the stories on *NoSleep* and recommends the stories which best fit the show. The criteria we look for goes beyond just a story which is frightening. We look for stories with strong audio cues which will help us create a more immersive adaptation. It's also important to find stories which we can adapt within our available resources. Our cast of voice actors need to be able to accurately portray the characters, so if a story includes non-English speaking character and we don't have an actor who can perform that role we would decline that story or work with the author to considering editing it to fit with our cast.



JK: How is the podcast designed and organized, and what's involved in its actual production?

DC: The show has evolved from its early days. My vision for the show has always been to try to match the radio horror I listened to as a teen. Initially we had one narrator on each story with generic moody music and almost no sound design. Today, most stories have [multiple narrators](#) for the various roles and a custom-made musical soundtrack and sound design.

The process involves finding the stories, assigning roles to various narrators, located all over the world, receiving their

recordings, and then editing them for the show. Our composer [Brandon Boone](#) creates the music for each story and I put it all together with the sound design.

The amount of time to record the narrations, create the music, and edit/produce the shows works out to at least 80 person-hours per episode.

JK: Growing up in Canada, did you ever listen to [Nightfall](#) on CBC Radio, or [CBS Radio Mystery Theater](#) on Canadian radio?

DC: I don't recall any specific series of shows when I listened on the radio. I am certain I must have heard some [Nightfall](#) episode over the years along with shows like [The Inner Sanctum](#) and some great BBC series. At that age, I just wanted to hear the stories and didn't focus much on what the shows were or who produced them. I have since become very fond of the CBC productions.



JK: Why do you feel *NoSleep* has been embraced to the extent that it has?

DC: It's largely because it took a rather new form of media (the podcast) and brought to it the age-old idea of straightforward horror storytelling. Whether it was people 200 years ago telling scary stories around the campfire or the radio shows of the 30s and 40s, the ability to close your eyes and hear a good story well told is a compelling experience which was lost when movies and TV came to the fore.

Therefore, in the twenty-teens you have a generation of people who mostly think of horror from films. But with storytelling, it allows the audience to use their imaginations to set the scene. We help with the music and sound effects but listeners are able to picture their scariest basement or haunted house, or the look of the horrible monster. What they see in their mind's eye will be what is scariest to them. Thus, as people started to recognize that this medium is as effective as it is for horror, it quickly became some people's favorite way to consume horror.

JK: Can you share information on *NoSleep*'s download numbers?

DC: Like most podcasters, we keep our download stats a guarded secret. I joke that if no one else shares their download numbers I had better go along with them. I can say that the audience has grown significantly. Our monthly download totals – the total number of overall episodes downloaded each month – have gone from around 150,000 to over two million. Bear in mind, this is by no means what I consider our audience size – that's a much smaller number. This is just the total amount of episodes downloaded from our entire library of shows. But overall downloads show very encouraging growth for the show.

JK: In what ways has the podcast and your relationship to it changed and evolved since it was first launched?

DC: When the show started I was a non-entity. I announced each episode but didn't identify myself as the host. I even spoke in the third-person and would say, "This story is narrated by David Cummings," rather than simply saying, "I narrate this tale."

As time went on and I became more comfortable in making the show my own I started interacting with the audience, beginning each show with 2-3 minutes of announcements and communicating with the listeners. This was a beneficial change which allowed the podcast to become more personal for me and form closer bonds with listeners.

The interaction I have with listeners online and via social media is so encouraging and it's fostered a genuine sense of community among us.

JK: What challenges have you – and the podcast – faced?

DC: There is always the challenge of wanting to change how one does things simply to please a small group of people. In the early days I was getting burned out because I felt I had to respond to every single piece of criticism by altering the show somewhat. It took around 18 months to truly understand that the show is mine and I have to produce it according to my vision for it; not to be swayed by people who feel entitled to have the show meet only their exacting standards of what it should be.

Another challenge is simply how to grow the audience. I've never focused much on advertising or marketing. The audience has grown almost exclusively via word-of-mouth. It's meant a slow yet steady increase in the number of listeners.

JK: Can you discuss Dathan Auerbach's "[Penpal](#)" series within the context of what makes for a highly effective *NoSleep* story?

DC: The "[Penpal](#)" series was the first "superstar" series of stories to come out of Reddit's *NoSleep* community. Six stories interconnected yet each of them work so well as stand-alone stories. The overall arc is so compelling and

powerful. When it came to adapting the series for audio it was at a time where we weren't doing much in terms of enhanced production styles which was probably a positive thing. The stories don't need much adornment, they just needed to be told effectively which I feel we did. Sometimes the stories are so good there is little else needed to make them well-loved by the audience.

JK: In what ways do you facilitate the experience of the stories for listeners, in terms of production? How do story, narrator and soundtrack create immersion and engagement for listeners?

DC: I have heard from many different people who say our productions are far scarier than reading the stories on their own. A lot of that is the music which can evoke a very effective atmosphere for setting the tone of the story. Having narrators authentically portray the stories is equally important. If the character is experiencing abject terror you don't want it read by someone who seems bored or indifferent. We try to portray the events of the story as if they genuinely happened and that can heighten the overall effect. We want the audience to care about the characters and feel like they are there with them as they live through the nightmare.

Little things can be very effective. My approach to sound effects is to be minimal but impactful. For example, if there is a scene early in the story when there is no sense of fear or dread yet developed and there is a knock at the door I likely won't add that sound effect because it doesn't add anything to story. But later on when the character is home alone and it's 3 a.m. and there's a knock at the door I will certainly add it there because it will have a huge impact on how the audience experiences the fear in that moment.

JK: Are there any recurring tropes that you feel the horror genre might be better without? And, conversely, are there any storytelling devices that you feel are often deployed effectively?

DC: I think almost any trope can either be wonderful or fail miserably depending on how well it's used. The most basic of all horror tropes is the haunted house. Yet we see countless haunted house stories which are beloved because of how well they work. So while horror tropes exist I don't think they are as irksome as in other genres.

In terms of a specific trope which has been overused lately, I would say the "extra-large grin" tops the list – the person with the creepy smile which grows larger and larger to an inhuman smirk. It can be such a creepy mental image but it's been done to death recently. It's at the point now that no matter how well it's incorporated into the story it won't be as effective because of how ubiquitous it is.

JK: Why do you think horror continues to draw and fascinate?

DC: I find horror fascinating because it's really the only genre which seeks to evoke a negative emotion. Comedy makes us laugh and feel happy. Romance makes us swoon and feel sentimental. Action excites us as we cheer on the hero. But horror tries to make us feel something which we desperately try to avoid in real life: genuine fear. By experiencing fear in a safe environment it can be a very satisfying experience. The monster isn't really under the bed. The psycho isn't really going to attack us in the shower. But by pretending it's real while you're hearing the stories you can experience both the fear and the relief that you're not really in danger. It's akin to riding a roller coaster. Your body feels like you're falling to your death but you swoop around and laugh in spite of your brain sending signals that you're in danger.

Author Biographical Summary

[Jeffery Klaehn](#) resides in Canada and holds a PhD in Communication from the University of Amsterdam and a PhD in Sociology from the University of Strathclyde. His fields of expertise include communication, comics and graphic novels, social theory, political economy of media, propaganda, digital storytelling, game design, and interactive media. His conversations with creatives working in visual, textual and digital arts have been published with the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, [ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies](#), the *International Journal of Comic Art*, *Studies in Comics*, [First Person Scholar](#), *Horror Studies*, *Synaesthesia: Communication Across Cultures*, the *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, *Loading: the Journal of the Canadian Gaming Studies Association*, and *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*.

Referees

Dr. Tom Ue researches and teaches courses in 19th-century British literature, intellectual history, and cultural studies at Dalhousie University.

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