



SERIOUS PLAY

Livestreaming,
Community,
and Popular Culture



POPULAR CULTURE STUDIES JOURNAL

VOLUME 9

ISSUE 2

2021

Editor

CARRIELYNN D. REINHARD
Dominican University

Copy Editor

AMANDA KONKLE
Georgia Southern University

Managing Editor

JULIA LARGENT
McPherson College

Copy Editor

AMY DREES
Northwest State Community College

Associate Editor

GARRET L. CASTLEBERRY
Mid-America Christian University

Copy Editor

PETER CULLEN BRYAN
The Pennsylvania State University

Associate Editor

MALYNNDA JOHNSON
Indiana State University

Reviews Editor

CHRISTOPHER J. OLSON
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Associate Editor

KATHLEEN TURNER LEDGERWOOD
Lincoln University

Assistant Reviews Editor

SARAH PAWLAK STANLEY
Marquette University

Special Issues Editor

LIZ W. FABER
Laboure College

Graphics Editor

ETHAN CHITTY
Purdue University

Please visit the PCSJ at: mpcaaca.org/the-popular-culture-studies-journal.

Popular Culture Studies Journal is the official journal of the Midwest Popular Culture Association and American Culture Association (MPCA/ACA), ISSN 2691-8617. Copyright © 2021 MPCA. All rights reserved.

MPCA/ACA, 421 W. Huron St Unit 1304, Chicago, IL 60654

EDITORIAL BOARD

KATHLEEN KOLLMAN

Bowling Green State University

RAYMOND SCHUCK

Bowling Green State University - Firelands

PABLO VILLALVA

UTE Univeristy

PAUL R. KOHL

Loras College

ASHLEY HINCK

Xavier University

GRAEME WILSON

Independent Scholar

SHYAMALA PARTHASARATHY

University of British Columbia

BERTHA CHIN

Swinburne University of Technology

SPECIAL ISSUE EDITORIAL BOARD

SERIOUS PLAY: LIVESTREAMING, COMMUNITY, AND POPULAR CULTURE

Guest Special Issue Co-Editors

Erik Kersting

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Janelle Malagon

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Guest Special Issue Managing Editor

Christopher J. Olson

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editorial Introduction: Livestreaming and Television1
CARRIELYNN D. REINHARD

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLES:

Serious Play: Livestreaming, Community, and Popular Culture

**Introduction to the Special Issue on Livestreaming as
Popular Culture3**
ERIK KERSTING, JANELLE MALAGON, AND CHRISTOPHER J. OLSON

Before You Step into the Stream6
ERIK KERSTING, JANELLE MALAGON, AND STUART MOULTHROP

Live Streaming and Archiving the Hegemony of Play20
TAYLORE WOODHOUSE

**From Parallel Play to Co-Play: Forms of Play in
Live Streaming Labor39**
KYLE BOHUNICKY, LINDSAY WATKINS, AND JEREMY FRUSCO

**Metagaming Attention: Defining the Metagame Through
the Economy of Attention on Twitch55**
AILEA MERRIAM-PIGG

**Watch Me Make History: Reenacting and Remaking the
Past in Historical Game Live Streams69**
KIRK LUNDBLADE

**Intimacy Games: *Critical Role*'s Struggle to Maintain Its
Tabletop Authenticity88**
ERIK KERSTING

The Video Video Game: On Watching Let's Plays105
MELANIE OBERG

**“No Gods, No Kings, Only Mon!”: *Twitch Plays Pokémon*
as a Case Study in Folkloric Recreation123**
PETER CULLEN BRYAN

**Not Going Viral: Amateur Livestreamers, Volunteerism,
and Privacy on Discord142**
NICHOLAS-BRIE GUARRIELLO

Moving the Show Online: An Analysis of DIY Virtual Venues159
PETER J. WOODS

ARTICLES: Regular Submissions

**“Just Jessica Jones”: Challenging Trauma Representation
and New Trauma Metaphors in Melissa Rosenberg’s
Jessica Jones178**
SEAN TRAVERS

**Conceptual Blending in Presidential Politics: How *The Great
Gatsby* Explained Donald Trump, 2015-2018.....200**
E. FLETCHER McCLELLAN AND KAYLA GRUBER

***Apocalypse Now*: Performing Imperialism and the Apocalypse.....224**
AMANDA DAWSON

**The Coffeehouse, The Diner, The Bar: The Rise and Fall
of Television’s Favorite Third Places.....242**
EMMA J. GIST
Michael T. Marsden Award Winner

**Singing Truth to Power: Folk Music and Political Resistance
in Steven Conrad’s *Politics*259**
LYNN D. ZIMMERMAN

ARTICLES: Student Showcase

**“Hey, What’s the Matter with Your Friend?”: Disability
and Productive Staring in *The X-Files*276**
MITCH PLOSKONKA

Love is (Color)Blind: Constructing Race Non-Visually on Reality TV294
KENDALL ARTZ

We Ate Them to Destroy Them: Carnivores, Cannibals, and the Critique of Mass-Market Feminism in the Age of Consumption.....315
EMILY NASER-HALL

REVIEWS

The *Popular Culture Studies Journal* Reviews:
Introduction340
Christopher J. Olson

Book Reviews.....342

Brown, Jeffrey A. *Batman and the Multiplicity of Identity: The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero as Cultural Nexus*. Routledge, 2019.
Angela M. Nelson.342

Cote, Amanda C. *Gaming Sexism: Gender and Identity in the Era of Casual Video Games*. New York UP, 2020.
David Kocik.347

Nichols, Michael D. *Religion and Myth in the Marvel Cinematic Universe*. McFarland, 2020.
Jackson Reinhardt350

Nygaard, Taylor and Lagerwey, Jorie. *Horrible White People: Gender, Genre, and Television's Precarious Whiteness*. New York UP, 2020.
Dakota J. Sandras354

Paasonen, Susanna. *Dependent, Distracted, Bored: Affective Formations in Networked Media*. MIT Press, 2021.
Grace Wilsey357

Saunders, Rebecca. <i>Bodies of Work: The Labor of Sex in the Digital Age</i> , Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. Mridula Sharma.....	359
Schwartz, Roy. <i>Is Superman Circumcised? The Complete Jewish History of the World's Greatest Hero</i> . McFarland, 2021. Matthew L. Miller.....	362
Shimpach, Shawn (ed.). <i>The Routledge Companion to Global Television</i> . Routledge, 2020. Melissa Beattie.....	364
Film and Games Reviews	368
<i>Black Widow</i> . Dir. Cate Shortland. Screenplay by Eric Pearson. Perf. Scarlett Johansson, Florence Pugh, David Harbour, and Rachel Weisz. Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2021. Elizabeth Shiller.....	368
<i>Cosmic Top Secret</i> , Klassefilm and Those Eyes, Nintendo Switch, 2021. CarrieLynn D. Reinhard.....	371
<i>The Medium</i> , Paolo Granata, 2021. Christopher J. Olson.....	374
ABOUT THE JOURNAL	377

Editorial Introduction: Livestreaming and Television

CARRIELYNN D. REINHARD

The evolution of television continues to be, well, televised.

Built on the inventions of the 1800s, television emerged as a mechanical contraption, drawing on Paul Nipkow's early work on wired transmission of images seen on spinning discs. Early twentieth century inventors Russian Boris Rosing, Scottish Alan Archibald Campbell-Swinton, and German Karl Braun all built on Nipkow's work, with Campbell-Swinton introducing the cathode-ray tube that would become primary for early electronic television. The evolution continued with Vladimir Zworykin, David Sarnoff, Philo Farnsworth and issues of patents at the Radio Corporation of American (RCA), and the first public demonstration of electronic television at the 1939 World's Fair in New York City. Television would later come to dominate American popular culture in the 1950s, fundamentally altering the radio and film industries as well as American politics.

In the eight decades since the World Fair, television has become the primary means of mass mediated communication around the world, distributing news, entertainment, advertisements, and propaganda. At the same time, the emergence and entwinement of digital technologies in everyday life have displaced the television set and traditional television distribution technologies in regions with strong bandwidth and broadband internet infrastructures. The internet operates as a primary distribution technology for television content around the world, whether that content is downloaded or streamed, and whether viewed on a smart TV or a smartphone.

I provide this brief history of television technology as a basic context for the articles collected in this special issue on livestreaming. The technologies have changed, but they still rely on the same basic understanding of physics that led to the experiments and inventions of the early twentieth century. What has changed drastically since then are the practices and power dynamics associated with television (see Reinhard and Amsterdam "Virtual World Television"). When our conception of "television" revolved around the "television set" as a specific piece of technology for watching television shows, television was firmly a mass mediated communication practice, whereby those few with the resources produced and distributed the content for the masses to consume. However, with the advent of

digital social media and convergence cultures, this close association ruptured, as “television-as-technology” spread out over various digital technologies; and, because of this dissemination, “television-as-content” evolved away from primarily being top-down mass communication to allowing more user-generated, social communication (Reinhard and Amsterdam, “Community of Televised Avatars”).

The dissemination of technologies to produce and distribute television means more individuals are now in the television business – with all the potentials and pitfalls associated with such democratization of communication. Anyone could become famous, wealthy, and influential with a webcam, broadband, and enough people interested in what they do. Live audiences can engage with other audience members and even the content producers, potentially influencing the influencer during the production of that content. Television has become more than just about watching; it has become about producing, sharing, co-creating, interacting, playing, communing, and more.

In this current formulation of television come these articles on livestreaming. The essays contained in this special issue consider livestreaming and its current relationships with communities, popular culture, communication, and television. The case studies presented and analyzed here consider how this approach to television-as-content blurs the lines between watching and playing, games and television, popular culture and folklore, labor and hobby. Broadband societies are firmly entrenched in convergence culture, nearly a century after the emergence of mechanical television, but our scholarship must continue to pull these blurred realities into focus to understand just how convergent, connected, and empowered our lives have become.

Works Cited

- Reinhard, CarrieLynn. D. and Pooky Amsterdam. “A Community of Televised Avatars: Interactivities in Virtual World Television Promoting and Acknowledging Participatory Communities.” *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2017, www.participations.org/Volume%2014/Issue%201/5.pdf.
- Reinhard, CarrieLynn D. and Pooky Amsterdam. “Virtual World Television Products and Practices: Comparing Television Production in Second Life to Traditional Television Production.” *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2013, jvwresearch.org/index.php/past-issues/62-arts.

Introduction to the Special Issue on Livestreaming as Popular Culture

ERIK KERSTING, JANELLE MALAGON, AND CHRISTOPHER J. OLSON

On April 14, 1996, a college student named Jennifer Kaye Ringley launched JenniCam.org, a website devoted to displaying black-and-white digital photos of Ringley (Hart). Designed to refresh periodically, the site provided users with an intimate glimpse into Ringley's life, from the mundane (e.g., chores and conversations with friends) to the erotic (e.g., stripteases and sexual activity). At its height, the site generated seven million hits per day and even managed to crash the web (Krotoski). JenniCam's massive success, and the subsequent success of others who followed Ringley's footsteps, heralded the ubiquitous popularity of what we now commonly perform and refer to as livestreaming. Far from the "life-casting" of the late 1990s, livestreaming has emerged as an immensely popular form of entertainment during the first three decades of the 21st century. While the medium gained popularity for sharing videogame play, especially given the nominal use of streaming to broadcast esports competitions, livestreaming has long since outgrown its origins as a platform relegated to either gameplay or live vlogging. Across contexts, this method of sharing something of ourselves to a live audience has

ERIK KERSTING is a doctoral candidate in Media, Cinema, and Digital Studies at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. They are interested in the intersection of games, history, and social life, particularly how digital media communicate philosophical and anthropological meaning. They are a member of the Digital Cultures Collaboratory and the Serious Play streaming group at The Center for 21st Century Studies. They can be reached at Kerstin2@uwm.edu.

JANELLE MALAGON is a PhD student at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee specializing in media studies and play studies. Their research interests focus on the relationship between digital games and the climate crisis. They are a member of the Digital Cultures Collaboratory and the Serious Play streaming group at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Center for 21st Century Studies.

CHRISTOPHER J. OLSON is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee with a media, cinema, and digital studies concentration. His research interests include cult media, professional wrestling, gender studies, and horror cinema. He is the author, co-author, and/or co-editor of various books, including *Normalizing Mental Illness and Neurodiversity in Entertainment Media: Quieting the Madness* (Routledge, 2021) and *Convergent Wrestling: Participatory Culture, Transmedia Storytelling, and Intertextuality in the Squared Circle* (Routledge, 2019).

Popular Culture Studies Journal
Volume 9, Issue 2, ©2021

become a medium for community building, full-time financial subsistence, knowledge production, and creative collaboration.

Driven in part by advancements in digital communication technology (not to mention the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic which necessitated a boom in accessible digital communication), livestreaming refers to online live broadcasts of anything from amateur home streamers who draw two or three regular viewers to beloved celebrities. Streaming functions as both a tool and method for artisans, social media influencers, and individual or gaming collectives alike to reach a global audience. Moreover, streaming intersects with almost every facet of popular culture, from videogames to movies and from live music to theatrical plays. This emergent practice has supplanted many forms of popular culture in the minds and hearts of younger generations, many of whom prefer unboxing videos to movies and would rather watch a Let's Play livestream than play the videogame itself. Given the enormous worldwide popularity of livestreaming, it is vital to consider the phenomenon of livestreaming through an academic lens. With this special issue, we hope to advance the work of scholars like T. L. Taylor, Stuart Moulthrop, Thomas M. Malaby, and others who set out to document and analyze the rise of livestreaming while also legitimizing it as a phenomenon worthy of study.

Building on Taylor's landmark study *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Live Game Streaming*, which helped legitimize academic inquiry into livestreaming, the essays in this special issue offer a wide array of research into various areas of livestreaming. By exploring the intersections between livestreaming, videogames, live music performances, archives, platform studies, and even the relationship between streamers and viewers through an array of methodological and theoretical frames, the contributors help to uncover the factors that have made livestreaming a popular activity with people around the world and from all walks of life. The issue begins with an introduction to the practice and study of livestreaming, followed by four essays that introduce cogent theoretical frameworks for understanding the elements of attention and play in livestreams. These theoretical interventions pave the way for the subsequent six diverse case studies which showcase the ever-widening scope of emergent livestreaming practices. The first three of these case studies focus on traditional video game streaming, while the latter three work toward refining the image of livestreaming practices which do not focus on gameplay.

We would like to thank each of this issue's contributors who all demonstrate an inspiring commitment to further legitimizing livestreaming studies. We are also

grateful to our fellow members in the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Digital Cultures Collaboratory and the Editor of the *Popular Culture Studies Journal* for helping us bring this idea to life. We believe this collection presents a dynamic vision of the present and future of livestreaming studies. This issue builds on the work of those who came before us and points the way toward new areas of inquiry that arise as livestreaming continues to evolve and incorporate other areas of both popular culture and life itself. The contributors to this issue all provide original and exciting insights into this thoroughly thrilling phenomenon that has come to influence nearly every aspect of contemporary society in a breathtakingly short amount of time. We trust that you, the reader, will find these essays useful to your own studies into livestreaming, and we hope that you will be inspired to step into the stream yourself, either through writing your own essay(s) or by switching on your webcam and going live.

Works Cited

- Hart, Hugh. "April 14, 1996: JenniCam starts lifecasting." *Wired*, 14 Apr. 2010, www.wired.com/2010/04/0414jennicam-launches.
- Krotoski, Aleks. "Jennicam: The first woman to stream her life on the internet." *BBC News*, 18 Oct. 2016, www.bbc.com/news/magazine-37681006.

Before You Step into the Stream

ERIK KERSTING, JANELLE MALAGON, AND STUART MOULTHROP

The phrase “livestreaming” invokes a myriad of images: high-stakes video game tournaments with both an online and in-arena audience; one person, playing *Minecraft* on camera for a dozen to tens of thousands of online viewers; a TikToker’s live “get ready with me” video; a YouTuber’s monthly live Q&A session. These images reflect livestreaming in popular terms, though the medium’s explosive popularity and accessibility have greatly influenced the diversity of interventions livestreaming can facilitate. The scope and technological requirements to livestream have changed significantly since the early days of Twitch, or even the height of the 2017 *Fortnite* craze that propelled high-profile streamers into international discourse. Indeed, while Twitch remains the most-used livestreaming platform, it has long outgrown its niche as a game streaming platform. From alternative platforms like YouTube and Facebook Live, to the consistent popularity of the “Just Chatting” streams on Twitch, the landscape of livestreaming continues to change in favor of an increasingly diverse set of purposes, contexts, audiences, and subjects.

As we discuss here, and as the other essays in this issue demonstrate, the boundaries of livestreaming remain ephemeral. Increased accessibility to the technology and platforms required to stream has entirely altered the landscape of livestreaming – a product of both an increased need for streaming technologies and

ERIK KERSTING is a doctoral candidate in Media, Cinema, and Digital Studies at University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee. They are a member of the Digital Cultures Collaboratory and the Serious Play streaming group at The Center for 21st Century Studies. They can be reached at Kerstin2@uwm.edu.

JANELLE MALAGON is a PhD student at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee specializing in media studies and play studies. They are a member of the Digital Cultures Collaboratory and the Serious Play streaming group at the UW-Milwaukee’s Center for 21st Century Studies.

STUART MOULTHROP is Distinguished Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee (UWM). He has a long record of creative and critical publication in digital media, especially electronic literature. With Anastasia Salter, he is co-author of *Twining: Critical and Creative Approaches to Hypertext Narratives* (Amherst College Press, 2021). With Thomas Malaby, Moulthrop co-directs the Digital Cultures Collaboratory in the Center for 21st Century Studies at UWM.

Popular Culture Studies Journal
Volume 9, Issue 2, ©2021

a broader array of accessible platforms facilitating livestreaming, especially in response to COVID-19 and the global effort to work remotely. Internationally renowned and amateur musicians alike perform on-stream on Twitch, Discord, or Facebook Live for an online crowd of handfuls to thousands; nature preserves livestream Q&A sessions about the endangered species they protect on Instagram and Zoom; Indigenous poets and scholars gather for a poetry reading on YouTube to announce the release of a milestone anthology of literary works. In all these examples and more, disparate fans, creators, advocates, and lurkers form vibrant communities by using and participating in livestreaming communities. Representative of this shift, the essays in this collection emphasize the malleability of livestreaming as a practice and product of popular culture, diverse in its creators, audiences, subjects, perspectives, and purposes.

Livestreaming might feel too amorphous to study in focus amid these shifting waters, too difficult to pin down and discuss critically with its diverse contexts. In this essay, we highlight the metaphor of *livestreaming* to emphasize the various labors involved in both the making of livestreams and in the growth of livestreaming studies. Before you step into the stream, we aim to provide a sense of the scope of livestreaming, as suggested by the essays in this issue. In this chapter, we aim to celebrate the diversity of livestreaming by dispelling popular misconceptions, surveying livestreaming's position as a medium for creating and communicating popular culture. To do this, we have cobbled together three *consejos* for fording the rushing waters of livestreaming studies. This is not meant to be expert or definitive advice. Rather, after our years streaming and studying streaming critically, we present not guidelines but *consejos*, pieces of advice drawn from our successes and failures of fording these waters.

We discuss livestreaming from our perspective as media scholars, reflecting on our use of streaming as a method for critical scholarship. Importantly, our perspectives stem from our work as part of Serious Play, a digital media research collaboratory in the Center for 21st Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Through our work in and outside of Serious Play, we have used livestreaming as a method for conducting research in play, game, and media studies. With these experiences in mind, we end in questions that remain to be answered, but might yet provide insight into the future livestreaming. In the following chapters, authors sometimes take up these questions themselves, reflecting the hopeful conviction that livestreaming – as both a methodological practice and mode of popular culture – can benefit our understanding of how communities form around

digital media.

Consejo #1: The Technology is Smaller than it Appears

One of the biggest misconceptions about livestreaming is that it requires significant technical expertise on behalf of the streamer. Really, anyone who can handle a Zoom or Microsoft Teams video call already has the tools necessary for livestreaming. These tools are primarily a microphone, a camera, and a computer. Most troubleshooting can be solved with a quick Google search or enlisting the help of a friend with some streaming experience. Moreover, with the parameters for open broadcast software (OBS) set up, users only need to open the program and press “start streaming” to broadcast to the world. The streamer does not need a powerful computer to handle the activity: many popular Twitch channels, particularly in the platform’s most popular category “Just Chatting,” simply stream from their smartphones. If such personalities can engage with a live audience in the thousands, all while at a restaurant, then we have truly arrived at the zenith of accessibility for streaming: an activity that can be done by anyone, anywhere with a stable internet connection.

Still, some ways of streaming are better than others. A high-quality central processing unit (CPU) is perhaps the most important part of the set-up, regardless of the kind of stream intended, since it does the bulk of the work of encoding video and audio for the audience. A good graphics processing unit (GPU) is needed to stream graphically intense games, but not required for less taxing titles or other kinds of activities. Often such GPUs come as circuit cards designed to fit into a configurable system, handling graphics independently of the CPU. Such units are called dedicated GPUs, in contrast to non-replaceable, integrated CPUs that may be found on the main circuit boards of other systems. Finally, a generous amount of random access memory (RAM) – somewhere in the ballpark of 8-16 GB – is useful for ensuring that your system renders video at a sufficient rate. Less capable systems may fail to render screen states (frames), leading to a stream perceived as “choppy.” This is more important in fast-paced titles where the pixels on the screen are dramatically changing. While one can invest in a variety of equipment, it is worth remembering that it is not the computer that makes a quality stream. The computer is simply a tool to help the streamer accomplish the goals of their broadcast.

The greatest investment for the streamer is not the time spent setting up the

technical aspects of the stream, but the time of streaming itself. Even two hours of streaming a week will add up to over a hundred hours over the course of a year. Those trying to make a career out of livestreaming will undoubtedly dedicate many more hours to the task, but this is not necessary to have a vibrant streaming community. Many people simply want to stream a game for a single friend a long distance away, or a few family members to feel closer for a short time. Or their streams are a singular event like a conference, poetry reading, or live concert. Academic study, financial sponsorships, and viewers tend to be attracted by people who make a living off the activity, primarily because it is such people and organizations who spend the most time streaming and ask for the most of other people's time in the process.

Perhaps more than any medium before it, streaming consumes time. Let's compare Twitch streaming to broadcast television. The most robust cable television services offer upwards of a thousand channels, an unconsumable amount of programming for an individual. Livestreaming, though, is made for a segmented media age. Streams find their audiences (or not) and require very little capital to launch and operate. At any given moment there are hundreds of thousands of channels live on Twitch and millions of people watching. Each month, billions of hours of time are consumed on the platform. As a viewer spends time watching, so too does the streamer spend that time broadcasting to them. "Full-time" streamers are just that: those who give an entire working day to broadcasting themselves gaming and chatting with a live audience. The recent rise of "subathons" among popular streamers, where they stay live provided people keep subscribing to their channel (i.e., supporting them monetarily), suggests just how much livestreaming can monopolize a person's time. In some of these events, the streamers even sleep on camera.

Consejo #2: The Community is Bigger, Better, Faster, Stronger than it Appears

Many people were introduced to livestreaming through esports and high-profile gaming personalities like Richard Tyler "Ninja" Blevins. These two avenues were the primary mode of growth in the early days of Twitch. Tournaments for competitive games like *Starcraft II* and *League of Legends* consistently had the largest amounts of viewers, but creators soon realized the market was much bigger than esports. While events-oriented programming (esports, etc.) tends to dominate

the peak viewers on streaming platforms, the hours and minutes spent in more intimate spaces outweighs the total of the more professionally produced products. Whether a streamer leverages some preexisting fame (such as from esports) or builds their brand from the ground up, these platforms are not a monolithic continent of content; they are an archipelago of small communities. For many, watching a streamer is akin to having a “lifestyle brand” with which they associate themselves. In a culture predicated on the existence of paid subscriptions, donations, and ad payouts, professional streamers need to attract an audience that will watch their content regularly, and in doing so attempt to craft a strong sense of identification, connection, and community with their audience. These brands tend to extend far off the platform the creator streams on, extending to services like Discord servers, YouTube channels, and accounts on Twitter, Patreon, Instagram, and OnlyFans. They may involve personal merchandise, giving the audience numerous ways to interact with the personality.

The most distinguishable aspect of streaming, compared to other media, is this interaction between the streamer and the audience. Streaming interaction primarily takes place in a chat box. Consider the difference between spending an hour watching a film, television, and a livestream. The film viewer cannot interact with their entertainment, except to play with its temporality via pausing, rewinding, and fast-forwarding. The television viewer can change the channel but has no control over the content once they choose to watch it. The livestream viewer not only has a wide variety of streams to watch but can interact with the streamer on a chosen channel, potentially influencing the content of the stream to fit their desires. Streamers often read the contents of chat aloud, giving those who interact a kind of “15 minutes of fame” each time the streamer notices them. Many streamers allow viewers to place a robotic voice over their stream with a short message as an incentive for donating or subscribing to the channel. This kind of interaction between streamer and audience defines livestreaming and cultivates an audience who expects to have an influence on the content of the stream. It is important, thus, for the streamer to recognize that the medium of livestreaming is primarily about the relationship between the streamer and their audience. From a critical perspective, this is the most fruitful site of analysis for the medium. The ways a streamer can interact with their audience are as various as the ways human beings can interact with each other, a truth that helps infer the deep social reality of streaming.

Importantly, the relationship between streamer and audience remains intricate

across both professional and amateur streams. Authors in some of the subsequent essays will demonstrate this distinction in greater depth, but for the purposes of introduction, we will briefly define them here. We consider professional streams as those which work toward financially sustaining an individual or collective of streamers. This group includes esports organizations and collaboratives like the *Overwatch* League, the Game Grumps, and ESL, but also refers to individual streamers Katie “PikaChulita” and Germán Garmendia. These streamers commonly use the money made by streaming to both help sustain themselves financially and improve the quality of the stream. It is useful to think of professional streamers less like traditional entertainers, and more like gig economy workers. By this account, artists and variety streamers like KayPikeFashion, Dominike “DOMO” Stanton, and are also professional streamers. These broadcasters often spend significantly more time on the platform, building large audiences which in turn support their content creation. Conversely, the scope of amateur streaming is endless. This category might include casual TikTokers who use the platform’s livestreaming function to communicate with friends and online acquaintances, musicians using Discord to share their work and performances in a live setting, or any number of individuals for whom streaming is a leisurely, perhaps infrequent activity. These individuals typically make no money from their streams, as their audience, as measured by views and watch hours, is too small to qualify for financial compensation.

Across both professional and amateur streaming settings, the relationship between streamer and audience remains integral to the success of the stream. In professional streams, it is not uncommon for moderators and bots to support the streamer in maintaining this relationship by engaging with chat, highlighting certain messages, or enforcing community guidelines. In amateur streams, the relationship between streamer and audience tends to appear as more closely-knit, often taking form as the streamer directly responding to chat messages and maintaining an extended conversation throughout the viewer’s engagement.

The popular conception is that those who stream, and watch streaming, are white young-adult males, and while the demographics of streaming on Twitch skew young this is not necessarily true for user-bases with a higher median age, such as Facebook Live (Kavanaugh). Though, on that note, in terms of economy of scale, even if only 3% of Twitch’s audience are older than 55, that number, around 40,000 people on an average moment, is still bigger than the population of some cities. Thus, on every platform one can find any given demographic livestreaming content.

Perhaps this is more important for advertisers than critics. Regardless, the low barrier of access to most livestreams means that livestreaming can be, and is, at least potentially for everyone.

This content does not have to involve playing video games: it can be tabletop games, arts and crafts, music, talk shows, co-watching a film or a television series, or simply the aforementioned “just chatting.” Thus, we can imagine that the activity of livestreaming can be placed over any kind of media artifact. So-called reaction videos, in which streamers respond vividly in real time to some media product, are the bread and butter of many YouTube stars. Through shows like these, livestreaming offers the potential for live reactions and taste-making on a moment-to-moment scale, a way to experience popular culture curated by and experienced with another person. While the current cultural moment of livestreaming primarily consists of gaming content, this is because of the tech-savvy inclinations of the medium’s early adopters and the fact that gaming, particular for so-called “games as live services,” gives the streamer a sufficiently varied experience (both for themselves and audience) over the exceedingly long times they desire to be live. This skew toward games may not always be the case: there could be a future where gaming is just one slice of the cultural pie on a site like Twitch. Already, the most popular category at any given moment is likely to be “Just Chatting” and many of the platform’s most recognizable stars are known not for their impressive skills in some virtual arena, but their individual charisma, their political views, or their ability to keep an audience engaged with their content for long periods of time. As you will come to see from many of the articles included in this collection, streaming is a place for much more than gaming.

Consejo #3: The Waters are Deeper than they Appear

As the subsequent chapters demonstrate and we have begun to discuss, the waters of livestreaming remain boundless, and in many ways, unexplored. Reaching far beyond video game communities, innovative use of livestreaming has proven the medium’s mettle as a mode of cultural production. Indeed, livestreaming both conforms to and challenges popular culture scholar Ray B. Browne’s appropriately sprawling description of popular culture as “[consisting] of the spoken and printed word, sounds, picture, objects, artifacts” which “are not narrowly intellectual or creatively elitist and which are generally though not necessarily disseminated through the mass media” (11). While generally aspiring to reach mass audiences,

most streamers across platforms perform for small audiences. Livestreams, across platforms and purposes, are inherently multimodal and tend to connect individuals across an ecology of platforms and digital spaces which streamers and audiences can use to proliferate content by and for the community. In this way, popular culture studies of livestreaming can discuss both the practice of streaming and the tangible objects produced by streaming communities. In this section, we discuss some of the ways this popular culture medium has extended far past the realm of video games.

While the history of livestreaming precedes the broadcasting of games, it was with the proliferation of smartphones that streaming came into its own, escaping the confines of desktop computing. The use of mobile devices is less prominent on traditional streaming sites, though not entirely absent, and more prevalent on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. Livestreams on these social media platforms have marked differences, even as they carry conventions from the style of streaming popularized on Twitch. Just as Twitch's focus on video games popularized practices (e.g., camera positioning, subjects of discussion, relationships between streamers and audiences) and stream genres (e.g., Twitch plays, charity streams, speedruns), so too do the platform's affordances inform other modes of livestreaming. Discord hosts an extensive network of server-based communities who livestream internally, both privileging the community built by joining a server and subverting the common imperative for creators to broadcast to as large an audience as possible. Across these platforms, livestreaming proves a malleable tool, both a means of multimodal communication and a binding agent for communities discussing, creating, and engaging in discourses of popular culture.

Livestreaming communities often form in response to specific media texts (e.g., a video game, TTRPG or board game, film, television series), though they can just as easily form in response to practices or more abstract interests. This is especially true on platforms where livestreaming is not the primary mode of content creation, such as TikTok. To give a sense of how far the culture of livestreaming has grown past the boundaries of video games, let's consider some broad categories: event-based streams, watch parties, arts and crafting, discourse, and the live archive.

Livestreaming can circumvent traditional restrictions for events and performances like physical distance, occupancy challenges, and audience logistics. As opposed to the garish helmets of [*Portlandia's 2016 VR concert skit*](#), livestreams of events traditionally held in person have become commonplace in performance circles in the form of concerts, plays, festivals, and the like. Event-based livestreams also have a place in academic and activist contexts, given the low cost

of a livestreamed event requiring no travel and minimal space requirements. In spring 2020, Serious Play hosted a livestreaming symposium in collaboration with the Center of Excellence in Game Culture Studies at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland, featuring scholarship from both the US and Europe. Over the course of two days, joined both streaming groups on Twitch, discussing the state of livestreaming studies on both voice and chat. Through a complex negotiation of various streaming and communication tools, we brought together presenters with both academic and livestreaming experience, using Twitch as our primary venue. The utility element of livestreaming is perhaps most obvious in event-based streams like these, wherein streaming facilitates copresence which might otherwise be impossible given physical distance or similar restrictions.

Hand in hand with the opportunity to livestream on platforms like Discord are watch parties, online contexts in which people gather to watch something together, generally a film, television series, play, or similar video media. Interestingly, this phenomenon coincides with the commercial potential for livestreaming, already capitalized by companies like Amazon, Netflix, and Disney. Amazon's ownership of Twitch has facilitated interactive watch parties of Amazon Prime content, hosted by Twitch streamers. Rather than merely emulating the experience of sharing the remote, as is the case with both Disney's and Netflix's watch party features, livestreaming Amazon Prime content on Twitch more closely reflects traditional livestreaming: a streamer leads the performance of reactions and attentiveness to the video as viewers share in the experience in chat. A similar phenomenon occurs on Discord, though there are marked differences in the relationship between media objects and viewers. In Discord, while one person streams the content from their computer, participants in the channel can usually participate verbally. In this way, while the streamer maintains control over the media object, the voice channel echoes the experience of watching a film with friends.

Perhaps one of the most diverse phenomena of livestreaming, common on both Twitch and social media streaming platforms like TikTok, broadcasts discussing or demonstrating crafting skills have grown considerably. The "Art," "Cooking and Food," and "Makers and Crafting" subcategories of the "IRL" header on Twitch demonstrate this most clearly, containing spaces wherein amateur chefs, makeup artists, and professional and beginning crafters alike share their work with viewers. These streams often have an educational focus, dispelling popular misconceptions about specific crafts or disciplines or demystifying the crafting process. One such example is pottery streamer PlayInTheMud, a professional production potter who

livestreams her work and practice on Twitch. Using a profile and top-view camera on her potter's wheel in addition to a silhouette camera of herself, the streamer splits the viewer's attention between herself and the most advantageous angles to see the pot she's working on. With minimal background music and an emphasis on the craft itself, PlayInTheMud casually chats with viewers about their day and the weather, answering intermittent questions about her craft or pending studio orders, occasionally stepping away from the throwing wheel to fix a frozen camera before hurrying back to the clay before it dries. Over the course of a three-hour stream, the potter can throw dozens of similar pots for the studio while simultaneously advertising her skills to viewers who are then encouraged to purchase wares from the studio site. Importantly, the chat is active during the stream, featuring long-time subscribers continuing conversations from previous streams and checking in with each other and the streamer. This example of idle chatter interspersed with critical discussion of various potting skills demonstrates the way livestreaming practices transcend genre given its educational potential.

A similar category of streaming is discourse-based, encapsulating educational, talk show, and live discourse streams. This category accounts for the rising popularity of talk shows, podcasts, and similar remediations of talk radio on streaming platforms. Most importantly, this category can be read as addressing the conundrum of livestreaming facilitating a live archive. On most platforms, livestreams can be accessed after the fact, which has proven important in recent political events captured on livestreams. From the Hong Kong protests to international BLM protests and anti-government protests in Cuba, livestreaming is used as a tool for activists to communicate with one another and with broader audiences. In a related example, livestreams of the attack on the US capitol by right-wing extremists have been used in both media coverage and legal investigations of the riot and the attackers involved. In all these examples and more, livestreaming is both a tool and a product, both of which can be used to amplify messages of protest and dissent, a living archive of resistance and subversion.

Consejo #4: Always Look Ahead! The Horizon is Closer than it Appears

This final part of the discussion is particularly informed by our university context, where there can be a perceived tension between traditional academic work – reading criticism and theory; writing new contributions to knowledge; engaging

students with ideas – and the non-traditional practice of streaming. Our thinking is also inevitably shaped by our work with analog and digital games, though as we have said there are many other purposes for livestreaming. First, we will consider some possible rewards of a live-streaming project, then some questions that remain productively open. While our focus here is on games and play, the rewards and questions we discuss about livestreaming remain relevant to academic inquiry of streams that do not feature video games.

First reward: producing the object of study. We belong to academic units that study games as forms of communication and culture. Some of us have been involved in game design, or in preparing students to work in that industry. We began to gather to play games on a regular basis, in some cases long before Twitch was created, in the belief that games can only be properly understood through play. As Henry Jenkins observed, games are a “lively art,” inherently performative. As film screenings for cinema studies or literary readings for creative writing and theory, shared play is as necessary to us in game studies, focusing our attention on key texts while building critical repertoires. However, a shared game session of play does not just re-present a game, but rather re-creates the playing of the game as a lived experience. We can refer to illustrations or recordings of gameplay, but these are secondary evidence. A game is most fully present when we *play* it. Play is most meaningful when it involves others as co-participants or watchers. It is no coincidence that live-streaming groups have started up in game studies and design programs around the world. Livestreaming makes the sharing of play easier, amplifies its reach, and enriches the experience through mechanisms like chat.

Second reward: coordinating modes of attention. The cultural theorist N. Katherine Hayles distinguishes between “deep” and “hyper” attention, the former associated with writing, the latter with digital media. Hayles associates deep attention with extensive mental activities that involve reflection over time, such as the way audiences understand character motivations, recurring motifs, or ironies in novels, plays, or films. Hyper attention is less concentrated and more immediate, the more labile form of attention we might use when scanning a webpage or orienting ourselves in a game level. Though the two modes can often seem at odds, both are valuable. Hayles appeals to educators to find ways to harmonize them.

Livestreaming represents an interesting response to, and perhaps a complication of this task. In the case of digital games, player and audience are to some degree immersed in the hyper-attentive idiom of play (in many if not all games), but the context of observation introduces an element of reflection that suggests deeper

consideration. Commenters may pull back from the immediate experience of play, making comparisons, asking questions about strategy and design. When this happens in chat, watchers of a livestream need to mobilize reading and writing – of a highly specialized type, no doubt, but still engagement with words – as well as visual and kinetic faculties. The result may be an even more intensely hyper-charged experience, where a virtuoso player manages both game demands and the flow of discussion – we have seen this happen. Because this experience involves other people, however, the hyper arguably “reverses,” as Marshall McLuhan would say, into the deeper terrain of notes, video lectures, and academic papers (51). To the extent this mixing of modes is desirable in education, as Hayles argues it is, livestreaming represents an important tool for media scholarship.

Third reward: communities of play. The game scholar Celia Pearce uses this phrase as the title of an ethnography of online gamers. Pearce argues that play is inseparable from community, making critical understanding of play necessarily a shared enterprise. For us, streaming activity involves an array of regular shows producing hours of weekly programming – a notably demanding operation – but even a more casual scheme will involve a collaboration between the performer and viewer/followers. T.L. Taylor, another ethnographer of play and the first major researcher of livestreaming, notes that streaming starts with an orientation to audience (6). Streamers are always “on” (socially-oriented) when they are on-stream. Streaming promotes connectedness. For us, the activity has fostered a remarkably successful academic community across schools and departments. A considerable amount of published work, much of it collaborative, has emerged from the first four years of this project, as have important critical insights and innovative approaches to teaching. We have begun making links to other streaming groups in our region and abroad. The senior members of our group, drawing on their prior experiences in digital humanities (electronic literature) and collaborative game studies (*World of Warcraft* guild play), emphasize the value of these connections, which may significantly impact developing scholarly careers. They may even influence the development of the academy.

In addition to these three clear benefits to streaming, we also suggest some issues that are perhaps more open to debate – questions that seem worth asking as you consider making streaming part of a scholarly or cultural project.

1. What is the relationship between play and learning or reflection? In addition to Hayles’ dualistic scheme, there is also James P. Gee’s more unified view, in which (computer) games are inherently cognitive activities,

a fusion of learning and play. What practices, structures, or assumptions will you use to coordinate these functions? Will you keep them distinct or encourage boundary crossing? How does interpretation intersect play? When can performance also be called research?

2. Play may imply community, but where are the limits to community in institutions that evaluate individual performance? How much sharing can we get away with? How can we understand ourselves as original or independent agents within contexts of shared discourse? Should we instead understand play as radically subversive of these institutions? Could shared play be the starting point of action to reform schools, companies, and states?

3. Should we apologize for fun? As our colleague Thomas Malaby has argued in “Beyond Play,” play can be an anxious and agonized activity, but our experience is generally the opposite. We more often find play fulfilling and stimulating. Even the most deeply flawed game can be an occasion for insight, invention, and shared thinking. Livestreaming tends to produce joy.

Can your institution or context handle that?

These questions seem pertinent now, in the first years of the turbulent twenties. It is impossible to know if they will still be appropriate in years to come. To paraphrase a certain song, the waters around us are still growing. No matter how you think about livestreaming, one thing is clear: a stream of any kind is an active proposition, embodying movement, energy, displacement, and change. You cannot step into the same one twice, nor will you be the same coming out as you were going in. Streams can be enlightening, inspiring, transformative – and just as often bewildering and bizarre. We can never say exactly what is going to happen when we step into the streams in which we play but can be certain that we will have the experience together.

Works Cited

- Browne, Ray B. “Popular culture: Notes toward a definition.” *Popular Culture and Curricula*, edited by Ray B. Browne and Ronald J. Ambrosetti. Bowling Green U Popular P, 1970, pp. 3-11.
- Gee, James P. *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. “Hyper and deep attention: The generational divide in cognitive modes.” *Profession*, 2007, pp. 187-99.

- Jenkins, Henry. "Games, the new lively art." *Henry Jenkins*, 2010, web.mit.edu/~21fms/People/henry3/GamesNewLively.html.
- Kavanaugh, Duncan. "Watch and learn: The meteoric rise of Twitch." *GWI*, 20 Aug. 2019, blog.gwi.com/chart-of-the-week/the-rise-of-twitch.
- Malaby, Thomas. "Beyond play: A new approach to games." *Games and Culture*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2007, pp. 95-113.
- McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. McGraw-Hill, 1964.
- Taylor, T.L. *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming*. Princeton UP, 2018.

Live Streaming and Archiving the Hegemony of Play

TAYLORE WOODHOUSE

“Streamer Mode is enabled. Stay safe, friend.” The instant messaging platform Discord displays this warning message when it detects that a user has opened live streaming software. Discord’s exhortation to “stay safe” is a reminder to its users to protect their personal information as they broadcast their videogame play over the Internet, but I read this warning differently. Staying safe while streaming for me, a half Black woman, means bracing for potential negative encounters. Will I be called ugly today? Will a viewer offer me money for sex work? Safe streaming means preparing for the reality that a fun gaming session might devolve into something uncomfortable or even abusive depending on who shows up. Some days, safe streaming means not streaming at all.

Dealing with abusive and harassing viewers is a common experience for video game live streamers. It is so common, in fact, that the live streaming platform Twitch.tv offers streamers 21 different strategies they can use to handle problematic viewers. The list of 21 safety strategies suggests that abuse and harassment are something that streamers should learn to expect and deal with. Advice given in streamer communities echoes this sentiment: harassment is going to happen, so ignore it. Act like you do not see it, and if you cannot, maybe streaming just is not for you. The commonality of this narrative can overshadow the fact, documented by streamers, platforms, journalists, and scholars, that marginalized streamers are especially vulnerable to abuse and harassment. In a 2015 white paper published by AnyKey, a female esports athlete and professional streamer called insults from viewers and fans “a regular part of the job” of broadcasting video game play online (2). A 2016 panel about diversity in live streaming at the convention TwitchCon saw its chat spammed with racist abuse attacking Black panelists (Campbell). October 2020 saw multiple ex-employees of Twitch tell their stories of abusive behavior at the company, including sexism, racism, and sexual assault (Sinclair).

Racist and sexist behavior seems to be embedded in live streaming culture, perpetuated by viewers as well as those who create the technology and policy that

TAYLORE WOODHOUSE is a PhD student in media and cultural studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her research sits at the intersections of new media studies, video game studies, and fan studies; she focuses on how interactions and struggles between the game industry, fans, and commercial web platforms result in the formation of fan and player communities that are raced, gendered, and classed. She can be reached at twoodhouse@wisc.edu.

Popular Culture Studies Journal
Volume 9, Issue 2, ©2021

facilitate streaming. Often this kind of abuse is brushed off as an unwelcome but unchangeable part of live streaming culture, something that streamers should expect to happen and expect to never change. Like what Lisa Nakamura has called “glitch racism,” harassment from viewers based upon race and gender is discussed as if it is a minor, unpreventable glitch in an otherwise functional system. However, Nakamura pushes us to reject such a complacent stance and instead look at online racism and sexism as deliberative discursive acts meant to exclude certain groups of people from participating in networked sociality.

As T.L. Taylor has argued, the abuse that streamers face from viewers is “a major ethical and business issue” for streaming platforms and live streaming culture that “goes to the heart of full participation not only in media and gaming but also in popular culture writ large” (*Watch Me Play* 109). Building on Taylor’s observation, I argue that abuse and harassment not only threaten the participation of marginalized streamers in videogame and live streaming cultures, but also threaten their presence in the history of those cultures. Live streaming is a participatory archival practice that scholars and historians are increasingly recognizing as a powerful tool for preserving and reconstructing digital culture. However, it is crucial that those who work with videogame and live streaming histories carefully interrogate who does and does not show up in archival materials and, more importantly, why that is so. Toward this end, I ask how gaming and streaming cultures, which are permeated by racism, sexism and other virulent belief systems, shape who shows up to live stream and whose presence is recorded for history as streams become archival materials. I argue that if scholars do not question how the forces that shape participation in live streaming culture also shape the archives used to write histories, not only will scholars and historians fail to represent people of color, queer people, people with disabilities, and others as full participants in gaming and live streaming. They are also liable to write histories that elide the deep-seated presence of discrimination based on race, gender, and other aspects of identity in these influential and growing areas of popular culture.

Live Streaming and/as Archiving

The potential of video game live streaming as an archival practice may not be immediately obvious given the association of live streaming with ephemerality. Crystal Abidin, for example, identifies the increasing popularity of streaming with a shift “from a culture of archived semi-permanent content [like blogs and YouTube

videos] to one of streaming always-transient content” (89). Sarah Handyside and Jessica Ringrose challenge such a clear-cut distinction between archive culture and ephemeral, streaming culture. Social media platforms, they argue, offer users “an intriguing mixture of stickiness and transience, perceived permanence and elusive ephemerality” within which to play as they create and post content (358).

This play between the enduring and the ephemeral is part and parcel of video game live streaming culture. Twitch, the most popular video game live streaming platform in the United States, allows users to create “clips” of streams that are saved permanently on a live streamers’ channel. Through clipping, fleeting moments of broadcasts are saved for re-watching and sharing. Twitch also offers streamers the option to archive full recordings of their streaming sessions, though these archived recordings are saved only for a set amount of time (from fourteen days to up to two months, depending on user status) before being deleted from the platform’s servers. Live streaming on Twitch, then, sits in the middle of the spectrum between permanence and ephemerality, a location chosen as much for technological reasons (permanently archiving the millions of hours broadcasted each year would be extremely taxing on Twitch’s servers) as for cultural ones (streaming, as a form of live performance, is fundamentally different from recording a video to be posted to a video sharing platform like YouTube).

If Twitch positions streaming in a gray area between permanence and transience, how does live streaming constitute an archival practice? Streamers can download their archived recordings and upload them to more permanent homes elsewhere on the Internet, with many users turning to YouTube for this purpose. Both streamers and viewers do this archival work, and work it is: often, uploading a streaming session to YouTube involves editing the full broadcast down into a “highlight” format that curates the most exciting moments of a stream for future viewers to enjoy. As a result, those who put forth the effort to edit and upload their streams to YouTube tend to be those who view streaming as more than just a casual hobby. Fans also participate in this archival practice through the creation of dedicated “highlight channels” on YouTube that save a variety of streamers’ broadcasts, with or without the streamers’ permission. Together, streamers and fans contribute to a vast, ever-growing, and loosely structured archive of live streamed videogame footage.

The thousands of hours of live streamed footage archived on platforms like YouTube can be instrumental in efforts to preserve and write the history of video game and live streaming cultures. Games are more than just code on compact discs;

while the decay of physical artifacts like cartridges and consoles poses a serious threat to saving video game history (Monnens 140-1), scholars and archivists also recognize that preserving those physical traces of history is not enough. Games are “hugely complex digital objects” that are constantly being updated and changed through software updates (Newman 136); these ever-changing, polyvalent assemblages come into being through the constant labor and interactions of producers, players, and non-human elements (Taylor, “The Assemblage of Play” 333). Preserving games means archiving them in a way that captures how constant updates, remasters and remakes, player-created mods and paratexts, and emergent gameplay experiences all contribute to virtual worlds and connect them to wider cultures (McDonough et al. 9).

Henry Lowood’s call for the creation of “game performance archives” to save materials created as users play, discuss, and modify games (15-6) is notable in that it highlights how important players are in shaping video game history. Game performance archives might include player-created objects such as mods, machinima videos, fan wikis, and even fan fiction that illustrate how players imaginatively interacted with games and used them to generate new forms of participatory culture (Winget 1880). Live streams seem a natural and noteworthy addition to such archives. T. L. Taylor argues that live streams showcase a specific form of play called “performative play” (*Watch Me Play* 86-7). Streams are carefully and intentionally produced performances that emphasize the personality and/or gameplay skills of streamers while facilitating interaction between streamer and viewer. While this means that more mundane, subdued, and casual versions of play that resemble average gaming sessions are rare in live streaming, streams capture a mode of play that is unique to streaming culture. Live streaming and performative play, as the products of an emergent participatory culture, demonstrate how video game culture overlaps with and is embedded in other cultures and communities, providing a richer understanding of the relationship between gaming culture and other areas of digital and popular culture.

Importantly, live streams also preserve video games themselves. Streams show how a game’s code comes to life through an encounter with a player whose interactions with code and fellow players are simultaneously recorded. Streams thus save an audiovisual image of how a game looked and functioned at a specific point in time. These recordings of code “in action” are especially valuable as software updates and patches become ubiquitous for all kinds of video games. As a game’s code changes over time through the release of patches and updates, so do

its aesthetics, mechanics, and community. In an industrial context in which game publishers restrict players from accessing previous versions of a game, video snippets of gameplay provide visual access to “a game that no longer exists...[to] a superseded version of the game, one ostensibly removed from public access” (Manning 201). For multiplayer online games, streams also provide a view of gameplay as emergent, embodied, and interactive that is not possible to recreate through emulation, allowing for the study of the kinds of interactive, social gameplay that multiplayer games are crafted to provide.

Live streams, then, record both code and play in action, resulting in an archival document that captures a game “as a lived object – as a playful artifact” (Taylor, “The Assemblage of Play” 332). They preserve for future observation the relationship between code, hardware, player communities, streamers, and viewers. However, the process through which live streams are archived can be fragile. A streamer may forget to enable the archive option on their Twitch channel, which is turned off by default; their broadcasts will never be saved by Twitch and are lost once they end their sessions and say goodbye. Streamers might choose not to upload their streams to YouTube; someone with a small community of only a few viewers may not see a need to save her broadcasts. Roadblocks like these, both technical and cultural, prevent streamers from contributing to YouTube’s archive of live streams. In what follows, I argue that raced and gendered abuse is a powerful factor that prevents many streamers from contributing to the live streaming archive.

The potential that streams have for documenting digital cultures and communities necessitates, then, that scholars and archivists examine who is represented in live streaming archives. Michel Foucault has argued that archives are “the first law of what can be said” (129). The materials selected for preservation in an archive shape the possible ways of knowing, talking about, and understanding the archive’s subject. Michel Rolph-Trouillot identifies the creation of archives as one critical point in which silences enter the process of history creation (26). As archives are created and compiled, decisions are made that intentionally and unintentionally exclude materials detailing the experiences, stories, and existences of certain people. When those archives are deployed to study and write history, the people and stories that are not present may be impossible to learn and write about, as the traces of their existence are inaccessible to historians. Videogame historians must begin asking questions about the archives they deploy, including and especially archives created through participatory practices like the live streaming archive. Whose faces, voices, and versions of play are saved, whose are not, and

why? Interrogating these questions is key to ensure that video game history does not reflect what has been called “the hegemony of play.”

The Hegemony of Play

In 2007, Janice Fron, Tracy Fullerton, Jacquelyn Ford Morie, and Celia Pearce used the term the hegemony of play to explain the overwhelming maleness and whiteness of the videogame industry and gaming culture. The hegemony of play identifies how “the power elite of the game industry is a predominately white, and secondarily Asian, male-dominated corporate and creative elite” that creates games “for self-selected hardcore ‘gamers,’ who have systematically developed a rhetoric of play that is exclusionary, if not entirely alienating to ‘minority players,’” including women, BIPOC, and queer folks (1). Importantly, the hegemony of play encompasses more than just individuals and their internalized biases. From the technologies and business imperatives that drive the game industry to the ways that games are designed for specific players and play styles, the hegemony of play stresses how all aspects of video game culture are implicated in the marginalization of specific groups of people.

There is abundant evidence that the hegemony of play is a powerful structuring force in gaming culture. Popular projects like Jenny Hanniver’s “Not in the Kitchen Anymore,” for example, collect vivid audiovisual evidence of sexist abuse that real women face during gaming sessions. Scholarly studies have documented the prevalence of sexist behavior among gamers (Fox and Tang, “Sexism in Online Video Games” 317), identified strategies that women employ to avoid sexual harassment while gaming (Fox and Tang, “Women’s Experiences” 1301-2), and explored how gaming communities structurally exclude women (Taylor, “Becoming a Player” 54; Taylor, Jensen, and de Castell 248-49; Salter and Blodgett 413). Things are not much better when it comes to BIPOC gamers. There is a wealth of scholarship, more than can be documented here, on how video games (fail to) represent racially diverse characters, while Kishonna L. Gray has done a great deal of work examining how Black and Latinx women handle raced and gendered abuse while gaming (“Intersecting Oppression” 425).

Because gaming culture and live streaming culture are closely intertwined, it is no surprise that the hegemony of play also affects streamers. Abuse and sexual objectification of women are common in live streaming communities (Taylor, *Watch Me Play* 100-11; Nakandala et al. 169-70; Anderson; Ruberg et al. 478-9).

Gray's work also illuminates the racism entrenched in streaming culture: she has shown how Black Twitch streamers are marginalized on the platform for being "too urban" for the platform's white viewership ("They're Just 'Too Urban'" 357-8). Twitch, Gray argues, is particularly problematic for Black women due to the difficulty of muting and blocking abusive viewers; the platform's inaccessible moderation functions severely limit Black women's power to control their online spaces and communities (*Intersectional Tech* 118). Her work demonstrates that the intersecting identities of womanhood, Blackness, and (in the case of Afro-Latinx women) nationality make Black women especially vulnerable to abuse and harassment in a culture that is already biased against women and people of color.

The hegemony of play provides a powerful accounting of how industrial practices, technologies, and individual biases together "subordinate and ghettoize minority players and play styles" (Fron et al. 2) in gaming and live streaming cultures. Surveying how the hegemony of play manifests while streaming on Twitch reveals how these forces not only create a raced and gendered landscape on the platform, but also shape who is and is not represented in the kinds of archives that are created through live streaming.

Methodology

My focus on how both technology and culture shape the archives created through videogame live streaming is rooted in Lisa Nakamura's call to understand online racism and sexism as "an effect of the Internet on a *technical* level" (par. 2). Explaining abuse and harassment online away as a "glitch" caused by singular bad actors in an otherwise functional system ignores how technology and culture are co-constitutive. The technology of live streaming, including hardware (cameras and microphones), software (live streaming programs like Open Broadcast Software or Streamlabs), and platform mechanisms (Twitch.tv's algorithms and stream moderation features) contribute to and enable abuse and marginalization. To account for the interconnectedness of technology and culture, I use André Brock's critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) as my broad methodological framework. CTDA provides for "a holistic analysis of the interactions between technology, cultural ideology, and technology practice" by looking at how digital communication technologies constitute and are constituted by wider cultural practices and ideologies (Brock 1013). It is a multimodal approach that calls

researchers to study online communication platforms and practices from two sides: culture as a technological artifact and technology as a cultural artifact.

Understanding culture as a technological artifact involves studying how online communication practices are shaped by the technologies and platforms that facilitate them. The ways that people use communication technologies are structured by the affordances and functionalities of that technology. To understand how technology shapes live streaming practices, I bring Brock's method together with the walkthrough method of interface analysis. The walkthrough method, developed as a "way of engaging with an app's interface to examine its technological mechanisms and embedded cultural references to understand how it guides users and shapes their experiences," requires researchers to slowly, carefully, and thoughtfully document the full experience of using an app (Light et al. 882). I expand this method to facilitate an analysis of the experience of live streaming from start to end. Bringing these two methods into conversation with one another allows me to perform a systematic interface analysis while being sensitive to how race, gender, and other aspects of identity inflect how an interface communicates with and is read by marginalized users. Examining technology as a cultural artifact means uncovering how ideologies and cultural meanings are encoded into the technologies we use. These meanings come from both creators and users of technology, and they shape how technologies are used within communities and cultures. I am guided here by Safiya Umoja Noble's method of reading Google search results for racial bias in the search engine's algorithm (17-24). As I walk through the process of streaming, I explicate the cultural meanings communicated by the interfaces and algorithms I encounter. With these analytic lenses, I examine how the technology of live streaming promotes an exclusionary culture while simultaneously being shaped by that culture.

Finally, and most importantly, I work from my position as a half-Black female streamer. As such, I take an autoethnographic approach and deploy the experiences and knowledge that I gained through streaming as valuable data. In a scholarly discourse that has yet to robustly include the voices of women of color, autoethnography allows me to speak back to discourses that may misrepresent or fail to represent Black women (McClaurin 65-7) and allows my "marginalized voice to speak for itself" (Boylon 414). I draw from my two years of experience operating a livestream for a weekly fighting game tournament in Central Texas, as well as my more sporadic but equally meaningful experiences streaming gaming

and crafting by myself. Through my autoethnographic reflections, I attend to the importance of user agency in CTDA.

Live Streaming Walkthrough

I organize my analysis in the form of a video game walkthrough. Described by Mia Consalvo as “detailed descriptions of where to go and what to do...to get through a game successfully,” walkthroughs “ensure that players [do] not become needlessly stuck or miss fun parts of the gaming experience” (328). The following live streaming walkthrough aims to point to areas in which streamers like me can get “needlessly stuck” or miss out on fun, areas created by the interplay of technology and culture in live streaming. As discussed above, there exist several roadblocks that can prevent a streamer from contributing to the YouTube archive and being represented in the history of gaming and streaming culture: archiving options may be accidentally turned off, or streamers may forget to download their archived broadcasts before they are deleted from Twitch’s server. In my walkthrough, I shine a light on a more complex obstacle: how the abuse of marginalized live streamers shapes who visibly participates in live streaming. I analyze my own experiences to uncover some ways that the technology and culture of live streaming discourage Black women from participating fully in live streaming in ways that will be preserved over time.

Step One: Assembling Hardware. My first stream began with having hardware pushed into my hands. After a few weeks of attending tournaments for the fighting game *Super Smash Brothers for Wii U* in my city, the tournament operator (TO) asked a friend and I to appear on the tournament stream as commentators. I knew very little about the game, but that didn’t seem to matter. The TO reasoned, correctly, that having two young women on screen would draw in viewers, even if we had very little to say about the skills and strategies of tournament competitors. The TO handed us headsets with microphones and sat us down in front of a webcam; we took our time angling the camera to capture us at our most flattering angles. When I saw my face and upper body appear in a small rectangular frame at the bottom-left corner of the stream, knots formed in my stomach. I was presenting myself, my face, my body, my voice for consumption to anonymous viewers. Those nervous knots have yet to disappear; every time I open my live streaming application to check that my microphone and camera settings are correct, seeing myself through the synthetic eye of my webcam reminds me that my body is a main

draw for potential viewers. The webcam and microphone emphasize that people come to watch me, not my gameplay.

As Sky LaRell Anderson explains, the use of technology like webcams and microphones indicates that streaming is not just about watching videogame play but is also about watching people. Analyzing and commenting upon expressions, body comportment, modes of dress, tone and quality of voice, and gender and racial presentation are all part of the fun from a viewer's standpoint. Performative play is an embodied practice, and that embodiment makes meaningful interaction with viewers possible. I perform for viewers using my whole body, laughing at funny comments in chat, gasping during tense moments in a fighting game match, or raising my arms high when my favorite player wins a close game. My physical performance enhances communication between viewers and myself.

This interactivity comes at a cost, however, because bodies communicate more than just words and emotions. They also convey information about identity. Anderson notes that the importance of appearance and embodiment "bring to the forefront some of the identity politics and conflicts currently present in game culture." Women's bodies, for example, are simultaneously sexualized objects and objects of scorn; male viewers enjoy consuming women's bodies while attacking those same women for "cheating" their way to success by showcasing their physical appearance (Ruberg et al. 468). Even those who reject the use of a camera and opt to use only a microphone are not exempt from the problematic aspects of embodiment. One can easily and quickly respond to viewers using a microphone but sharing one's voice opens them up to what Kishonna L. Gray calls linguistic profiling, in which listeners judge a person's gender, race, and other identity markers just from their voice ("Intersecting Oppressions" 416).

Cameras and microphones capture the presence of streamers, allowing their bodies and performances to be broadcast and, crucially, preserved and archived. Seeing the faces and hearing the voices of women of color in archival materials can be instrumental in telling a richer version of video game history. However, once one's gendered and raced body is made available for viewers, it can easily become an object of sexualization, sexual harassment, and racist abuse. Thus, while the hardware of streaming can help enrich the live streaming archive, it also opens one up to responses that can make visibility and performance undesirable. Though cameras and microphones are ostensibly neutral, as we shall see, the problematics of the visibility they provide can drive marginalized streamers out of the community and out of the archive.

Step Two: Interfacing with Interfaces. After wrangling hardware, a streamer must familiarize herself with the software and web platforms that will facilitate her broadcasts. Streaming involves multiple video and audio inputs; even a basic gaming stream will have to balance gameplay footage and audio with the inputs from a camera and microphone. Free software like the barebones Open Broadcast Software (OBS) or the more robust Streamlabs allow streamers to handle these multiple inputs with relative ease and, with a bit more learning, make it possible to overlay graphics that further increase a stream's interactivity. These programs are intricately connected to Twitch; it is through Streamlabs that I press the button to begin my broadcast, monitor my view count during the stream, keep up with my chat, and even track how many followers I gain over time. Streamlabs, in particular, has become an influential force in determining what streams look and feel like; by offering free pop-up graphics sets that appear on-screen when a viewer follows, subscribes, or donates, the software encourages streamers to turn these viewer-driven events into public celebrations and moments for interaction.

Streamlabs' graphics affordances follow a precedent set by Twitch on its Creator Dashboard interface. The Creator Dashboard, an easy-to-access and navigate portal on Twitch's desktop interface, includes all the necessary tools for running a stream. It is here that streamers can title their broadcasts, set up automatic chat moderation, track their viewership statistics over time, and apply for affiliate and partner statuses that allow streamers to profit off their performances. The Dashboard also communicates what sort of priorities streamers should have through its "achievements." Like videogames that award players with achievement titles when they accomplish certain tasks, Twitch incentivizes streamers to aim for specific goals tied to viewer counts, follower and subscriber numbers, and chat activity. The achievements lay out the path to becoming a "successful" streamer by prioritizing attracting and retaining chatty viewers. These priorities are encoded into Twitch's visibility algorithm, which places streamers with large viewer and subscriber counts at the top of its pages. By providing free graphics and tools that turn viewer interaction and loyalty into spectacles, Streamlabs reinforces the idea that streamers should aim to increase their visibility by drawing in and catering to as many viewers as possible.

I have an ambivalent relationship with this imperative to seek visibility. On one hand, visibility on Twitch seems like an impossibility. I visit Twitch often, yet rarely do I see Black women promoted on the site's home page or search pages. The algorithms that determine who is promoted seem programmed to produce a

landscape structured by the hegemony of play. The screenshot of the Twitch homepage below (Figure 1) is a typical example of what I see: many white men, some men of color, and a few women thrown in for good measure. Black women are a constant and conspicuous absence here, as well as in the searches through archived live stream footage on YouTube. The YouTube search algorithm, like the Twitch recommendation algorithm, seems to reproduce the hegemony of play when representing the live streaming archive.

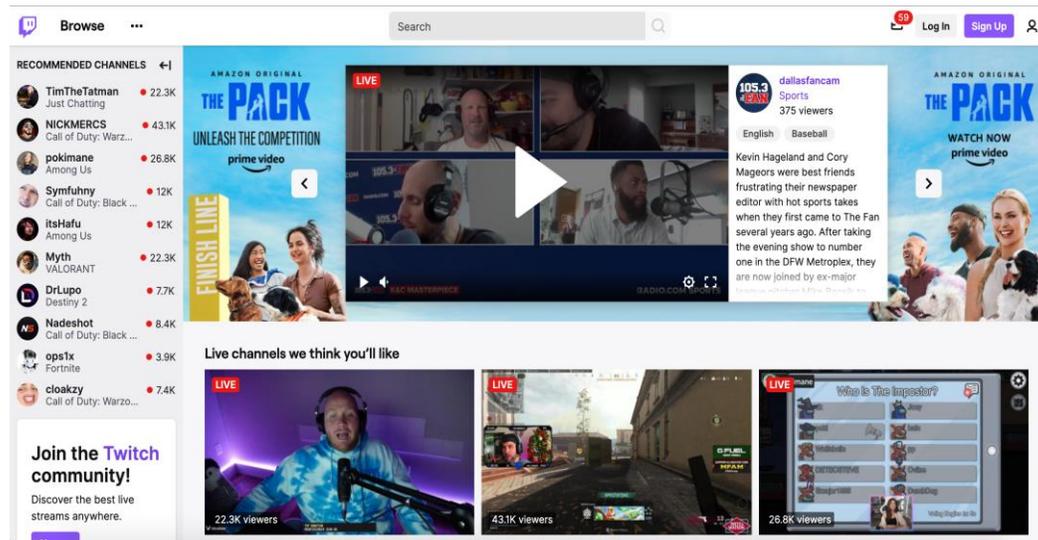


Figure 1. Screenshot of Twitch home page, accessed from an Incognito window on November 20, 2020

At the same time, the seeming invisibility of Black women on the platform renders our presence hypervisible when we do appear. When the tournament operator asked my friend and I to appear on stream, he did so knowing that our female faces would stand out among the dozens of competing *Super Smash Bros.* streams that night that had no women. Our presence made our stream hypervisible and attracted attention in a sea of otherwise similar broadcasts. Now, as I stream games that are more popular with female streamers, my blackness renders me hypervisible and draws attention. While fellow small streamers complain about remaining in the dreaded “zero viewer hell,” my hypervisibility ensures that I always have a least a few anonymous viewers keeping me company as I play. My experiences bear out what Joshua Daniel Phillips and Rachel Alicia Griffin identify as the simultaneous invisibility and hypervisibility of Black women in media. We

are, paradoxically, often made invisible as agential subjects while being rendered hypervisible as sexualized or vilified objects (39-40). Though my hypervisibility means I never sit in “zero viewer hell,” the ways in which I am visible mean visibility is, for me, both a blessing and a curse, as I explain below.

Step Three: Going Live. Once I have checked all my settings in Streamlabs, ensured my camera and microphone are working properly, and titled my broadcast on the Creator Dashboard, it is time to go live. I press the “start streaming” button on Streamlabs, wait for my computer to connect to the Twitch servers, and then begin my performance. Though I try to stay focused on gameplay, my eye drifts often to the view counter or the chat window, both of which are prominently featured in the Streamlabs interface. Though chat is empty, and my viewer counter reads “0,” I must perform. A beaming smile in the stream thumbnail might be what draws in my first viewer, and once that first person arrives, it is my commentary and my personality that will keep them around. Performance is key, even when I am performing for no one.

There is a rush associated with gaining viewers. On my first day streaming at the *Smash Brothers* tournament, my friend and I were amazed to see our low viewer count grow in the minutes after we appeared on-screen. Now, years later, I still feel a nervous excitement when a viewer drops in; the feeling of connecting with someone, even if I know nothing about that person, is what drives me to go live time and time again. But gaining viewers also brings anxiety. Many viewers are “lurkers,” silent watchers who say nothing in chat. Streamers often complain about lurkers because their silence contributes nothing to the broadcast. Keeping an eye on the chat window and responding to viewers is an expectation of any streamer, and I have had some interesting and friendly conversations with kind viewers in my time streaming. However, after a few uncomfortable experiences with chatty viewers, I have come to prefer lurkers.

On my first day on stream, my hair was insulted. I was called ugly and fat. Viewers questioned my intelligence because I could not keep up with the fast action of the fighting game that I had only just started to play. One person called me “ice cold” because I refused to act flirty. These are all small jabs that I laugh off now, but despite my best efforts to blow them off, they have stuck with me. They remind me to perform in specific, often invisible ways: I spend extra time before each broadcast to ensure my curly hair looks presentable; I smile more and respond to viewers in cutesy voices; I laugh at their bad jokes. Since making these changes, I receive fewer insults, but the nature of my chat has changed from attacks upon my

appearance to sexual comments. I have even been propositioned for sex work in my chat. When ignored, this particular viewer followed me into my Twitch private messages, which I did not know were open for communication by default until I saw him pop up there. I have not gone one stream without an undeserved insult or unwanted sexual comment being hurled my way. I always ignore them. It is exhausting emotional labor, and it remains invisible precisely because performing such labor would only draw more negative attention. My viewers should not see this labor, which means neither will someone who watches an archived stream. This kind of labor remains invisible in the archive, and thus inaccessible to historians who hope to understand streaming practices and culture.

Advancements in Twitch's algorithmic chat moderation have made it possible to filter out some of the abusive and harassing messages that viewers send. However, streamers who are particularly vulnerable to abuse must modify their "AutoMod" settings. The program's default settings set AutoMod to do "some filtering" of discriminatory language based on race, religion, and gender, but does not filter out sexual language, bullying, or profanity. Strengthening these settings to filter out objectionable chat messages more stringently is simple, but the defaults communicate a powerful community norm. Twitch assumes that its streamers will not experience, or perhaps are fine with experiencing, racist, sexist, and/or abusive language from their viewers. Such default settings make clear that women of color, and Black women specifically, are not the ideal or expected Twitch streamer.

Step Four: Turning Off. Eventually, a stream must end. I find myself exhausted around the two-hour mark, apologizing to my viewers that I could not stay on longer and promising to show up again soon. After I say my goodbyes and click the "stop streaming" button, I breathe a sigh of relief. My performance is over. No one is watching me. I can stop regulating my emotions, monitoring my facial expressions, and comporting my body so the camera captures me at my best angles. Though this performative labor is meant to be invisible to the viewer's eye and thus never shows up on camera, it is what I associate most with streaming. Yet, while I can stop performing, I am not exactly done. The Creator Dashboard is ready with a summary of my statistics, complete with charts tracking my viewer count and chat participation; these details also come to me in an email. Twitch's communications encourage me to strategize ways to improve my viewer participation and earn more achievements going forward.

It is also time to decide whether I will archive my stream. None of my solo broadcasts are archived. Each stream features some sort of uncomfortable

interaction with viewers that I would prefer never to be made permanent. I condemn those interactions, and my activity as a streamer, to ephemerality. As a result, someone looking at my Twitch channel might assume that I have never actually streamed. I am similarly absent in the archived streams of my city's *Smash Brothers* tournaments. Our earliest streams, those in which I participated on camera, were never archived because we did not know Twitch offered an archiving option. I eventually decided to move behind the camera and become part of the TO team, a choice made because I was tired of the work I put into looking my best, regulating my emotions, and keeping a cheerful countenance. It was not the insults or harassment that led me to go off-camera, but the desire to avoid the labor of handling hypervisibility. It was only after I moved off-camera that we opened a YouTube channel and began to upload each week's tournament broadcasts. Because of this, the archive of my city's fighting game community bears virtually no trace of my involvement. I was present every week for two years, running brackets and setting up our streaming equipment, but my behind-the-scenes work was never captured. The archive I helped to create from behind the camera presents a community in which I never feature. Although I have actively participated in gaming communities and live streaming culture, that participation is not visible in any archives, effectively erasing me from the histories of those communities and cultures.

Conclusion

Though the experiences and emotions recounted above are my own, they are not unique. If anything, they are mild; while I encountered a great deal of gendered abuse and sexual harassment, racism was not a major problem for me. As a half-Black woman, my light skin protected me from the kind of racist vitriol that other Black streamers regularly experience. Video game and live streaming cultures are structured by racism and sexism, and the technology of live streaming—from cameras to Twitch interfaces—enable and support the expression of those ideologies. Culture and technology work together to create communities in which Black women, as well as others who do not fit within the hegemony of play, are discouraged from full participation. Streamers who do not have the energy or emotional capacity to deal with abuse are pushed to the margins to hide from hypervisibility and the attention it brings. As a result, their presence is rarely recorded in the streams and audiovisual materials that will be used to write the

histories of their communities. Their absence in the footage that makes it into the archive has serious consequences for what can be said about the history of gaming and live streaming.

Knowing this, how should scholars and archivists take advantage of the potential of live streaming archives while recognizing the crucial limits and silences of those archives? One important step is making streaming and gaming communities safer for marginalized participants. This work is already being done; the organization Black Girl Gamers, for example, fosters a network of Black female streamers who support and encourage each other to persevere against the systemic racism and sexism of streaming and gaming cultures. Twitch, for its part, has created a Safety Advisory Council to advise on safety policies and help create new features to build a safer, more positive community for all platform users. Recently, the platform announced new moderation policies that ban unwanted comments about a streamer's appearance, other kinds of sexual communication, and the use of the Confederate flag on the platform. Changes like these demonstrate a commitment to making both the culture and technology of streaming safer for marginalized users.

Scholars and archivists must also work to compile archives that represent the diversity of gaming and live streaming communities. Working with groups such as Black Girl Gamers to include them in archiving efforts, for example, could be one important step. Scholars must also read archives against the grain to uncover presences where people of color, queer people, people with disabilities, and others appear to be absent. Creative archival and history-making practices are a hallmark of doing media history, and especially digital media history. As the power of live streaming as an archival practice becomes even clearer, those creative energies must be put to use to make sure that the archives created and the histories written do not reinforce and reproduce the hegemony of play but disrupt that reproduction to document the diversity of players and play practices in video game culture.

Works Cited

- Abidin, Crystal. *Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online*. Emerald Publishing, 2018.
- Anderson, Sky LaRell. "Watching people is not a game: Interactive online corporeality, Twitch.tv and videogame streams." *Game Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2017, gamestudies.org/1701/articles/anderson.

- AnyKey. "Women in esports whitepaper." *Workshop 1*, October 2015.
- Boylon, Robin M. "As seen on TV: An autoethnographic reflection on race and reality television." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2008, pp. 413-33.
- Brock, André. "Critical technocultural discourse analysis." *New Media & Society*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2016, pp. 1012-30.
- Campbell, Colin. "TwitchCon diversity panel deluged with racist chat." *Polygon*, 6 Oct. 2016, www.polygon.com/2016/10/6/13176706/twitchcon-racism.
- Consalvo, Mia. "Zelda 64 and video game fans: A walkthrough of games, intertextuality, and narrative." *Television & New Media*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2003, pp. 321-34.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith. Pantheon Books, 1972.
- Fox, Jesse and Wai Yen Tang. "Sexism in online video games: The role of conformity to masculine norms and social dominance orientation." *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 33, 2014, pp. 314-20.
- . "Women's experiences with general and sexual harassment in online video games: Rumination, organizational responsiveness, withdrawal, and coping strategies." *New Media & Society*, vol. 19, no. 8, 2017, pp. 1290-307.
- Fron, Janice, Tracy Fullerton, Jacquelyn Ford Morie, and Celia Pearce. "The hegemony of play." *DiGRA '07 - Proceedings of the 2007 DiGRA International Conference*, vol. 4, 2007, pp. 1-10.
- Gray, Kishonna L. "Intersecting oppressions and online communities." *Information, Community & Society*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2012, pp. 411-28.
- . *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming*. Louisiana State UP, 2020.
- . "'They're just too urban': Black gamers streaming on Twitch." *Digital Sociologies*, edited by Jessie Daniels, Karen Gregory, and Tressie McMillam Cottom, Polity Press, 2017, pp. 355-68.
- Handyside, Sarah and Jessica Ringrose. "Snapchat memory and youth digital sexual cultures: Mediated temporality, duration and affect." *Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2017, pp. 347-60.
- Light, Ben, Jean Burgess, and Stefanie Duguay. "The walkthrough method: An approach to the study of apps." *New Media & Society*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2016, pp. 881-900.

- Lowood, Henry. "Shall we play a game: Thoughts on the computer game archive of the future." *Bits of Culture: New Projects Linking the Preservation and Study of Interactive Media*, Stanford UP, 2002.
- McClaurin, Irma. "Theorizing a Black feminist self in anthropology: Toward an autoethnographic approach." *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis, and Poetics*, edited by Irma McClaurin, Rutgers UP, 2001, pp. 49-76.
- McDonough, Jerome et al. *Preserving Virtual Worlds: Final Report*. Library of Congress, 2010.
- Monnens, Devin. "Losing digital game history, bit by bit." *Before It's Too Late: A Digital Game Preservation White Paper*, special feature of *American Journal of Play*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2009, pp. 140-7.
- Nakamura, Lisa. "Glitch racism: Networks as actors within vernacular internet theory." *Culture Digitally*, 10 Dec. 2013, www.culturedigitally.org/2013/12/glitch-racism-networks-as-actors-within-vernacular-internet-theory.
- Nakandala, Supun, Giovanni Luca Ciampaglia, Norman Makoto Su, and Yong-Yeol Ahn. "Gendered conversation in a social game-streaming platform." *Proceedings of the Eleventh International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, 2017, pp. 162-71.
- Newman, James. "Ports and patches: Digital games as unstable objects." *Convergence*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2012, pp. 135-42.
- Noble, Safiya Umoja. *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. New York UP, 2018.
- Ruberg, Bonnie, Amanda L. L. Cullen, and Kathryn Brewster. "Nothing but a 'titty streamer': Legitimacy, labor, and the debate over women's breasts in video game live streaming." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 36, no. 5, 2019, pp. 466-81.
- Salter, Anastasia, and Bridget Boldgett. "Hypermasculinity and dickwolves: The contentious role of women in the new gaming public." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol. 56, no. 3, 2012, pp. 401-16.
- Sinclair, Brendan. "Twitch staff call the company out on sexual assault, racism, more." *Gamesindustry.biz*, 8 Oct. 2020, www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2020-10-08-twitch-staff-call-the-company-out-on-sexual-assault-racism-more.
- Taylor, Nicholas, Jen Jenson, and Suzanne de Castell. "Cheerleaders/booth abbes/*Halo* hoes: Pro-gaming, gender and jobs for the boys." *Digital Creativity*, vol. 20, no. 4, pp. 239-52.

- Taylor, T.L. "The assemblage of play." *Games and Culture*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2009, pp. 331-9.
- . "Becoming a player: Networks, structure, and imagined futures." *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming*, edited by Yasmin B. Kafai, Carrie Heeter, Jill Denner, and Jennifer Y. Sun, The MIT Press, 2008, pp. 51-65.
- . *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming*. Kindle ed., Princeton UP, 2018.
- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Beacon Press, 1995.
- Winget, Megan A. "Videogame preservation and massively multiplayer online role-playing games: A review of the literature." *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, vol. 62, no. 10, 2011, pp. 1869-83.

From Parallel Play to Co-Play: Forms of Play in Live Streaming Labor

KYLE BOHUNICKY, LINDSAY WATKINS, AND JEREMY FRUSCO

In this article, we examine the significance of parallel play to player labor on live streaming platforms like Twitch. Parallel play is a concept that emerges from research in the areas of early childhood education and development, denoting a style of play in which two or more participants play alongside or concurrently to one another without direct interaction. In “Social Play Among Preschool Children,” Mildred B. Parten documents several examples of this phenomenon in early childhood including two children playing with dolls next to each other or building with blocks in ways that shared a physical and emotional space but rarely crossed over into interaction with one another’s play (141). During parallel play, children allowed other children to share in their joys or sorrow rather than the activity itself by reportedly calling others over to witness their accomplishment and attracting onlookers to intently watch them during play (Parten 143-6). In its most complex forms, children involved in parallel play were found to produce a shared affective space often layered with specific social and cultural values. Parten found that children playing house would adapt parallel roles scaffolding and amplifying those already present in house play without the necessity of direct interactions. Parten

KYLE BOHUNICKY is an assistant professor at the University of Florida’s Digital Worlds Institute. His work focuses on production and performance for live streaming platforms to support democratic engagement with and critical interventions into culture, art, and research. As Co-Founder, Producer, and Lead Content Developer on Looking for Good, he invites artists and researchers into a live-stream environment to play games and spread awareness about critical social issues. He can be reached at kbohunicky@ufl.edu.

LINDSAY WATKINS is working towards her master’s degree in musicology at the University of Florida. Her research focuses on music, fandoms, and affect in video game culture. Lindsay’s aims to amplify the voices of marginalized people through her work with participatory media such as Twitter, Twitch, Reddit, and YouTube.

JEREMY FRUSCO is a Ph.D. candidate in Music History and Literature at the University of Florida. His dissertation research examines how the Italian rapper Ghali forms creative strategies of care and responsibility in response to the pressures of celebrity, internet culture, and sociopolitical conflict.

Popular Culture Studies Journal
Volume 9, Issue 2, ©2021

writes that “events occurring in the home were re-enacted: setting the table and giving a party; telephoning daddy to ask when he was coming home; receiving the doctor for a sick baby” in the same fictional home without or rarely directing the conversation to other children playing house as well (144). Although the practice and goals of parallel play largely emphasize individual players, Parten’s study demonstrates that they generated moments of intersection through emotion, spectatorship, and affect--categories fundamental to the production and labor of play in live streaming.

While Parten’s work with parallel play presents it as a sequential step in childhood development, later studies of this phenomenon, such as P.K. Smith’s “A Longitudinal Study of Social Participation in Preschool Children,” reveal that parallel play occupies preschool children’s lives as a state or form of play rather than as a fixed step in a developmental sequence. Specifically, Smith’s research shows that parallel play is not guaranteed to occur immediately before or after other kinds of play and instead appears as a form of play unto itself. Roger Bakeman and John R. Brownlee’s “The Strategic Use of Parallel Play: A Sequential Analysis” supports these findings, observing that parallel play is, in fact, optional for many children: “If parallel play really represents an intermediate level of social participation between playing alone and playing with other children, then we would expect Smith’s children to have demonstrated a progression from Alone to Parallel to Group play, but in fact few did” (873). Yet Bakeman and Brownlee caution researchers that parallel play being optional for children does not make it any less significant as a form of play, and recent analyses studying parallel play in video games have shown that parallel play transcends childhood and is meaningful to players of all ages. Wei Peng and Julia Crouse, for example, note the presence and importance of parallel play for all ages in rhythm and “exergames” like *Dance Dance Revolution* (423). Echoing Parten’s findings that parallel play provides affective amplification and scaffolding, Peng and Crouse write that players playing both solo, cooperatively, and competitively in parallel environments reported more enjoyment, motivation, and achievement in play. Their recognition of parallel play as a significant form of play beyond childhood leads them to call for further research on parallel play and play spaces to better understand where and how this form of play occurs (Peng and Crouse 425-6).

Video game live streaming on platforms like Twitch has emerged as one of the most prominent and public-facing forms of parallel play across ages. Examples and variations of parallel play abound on the platform, most easily recognized in

popular performances like the side-by-side speedrunning relays and races featured on Awesome Games Done Quick.

These runs use a shared physical space as well as the malleable digital space of broadcast software to place together four separate instances of the same game being played by four separate players into the same space. As Figure 1 depicts, each player's run is divided into separate quadrants of the same screen. While each player is engaged in their own activity as they race to complete the game as fast as possible, their side-by-side play produces an amplification and scaffolding of outcomes and affect noted in Peng and Crouse's work with exergames. For example, the audible and rhythmic tapping of controllers in patterns specific to *Mega Man X*'s run as well as the bodily reactions and poses in response to weaving through specific challenges within the game provide an aural residue and physical backdrop linking individual player feelings and performance. While relays and races are just one genre of parallel play popularized in video game live streaming on Twitch, it gestures towards a broader community of practice that stands to expand parallel play beyond the categories of childhood development and exergames.



Figure 1. A four-person speedrun of *Mega Man X* featured at Awesome Games Done Quick 2020

As Figure 1 demonstrates, live streaming platforms spectacularize parallel play through side-by-side multi-capture windows and chat feeds in which we can find play happening between viewers, streamers, and machines in most video game live streams. Camera feeds of player reactions sit snugly against feeds of gaming spaces that are bordered by text-based chat windows housing the words of audience members and commands from interactive bots. The partitioned structure of each feed provides opportunities for the parallel modes of play documented by Peng and Crouse, such as a streamer’s game play happening in one region of the stream while the chat feed hosts an entirely unrelated conversation in another portion of the live stream.

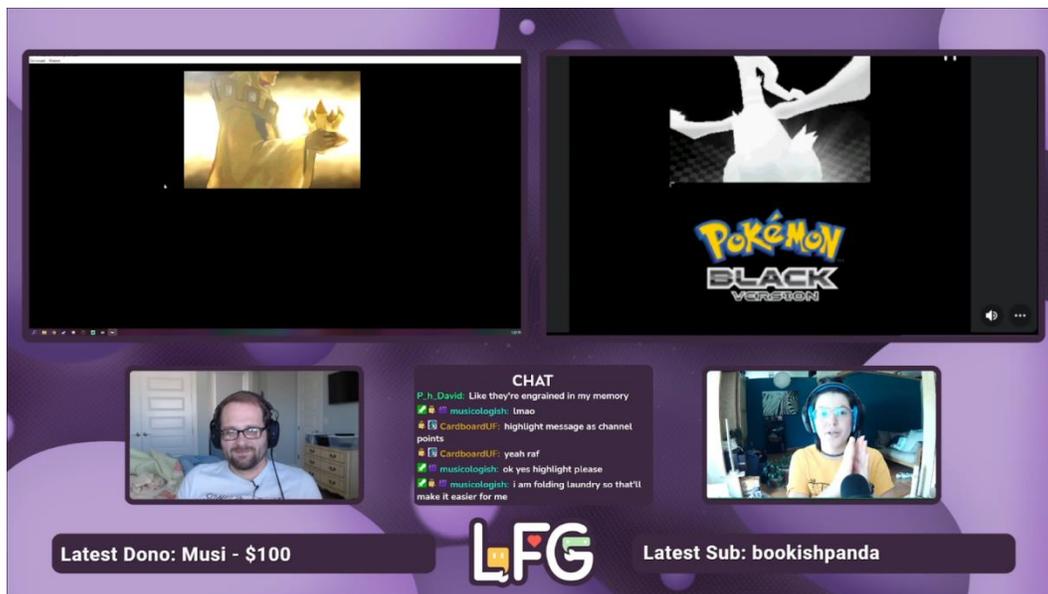


Figure 2. A two-person side-by-side playthrough of two differently randomized *Pokémon Black* games on Looking for Good while viewers in chat (bottom center) hold a separate conversation

Figure 2 shows a common example of parallel play on Twitch. The hosts, Looking for Good’s Kyle and Raf, have created an “overlay” (a term describing the visual frames and borders for the various feeds and information in a live stream) and placed it into a broadcasting software to separate each video feed featured in the stream. In addition to separated camera feeds, each plays their own “randomized” copy of *Pokémon Black* in separate areas of the overlay. Randomization, a popular category of video game live streaming that individualizes

the play experience by swapping items, characters, level design, and more elements normally found in the game with completely random ones, further separates and individuates the parallel play by ensuring significant differences in the progression of the games themselves. Rather than an outlier, Looking for Good's approach is representative of the many ways live streamers and audiences approach video game live streaming through the logic of parallel play.



Figure 3. A blend of parallel play and co-play featuring separate game feeds of *Portal 2* while the hosts appear as part of the game play and game/streaming space

Figure 3 provides a mixed example of co-play on Twitch using broadcasting software and chroma keying. The hosts, SummersFTW's Summers and Raf, each control separate characters in *Portal 2*'s cooperative mode divided by a center split in the game play feeds while a separated feed of Brock (Summers' pet guinea pig and co-host) is bordered in the lower left-hand corner of the screen. Unlike Brock, Raf and Summers use chroma keying to remove their surrounding environment and place their video capture over and into *Portal 2*. Whereas the hosts in Figure 2 are captured in their current and separate surroundings, viewers would struggle to tell whether Raf and Summers are in the same space or if they have both added separate chroma keyed video feeds to the overlay to make it appear as if they were, in fact, playing together. Through chroma-keying and the careful arrangement of their video feed in the overlay, SummersFTW's hosts create a shared common space that

is both a part of and apart from the stream and the game. In this instance, parallel play becomes co-play as the partitions between hosts, stream, and game are dissolved into a more unified form. This style of play can also be found in early experiments with video capture and video games like *Nick Arcade*, which would use this technique to synchronize players with various video game environments and challenges (Figure 4).



Figure 4. An image from *Nick Arcade* that depicts co-play achieved by using a physical environment on a bluescreen stage and contestants blending their bodies and performances into a video game-like space.

A more complete example of co-play can be found in *Twitch Plays Pokémon*. Launched on February 12, 2014, *TPP* is a crowd-sourced playthrough of Nintendo's *Pokémon Red* using a fan-made hack of the game playable via Twitch chat. The emulator running the *TPP* version of *Pokémon Red* featured a script that would "listen" to the text sent to the chat room for specific messages such as "B," "A," "Down," "Start," "Up," "Left," "Right," etc. After viewers typed and sent these messages to the chat room, the script would relay them to the game as in-

game commands. By typing “Start” in chat, viewers could achieve the same effect as pressing the “Start” button on a Game Boy and pull up the game’s pause menu. This transformed *TPP*’s chat into a collective controller for *Pokémon Red*, allowing roughly 1,165,140 players over the 16-day journey to co-play as Red.



Figure 5. Screen capture of *Twitch Plays Pokémon* showing, from right to left, chat, chat’s commands, *Pokémon Red*, and chat’s current team of Pokémon. The bottom of the screen shows statistics on game progress.

As players worked to coordinate millions of inputs in real time with thousands of anonymous Twitch viewers also controlling Red, the collective often encountered interference from delays, latency, lag, and trolls. To anticipate and resolve these issues, players relied on constructing an affective intuition that could anticipate reciprocal inputs in advance of seeing other players’ inputs, effectively visualizing a mode of pre-cognitive play that worked to synchronize the otherwise chaotic inputs. Players would, for example, anticipate inputs seconds and minutes into the future that could place them into dangerous situations and time their own inputs to correct these attempts at derailing their desires to complete the game. As a result, players came to forge a shared anticipatory mode of play that relied on (and succeeded because of) feeling and sensing in advance of seeing any concrete inputs in the stream chat. Doing so resulted in a massive deluge of fan content (art, fiction, film, theology, and more) documenting and mem(e)orializing the shared

emotional and somatic ties formed between viewers in the chat as they coordinated their shared embodiment of Red and the remarkable events encountered during their journey.

Yet the sheer number of player inputs would most often end up pushing Red in directions seemingly unexpected and unproductive. The disarray and turmoil of chat's attempts to co-play *Pokémon Red* that emerged in Red's behaviors led to fan art that split the character between the identities of "Red" and "Redbot," both of whom have distinct personalities and behaviors. The "Red" version of the character is commonly depicted as a human character whose experience as a conduit for chat's inputs manifests as suffering. Artists depict these inputs as causing Red to struggle with his body and identity as he questions how to process these feelings and impulses within him. Red's body becomes a playground for viewers, and this experience breaks him, causing him both significant trauma as well as social alienation from other non-playable characters in the game. Similarly, Redbot represents an equally worrying interpretation of co-play. Unlike Red, who is depicted as a human, Redbot is a stylization of Red that presents him as a robot. In these works, concerns about health and the fears of Red's companions are gone. In their place, we find non-playable characters within the game expressing befuddlement and confusion over the behaviors of this quirky little bot. Redbot does do unusual things because of the state of co-play that he finds himself in, but this character is distinct in that Redbot is not agonized by co-play like Red. Read alongside Red, the implication that emerges here is that although co-play is a common variant of parallel play, the labor involved requires one to either become a machine or acclimate themselves to perpetual emotional turmoil and abuse. Although both Red and Redbot are fictional characters, their depictions provide a window into the complicated emotional work that can arise from these forms of play when streamers and their streams become playgrounds for viewers.

As these examples demonstrate, both parallel play and co-play are significant methods for engaging with and sharing video games on live streaming platforms. While parallel play encompasses practices that aim to border play, co-play encompasses those that actively seek to transgress these boundaries. With each type, however, comes varied forms of labor with varying degrees of emotional work. To better understand the expectations and labor surrounding both types of play, we turn to the representation of live streaming fiction and documentation. As we explain in the following section, these fictional and imagined representations of parallel play and co-play provide a way of studying the mentality and behaviors in

live streaming. Specifically, we look to Guillermo del Toro's sensational summer blockbuster *Pacific Rim* (2013) as a particularly spectacular speculation on what the labor parallel play and co-play might accomplish. We use del Toro's film as an example framework for parallel and co-play approaches to live streaming because the emotional and affective dimensions are often difficult to grasp through quantitative methods and linguistic analyses of live streaming. As a product of the imagination, film provides a way of imaging the often invisible and in-articulable feelings that elide more discrete methods of analysis. Rather than a literal analogue for what streamers encounter, we present *Pacific Rim* as a rough framework for identifying the emotional and affective aspects for both forms of play.

Parallel Play and Co-Play in the Imagination

According to L.H. Stallings, "fiction, the surreal, and the imagination" all serve as means of knowledge production where the truths, pleasures, and feelings of our embodied interactions with others are forged (7). Conversely, products of the imagination (media, fiction, art, etc.) can provide valuable sites to grasp at the possible meanings and potential manifestations of these understandings. While live streaming has benefitted from numerous sociological and data-driven studies to help better understand the place of live streaming in individuals' lives and culture broadly, live streaming's place in the imagination and its products provides a secondary area to support and complicate these findings. Many popular live streamers, for example, have been remediated into Funko POP and LAMO figures as well as equippable costumes in various competitive video games. What we might gain by analyzing these products and their depictions of live streaming poses significant value to our goal of understanding the place of live streaming broadly. Furthermore, Amiri Baraka notes that the imagination also provides an opportunity to disrupt and remake modernity's accepted "facts" about the body and subjectivity:

What is called the imagination (from image, magi, magic, magician, etc.) is a practical vector from the soul. It stores all data and can be called on to solve all our "problems." The imagination is the projection of ourselves past our sense of ourselves as "things." Imagination (Image) is all possibility, because from the image, the initial circumscribed energy, any use (idea) is possible. And so begins that image's use in the world. Possibility is what moves us.

Without engaging the imagination and its products, we risk missing opportunities to capture other ways of thinking and practicing a phenomenon like live streaming. Perhaps, then, studies of how live streaming and live streaming technology are depicted in various forms of media can not only nuance ongoing research on the current motivations and experiences of live streamers – these forms of inquiry could potentially help us speculate on its possible futures as well. While these depictions may not present exact replicas of our current reality, in those flickering moments of similarity and wonder we can begin to grasp realizations that elide raw fact.

We find much speculative value in the fantastical depictions of live streaming that appear in Guillermo del Toro’s sensational mecha versus Kaiju film *Pacific Rim* (2013). Although the film’s depiction of live streaming labor is entirely hyperbolic, del Toro’s exaggerated representation of parallel play and co-play through a fictional technology called “drifting” provides some starting points for us to begin investigating the emotional labor supporting these practices. In the film, drifting is a mental link between two or more pilots designed to reduce the cognitive and physical stress of piloting giant robots collectively called “Jaeger” that are used to defend humanity from various Kaiju. Like parallel play and co-play in live streaming, both of which task streamers and audiences with performing the borders and intersections of their bodies and various kinds of media, this technology requires pilots to navigate a similarly complex stream of information. Yet whereas the examples that open this article focus largely on the surface of live streaming, *Pacific Rim* gets under this skin. While watching the drift between pilots, we witness them playing their emotions and experiences to and with one another to enter a state of “in-between-ness” where pilots feel and experience the memories and trauma of the other pilot. Whereas live streaming gives viewers little to no visual reference for the kinds of emotional work involved in navigating borders and synchronicity between streamers, audiences, and technology, *Pacific Rim*’s presentation of drift provides us with a visual metaphor for the invisible labor involved in navigating these boundaries.

The film characterizes co-play, depicted as synchronicity between the play of pilots’ emotional and physical states, as a source of strength and empowerment. Creating and maintaining this state in which the pilots are both physically parallel but unified through the media landscape of their emotional “films” and the Jaeger mecha in some sense reflects what researchers have identified as one of the key pleasures of live streaming. In “Why do Audiences Choose to Keep Watching on Live Video Streaming Platforms?” Mu Hu et al. explain that live stream audiences

seek out co-play through what they identify as “cognitive communication” and “resonant contagion.” Both terms characterize viewers’ tendencies to pursue streams that provide a sensation of having their own thoughts and actions synchronized with a collective intellect and performance during a live stream. Although audience and streamer occupy vastly different physical locations, emotional states, and embodiments, Mu Hu et al.’s work highlights how transgressing these borders to find moments of “drift” with the stream and its streamers is a significant form of playful labor in live streaming.

A common example of this emotional and performative synchronicity appears as “hype trains,” events during which enthusiasm and excitement between streamers and chat are brought to exaggerated levels of mutual pleasure. Beyond their uses for marketing upcoming video games and catalyzing donations, hype trains also frequently accompany exceptionally difficult moments in a video game or virtuoso performances skillfully executed by a streamer. In a sense, then, they serve as a means of shifting from parallel play to a form of co-play that allows audience members to collectively share and celebrate the burden and achievements during streamed video game play. They also galvanize both audience and chat into a shared emotional state that informs and guides their interaction with the various media presented in the stream. Although these moments cannot and do not reach the gratuitous extremes present in *Pacific Rim*, the film helps to visualize the often invisible attunements and emotional labor in this form of co-play.

While *Pacific Rim*’s depiction of drifting presents opportunities to us to examine the pleasurable and productive labors of parallel play and co-play in live streaming, it can also provide insight into the risks of these types of play. In one scene, the protagonists Mako and Raleigh participate in training for mutual “drift compatibility.” During the training, Raleigh begins reliving the trauma of losing his brother and suffering significant harm while piloting a Jaeger during a mission five years previously. As Raleigh slips out of sync with Mako and into his trauma, Mako also becomes trapped in her own trauma as she is forced to relive a terrifying Kaiju attack from her childhood. As the two remain in a state of parallel play and slip further apart, their respective histories of suffering manifest in the operation of the Jaeger and activate the unit’s weapons system, nearly destroying the entire base and everyone within. While this depiction of the risks associated with the emotional openness and connection that co-play can generate is certainly excessive, streamers are often forced to navigate pairings (both welcome and unwelcome) that can result in emotional harm and trauma.

Kishonna Gray's critique of visibility and exposure on Xbox Live voice chat serves as an important entry point to consider how co-play has the potential to cause significant harm. In her work, she describes how Xbox Live voice chat's lack of limits positions black women and men as targets of hate speech and abuse. In researching the experiences of black women and men on Xbox Live, she also gestures broadly toward the abuse that many women in competitive gaming spaces like *Overwatch* have noted when even trying to impose limits that would keep them safe (Chassidy). Popular streamer CriticalBard experienced similarly vicious and racially motivated attacks after Twitch featured his face as the "pogchamp" emote for the day, a decision that made CriticalBard's identity and community publicly visible to all users on the platform. CriticalBard's experience demonstrates how even various forms of media baked into platforms like Twitch can connect players in ways that grant unfettered access to vulnerable and minority populations.

As Ruberg and Cullen argue, the responsibility for absorbing, managing, and mitigating hostility of online spaces that arises during moments of co-play routinely falls on minorities and their communities. They write that, "[in] the context of video game cultures – which are often hostile toward women, people of color, LGBTQ people, and others who are marginalized...women streamers are expected to engage in more emotional labor than men streamers. The cultural and personal stakes of cultivating, performing, managing, and leveraging emotions successfully are also higher for women streamers" (86). As Ruberg and Cullen's interviews with streamers demonstrate, the emotional and personal toll of performing borders and navigating uninvited moments of co-play is vastly devastating for whom self-regulation and code-switching are daily practices of self-preservation within white supremacist and patriarchal systems. These experiences both literally and figuratively demonstrate how co-play can leave one corporatized, dislocated, and un-selfed by the aims of a homogenizing streaming culture.

Pacific Rim is by no means a perfect analogue to the possibilities and problems of engaging in both parallel play and co-play while live streaming, but it does present us with a framework to begin unpacking and understanding what these experiences may entail for both streamers and audiences. In the concluding section, we close by touching on several prominent examples of co-play

Conclusion

As our article has explored, both parallel play and co-play are significant sources of pleasure and risk in live streaming. Beyond their basic design and underlying labor, both styles of play ultimately serve live streaming as performances with rhetorical possibilities that have been leveraged by and against streamers as live streaming has pushed beyond video games into the realms of politics and industry.

Specifically, co-play's rhetorical potential was perhaps modeled best in United States Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rep. Ilhan Omar's 2020 *Among Us* live-stream. During the live stream, Ocasio-Cortez and Omar played *Among Us* with prominent streamers on Twitch's platform. As of the date of their stream, *Among Us* was a popular video game adaptation of the murder party deduction genre that tasks players with puzzling out who among them is a killer. The stream reached 435,000 concurrent viewers and was designed to connect through play with potential voters in the 2020 U.S. election about many of the key issues surrounding the vote. Joshua Rivera, writing for *The Guardian*, effectively summarizes the role of co-play as a campaign strategy that, on its surface, simply appeared to make the stream both entertaining and enjoyable. Describing chat's general response to the stream, Rivera observes that Ocasio-Cortez and Omar "achieved something most politicians attempt and fail at daily: they looked like completely normal people...that's the secret to Ocasio-Cortez and Omar's success: that, for a little while, they weren't opportunistic politicians, but motivated fellow citizens, just a couple of Twitch streamers among us." As Rivera gestures towards, playing *Among Us*, a game about hiding one's true identity from others through carefully crafted performances and rhetorical strategies that allow one to blend in with and around a larger group of others, perfectly encapsulates the play-based rhetoric of co-play. Had Ocasio-Cortez and Omar's session been broadcast through traditional means of broadcasting, it is unlikely that their performances would have generated the collective amplification that enabled viewers to see and experience them as "one of us." Mirroring a significant portion of their chat, streaming culture, and gaming culture through their on-camera performance and game play prompted widespread self-identification within the chat, and the amplification of these emotions opened up pathways for Ocasio-Cortez and Omar to discuss political topics in ways that felt candid rather than canned. Yet despite the massive success of this event, Rivera's reading also speaks to the perils of this practice as streamers and audiences (mis)recognize themselves as the sole agents playing with their identities when, in fact, they act and perform akin to *TPP*'s Red.

On February 11th, 2021, Texas lawyer Rod Ponton encountered co-play in another jarring form. Ponton logged into a Zoom hearing only to find that he had become a kitten. In the viral clip, Ponton's face had been altered with a visual filter that made him look like a kitten to the rest of his colleagues in the Zoom call. This image was produced with a face filter that had unknowingly been enabled on Ponton's software prior to the start of the hearing. The filter depicts a small white kitten with folded ears, large teary eyes, and diminutive mouth that conveys a doe-eyed fragility and sadness. The filter also included facial tracking animations that moved the kitten's eyes and mouth to reflect Ponton's own. As Ponton struggled to understand and resolve his altered appearance, his meek and panicked responses to his newfound identity and the perception of his colleagues expressed genuine concern and fear with being entrapped in a body and identity not his own. Stumbling over his words as he struggles to resist the identity projected into the Zoom call and, through the gaze and interactions of his colleagues, back onto him in a quick and what sounds like agonizing exchange of his identity, Ponton mutters "it's not...I'm not a cat." Instead of playing a cat, Ponton's experience and confusion emerged from the exact opposite: an image of a cat was playing Ponton. Through the visual filter, the cat replicated and imitated Ponton's expressions and movements, throwing a grown man into metaphysical terror due to a kitten filter. Although this example of co-play is comical, it visualizes the very real problems that breaking from parallel play to co-play in live streaming environments can cause streamers. Who (or what) plays with and upon streamer and audience identities can create significant challenges in navigating the emotional labor of live streaming. While this article begins the preliminary work of outlining and unpacking these two forms of play in live streaming, future research might begin to engage with various sub-genres of these two forms and their effects in and beyond live streaming.

Works Cited

- Anable, Aubrey. *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect*. U Minnesota P, 2018.
- Bakeman, Roger and John R. Brownlee. "The strategic use of parallel play: A sequential analysis." *Social for Research in Child Development*, vol. 51, no. 3, 1980, 873-8.
- Baraka, Amiri. "Abbey Lincoln: Straight ahead." *JazzTimes*. 25 Apr. 2019, jazztimes.com/archives/abbey-lincoln-straight-ahead.

- Blight, Michael G. *Relationships to Video Game Streamers: Examining Gratifications, Parasocial Relationships, Fandom, and Community Affiliation Online*. 2016. University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, PhD Dissertation.
- Boluk, Stephanie, and Patrick LeMieux. *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames*. U Minnesota P, 2017.
- boyd, danah, and Alice Marwick. "To see and be seen: Celebrity practice on Twitter." *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2011, pp. 139-58.
- Gray, Kishonna. *Race, Gender, and Deviance in Xbox Live*. Routledge, 2014.
- Hu, Mu, et al. "Why do audiences choose to keep watching on live video streaming platforms? An explanation of dual identification framework." *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 75, 2017, pp. 594-606.
- Luo, Mufan, et al. "Emotional amplification during live streaming: Evidence from comments during and after news events." *ACM Human-Computer Interaction*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2020, pp. 1-19.
- Pacific Rim*. Directed by Guillermo del Toro and Steven S. DeKnight. Legendary Entertainment, 2013.
- Parten, Mildred B. "Social play among preschool children." *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, vol. 28, no. 2, 1933, pp. 136-47.
- Peng, Wei and Julia Crouse. "Playing in parallel: The effects of multiplayer modes in active video game on motivation and physical exertion." *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, vol. 16, no. 6, 2013, pp. 423-7.
- Rivera, Joshua. "AOC played *Among Us* and achieved what most politicians fail at: Acting normal." *The Guardian*, 22 Oct. 2020, www.theguardian.com/games/2020/oct/22/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-ilhan-omar-among-us-twitch-stream-aoc.
- Ruberg, Bonnie, and Amanda L. L. Cullen. "Feeling for an audience: The gendered emotional labor of video game live streaming." *Digital Culture and Society* vol. 5, no. 2, 2020, pp. 85-102.
- Seigworth, Gregory J., and Melissa Gregg. "An inventory of shimmers." *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, Duke UP, 2010, pp. 1-25.
- Smith, P.K. "A longitudinal study of social participation in preschool children: Solitary and parallel play reexamined." *Developmental Psychology*, vol. 14, no. 5, 1978, pp. 517-23.

- Stallings, L.H. *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures*. U Illinois P, 2015.
- Stephen, Bijan. "Streamer CriticalBard talks being the temporary face of PogChamp." *The Verge*, 13 Jan. 2021, www.theverge.com/2021/1/13/22229209/criticalbard-pogchamp-gootecks-hasanabi-twitch-emote-harassment.
- Taylor, T.L. *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming*. Princeton UP, 2018.
- Strapagiel, Lauren. "This streamer recorded the sexist abuse she gets playing *Overwatch*." *BuzzFeed.News*, 12 July 2019, www.buzzfeednews.com/article/laurenstrapagiel/overwatch-sexist-harassment.
- Woodcock, Jamie, and Mark R. Johnson. "The affective labor and performance of live streaming on Twitch.tv." *Television & New Media*, vol. 20, no. 8, 2019, pp. 813-23.

Metagaming Attention: Defining the Metagame Through the Economy of Attention on Twitch

AILEA MERRIAM-PIGG

“Play is never innocent or inconsequential.” (Mejia and Bulut 166)

In early 2015, I watched my first Twitch stream. By March 2015, I was a moderator for Geek & Sundry’s new Twitch channel. By the following January, I had launched my own channel. In my five years working on the platform, one constant has always been the importance of what Richard Lanham famously termed the economy of attention. On Twitch, those who succeed are those channels that amass the most attention through active viewers, those present for live Twitch streams. One of the most successful techniques used to both gain and increase attention for streamers has been the use of metagames.

When seeking to define metagaming, Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux admit “there is no unified definition of metagame” (10). Because the term’s exact definition and scope remain elusive in game studies, metagames demand further analysis. In this article, I will define metagames in terms of their deployment as strategies to garner attention, whether implicitly or explicitly. I assert that metagames can be understood as games that are designed to increase attention toward another artifact or event to which they are paratextual. While some analyze metagames as strictly “games about games” I take the approach that metagames are games which are meta, or, as stated in the Oxford English Dictionary, “a second order beyond” the original artifact, not just games but any artifact to which the goal is increased attention.

In contradiction to Boluk and LeMieux, who state “every game must have a metagame and every metagame must have a game” (6), metagames do not require games to be their central artifact. Think of drinking games for various movies. These games function as metagames for movies; the movie is the central artifact

AILEA MERRIAM-PIGG is a PhD candidate in the Communication Arts department at University of Wisconsin at Madison. Her research interests often revolve around structures of power in online spaces, especially spaces where fans or gamers tend to congregate. Ailea has conducted several research studies focused on Twitch, including a research project on Twitch community formation and management (for which she earned her MA in Applied Anthropology), and a thesis illustrating streamer use of rhetorical strategies to increase audience interaction (for which she earned her MA in Communication Arts). She can be reached at merriampigg@wisc.edu.

Popular Culture Studies Journal
Volume 9, Issue 2, ©2021

for the paratextual metagame. What is primary to these metagames is that their rules are created in ways meant to increase attention for a central artifact in a specific span of time. Similarly, metagames on Twitch are not paratextual to the games streamers play, but to the streamers themselves.

To demonstrate the utility of this definition, I will analyze metagaming practices on Twitch as powerful components of an economy of attention. On Twitch, these metagames are not paratextual, or “texts or artifacts that surround a central text, lending that central text meaning,” to games being played (Consalvo 177). That is, they are not games about games. Instead, they are paratextual to the stream/streamer. They are not meant to increase attention for a game, but for a Twitch channel and, in doing so, build capital for the channel. In *Watch Me Play*, T.L. Taylor states that “Both game developers and platforms build tremendous communities and capital by having users constantly engaging with each other, producing content, and deeply building value by their presence and interactions” (174). On Twitch, these interactions between audiences and streamers that build capital often take place in the metagame or as part of a metagame strategy.

On Twitch we observe an evolution of fan culture, blurring the lines between fan and cultural artifact, which simultaneously shifts expectations of what the cultural artifact is or should be. When we resituate metagames as the central artifact of study, metagames can be seen to be more than “games about games” and more specifically defined than “the only kinds of games we play” (Boluk and LeMieux 3). In this article, four types of metagames are explored: indirect metagame strategies, direct monetary metagames, metagames of chronocapital, and metagames of appreciation. Metagames are paratextual to a central artifact, an artifact which does not inherently need to be a game, and function to increase attention for that artifact. As Boluk and LeMieux argue, “The metagame anchors the game in time and space” (11). While our definition repositions metagames from being bound specifically to games, metagames still bind the artifact and participants in time and space. And this is how they function in the economy of attention.

Attention as Capital

The attention economy (Carey; Hyde; Lanham) is central to Twitch and it is through this economy of attention that the metagame is created. According to Lanham, economics is the study of the allocation of scarce resources (xi). By defining an economy based around attention, Lanham tells us that attention is both scarce and

a resource; scarce in that it is limited in nature and a resource in that it is both usable and holds value. Furthermore, Lanham states that the attention economy is “built on electronic information as its central wealth” rather than any physical good, making Web 2.0 and social media platforms predisposed to create economies of attention over other commodities (12). The attention economy “combines the power of a free market...with the cooperative ownership of the cultural conversation” (Lanham 13). Thus, an attention economy depends on active participation from the “market actors” while considering all potential participants as market actors. By analyzing metagames, defined as paratextual tools to increase attention for central artifacts, we may better understand how economies of attention are produced through the mobilization of an audience to active participation and interaction.

Active participation and interaction are dependent on the metagame of an artifact. “No matter how small, no matter how subtle, the metagame is never insignificant” (Boluk and Lemieux 9). For the purposes of this article, I focus on three Twitch channels featuring tabletop roleplaying games which foster community via metagames. Tabletop roleplaying games (TRPGs) are ideal for this study as they are easily customizable and adaptable, lending themselves to easy insertion of metagames and clearer illustration of the dynamics at play on Twitch.

Twitch’s Active Audience

Twitch itself relies on streamers to draw in audiences and reconstitute those audiences as loyal fans and active members of the Twitch platform, thus putting the onus on the individual as market actor. It is important to note that Twitch characterizes its viewership as active. They claim that “Twitch is where millions of people come together live every day to chat, interact, and make their own entertainment together” and the very first sentence on their About page is “We saved you a seat in chat.” Both these statements privilege the audience, not the streamer, as the most important element of Twitch. So, while Enrico Gandolfi argues that, quantitatively, communication is not very high on Twitch in terms of the ratio of viewers to active participants in chat rooms, especially in larger channels, the rhetoric of Twitch itself emphasizes active communication as its highest priority. In addition, according to Hendrik Storstein Spilker, Kristine Ask, and Martin Hansen, “When choosing what type of channel to watch, the social aspect was frequently highlighted” (7). This makes clear that Twitch audiences

watch channels in which they feel bonds to the streamer and other members of the audience, something that is fostered through active participation and interaction. Channels which foster these bonds are therefore more successful in an attention economy.

Twitch also encourages audience members to become streamers, telling fans “Watch what you love, connect with streamers, and chat with tons of communities” and “Bring your passions; we’ll help you build a community around them” (“Twitch About”). The first statement follows an expected Twitch viewer’s progression, from passive viewer to building connections to streamers to interacting in the chat and with communities. The next quote appears directly below the first and is a call for new streamers, implying that audience members, once integrated fully as active viewers, should progress to the role of streamer.

In addition, Twitch is calling for members to become streamers based on their passions, not just limited to games. It is not important to be a good gamer, or a gamer at all, to be successful on Twitch. According to Twitch, all you need is passion and some work, and you can succeed. However, once audience members progress to streamers of their own channels they now must do the work of growing and retaining an audience who will, theoretically, one day become streamers themselves. This is the neoliberal metagame of Twitch.

When looking at metagames, audiences must be considered as potential players, not just as spectators of play. Boluk and LeMieux tell us that “Metagames reveal the alternate histories of play that always exist” (9) We need to consider the multitude of games that are concurrent within the space of a single stream and in a larger context, across Twitch in general. “Onlookers assist in enhancing and expanding gameplay when they accept the roles of focused audience members or learning apprentices, thereby turning play into public performance and supporting the showroom frame” (Lin and Sun 134). When we consider this quote in conjunction with metagaming on Twitch, we see the importance of the audience to the transformation of play to performance. Additionally, given the already established importance of interaction to a Twitch stream’s success, we see how performance functions to engage the audience themselves in play. While the streamer’s play is transformed to performance, the audience’s viewership is transformed to play.

Scaling Up: Metagames as Explored in Three Examples

I could have sworn the strange creature in the lake was going to attack us, but just as I warn my friends of its presence, the creature speaks in my head. It reminds me that we are friends, I have known it for my entire life. Why would it want to attack me? What a silly thought, Zulta. In the back of my head, I hear the echo of a familiar voice. I think I hear “I would like to remind you, if you would like to send anything to help the party NOT DIE, just scroll over the screen. There’s a nice little ZU shield. Press it and...” but then Eruna reminds me- “We’re not gonna die, Zulta. They’re friends.” I smile. The familiar voice seems to be screaming in my head that I’m in danger, but Eruna’s right. These are our friends. I watch Eruna as he sinks to the bottom of the lake, knowing he’ll be ok because our friend, the creature, said so. It doesn’t matter that Gorons like him can’t swim... (Zelda Universe 2019)

To reach a workable definition of metagames on Twitch, I observed three Twitch channels run by organizations of various sizes and through different positionalities: Zelda Universe (as a player/streamer on the channel), HyperRPG (as a moderator for the channel), and Critical Role (as a regular audience member). Although these channels enact their metagames in different ways, their playbour (Kücklich) contributes to and reinforces the definition of metagames as tools to increase attention of an artifact.

Zelda Universe (ZU) has the smallest community on Twitch of the three observed for this study. By the end of 2019, ZU had approximately 28 subscribers and 6,835 followers (personal communication, 2019). Its smaller size correlated with a lower budget. Channel streams were carried out in a streamer’s home, using self-purchased devices (webcams, microphones, games, etc) and the show observed here, *Realms of the Wild*, utilized video (Zoom for a small fee) and gaming (Roll20 for free) platforms to allow the cast to play and work together to entertain their audience.

Hyper Rabbit Power Go (HyperRPG) is an entertainment company operating on Twitch which calls its audience “thumpers.” The company launched its Twitch programming in late February 2016. By the end of 2019, HyperRPG had 1,368 subscribers (personal communication, 2019) and 93,902 followers (HyperRPG, 2019). While both ZU and HyperRPG emphasize the audience in their entertainment, HyperRPG has more resources for their streams. HyperRPG has multiple cameras, a professional microphone for each player, and a crew who can switch between shots, adjust lighting, and create transitions in real time. This, when compared to ZUs more static screen and fully digital production, creates an image of a highly professional setup that is closer to television filming than the origins of

Twitch streaming, in which a streamer would use a low-cost setup such as a webcam and free software to capture their face and gameplay.

Critical Role is even closer to traditional television than HyperRPG. While Critical Role (CR) now operates as its own company with 37,580 active subscribers (“TwitchTracker”) and 544,000 followers, it began as the most popular show on Geek & Sundry’s Twitch channel. Geek & Sundry (G&S) utilizes a television-esque set with three walls for ease of filming. There is a full professional film setup and crew, beyond HyperRPG’s limited crew, and sets can be changed out, creating a highly professional, traditional television show image for the audience but with chat interaction.

The Indirect Metagame Strategy. Heavily featured by Twitch from its inception, appearing on Twitch’s homepage during the show’s Thursday night episodes for approximately six months straight, CR quickly grew a separate fan base from Geek & Sundry known as the “critters.” CR’s live episodes far outpaced other G&S Twitch shows in terms of audience numbers, with tens of thousands of people appearing in the chatroom to watch the show live (compared to at most, a thousand or so for their next most popular content) (personal observation as Geek & Sundry moderator, 2015-2018). Due to its extreme popularity, Critical Role was able to separate from G&S in 2018 and now produces content on its own Twitch channel, later uploaded to its own YouTube channel, and shared on its own website where they also post fanart from critters and sell CR merchandise (as of July 2020 the website lists US, UK, and AU-specific stores for their goods). According to CR’s website

What began in 2012 as a bunch of friends playing in each other's living rooms has evolved into a multi-platform entertainment sensation, attracting over half million viewers every week. Now in its second campaign storyline, the show features seven popular voiceover actors diving into epic Dungeons & Dragons adventures, led by veteran game master Matthew Mercer. (“CritRole About Us”)

Critical Role’s emphasis on the players as “friends playing in each other’s living rooms” who just happen to have found large-scale success is carried out in their live content and is the central framing of their metagame strategy. The following is a transcription of an introduction done for a one-shot, a TRPG game that is wrapped up in a single session rather than taking place over multiple sessions of gameplay, originally performed around Halloween 2018 and uploaded to CR’s YouTube channel December 20, 2019.

Laura Bailey (GM): But first, before all that, let's get some announcements. Our sponsor, for the night, is...

Travis Willingham: Oh, I got it. Here, model this, Brian. Tonight's episode is sponsored by DnD Art and Arcana by Random House Publishing and Ten Speed Press. Gamers and game historians Sam and Michael Witwer, Kyle Newman, and Jon Peterson have taken on this massive archaeological effort to create a must-have book for anyone who has ever played or just loves DnD...So help support the show by grabbing your copy at critrole.com/artandarcana.

Laura: Sorry to interrupt you, but our poster is in this freaking book!

Sam Riegel: Wait, what? No, it's not.

Laura: Yes, it is. It's at the end of the book. (Brian begins flipping through to find it)

Sam: We're not an official thing, though. We're just a mom and pop thing; we don't really exist."

Here Travis gives the official sponsor speech, acting as the messenger and professional voice, while both Laura and Sam interrupt with more vernacular discussion (see Howard). Travis's official speech makes the goal of the exchange clear – to get the audience to buy the book. By framing it as a “must-have book for anyone who has ever played or just loves DnD” Travis is calling out to the entire audience who, as fans of CR, must also enjoy DnD. Laura emphasizes that a poster of the CR cast is in the book, seemingly too excited to let it remain unknown, and thus making a stronger case for fans of CR to buy the book. Sam follows up by denying that this is possible, emphasizing that they are “just a mom and pop thing” and downplaying their impact on *Dungeons & Dragons* and tabletop roleplaying games more generally. Sam's focus on the pedestrian image of the channel, just as with the PR message on CR's YouTube and website, is meant to better connect the audience to the streamer.

It is the metagame – played as a performance between the talent but utilized to create a better focus of audience attention. These comments are meant to be interpreted as “we are just like you” to a non-professional audience. However, there is also a necessary dichotomy in that Travis sticks to scripted content throughout the exchange, a message provided by the official sponsors of the episode, and ends with a reminder to visit the Critical Role website to purchase the product being advertised. The goal of this metagame is not to increase attention for CR's gameplay; the channel is quite successful. Instead, this metagame strategy is aimed

at increasing audience attention to CR as a company, visiting their website and buying the products they endorse and in which they are included. In this way, the cast plays their metagame through the dichotomy, simultaneously building connections to the audience with their vernacular discourse and urging audience members to spend money on the sponsored product through the official message.

The Direct Monetary Metagame Strategy. HyperRPG has also included sponsored content, though with less success than Critical Role. While HyperRPG has had contracts with comic book publishers (Valiant Universe) to produce a comic book RPG, and larger companies (Saban) to create a *Power Rangers* RPG, most of their pop culture RPGs are not sponsored content and are one-shots occurring during their HyperDrives. CR's original ties to Geek & Sundry precluded them from asking for their audience to directly contribute financially to the company and thus instead of playing direct metagames with their audience on their channel, as many streamers do, they play metagames which intend to increase auxiliary support for the cast, by directing them to their offsite resources (e.g., critrole.com) and sponsored content. However, HyperRPG has no such limitations and relies more heavily on direct audience contributions than sponsorships to continue operation (a more traditional model of earning additional capital from the audience). In fact, HyperDrives were devised as a monthly fundraiser with the singular goal of keeping HyperRPG running for another month. Thus, HyperRPG heavily depends on metagames based around monetary capital for the HyperDrive's (and channel's) success.

HyperRPG has had a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* roleplaying game, but they have also created one-shot games around *Pokémon*, *One Piece*, and the 80s movie cult classic *Gremlins* (to name just a few). During their *Gremlins* one-shot, played during the December 2019 HyperDrive, audience members could purchase numerous items for the players/game. Moderators for the channel would semi-regularly post the command !support, which would activate "Nightbot" to state which items were available for purchase and where audience members could go to purchase them.

“(In chat) parvus_sed_potens:!support It's not like we could ever have too many gremlins, right?”

Nightbot:\$10 add a #brightlight, \$25 a #holiday monologue, \$50 #water to add gremlins to the fight, \$50 #gremlin to add your own gremlin and 100 to add #batgremlin | oneshot.straylogic.com.” (“HyperRPG Chat”)

In the above quote, a moderator for the channel uses the “!support” command to advertise the “purchaseables” for the *Gremlins* one-shot metagame. Purchaseables are bought by audience members with the goal of having an in-game effect, whether for combat (#brightlight, #water, #gremlin, or #batgremlin) or roleplay purposes (#holiday or #batgremlin). The moderator also adds their own commentary when activating Nightbot. Though moderators are used across Twitch to moderate chat content and make sure the rules of the channel are followed, they also function as an intermediary between streamer and audience member, actively working to increase audience participation while the streamers play their game. Notably, when the moderator for HyperRPG used the command to activate Nightbot’s list of rewards that could be bought for the *Gremlins* RPG, they specifically encouraged adding more gremlins to the fight (“It’s not like we could ever have too many gremlins, right?”). The moderator is both encouraging the audience to work against the players, by adding more adversaries, and encouraging the audience to support HyperRPG by spending more money, therefore increasing the final total HyperRPG would earn from their HyperDrive. This call speaks to both audience members who want to financially support the channel and those who, though they may not be as willing to support the channel financially, are interested in impacting the game. Ultimately, the moderator’s encouragement functions as a motivator for audience members to participate in the monetary metagame, no matter their position.

Metagames of Chronocapital. Unlike HyperRPG, on ZU’s Twitch, they have crafted a metagame that is dependent on the live chat audience’s time rather than money, creating a time-based economy, or chronocapital, for their channel. Both ZU and HyperRPG read out donor names (though HyperRPG donations are monetary and *Zelda Universe* depends on chronocapital) to show appreciation. Players of *Realms of the Wild* on ZU will also read out funny or entertaining comments by chat members, thanking the member for the content. ImpInMyHead (Imp), an audience member who has watched nearly every episode of *Realms of the Wild*, is particularly helpful to both the players and the rest of the audience. Imp can often be seen in chat at the start of episodes saying things like, “Here’s something else you can do, folks...When you click on that lil shield when you mouse over the screen you can do things!”, but also is a prolific chatter, providing entertaining content for the channel (“ZU Chat”). In fact, while players of *Realms of the Wild* can be given points in the game in exchange for doing something unexpected, unusual, or highly entertaining, these points have been granted to audience members, mostly Imp, who do the same. While these “legend points”

given to the audience members cannot be redeemed as they can in the game, they function to elevate chat from viewing audience to active participant. When a chat member earns a legend point, other chat members increase their activity and creativity in their responses, hoping to earn a legend point of their own and becoming more invested in the game (and channel) in the process.

In addition, while the players show appreciation to audience members who contribute to HyperRPG and ZU, they also often solicit these audience members for more help, changing the dynamic of the original tabletop RPG from one among the players and GM to heavily reliant on audience intervention. In one episode, I (GreenEyedTrombonist), after receiving a legend point from Imp, began this exchange:

“GreenEyedTrombonist: And remember, if you would like to give us a legend point, or maybe a great fairy to heal some lethal damage, you can just pop on over and press that shield button. And it’s a reward!

Elias/Eruna: (Laughing during GET’s speech) Mash that shield button!

(In chat) ImpInMyHead: I’m gonna shut off that extension now :)

(In chat)VelvetBlondie: What, are you guys dying again?” (“ZU Chat”)

While another player, Elias, laughs during my speech and does a play on YouTube channels demanding people subscribe (“mash that shield button”), chat also jokingly interacts with my request, either stating they will no longer activate rewards (as a joke, given the smiley face Imp includes in their statement) or by joking that the party is about to die again. While my speech more explicitly calls the audience to action and makes the players’ dependence on audience intervention clear, the other three implicitly acknowledge the importance of the audience and the audience metagame to *Realms of the Wild*, by comparing it to the importance of YouTube subscribers, jokingly removing that support, or indicating how chat has helped the party live through previous difficult encounters. Furthermore, this highly contextualized everyday communication illustrates how players on Twitch shift from a player to streamer identity, and audience members shift from observers of the game to interactive participants, highly intertwined with streamers as co-players of the metagame.

Metagames of Appreciation. While metagames are enacted differently on each channel, all three channels studied here make a point to show appreciation to their fans. Both HyperRPG and ZU thank those who redeem rewards, whether those rewards were purchased with financial capital or chronocapital. CR does not directly allow fans to alter gameplay sessions and does not call their fans out during

the run of a game session. However, CR appeals to its fans by calling out their appreciation for fans and fan work at the end of the show through a digital slideshow of fan art.

This slideshow begins with the written comment “To the talented fans of critical role/ Thank you for sharing your incredible art with us” and displays fanart images, ranging from hand drawings to sculptures to GIFs, and more. The images are accompanied by music and author credit for each piece of fanart is displayed at the bottom of the screen. Over the final image, the written comment “Thank You!” is left. This is a specific call of appreciation to fans, working to strengthen bonds and loyalty to CR, but is also another call to action. Fans who make art are advertised by the channel and, in fact, previous fan art has been used (with permission) in CR products. Although the first written text is a callout to “the talented fans”, the language quickly shifts to “you” thus calling out fans who have yet to produce fanart to start producing and sharing their work (as well as encouraging fans who have shared work to produce more). This “you” also works as a call to new viewers of the show, encouraging them to become members of the community by purposefully displaying CR’s appreciation for the critters. The subliminal message of this metagame is clear: You want to produce fanart for CR and you want to be a critter.

HyperRPG and ZU both also share and call out fanart and fan-produced content around their shows. For both, this is most often seen as retweeting fanart and other content shared on Twitter, rather than as a giant slideshow in the outro. In addition, HyperRPG continually states that their focus is on the community. According to their Twitch page, “Hyper Rabbit Power Go is a hyperactive, interactive community-driven broadcasting channel” and “The thumpers are a welcoming and open community...All of Hyper RPG’s content revolves around the community and it will always remain that way” (“Hyper RPG Twitch”). While this dedication to the audience and community may be seen as admirable, it also mirrors and underscores Twitch’s central message: the audience, the chat, is the lifeblood of Twitch.

While streamers call out audience members to retain viewership and build loyalty, audience members are simultaneously trying to enact practices that will get them noticed, creating a metagame loop. As Mia Consalvo states, “We see a competition at work for viewers. That bid for viewer attention and the revenue they bring with them happens in multiple ways” (180). Note that, as displayed in the different metagames of HyperRPG and ZU, that revenue may appear as monetary

or chronocapital. While metagames may function along lines of monetary or chronocapital, depending on the level of consumerism possible (i.e. smaller channels are less likely to focus on monetary and focus more on chronocapital) they ultimately rely on the economy of attention to succeed, which contributes to Twitch's own metagame of transformation. "Both game developers and platforms build tremendous communities -and capital- by having users constantly engaging with each other, producing content, and deeply building value by their presence and interactions" (Taylor 174). This plays into Twitch's larger metagame of recruiting audience members and then transforming those members to streamers who enact their own metagames for views. Twitch, therefore, is in the market of monetizing attention and harnessing time as a form of capital, while relying on independent streamers as their primary market actors.

"It's Metagames All the Way Down"

While Twitch may be unique in that metagames are more easily displayed, the economy of attention is present across social media platforms. Since, depending on our perspective, it can be "metagames all the way down" (Boluk and LeMieux 15), the economy of attention present on these social media platforms functions via metagames. These metagames do not require games to be their central artifact. Metagames do not exist in conjunction with a central game but instead function as meta to any artifact, from movies to educational material to cleaning a room. Furthermore, the rules of these metagames are crafted to increase attention for the central artifact. On Twitch, rather than movies or games, metagames function as paratextual to streams and streamers, crafted to increase attention and retention for these channels.

Here I have covered the multiple metagames played across three Twitch channels: indirect metagame strategies, direct monetary metagames, metagames of chronocapital, and metagames of appreciation. While indirect metagame strategies do not call on the audience for immediate participation in the metagame, they rely on mobilizing the audience for the metagame's ultimate success. Direct monetary metagames engage the audience as a player who, through their monetary capital, gets to join and alter the game. Metagames of chronocapital do not rely on monetary capital, but the capital of time. These metagames rely on audience members to spend more time on the channel to impact the shows they watch. Finally, metagames of appreciation were seen across all three channels and function to bond

audience members closer to the channel, by thanking them for some active work they have done (helped the players, contributed monetary capital, created fan art, etc.) while also working to mobilize more of the audience toward these actions. And more metagames persist.

Ultimately, on Twitch, what we see is an evolution of fan culture which highly blurs the line between fan and the cultural artifact, while simultaneously shifting expectations of what the cultural artifact is/should be. By resituating metagames as the central element of study, we can move beyond a definition of metagames as “games about games” and recontextualize metagames as the primary mechanisms by which economies of attention function. Through this article we see how metagames are paratextual tools to increase attention for central artifacts and, by resituating metagames as the central artifacts of study, we better understand how they function through and around economies of attention. If it is metagames all the way down, it is strategies for garnering attention in an attention economy that we see. Metagames are attention strategies. Attention strategies are metagames. And so, it is through metagames the attention economy persists.

Works Cited

- Boluk, Stephanie, and Patrick LeMieux. *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames*. U Minnesota P, 2017.
- Carey, James W. *Communication as Culture, Revised Edition: Essays on Media and Society*. Routledge, 2008.
- Consalvo, Mia. “When paratexts become texts: De-centering the game-as-text.” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2017, pp. 177-83.
- Critical Role. “About us.” 2020, critrole.com.
- . “Critical Role and the club of misfits (Laura’s oneshot).” *YouTube*, 20 Dec. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=PRmVQKOy9Bo.
- Gandolfi, Enrico. “To watch or to play, it is in the game: The game culture on Twitch.Tv among performers, plays and audiences.” *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, vol. 8, no.1, 2016, pp. 63-82.
- Howard, Robert Glenn. “The vernacular web of participatory media.” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 25, no. 5, 2008, pp. 490-513.
- Hyde, Lewis. *The Gift: Creativity and The Artist in the Modern World*. Vintage, 2009.

- HyperRPG. "Gremlins RPG | Holiday HyperDrive." *Twitch*, 2019, www.twitch.tv/videos/521598707?filter=all&sort=time.
- HyperRPG. "Home." *Twitch*, 2019, www.twitch.tv/hyperrpg
- Kücklich, Julian. "Precarious playbour: Modders and the digital games industry." *Fibreculture*, vol. 5. No. 1, 2005, pp. 1-5.
- Lanham, Richard A. *The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information*. U Chicago P, 2006.
- Lin, Holin, and Chuen-Tsai Sun. "The role of onlookers in arcade gaming: Frame analysis of public behaviours." *Convergence*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2011, pp. 125-37.
- Mejia, Robert, and Ergin Bulut. "The cruel optimism of casual games: Neocolonialism, neoliberalism, and the valorization of play." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2019, pp. 156-70.
- Spilker, Hendrik Storstein, Kristine Ask, and Martin Hansen. "The new practices and infrastructures of participation: How the popularity of Twitch.tv challenges old and new ideas about television viewing." *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2020. 1-16.
- Taylor, T. L. *Watch Me Play: Twitch and The Rise of Game Live Streaming*. Princeton UP, 2018.
- Twitch Tracker. "Critical Role subs." twitchtracker.com/criticalrole/subscribers. Accessed 13 July 2020.
- Twitch Interactive. "About." *Twitch*, 2019, www.twitch.tv/p/en/about.
- Zelda Universe. "Realms of the wild - Episode 45." *Twitch*, 2019, www.twitch.tv/videos/521742461?filter=all&sort=time.

Watch Me Make History: Reenacting and Remaking the Past in Historical Game Live Streams

KIRK LUNDBLADE

It's eleven-o'clock in the morning, and I'm watching a war end. Live on YouTube, I join with a thousand other viewers as the Mayans, long assailed by their ancient enemy Saladin, sally forth from their capital of Spudtopia to drive their antagonists out of the Patagonian basin. The end arrives swiftly – barely three hours after I started watching. Later, I join another large group of fans to observe an entirely different spectacle: the young Count Eudes, newly ascendant in West Francia in 892 C.E., schemes to seize the ducal title of his overlord. We the audience spend twenty minutes unraveling the quirks of early medieval primogeniture and titular claims to figure out who, exactly, the young Count should befriend, marry, and kill. The two popular games played here, *Sid Meier's Civilization VI* and *Crusader Kings III*, represent the latest iterations in long-running franchises that were – until recently – largely played by individuals in isolated scenarios. Now, history can be made and remade live, with you and a thousand of your best friends. Yet how, exactly, does this work? What role does history and historical thought play in the process T.L. Taylor calls “[transforming] private play into public entertainment?” (*Watch Me Play* 6). To answer these questions, I examine two live streamers and their communities for historical engagement, connecting my analysis of these two microcultures to a growing body of research on historical games and the people who play them.

For decades, historians and scholars of digital media have cast a wary eye on digital historical games. For many of these scholars, the importance of digital historical games is clear – they're extraordinarily popular, and they represent not just a few hours' worth of engagement, but potentially hundreds of hours per individual (Chapman, *Digital Games*; Kee and Bachynski). In addition, with waves of cultural backlash channeled at historical education sweeping the United States,

KIRK LUNDBLADE is a doctoral candidate in the texts and technology program at the University of Central Florida. His research focuses on how players of historical games relate to and develop understandings of history. His most recent publication, *Civilizing Civilization (and Beyond): A History of Historical Game Studies*, tracks the emergence of the field of historical game studies and demonstrates its broad applicability to other fields. He can be reached at Kirk.lundblade@knights.ucf.edu.

Popular Culture Studies Journal
Volume 9, Issue 2, ©2021

the historical representation and encounters happening in popular digital spaces becomes ever more important. In short, the popularity of these games – for good and for ill – underscores their importance in popular understandings of history.

The popularity of digital historical games emphasizes a long-running scholarly debate regarding the compatibility of these games with scholarly history itself. Much of this debate is rooted in the shifts and turns in historical scholarly discourse, which contest the public legitimacy, academic validity, and general efficacy of digital games for historical purposes. This debate finds its roots in an earlier shift in historiography; this shift opened up what has been termed a deconstructionist approach to historical scholarship which asserts that, according to historian Alun Munslow, “past events are explained and acquire their meaning as much by their representation as by their ‘knowable actuality’” (13). In this deconstructionist view, scholarly narrative is dethroned as a singular source of objective truth, and the role of more material factors – such as authorial bias, narrative structuring, and the medium in use – become prominent. Deconstructionist historiography thus foregrounds an old question – originally put forth by historian Hayden White – which asks if the affordances of a particular media form are compatible with scholarly history. Thus, the importance of the form of digital games.

The twin overlapping emphases provided by form and popularity are further emphasized by a third vein of scholarly activity: the exploration of digital historical games’ pedagogical potential. This particular scholarly thread is one of the few to also include examinations of analog historical games, which have a longstanding place in historical (particularly military) education (Dunnigan). Scholarly work investigating the pedagogical potential of historical games – digital and analog – centered largely on both the engagement factor (e.g., students’ unsurprising enthusiasm for games in the classroom) and their use in teaching complex and systemic historiographic concepts. Kurt Squire, a notable early scholar in this area, argues for his work by highlighting his historical game of choice’s “wide appeal, design sophistication, and unique affordances as a world history simulation” (4). He and Historian Tom Taylor both also emphasize the facility of these games in allowing students to explore historical processes – a notably difficult set of concepts to teach (T. Taylor). Thus, digital games represent a potentially valuable resource for educators at all levels – and the need to better articulate and comprehend their underlying formal structure is also increased.

All three of these overlapping arguments for importance – popularity, form, and pedagogy – are reiterated and reemphasized by large-scale, tectonic shifts in the

landscape of digital gaming which threaten to invalidate many of the detailed analyses on which they were built. As I have written elsewhere, the bulk of the early scholarship previously characterized here focused heavily on the digital game as a specific, concrete artifact played by small groups of individuals (Lundblade); more recent scholarship has turned toward viewing games in a more sociological light, locating the older conception of digital game within a layered network of other physical, social, cultural, and economic phenomena. Responding to a variety of trends which trouble the older ideas of game, such as the rise in alternate-reality and virtual reality gaming and digital game live streaming, many of these recent works see the necessity in situating a proliferation of game and game-adjacent media forms within broader, more encompassing frameworks than just the game itself.

Historical games scholarship is just beginning to incorporate this material turn in wider games scholarship and has yet to incorporate any studies of historical games in newer modalities such as live streaming. With such a popular modality yet unexamined, White's questions reemerge in a new light: how do the affordances of digital gaming change when it is "[transformed from] private play into public entertainment" (*Watch Me Play* 6)? Is the audience-player model represented by live streaming more in line with the affordances of historical films or historical games? How does live streaming impact informal historical education and learning? If, as scholars argue, digital games grant players an agentive role in historical construction, what happens when large audiences are engaged in watching streamers make that history? As the popularity of live streaming grows, and as the politicization of historical education increases, the importance of answering these questions will only continue to grow.

Examining Historical Game Live Streaming

This work seeks to form an initial, exploratory extension of historical games scholarship into digital game live streaming. It seeks to identify how a selected pair of popular streamers and their respective audiences engage with history when streaming two different historical games – *Sid Meier's Civilization VI* (Civ6) and *Crusader Kings III* (CK3). Using discourse analysis in what James Paul Gee describes as both its descriptive and critical aspects, two major interweaving streams of discourse – the verbal utterances of the streamer and the written discourse found in the stream's chat feed – are analyzed for their "ways of saying

(informing), doing (action), and being (identity)” (*An Introduction* 8), as well as for how historical streaming discourse articulates positions of power and authority through play and through reference to history or historicity. Both descriptive and critical lenses are essential, considering the close connections between racism, white supremacy, and historical appeals in online spaces. Through the application of this analysis to the streams under examination, I then use grounded theory (Birks and Mills) to move between the copious available data – potential thousands of hours of recorded live streams – and the production of a set of codes that aim to provide an initial characterization of historical engagement within the multifaceted sites associated with historical game live streaming. I then seek analogous paradigms of historical inquiry in the extant scholarship on historical games, which enables me to build a bridge between the large body of previous work and this new modality.

Examined in detail, digital game live streams represent complex assemblages in and of themselves. Attempting to break down their constituent elements and relevant actors reveals an extremely large set of factors to consider – from the streaming platforms, players, viewers, games, archived recordings, and the various technological, legal, and social actors framing these other interactions, to name a select few. While one option would be to take an experimental approach which isolates a specific platform, game, or streamer (the most feasible options), this approach would limit the ability to draw connections between some of the rich contextual factors impinging upon the observed play experience by eliminating key opportunities for comparison-based analysis; instead, I have chosen to treat the study of historical live streaming as an assemblage of play, whereby, according to Taylor,

many varying actors and unfolding processes make up the site and action, allows us to get into the nooks where fascinating work occurs; the flows between system and player, between emergent play and developer revisions, between practices and player produced software modifications. [...] between legal codes, designer intentions, and everyday use practices, between contested forms of play, between expectation and contextualization. (“The Assemblage of Play” 332)

Within this rich notion of assemblage, I have chosen to initially highlight two major observed drivers of differentiation in historical play: the live streamers themselves, and the games themselves.

Embodying History: Quill18 and *Crusader Kings III*

The first game included in this examination of historical streaming is Paradox Interactive's hit 2020 release, *Crusader Kings III* (*CK3*). Following previous iterations of the series, this latest iteration of *Crusader Kings* places a single player in control of a (generally) historically rooted personage from the 9th through 15th century. *CK3* is marketed and broadly characterized as a grand strategy game – a subgenre of strategy game which generally provides a more multifaceted and multidimensional play experience than other mainstays of strategy gaming, such as the popular 4X (Explore Expand, Exploit, and Exterminate) titles. Strategy games such as *CK3* have featured prominently in studies of historical games, with titles in the *Civ* series becoming among the most-cited games within game studies scholarship (Frome). As such, they form an integral basis for the conceptual frameworks – rooted in examination of form – which have sought to establish a deeper scholarly grammar for their examination (Chapman, *Digital Games as History*; Uricchio). In *Digital Games as History*, media scholar Adam Chapman characterizes these strategy games as generally falling under what he calls a conceptual simulation style – a style rooted in high-order abstraction which more easily positions the player as a godlike historian (rather than a mere historical agent) managing the complex interactions of a multitude of historically-rooted processes. Thus, Chapman argues, the historical argumentation in these games is largely rooted in procedural rhetoric (Bogost) and serves “not only [as] a simulation of the past itself but a simulation of discourse about this past.” (Chapman, *Digital Games as History* 75). It would seem that, as a grand strategy game, a formal analysis of *CK3* would fully situate it on this end of Chapman's spectrum.

However, *Crusader Kings III*, like its predecessors, contains substantive elements which break this conceptual mold. The first clue is found in the game's marketing, which offers a “life of medieval drama and majesty” and the ability to “live stories of romance, bravery, duplicity, and greed in a richly detailed medieval sandbox” (*Crusader Kings III*). This highlights one of the series' key twists – placing the player not in control of entire civilizations or organizations per se, but in control of a series of individuals (hopefully) forming a medieval dynasty. Thus, the player takes on the role not of some omnipotent diegetic agent, but specific historical(esque) actors whose power and range of responsibility is largely determined by the player's efforts with the preceding generation. Thus, the game also incorporates aspects typically associated with the opposite end of Chapman's

spectrum – the realist simulation style – which are underpinned by stylistic techniques aimed at a form of visual “realism” and attempts to tie the player concretely to the diegetic level of specific historical agents. Circling back to the key role form plays in the legitimization of historical play, this brief framing of *CK3* suggests that observed play of *CK3* will reveal modes of historical interaction in line with what is suggested by its hybridized conceptual and realist simulation styles. How well, then, does this analysis of form characterize the modes of historical engagement actually identified in live streaming assemblages? To answer this, we turn to the first streamer and set of streams analyzed: Quill18’s Count of Anjou series.

The first examined streamer, Quill18, positions himself as a variety streamer focusing on digital strategy games, playing strategy games ranging from Paradox Interactive titles such as *Europa Universalis IV*, *Crusader Kings III*, and previous iterations in these series, to city builders and other role-playing games. Across the titles examined, Quill exhibits several distinct behavior patterns that carry across all the titles he chooses to play. First, Quill leans heavily into what Taylor characterizes as a variant of the “think aloud” usability protocol, wherein the participant is asked to verbalize the entirety of their normally internal thinking process when making decisions and interacting with certain systems. As Taylor notes, this behavior “is typically accompanied with humor, frustration, and suspense” (*Watch Me Play* 75). Quill also engages in a comparable “read aloud” protocol – my term for his proclivity toward reading the entirety of various game messages and written entries, ranging from help-screen messages to internal game encyclopedia entries. Through emphatic and skilled elocution, Quill selectively reads game content in a way that almost completely eliminates the reading load for his audience, transforming his play into a more auditory experience which more closely recalls tabletop RPG podcasts. In a ludically-dense game which nonetheless possesses extensive “filler” or “fluff” text (common community terms for descriptive/narrative text lacking a clear ludic link), this dialectical strategy shifts the presentation of the game further towards the first person, narrative-focused side of Chapman’s spectrum.



Figure 1: A CK3 event pop-up. With his read aloud approach, Quill usually reads the narrative and mechanical descriptor text in the course of play.

The second notable stylistic marker stems from Quill’s deft awareness of the relatively fluid transmedia properties of streaming – for video game live streams represent a form of transmedia, as they necessarily combine a form of cinematic entertainment with ludic engagement; this positions the interactions between streamer and audience “across media” (Jenkins 2011). Like many streamers, Quill uses simple and clear pronoun distinctions (e.g. “I” vs “we” statements) to shift between a mode of play which elides the audience – one where the streamer narrates their decision-making and thought process in the first person – and a collectivist mode of play which incorporates the audience into the role of the player through the use of direct audience questions and collective framing (and thus partially collapsing the transmedia divide between audience and player). An early example from Quill’s Count of Anjou series demonstrates his use of this split:

Quill18: We have to kill one of their husbands – oh that’s not true...I think I still want to marry there. I mean, we could – wait, I mean he’s six, so we’d have to wait forever for him to come of age. That would be no good.¹

¹ Transcribed from Quill18’s “Let’s Play Crusader Kings III – Count of Anjou – Part 13,” at approximately 13:40.

In this brief section, the streamer is discussing the strategic choice of whether to order the assassination of one of their character's daughter's husbands, allowing the player to remarry their newly widowed daughter to a higher-status strategic target. Here we can see this streamer's own negotiation of the transmedia divide: personal opinions and desires are clearly separated and not attributed to the audience, while all discussion which frames specific in-game action uses the collective framing. This linguistic strategy positions the audience and streamer together as a single player, partially collapsing the transmedia positioning inherent in the divide between audience and player. This strategy which is extended by the more direct strategy of soliciting viewer input on decisions with varying ludic value, from highly strategic marriage strategies (with a high level of ludic relevance) to naming the character's children (with absolutely no ludic connection). This direct and indirect prompting towards collective identity and action, I argue, increases engagement in the decision-making process – engagement which directly bears on the ways in which history and historicity impinge upon the *CK3* play experience.

Taken together, the combination of formal depiction and the streamer's layered mannerisms mediate the viewers' individual and collective engagement with our primary target for analysis: the historical aspects of play. Historical engagement in Quill18's *CK3* streams tends to take a small set of forms, most of which fall under the broad category of historical resonance. Chapman defines historical resonance as "the establishment of a link between a game's historical representation and the larger historical discourse, as the player understands it" (*Digital Games as History* 36). In Quill's streams, historical resonance can not only be directly identified as shaping play, but specific instances that span the intersections between streamer, audience, and game can be separated out and further elucidated. Two examples from his stream shall suffice to illustrate the point. In the first case, an in-game event has just revealed that a young, female, married character in the streamer's dynasty (essentially a family member to some degree) has committed adultery with a considerably older male priest. Needless to say, this scenario provoked an outburst of discussion:

pharynx007: a catholic priest preying on a child... noooo. color me surprised. Lol

Anamalocarid: Eighty was like being Methuselah back then

Robodine: Wasn't there a US president who fathered a child at high age, with said child also fathering a child age?²

In all three samples, different articulations of historical resonance appear, as all three viewers explicitly attempt to situate recent events in a historical context. In the first, we see an explicit connection first with current events (with the stereotypical proclivities of priests a well-known cultural referent), but also makes an implied argument for the historical continuity of this stereotype. The second draws an empathic framing which emphasizes the male character's extreme age specifically within the game's historical context; this sort of historical connection was drawn by many other viewers as well. In the third, the viewer draws a connection between the event and another historical scenario as part of an ongoing side discussion on the likelihood/frequency of octogenarians fathering children. All three vary in the ways in which they incorporate historical awareness into their response to play events, but all these comments represent individual and collective efforts to frame and legitimize the game's events into their historical awareness.

This first example presents commentary and reactions which flow entirely between participants in the community chat; this intra-audience historical engagement is not addressed or built upon by the streamer. Quill18's own responses to the conversation stirred up by this incident are instead directed at more humorous comments. Here we must separate the identified interactions which remain entirely between chat participants from interactions which involve streamer and audience acknowledging and responding to each other. The first category – represented by the previous sample – I term intra-audience engagements. While relevant for addressing our core questions, this first category does not readily speak to the overall structure of the community created by the stream. Our second example comes from a different category: interactions where the streamer acknowledges and responds to discussions and questions in chat. These I term curated engagements. The overall structure and distribution of these curated engagements reveal more about the micro culture being constructed at this particular site – since interaction with the streamer is generally an extremely desired outcome, the type of interactions which the streamer selects as worthy of response are likely to have a strong effect on shaping the micro culture of that streamer's community.

² Archived from Quill18's "Let's Play Crusader Kings III – Count of Anjou – Part 14," at approximately 4:10, 4:13, and 4:54 respectively.

Quill's curated engagements are largely focused on humorous and other convivial responses to his audience, with a focus on acknowledging and strengthening the relationship between his audience members and their occasionally embodied avatars – one of his distinctive practices. In his *CK3* streams, Quill allows his audience members to enter their names into an ad-hoc database from which names for in-game characters are randomly selected; many of his curated engagements center and reinforce this narrative embodiment, as he frequently re-engages with and responds to audience members whose in-game avatars have become embroiled in entertaining or relevant events. However, some of Quill's curated engagements also respond to and acknowledge instances of historical resonance; here, in our second example, Quill responds to chat by discussing the stream's gameplay options going forward:

Quill18: We could potentially start a faction, and other people might join our faction...but I don't know; do we really want to be that game-y and do it? In reality, Count Eudes would already be king. He would've been elected king because of some things that happened.³

This passage is notable for several reasons: first, it represents a direct understanding of the potential conflict between player actions and historical understanding – a form of the commonplace tension between player agency and game systems often brought about by ludic and narrative constraints at odds with one another. It is here that Quill engages in what Apperley calls configurative resonance, which “involves the player deliberately configuring, and/or performing actions in the game – out of all the possible potential configurations and performances – in order to create specific resonances” (135). Quill's historical resonance includes awareness of past events as history (his reference to the historical record), but his brief discussion of configurative resonance shows his understanding of how specific game actions would generate not undesirable historical outcomes (otherwise any gamified historical process would be an acceptable way to bring the game's events closer to the strict historical record), but represent a-historic, expressly ludic mechanisms for accomplishing those ends. Critically, this shows an awareness of historical resonance in Quill's configurative resonance play – and this resonance is nuanced enough to differentiate between and include both historical *events* (e.g., the strictly linear names, dates, and places structure pedagogically aligned with conceptions of

³ Transcribed from Quill18's “Let's Play Crusader Kings III – Count of Anjou – Part 13,” at approximately 13:00.

history that claim objective historical understanding of the past) and historical *processes* (e.g., the social mechanisms by which rank and title were acquired in early medieval European society).

Continuing examination of Quill's *CK3* streaming shows similar types of interactions and historical engagements; both streamers and viewers engage in discussions of historical resonance, seeking to draw connections between their individual historical understandings and the events unfolding in the game. Concurrently, streamers and viewers engage in configurative resonance to take historically resonant actions as well as to achieve historically resonant outcomes and events. Notably, while these interactions are common, they still represent only a small fraction of the viewer and streamer discussions – even during events which precipitate this sort of historical reflection. The bulk of the discourse, even at these moments, is filled with commonplace cultural touchstones, memes, and other continuing conversation threads.

When viewing Quill's flip to streaming *Civ 6*, one of his core tendencies immediately serves to differentiate the stream's historical engagement: as previously discussed, Quill makes heavy use of both the commonplace think-aloud protocol and his more distinct read aloud approach; with *Civ 6*, a game where the written content load leans towards the ludic, this read aloud directly leads to a greater emphasis on the ludic aspects of play – simply reading the available stream of text in *Civ 6* provides the player and audience with a far more dense ludic load (though still far below that of the second streamer examined here). Beyond the shift to the streaming experience inflected through Quill's read aloud approach, his *Civ* streams are notable for a near-complete lack of historical resonance, awareness, or engagement of any kind. Viewer comments do not introduce any of the historical resonance, configurative resonance, or historiographic knowledge demonstrated by both streamer and audience.

The overall effect of Quill's stylistic behaviors is to center narrative embodiment and roleplaying in his play. Borrowing mannerisms from notable tabletop RPG communities, Quill endeavors first and foremost to create a lighthearted, convivial environment where nothing is taken too seriously, and the audience can locate themselves somewhat in the unfolding narrative of community play. The balance between narrative roleplay and ludic, systems-driven interaction in Quill's streams is somewhat affected by the choice of game; in *CK3*, examinations of curated and intra-audience engagements suggest that the community styles of light roleplay and embodiment lead to greater consideration

of the game's clear connection to a popular historical past. Conversely, in *Civ 6*, the embodied roleplay shifts more towards a generalized humorous approach which satirizes historical connection. While these aspects are largely recognizable in isolation, to achieve some additional clarity and understanding of how historical engagement occurs in Quill's *CK3* streams, it is necessary to turn to a different streamer entirely, and to investigate how their stream and their community engage with the same game.

Mastering Play: PotatoMcWhiskey and *Sid Meier's Civilization VI*

Sid Meier's Civilization VI, the latest in the best-selling series, continues the iterative reproduction of one of the most-referenced game series in the game studies canon (Frome), as well as one of the pivotal early objects of study in historical game studies (Chapman, "Is *Sid Meier's Civilization* History?"; Poblocki; Friedman). A classic 4X game which purports to allow players to guide a chosen civilization across history, *Civ* – like the *Crusader Kings* series – is closely connected to history and historical processes. While *CK3* presents an atypical blend of elements from across Chapman's simulation style spectrum, *Civ* (and specifically *Civ 6*) occupies the prototypical niche for conceptual simulation, featuring high levels of abstraction and a diegetic scope that puts the player in a deific and far-reaching authorial position – indeed, a popular early term for similar games was "god games." For streaming, then, if the formal analysis translates directly to observed play, we would expect to identify historical engagement taking the form of awareness of historical processes and conceptions of history itself.

Looking at streamers who play *Civ 6*, one of the most prominent and popular is PotatoMcWhiskey. Well known in the community for his constant use of the game's highest difficulty setting, Potato's streams largely focus specifically on *Civ 6*, with a relatively small percentage directed towards many of the same strategy games streamers such as Quill18 play in a more balanced rotation. When compared with Quill, Potato's streams are marked by the near-complete absence of two of Quill's defining streamer characteristics; first, he generally avoids the collectivist framing Quill frequently makes use of, framing the entirety of his think aloud process in the first person singular (with occasional lapses into collective language as the exception). Second, he largely avoids Quill's inclusion of a comparable read aloud behavior, preferring to instead devote most of his speaking time to thoroughly explaining his strategic thought process; where he does read aloud, the chosen text

is never the filler of fluff text – Potato instead reads and re-reads relevant rules text to his audience, usually to legitimize or explain his overall strategic thinking. Third, instead of selecting and including participant names from chat as names for entities in-game, Potato instead allows his chat to pay to set almost any name for the game’s renamable entities. Thus, for PotatoMcWhiskey, the auditory load shifts from narrative embodiment (literally reading the audience into the world of the game) to a ludic focus which continually exposes game systems and allows for lengthier strategic forecasting.

Close analysis of Potato’s curated engagements also reveals a ludic expertise-driven focus. Like Quill, Potato responds to occasional jokes, jibes, and humorous quips in his chat. However, the bulk of Potato’s curated engagements take the form of two overlapping types of interaction: strategic assessment and explanatory knowledge-sharing. The latter is easily demonstrated through the following interaction:

Tamer Batayneh (in chat): Why can't aqueducts be built across rivers? That makes no sense.

PotatoMcWhiskey (audibly): Why can't aqueducts be built across rivers? Um, it's actually really really simple. So, aqueducts can be built across rivers...let me open up paint...so here's how aqueducts work...

PotatoMcWhiskey (while drawing): For people who don't understand them: I've explained this before. Some people in chat may be familiar...all right, so we've got our hex grid...⁴

In this interaction, Potato demonstrates a behavior pattern largely distinct to his streams; he frequently moves in and out of the game on stream in order to examine charts, graphs, spreadsheets, and other graphics (often drawn on the fly) in order to thoroughly analyze a particular tactical or strategic option within the context of the game. The visual explanation which followed the above exchange is presented in Figure 2 below.

⁴ Transcribed from PotatoMcWhiskey’s “THICC and TALL Maya Livestream” at approximately 2:33:57.

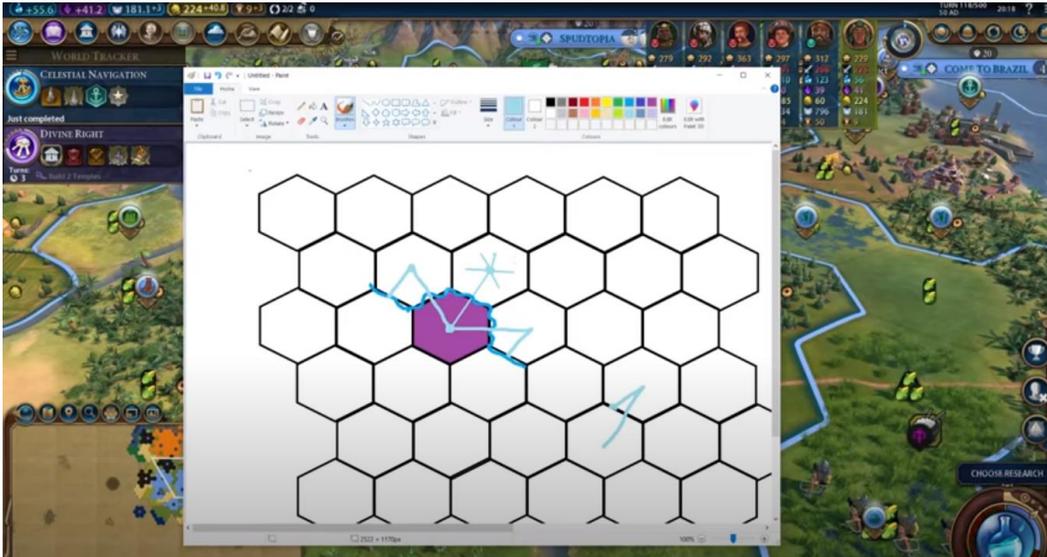


Figure 2: Streamer PotatoMcWhiskey demonstrating the complex Aqueduct placement mechanics in Civ 6 (taken from PotatoMcWhiskey’s “THICC and TALL Maya Livestream” at approximately 2:37:14)

Entries in this first category of interaction, rule-based explanations, are conducted in a manner analogous to the facilitator-student interactions observed in Durga and Squire’s two-year study of a *Civilization*-based course environment (Durga and Squire), wherein facilitators paired with students and helped answer increasingly complex questions. For Durga and Squire’s class, this enabled their students to progress along what the authors characterize as their “multiple trajectories of expertise” (13). In Potato’s stream, these interactions begin not through contestation of his value judgments or expertise, but through interrogatives directed at opaque game systems; they are resolved when Potato, generally taking cues from chat, believes the rule has been articulated and understood. Other interactions fall more into the strategic assessment camp, wherein Potato defends (to varying degrees) his assessments of the game state and his overall strategy:

PotatoMcWhiskey (audibly): I think we disperse [the barbarian encampment]. We could get thirty gold out of it.

Kam Sing (in chat): No

Kam Sing: City state better

PotatoMcWhiskey: City state is better? This one is pretty close to where I may want to settle cities. I haven't decided upon that...⁵

In this interaction, Potato jumps in to defend his desire to remove a potential long-term resource, the barbarian encampment, from the map. Though initiated at this early phase of the game, the bulk of the argument plays out over the subsequent hour, as Potato enacts his initially-proposed plan immediately before he became able to make use of the territory the camp formerly occupied. This and comparable strategic contestations do not center discussions of rules and mechanics (though they frequently include them), but instead center more amorphous articulations of values and competing desires (e.g., which do I want more: a trading partner or available land?). These interactions are frequently more open-ended and are rarely resolved immediately after the initial discussion.

Through both mechanical explanation and strategic debate, PotatoMcWhiskey's curated engagements reveal the empowered norms of the affinity space he is largely responsible for directing: he articulates a clear, singular trajectory of expertise rooted in mastery of the game's rule-driven systems (not unlike the affinity spaces surrounding *Age of Empires* which Gee characterizes in *Situated Language and Learning*). In a move that is instantly familiar to any longtime educator (or student), Potato frequently chides audience members who ask questions which he has already answered and documented – reinforcing and reinscribing his contextual role in these interactions as educator and facilitator (as well as solidifying other recognizable scholastic norms: attendance and attentiveness). Conversely, Potato's praise is reserved for audience members which can articulate novel (and convincing) strategic approaches or are able to improve upon the community's existing knowledge of game systems (usually by correcting or extending an explanation given by Potato). The tonal connotations of these interactions further underscore the core social currency of Potato's streaming community: public displays of game knowledge.

PotatoMcWhiskey's mastery-driven community style persists even through changes in game selection. When playing CK3, Potato's curated engagements or distinctive stylistic behaviors do not alter significantly; his CK3 streams still largely lean on his strategic, think aloud approach which delves deeply into game mechanics and is accompanied by occasional digressions to visually present and

⁵ Transcribed from PotatoMcWhiskey's "THICC and TALL Maya Livestream" at approximately 32:54.

articulate his decision making, with almost none of the implicit or explicit awareness of historical and configurative resonance which characterizes Quill18's *CK3* streams. When compared to Quill18's *CK3* streams, Potato directs a much greater portion of his read aloud efforts at rules text – completely avoiding the narrative fluff text which Quill centers.

Overall, PotatoMcWhiskey's *Civ* streams demonstrate a strong focus on purely ludic play with an inseparably intertwined pedagogical component. Mirroring the mastery and knowledge development arc described in Squire and Giovanetto, Potato scaffolds detailed explanatory discussions of game systems in a clearly pedagogical manner. Lacking any overt connection to conceptions of history, his *Civ6* and *CK3* streams sever *Sid Meier's Civilization* from any historical context, perfectly aligning with the purely ludic, semiotic disruption identified by Myers; Carr; Durga and Squire. For PotatoMcWhiskey's community, mastery of the game's systems is the coin of the realm – all others need not apply.

History in the Margins: Quill18 and PotatoMcWhiskey in Context

This study sought to examine a key linchpin in the tripartite arguments for validity which undergird the study of historical games. Specifically, I sought to examine a contemporary style of play and game engagement for direct, qualitative evidence of the oft-theorized notions of historical engagement found in play. To accomplish this goal, this work has to negotiate the complex assemblage of play which constitutes the live streaming of historical games, and, in doing so, must seek to provide some additional insights into the complex relationship between historical games and historical game streamers.

In this study of two major historical game streamers – Quill18 and PotatoMcWhiskey – each playing two different historical games – *Crusader Kings III* and *Sid Meier's Civilization VI* – two distinct community styles emerged. Examination of their distinct streamer behaviors, differing curated engagements, and identified intra-audience behavior reveals the norms and values which govern each group, and provides indications of the ways in which these norms enable or avoid differing forms of historical engagement.

Of the two, PotatoMcWhiskey's community exhibited the most strongly identifiable set of norms, and very closely modeled the affinity spaces for game-based learning modeled in early game studies scholarship (Gee, *Video Games*; Durga and Squire; Squire and Giovanetto). His community most values

recognizable scholastic norms such as attendance and attentiveness – norms which support the primary social currency in his space: game-related knowledge and mastery. For Quill18, a strong narrative focus when playing *CK3* – one which seemed to encourage historical resonance and direct consideration of the game’s historical aspects – largely dissolved when switching to *Civ 6*.

While a considerable body of research has addressed digital historical games as an overall form (and has added considerable analytical flexibility via incorporation of genre, simulation style, etc.), historical engagement in these two major historical game streamers’ communities mostly occurred in the intersections (and margins) between game-specific affordances and the streamer’s particular community cultures and conventions. For Quill18, the game-specific affordances exhibited significant influence over whether the community directly grappled with historically resonant play, with a superficially similar historical game (*Civ 6*) leading to a near-complete lack of this historically resonant engagement. In addition, the oft-studied paradigm of ludic mastery appeared dominant in PotatoMcWhiskey’s community, with the complete semiotic separation between game element and historical representation observed by numerous early scholars reasserting itself in a new context. Largely, this work suggests that streamers of historical games – as well as their audiences – infrequently engage in explicit examination of the ubiquitous historical representations presented in these games, largely preferring to focus on more ludic and narrative/embodiment facets of play. In many cases, efforts to improve play within a ludic context work directly against historical engagement for both streamer and audience – thus, the broad cultural values (which are emphasized further in some micro communities) placed upon ludic skill and success work directly at odds with the marketed historical engagement. For these streamers and their audiences, history is an effect applied to play, and is rarely examined directly.

While the results presented here shade historical engagement through play with a thick cloud of skepticism, this introductory study offers several intriguing lines of future inquiry: if previously identified styles and cultures of play can be readily identified in contemporary streaming contexts, then it remains an open possibility that comparable communities structured around a more historical trajectory of expertise exist or can be constructed on live streaming platforms. In addition, the norms of both communities studied here largely remain amenable to education praxis and deserve future study as part of historical games-based education efforts. Notably as well, this research contains several key limitations which deserve to be

addressed in future work. Specifically, discourse analysis fails to capture evidence of historical resonance and understanding which is not directly articulated either by the streamer or member of the audience; with a large percentage of the audience rarely engaging in the examined conversation, it is highly possible that historical resonance occurs in more individual, offline responses than this study could capture. Furthermore, as a complex and shifting assemblage with numerous interlocking social, cultural, and technical factors, simply examining stream chat and streamer response is unable to capture the off- and cross-platform channels in which this engagement may also take place. Hidden in these limitations glimmers yet another desirable possibility: that more comprehensive ethnographic excavation of these mixed communities can unearth deeper veins of historical inquiry – present only as resonant glimmers in this initial work. For it is a near certainty that these communities will continue to grow, evolve, and influence how history is made and remade for an eager public.

Works Cited

- Apperley, Thomas. *Gaming Rhythms: Play and Counterplay from the Situated to the Global*. Institute of Network Cultures, 2010.
- Birks, Melanie, and Jane Mills. *Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide*. 2nd edition, SAGE, 2015.
- Bogost, Ian. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. 2007.
- Chapman, Adam. *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice*. Routledge, 2016.
- . "Is Sid Meier's Civilization History?" *Rethinking History*, vol. 17, no. 3, Sept. 2013, pp. 312-32.
- Crusader Kings III*. Paradox Interactive, Aug. 2020, www.crusaderkings.com/en#hero.
- Dunnigan, James F. *Wargames Handbook*, 3rd ed., Writers Club Press, 2000.
- Durga, Shree, and Kurt D. Squire. "Productive gaming and the case for historiographic game-play." *Handbook of Research on Effective Electronic Gaming in Education*, 2009, pp. 200-18.
- Friedman, Thomas. "Civilization and its discontents: Simulation, subjectivity, and space." *On a Silver Platter: CD-ROMs and the Promises of a New Technology*, edited by G. M. Smith, pp. 132-50.

- Frome, Jonathan. "Describing the game studies canon: A game citation analysis." *Proceedings of DiGRA 2019*, p. 21.
- Gee, James Paul. *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method*, 3rd ed, Routledge, 2011.
- . *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Jenkins, Henry. "Transmedia 202: further reflections." *Confessions of an Aca-Fan* 31, Aug. 2011, henryjenkins.org/blog/2011/08/defining_transmedia_further_re.html.
- Kee, Kevin, and John Bachynski. "Outbreak: Lessons learned from developing a 'history game.'" *Loading... The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association*, vol. 3, no. 4, 2009, p. 14.
- Lundblade, Kirk. "Civilizing *Civilization* (and beyond): A historiography of historical game studies." *Proceedings of the 15th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games*, ACM Press, 2020.
- Munslow, Alun. *Narrative and History*. Macmillan International Higher Education, 2007.
- Poblocki, Kacper. "Becoming-State: The bio-cultural imperialism of Sid Meier's *Civilization*." *Focaal - European Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 39, 2003, pp. 163-77.
- Squire, Kurt D., and Levi Giovanetto. "The higher education of gaming." *E-Learning and Digital Media*, vol. 5, no. 1, Mar. 2008, pp. 2-28.
- Taylor, T. L. "The assemblage of play." *Games and Culture*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2009, pp. 331-9.
- . *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming*. Princeton UP, 2018.
- Taylor, Tom. "Historical simulations and the future of the historical narrative." *History Computer Review*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2003, quod.lib.umich.edu/j/jahc/3310410.0006.203/--historical-simulations-and-the-future-of-the-historical?rgn=main;view=fulltext.
- Uricchio, William. "Simulation, history, and computer games." *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, edited by Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein, 2005, pp. 327-38.
- White, Hayden. "Historiography and historiophoty." *The American Historical Review*, vol. 93, no. 5, 1988, p. 9.

Intimacy Games: *Critical Role's* Struggle to Maintain Its Tabletop Authenticity

ERIK KERSTING

Every Thursday evening approximately fifty-thousand people tune in on Twitch to watch a live episode of *Critical Role*. Unlike most Twitch streams where viewers watch streamers play video games, these viewers are tuned in to watch voice actors play the tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons*. *D&D* has reemerged a cultural phenomenon in recent years, with its fifth edition skyrocketing the game's popularity. This growth can, in part, be attributed to shows like *Critical Role*, whose live audience only represents a fraction of its fans: weekly uploads of the three- to five-hour show to YouTube hover around a million views. As a result, the cast of *Critical Role* are considered the “ambassadors” of *D&D* by the community and game designers. In 2019, Stephen Colbert, host of *The Late Show*, played an adventure with Matthew Mercer, the show's dungeon master, and Amazon purchased streaming rights to two seasons of an animated series based on the show's intellectual property.

Critical Role is, in essence, a Twitch live stream of Mercer's *D&D* campaign, set in the fictional world of “Exandria.” It features a variety of “nerdy-ass voice actors,”¹ as Mercer calls them at the beginning of each episode, who role play as heroic characters going on adventures and interacting with the fantasy world. The entirety of this role playing is done verbally, with the occasional inclusion of professionally and fan-made character art, and a short introductory animation, which remediates some visual aspects of the story. The primary selling point of the stream is the professional voice-over talent of the cast, which creates the show's compelling atmosphere, as their skills in vocal performance translate readily to a *D&D* live stream. It is useful to understand the show as a mix between game: the

¹ The cast of *Critical Role* is: Travis Willingham, Marisha Ray, Taliesin Jaffe, Ashley Johnson, Liam O'Brien, Laura Bailey, Sam Riegel, and Matthew Mercer.

ERIK KERSTING is a doctoral candidate in Media, Cinema, and Digital Studies at University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee. They are interested in the intersection of games, history, and social life, particularly how digital media communicate philosophical and anthropological meaning. They are a member of the Digital Cultures Collaboratory and the Serious Play streaming group at The Center for 21st Century Studies. They can be reached at Kerstin2@uwm.edu.

players roll dice and make tactical decisions as RPG characters, theater: the players perform roles, craft a compelling narrative, and put on accents for a live audience, and improv: since both the dungeon master and players are making consequential decisions moment to moment and playing off each other in character. As the show has grown in popularity its creators have become their own media company with a dozen or so other live shows outside the flagship *D&D* campaign, including talk shows, comic books, video game streams, and the aptly named *#EverythingIsContent* variety show.

As both *Critical Role* and *D&D* continue to gain popularity they offer a compelling medium to study in terms of broadcast and fan culture. First, the show is a remediation of *D&D*, a game not traditionally understood as a spectator affair. Following the definitions set forth by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, the show is a mix of transparency and hypermediation, it attempts to balance being a simple game of players around a table (transparency) with the heightened performance of professionals trying to create an engaging and profitable piece of entertainment (hypermediation). Second, *Critical Role* succeeds not because it mediates a tabletop game, but the feeling of sitting down with friends at the table for game night. It functions as a site of affective response akin to the theater: the audience empathizes with the players, relishing in their victories and sulking in their defeats. The players are immediate to the audience, which generates a sense of intimacy between them. This intimacy allows for more profound emotional resonance, as Jonathon Flatley writes in *Affective Mapping*, “Powerful emotional experiences – quite different from more cognitively mediated ones – connect us with, even transport us *into* the materiality of the world around us” (18) [emphasis original]. For *Critical Role* this might imply that the audience's affective response places them at the table with the players. Third, this intimacy is encouraged by the cast, who have cultivated a highly engaged fan community (named “critters”) and incorporate their fans into their broadcasts via Twitch chat, having episodes in front of live audiences, and featuring fan art on each stream. Finally, in recent years, the cast have started their own media company and are branching into other media, primarily live streaming, but also comics and animated television. Considering that one of the primary appeals of *Critical Role* is the perceived authenticity of the cast and the intimacy the show creates with viewers, their attempts at maintaining the affect of the *D&D* table while expanding as a media corporation, and the conflicts that arise as a result, offer an interesting case study on the strained relationship between media and audience in the digital age.

Critical Role as Remediation

Before discussing how *Critical Role* remediates *D&D*, it is important to understand the ways in which the structure of the game resists remediation. *D&D* is not like most games; it does not have a set start time or end time, there are no “winners” or “losers,” and there are few visual components to the game. The action is almost entirely in the imagination of the participants. In the history of the game before this decade, *D&D* was not thought of as a spectator affair. There was an animated television series in the 1980s titled *Dungeons and Dragons*, but this remediated the fantasy fiction genre, think *Lord of the Rings*, rather than a tabletop role-playing game. This is why at the outset I'm defining these live streams as part game, part theater, and part improv. If we consider a live stream of the game as just theater we risk removing the stochastic contingencies that the dice offer, and if we consider the game as simply improv we risk undercutting the ways in which players role-play as characters with narrative continuity and a desire to see goals met. These are not insurmountable obstacles, as the success of *Critical Role* displays, but to understand the show, one must understand how it remediates each of these things to function and find success. Perhaps most importantly, *Critical Role* remediates not just the play of *D&D* or the experience of theater, but the experience of a game night with friends. While not traditionally understood as “media,” a game night has several unique markers the show borrows, in particular sitting down at the table at a particular time and place, with a reliance on social contingency, to create engaging media.

Part of the intimacy of *Critical Role* has to do with its humble beginnings. Mercer's *D&D* campaign was not intended to be a live stream consumed for audiences. In fact, the group had already been playing together for two years before they started streaming. As a result, the series begins in media res, strengthening the feeling that the audience is viewing the group's normal weekly game of *D&D* rather than a conscious media production. These early episodes typically have poor audio and video quality, with the cast situated in what appears to be a simple living room. This replicates the “lofi” aesthetic of certain musical acts. Andy Stuhl writes in “Reactions to Analog Fetishism in Sound-Recording Cultures” that “song – and performance – centric views treat production as inherently opposed to musical authenticity.” For Stuhl, “Lo-fi music presents a striking example of how a whole set of cultural decisions are embodied in an aesthetic category best identified simply

as a 'sound'." While Stuhl specifically discusses rock music, the same principles can be applied to other DIY media. The low fidelity of *Critical Role* episodes helps create a sense of authenticity which fosters the initial intimacy the show cultivates for its audience. The difference between DIY music and streaming rests in their intentionality and how they grow. Stuhl explains that many DIY music acts struggle when they become successful because higher production fidelity can result in a wider audience, but also alienate the initial audience. While *Critical Role's* early lack of fidelity seems to be a result of a lack of resources, the stream has grown into a more professionally produced product over time. Current episodes, now years removed from their earnest beginnings, are set in a studio with high-quality audio equipment, have overlays to display game information, and contain markers of glossy production techniques with a production crew helping run the technical side of the live stream. With the advent of COVID-19, they constructed an elaborate, and reasonably safe, streaming space where they could be in person, but still maintain California's policies on distance for public gatherings.

It is useful though to analyze these early episodes through the lens of remediation, because this is the format that *Critical Role* used to become the most popular *D&D* live stream. At first blush, especially with the DIY aesthetic detailed previously, it might seem as though these early streams are explicitly *not* immediate, considering Bolter and Grusin describe the transparent interface as "one more manifestation of the need to deny the mediated character of digital technology altogether" (24), while Stuhl's lofi aesthetic confers authenticity via noticeable digital remediation. Yet, visual and aural artifacts indicating the digital nature of the stream do fit within the "family of beliefs" that constitute immediacy. Bolter and Grusin argue "The common feature of all these forms is the belief in some necessary contact point between the medium and what it represents" (30). These early streams are filled with such contact points. Particularly in the representation of a weekly game night, whether that be the video feed of the faces of players at a table, the location of the stream in a living room, the various beverages, food, and books that can be seen on the table in front of the players, or the division of the video feed between the dungeon master and players (who function in different roles in a game of *D&D*).

The most important contact point between the medium and what it represents is the fact that it is aired live, though through COVID-19 the episodes have aired a week after they were recorded. Even though the majority of *Critical Role* viewers do not watch the show live, the experience of a *D&D* game night necessitates that

individuals be in a room together and infers continuous play for a set period of time. This liveness is an aesthetic of immediacy for *Critical Role* as a mediated product. The show fits within Philip Auslander's arguments in *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* that “live performance recapitulates mediatized representations” (54) and “like liveness itself, the desire for live experiences is a product of mediatization” (55). Similarly, *Critical Role's* “live aesthetic” is part of its mediatization and the affect the series cultivates: instead of being mutually exclusive, they inform one another. The series has, over time, discarded some aspects that marked its liveness in favor of creating a more mediatized product. Auslander resists claims that live performance and mediatized performances are a mirror upon one another, instead arguing, “my view of cultural economy holds that at any given historical moment, there are dominant forms that enjoy much greater cultural presence, prestige, and power than other forms. Nondominant forms will tend to become more like dominant ones, but not the other way around” (162). In the case of *Critical Role*, it is difficult to tell what form it may be trying to mimic is. Initially, as a relatively obscure media product, it could be considered a “nondominant form” which remediates the live show, but as it has grown in popularity, it has become the measure by which other *D&D* shows are judged, with many having some kind of mediated twist on the formula. This extends to other *Critical Role* broadcasts as well and creates some of the disjointed relationships between the show and its audience, since its dominance is rooted in a sense of authentic liveness that can be easily lost when the markers of immediate remediation are removed from the stream. As the show has been professionalized its visual and aural fidelity has improved, the cast no longer eats on stream, and there is a stricter adherence to “good” recording practicing, which impacts the authentic liveness originally cultivated in early episodes. The series is immediate insofar as it confers “liveness” as a principle aesthetic, but as a web-mediated product, it is hypermediated to feel live as well.

Various hypermediations indicate the “liveness” of the stream and help constitute its remediation as game night. Bolter and Grusin define “the logic of hypermediacy,” which:

acknowledges multiple acts of representation and makes them visible. Where immediacy suggests a unified visual space, contemporary hypermediacy offers a heterogeneous space, in which representation is conceived of not as a window on to the world, but rather as “windowed” itself – with windows that open on to other representations and other media.

(33-4)

While these hypermediations have become more prevalent in the years since the series aired, the early streams are still thoroughly windowed affairs. Outside of the visual remediation of the players, the most prominent of these windows is the live chat box featured early in the series. This fast-moving chat archives the “liveness” of the show by giving the viewer a sense of a live audience watching the show. The comments in chat do not typically rise to the level of meaningful criticism but act as a further remediation of the action of the narrative. For instance, when Willingham's Grog, an unintelligent Goliath, says a funny line, the chat may be spammed with users typing “Grog!” Similarly, emotes and other short phrases help the audience communicate to each other how to feel about what is going on in the game, similar to how a laugh track functions in a sitcom. Chat members may also answer questions for viewers who are not caught up on the series, helping to create coherency where there might not otherwise have been any. Also conferring liveness, these early episodes are hypermediated by a visual pop-up indicating when users followed or subscribed to the stream, which, like the chat box, indicates that the stream is live and that users are interacting with the content as it is aired. As the show has grown as a production and career for its cast, these hypermediations, specifically the chat box and visual announcement of new followers and subscribers, have been removed in favor of sponsorship deals and a more streamlined production. Still, these early streams suggest the importance of maintaining a live aesthetic through hypermediation. Such chats still exist when *Critical Role* is aired live, they are just no longer privileged with appearing in their own box live stream and subsequent uploads.

This is not to say that all aspects that engage fans directly have been removed from the live stream of *Critical Role* as it has professionalized. Much of the dead air time before and after the show, and during the mid-show break, features fan art, specifically noting the name of the artist and where to find their work on social media. Fan art occupies a strange space of remediation for *Critical Role*. On one hand, it presents the narrative as more immediate, giving a visual representation of the characters and depicting their adventures to better facilitate an imaginative understanding of the otherwise aural show. On the other hand, as a hypermediation of “liveness” it functions as a way for the stream to visually engage fans and privilege their affective labor akin to the chat box. The key difference, of course, is that the fan art is premediated and chosen by the production crew while the chat box can be unpredictable. As the cast of *Critical Role* attempt to professionalize

their media product, they make changes to it that aim to maintain the spirit of fan engagement without compromising the marketability of their stream.

Perhaps the most obvious hypermediation on current *Critical Role* streams is their prolific use of sponsorships. In the second campaign, which started airing in 2018 and wrapped up in 2021, nearly every episode is sponsored by *D&D Beyond*, an app that remediates *D&D* virtually by maintaining character sheets, rules, and other information found in the game's rule books. The cast of *Critical Role* use *D&D Beyond* to manage their live game, with tablets on the table during the stream indicating that the players have done away with the traditional pen and paper in favor of a digital remediation. While the core of the *D&D* experience remains, because there are still people gathered around a table talking, this represents a marked change from the first campaign, where no tablets or digital remediations of the game are situated in the play space. A *D&D Beyond* overlay is continually present on the stream, there are advertisements for it during the midshow break. In the introduction before the episode “proper” begins, Riegal typically does a skit which acts as an ad for *D&D Beyond*. These skits are a way to maintain the intimacy of the *D&D* table while attempting to become a more corporatized entity. Instead of just running a traditional advertisement for the product the cast engage in jokes around their sponsorship. A running gag throughout part of the second campaign is Riegal and O'Brien running for “president of *D&D Beyond*” with politically inspired videos that advertise the candidacies, and the product. Whether these skits work or not as advertisements is less important than the clear desire on the part of the cast to maintain authenticity by making light of their sponsorships.

Another hypermediated aspect of the show comes from this relationship with *D&D Beyond*: a sponsored Twitch overlay that tracks crucial game information live. This overlay keeps tabs on each player's health and resources so that the audience has a better idea of how the game is going. This is a hypermediation on not just the stream experience, as the audience gains special access to information otherwise unavailable to them, but on the experience of playing *D&D*, a primarily vocal game in which this information is typically not known between players unless they verbally ask each other or peek over their friend's shoulder. As a result, the audience feels more “at the table,” since they have a good idea of the current status of the party, but also transcend the table, knowing information that the players and dungeon master don't know, even if it is not exactly “closed” information, since players can learn it by verbally asking. Importantly, this and other promotions, such as the giveaway each episode, which rewards members of the audience materially

for tuning in live, are still related to the hobby being presented on stream. *D&D Beyond* is an app explicitly for *D&D* players, other advertisements on the show are for *D&D*-related products, and the giveaways are often for supplemental *D&D* items that facilitate play, such as dice or dice trays. As the show reaches for sponsorships outside of the hobby's environment, it creates a disconnect between the cast and the audience, especially when these sponsorships are not explicitly *D&D* related. *Critical Role* broadcasts are thoroughly remediated affairs, attempting to balance the intimacy of the *D&D* table, through liveness and fan interactivity, with the burgeoning needs of a sponsored live stream looking to gain capital through hypermediation.

Critical Role as Affective Media

The previous discussion of how *Critical Role* remediates the *D&D* table to create a mediatized product only captures part of the show's allure to audiences. The series did not reach significant success simply because it remediates *D&D*, there are many shows that do this, but because as a piece of entertainment it generates affective responses. Rather than *just* a game night the audience is invited to be a part of, *Critical Role* is a *heightened* experience of *D&D*, offering a compelling emotional environment that engages fans on a narrative level far greater than the typical table, whether broadcast or private. Case in point, in the *D&D* community there is a phenomenon known as the “Mercer effect,” which refers to the way that *Critical Role* sets up high expectations for fans regarding the emotional involvement a game of *D&D* entails, only to be disappointed when a home game does not reach such heights. Mercer himself has addressed the effect on social media:

we are a table of professional actors and I have been DMing for well over 20 years. We have spent our lives training in particular skills that allow us to get as immersed in the characters as we enjoy doing. Anyone can jump in as deeply, should they wish to, but EXPECTING that immediate level of comfort and interest is unfair and absurd.

The skills and training of the cast results in an experience that is affective in a way unlike the traditional *D&D* table. In this section, I will closely read a few episodes from the show to understand how they generate affective responses from fans.

“Mood” is a good starting point for our discussion of affect in *Critical Role*. Flatley takes “mood” to refer to a kind of affective atmosphere... in which intentions are formed, projects pursued, and particular affects can attach to particular objects...

our mood creates the world in which we exist at any given moment” (19). Mood, or *Stimmung*, is of particular importance for a *D&D* show because the world of the narrative is entirely imagined. As such, affects “create the world” for the audience that otherwise wouldn't exist. Mood in this sense is not a psychological phenomenon, but rather, as Flatley puts it, “Moods are not in us; we are in them; they go through us... They 'assail us.' And in this sense mood is also total, or totalizing. Moods do not shed light on some thing in particular, but on a whole environment” (22). A broadcast of *Critical Role* does not attempt to create an immediate world in the vein of photo-realism, but it is immediate in an emotional sense, asking the audience to empathize with the players and their characters to create a sense of “realness.” These broadcasts go to great lengths to set the mood of the moment: music is curated to generate fear, sadness, or excitement; Mercer describes environments and the action less in specific details and more in the affect he wishes to impart; the cast adjust their posture for different moods. For instance, during a tense moment, everyone will likely be paying close attention, doing as little as possible to distract from the action of the scene, but in casual moments the group will crack jokes, giggle, eat, drink, or have side chats. Bodily, it is not unusual for players to tear up, whether from laughing or sadness, get visibly angry, or physically jump in excitement during the stream. These emotions create the core of the audience's relationship with the show and these moods help create the feeling of “liveness.” As Flatley points out: “*Stimmung* is a collective, public phenomenon, something inevitably shared. Moods constitute the 'way in which we are together'” (22) [emphasis in original]. Thus, in sharing in the mood with the participants at the table, the audience better relates to the action at the table and connects with the narrative. The show is live for them because they feel as though they are living through the action with the cast, but also because they are sharing in this mood with the Twitch chat and the broader community of “critters.”

It is worth noting that these streams are quite long. TL Taylor describes multihour broadcasts in *Watch Me Play* as “sometimes exactly *not* 'digestible' but instead composed of long stretches of affective, engaged performance” (255) [emphasis in original]. This lack of digestibility certainly transfers to the *Critical Role* broadcast. While there is typically a break in the broadcast, episodes can last up to five hours, demanding an engaged audience if watching live, or an attentive audience if watching after the fact. These long periods of time the audience spends with the show help cultivate moods; which are able to transition slowly rather than abruptly and crescendo over time. An example of these affective moments occurs

in the episode “Divergent Paths.” A few episodes prior the group functionally adopted an orphan child named Kiri, whose parents likely died on the dangerous road they themselves were traveling down. Of course, the life of these adventurers, filled with travel and violence, is no place for a child, but the group had no choice but to take them in as they progressed to a nearby city. Over the few episodes of spending time with Kiri, a playful mood was struck between the cast and the child, a crow-like creature who would mimic them verbally, creating inside jokes for the cast and audience. Growing close to the child, Jester, played by Laura Bailey, gave Kiri a small music box as a present. Before the group left the city, they helped a family reunite and decided it would be best to leave Kiri with this family. As they leave they tell Kiri she will not travel with them any longer but will be staying with the family. Mercer describes her as “conflicted and confused, but you can see a bit of understanding wash over.” Kiri then pulls out the music box and hugs various members of the party. Subtly, the live, on-stream, music shifts from its standard affair to a cute and simple music box melody, which immediately sets the mood as somber. Within moments two cast members start crying. Marisha Ray tries to stay in character as they say goodbye to the family, but she struggles to maintain composure in the sentimental mood of the goodbye. This affective moment would not be possible without the many hours of prolonged and engaged “indigestible” time that the audience and characters had spent cultivating a relationship with Kiri, reflecting the importance of mood on the most powerfully affective moments the show has to offer.

Because *Critical Role* is a remediation of *D&D*, there is also the possibility of character death. While in traditional theater death is a scripted affair, *D&D* is a game with stochastic characteristics and players cannot prepare for the deaths of the characters they have spent many hours creating and role-playing as. Thus, however infrequent, character deaths do occur in *Critical Role* and are some of the most poignant affective moments the series has to offer. The strain of such a moment can be found in the episode “Found & Lost,” in which Jaffe's character Mollymauk dies. To set the scene, slavers kidnapped a few members of the party in a previous episode and the remaining members set an ambush to save their friends, but as the ambush begins it becomes clear that the party is outmatched. As the fight continues, Mollymauk finds himself in one on one combat with Lorenzo, who is to become the main villain for the next narrative arc. Lorenzo manages to best Mollymauk, and then “makes an example” of him, stabbing him through the chest with his glaive, a merciless decision to hurt an already unconscious character.

Mercer asks Jaffe, “what do you want to be your last words,” with a pained expression on his face, and the entire group reacts with shock. After giving his answer, for the next few minutes Jaffe sits back in his chair, unsure what to do, the combat continues while the rest of the group looks at each other worriedly. Eventually, the pressure is too much and Jaffe leaves the table. After the combat resolves it is obvious that the moment took an emotional toll on the cast: Mercer consoles a guest star who blames herself for what happened, saying “that's the game” and that it was a “terrible convergence of events.” Riegal bluntly says “that's *D&D*.” But in an emotionally real way, these players are dealing with grief, and the tenseness of it is easily felt by the audience as they respond affectively to the emotions of the cast. Some fans of the show were upset to see a favorite character die and there was enough backlash that Mercer felt the need to respond to it on Twitter, writing that it's “the nature of the game, not all ends are written. If you found this one, singular moment so strong to somehow break your trust in me, then... I am sorry. Genuinely.” Mercer empathizes with the audience and acknowledges that the show generates real emotions, asking, “When the stages of grief have washed over, I hope you still wish to join us.” This moment, and the grief felt by fans after it, helps us understand the highly affective environment fostered in the *Critical Role* broadcast as something that *feels real* for the audience. This is akin to television, in which the audience spends a lot of time with characters and can experience grief when those characters move on or the show is canceled. But it is also a byproduct of the engaged and “indigestible” nature of a live stream. Because these tense moments are filmed and broadcast live, their shocking nature reaffirms the “liveness” of the format and the unscripted qualities of the broadcast that help maintain a sense of contingency for the narrative of the show.

A few episodes after “Found & Lost,” the group faced Lorenzo again in “The Stalking Nightmare.” Interestingly for our purposes, this episode was filmed in front of a live audience, a unique fold in the *Critical Role* formula where they play the game in front of a packed theater. In these streams, the affective nature of the show is constantly reaffirmed by the audience's cheers, gasps, and laughter, acting as a literal laugh track on the action. One of the most iconic lines from the series is Mercer's “How do you want to do this?” question when a player gets an important kill on an enemy, allowing the player to help create the narrative of the moment. In this episode, O'Brien gets asked the question after dealing damage to Lorenzo, signifying that they have defeated him. While the entire broadcast the crowd has been loudly engaging with the cast with chants and cheers, they become

exceedingly audible and disruptive when O'Brien's wizard Caleb gets this kill. The camera cuts to the audience, who are almost all standing with their arms in the air cheering and clapping. The video feed of the actors becomes obscured by the audience's raised hands and the action of the moment is delayed until the audience calms down. This moment helps connect the perceived affective response of the studio episodes with the actual response of audiences. The elation of the live audience contextualizes the grief of Mollymauk's death and the kinds of emotional connections the audience has to the narrative.

Overall, these examples point to how the *Critical Role* creates a mood that facilitates moments of affective response in both cast members and the audience, whether they be elation, sadness, or desperation. While these kinds of affect can be found in other media, they don't exist in *Critical Role* because it is remediating theater or film, but because it is a contingent game with uncertain outcomes. Like a spectator sport, it is the uncertainty of the outcome of events that keeps the audience engaged with the narrative, in particular affective moods, which in turn the "liveness" of the stream that indicates that anything can happen in the shared imagined world of players and audience.

Critical Role as a Media Company

In its early days, *Critical Role* was a broadcast on "Geek & Sundry," a platform and YouTube channel which mostly programs unscripted shows based around "nerdy" hobbies and intellectual properties like *D&D*. But in early 2019 the show split with their production company to form one of their own, "Critical Role Productions LLC." Since forming their own company there has been a significant uptick in spin-off productions. These productions often aim to capitalize on the wide audience of *Critical Role*, its affective nature, and the connection the audience has to the main cast. *Talks Machina* is an aftershow in which a few cast members discuss that week's episode, while *Critical Recap*, as the name implies, offers quick summaries to keep fans in the know as to the events of the series. The former of these functions more within the mood set by *Critical Role*, since it maintains the personal touch of the cast and relies on their position as players and actors to generate interest. *Critical Recap*, on the other hand, is a kind of remediation itself on *Critical Role*, since it retells the events of the episode in a story-like and direct manner. Importantly though, the affective labor that the cast does is lost in these recaps, since it is hosted by a production coordinator and not a member of the cast. While

this functions like “last time on...” promos before television series, because of the “indigestible” nature of live streams it simply recaps narrative points without successfully relaying the mood or emotional resonance of an episode. While it may catch the viewer up on narrative details, like the aforementioned promo, it does a poor job of communicating the liveness of the media in question. Both of these *Critical Role* paratexts represent some of the most straightforward pathways to expansion for the production company, since they focus on the flagship program, but other shows attempt to remediate the affective nature of the show without being related to *D&D* at all.

One such show is *Between the Sheets*, an edited talk show between Brian W. Foster, an author and host of *Talks Machina*, and the cast members. Typically, Foster sits down one on one with a cast member and they discuss their life, what lead them to become an actor, and their experiences on *Critical Role*. Specific details about the narrative are left at the door while the show tries to create an intimate atmosphere between host and guest. They usually sit down at a bar and make a mixed drink while the guest tells stories from their life. While no *D&D* is present, the mood set by the show carries over to these interviews: the one-on-one premise helps create an atmosphere of engaged, affective performance. These interviews represent one way in which the affective nature of *Critical Role* carries over into related media and specifically points to intimacy, whether it is between host and guest or audience and cast, as something key to the success of the show, meant to be maintained even when they are not playing *D&D*.

This intimacy between cast and audience was almost immediately mobilized when the cast became their own production company. In the spring of 2019, just a month after they broke ties with Geek & Sundry, the company announced their first Kickstarter campaign to create an animated series based on the first campaign with the entire cast reprising their roles as voice actors instead of players on a stage. While this animation would be interesting as a remediation of the show, already a remediation of a game night, it is still in development at the time of this writing. Still, the circumstances of its funding, like the live crowd in “The Stalking Nightmare,” give us a tangible understanding of the value of *Critical Role* to its audience. The initial goal of the Kickstarter was to raise \$750,000 to produce an animated special, but this amount was raised in merely 40 minutes after the Kickstarter going live, and the one-month campaign ultimately took in over \$11 million dollars. This exceptionally fast and overwhelming support from fans of the show suggests how effective the emotional mood of the show is at captivating its

audience. As with all Kickstarters, the cast implemented many “stretch goals,” which were special prizes for backers if particular monetary goals were met. These stretch goals pointedly play off of the affective nature of the show. For instance, the 10 million dollar stretch goal was for a live stream of Willingham going on a “spooky journey through a haunted house.” The update notes, “If you know Travis, you know that he's not fond of scary things—in fact, you might say that he's vehemently opposed to all things frightening.” This stretch goal plays up the affective nature of the show, presenting Willingham as someone the audience “knows,” and the reward itself, a live stream of Willingham's affective response to a haunted house, is another piece of entertainment linked to the mood created by the show. As such, it is not just that *Critical Role* generates a particularly affective atmosphere, but they know they do and explicitly use it to raise capital and engage with their audience.

Still, the cast of *Critical Role* doesn't always understand this atmosphere, what it means to their audience, and what their audience expects from them. A misalignment of these expectations came in late 2019 when the cast replaced their normal Thursday night broadcast of *Critical Role* with a sponsored live stream of a Wendy's parody of *D&D* called *Feast of Legends*. Almost immediately this sponsored stream received a vitriolic reaction from many fans of the show. These fans were complained about how Wendy's was not part of the “Fair Food Program,” an initiative that “ensures humane wages and working conditions for the workers who pick fruits and vegetables on participating farms.” While the show has embraced left-wing politics and views, in particular LGBTQ+ issues, it seems unlikely that it was just Wendy's being an “evil corporation” that frustrated fans. After all, streams are on Twitch, a subsidiary of Amazon, whose corporate policies and unwillingness to treat employees well are continually controversial, and episodes are archived on YouTube, owned by Google. Instead, the affective nature of the show, as evidenced by the Kickstarter, has fostered a sense of ownership among fans. If they feel, as Flatley puts it, that they are in the “materiality” of the show, or that they are sitting down each week at a friend's game night, it makes sense that audience members might feel disconnected when the content of the weekly show is corporatized and sponsored by a commercial entity: suddenly the show doesn't feel like it is “theirs” anymore.

The backlash to this episode was intense enough to spark a reaction from the cast. Within 24 hours of the stream Mercer posted an apology on Twitter:

Striking into the unknown of independent business is a delicate, scary

thing... What we have done with CR, and are striving to keep doing, is an exercise in vulnerability in a sometimes volatile space... In this vulnerable space, we make our decisions out in the open, sometimes stumbling. Hard lessons can and will be learned from... What we have always done and will continue to do is listen and learn from you, the Critters, and make amends the best we can.

This apology points to the heart of the relationship between the cast and the audience. Mercer correctly identifies not that the fans are angry about a *Wendy's* sponsorship, but that as a piece of affective entertainment they have created a kind of social contract with their fans that confers an “ownership” onto them. Mercer's continued insistence that they have created a “vulnerable space” suggests how important the collective mood of the show is to maintain. His appeal that they will learn from their audience directly places them as open participants in the affective atmosphere of *Critical Role*. The official Twitter account of the show also tweeted an apology and donated all the profits from the sponsorship to Farmwork Justice, an organization that fights for the rights of farm workers, clearly a backpedal trying to respond to the criticism of the sponsorship. Since airing the *Feast of Legends* stream, the company has completely distanced themselves from it: they have deleted all tweets promoting the event and have not uploaded the episode to YouTube.

This moment strikes at the nature of affective entertainment in the 21st Century on platforms like Twitch. Streamers, even ones with large audiences and able to raise such significant sums of money, are still precarious laborers in a gig economy. TL Taylor writes of this in *Watch Me Play*, “many ways in which game live streamers precariously navigate between self-determination, creative expression, and meaningful interaction and structures always at work to capture as well as regulate their endeavors” (259). In this case, the cast of *Critical Role* must balance its self-determination as a new company and creative avenue for its artists with the demands of an engaged modern audience who, in part due to their affective ownership of the show, “regulate” its content through public feedback and outrage. While there has always been a relationship between popular art and audiences, the success of *Critical Role* points to both the possibilities and troubles that come with making such a relationship explicitly intimate, showcasing the vulnerability of the artist and using it as a vehicle for profit and recognition. There is a constant push and pull, then, between the capitalistic tendencies of *Critical Role* as a corporation and its situated ethos as an affective provider of a particular mood. The conflict

between capital and ethos suggests that in 21st Century entertainment there is a high price tag for authenticity and intimacy; it can bring about potential viewership and revenue, but it limits a platform by creating particular expectations for an audience, which, if not met, can result in a schism between fans and creators. The cast of *Critical Role* walk this fine line and have still not fully managed to figure out what that means.

Works Cited

- Auslander, Philip. *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. Routledge, 1999.
- Bolter, Jay David and Richard Grusin. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. MIT Press, 2000.
- Critical Role. "Stephen Colber's D&D Adventure with Matthew Mercer (Red Nose Day 2019)." *YouTube*, 23 May 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=3658C2y4LIA.
- . "Divergent Paths | Critical Role | Campaign 2, Episode 25." *YouTube*, 2 July 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=CoomA-qeJMI.
- . "Found and Lost | Critical Role | Campaign 2, Episode 26." *YouTube*, 16 July 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZVqPja6Alg.
- . "The Stalking Nightmare | Critical Role | Campaign 2, Episode 29." *YouTube*, 6 Aug. 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3vV7ZdE_w8.
- . "Critical Role: The Legend of Vox Machina Animated Special." *Kickstarter*, 13 Sept. 2021, www.kickstarter.com/projects/criticalrole/critical-role-the-legend-of-vox-machina-animated-s.
- . "We've donated our profits..." *Twitter*, 4 Oct. 2019, <https://twitter.com/CriticalRole/status/1180219441247703040>.
- Evanier, Mark. *Dungeons & Dragons*. CBS, 1983-5.
- Fair Food Program. "Homepage." 2019, www.fairfoodprogram.org.
- Flatley, Jonathon. *Affective Mapping*. Harvard UP, 2008.
- Mercer, Matthew. /u/MatthewMercer. "How do I beat the Matt Mercer effect?" *Reddit*, 24 Dec. 2018. www.reddit.com/r/DMAcademy/comments/a999sd/how_do_i_beat_the_matt_mercer_effect.
- . "I appreciate the support..." *Twitter*, 18 July 2018, twitter.com/matthewmercerc/status/1019590229206843397.
- . "<3"... *Twitter*, 4 Oct. 2019,

twitter.com/matthewmercerc/status/1180222723600945153.

Stuhl, Andy Kelleher. "Reactions to analog fetishism in sound-recording cultures."

The Velvet Light Trap, vol. 74, no. 1, 2014, 42-53.

Taylor, TL. *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming*. Princeton UP, 2018.

The Video Video Game: On Watching Let's Plays

MELANIE OBERG

“[T]he players are not the only people engaged with the game...”
– Gifford Cheung and Jeff Huang

A Let's Play (LP) is footage of a video game as a person (or persons) play their way through it. Unlike streaming, these videos are an address to an absent viewer as the player talks to a camera prior to uploading their video. The popularity (and what might now be a decline) of LPs is nothing short of a cultural phenomenon, with millions of viewers still watching over a thousand LPs daily. Over the past ten years, LPs have grown from simply sharing gameplay with commentary, to full cinematic game walkthroughs, live reactions, and channel branding specific to the player. As the term “Let's Play” suggests, the viewer is invited to participate and spectate as their “host” or Let's Player (LPer) navigates their way through a video game. It is this invitation and address that have likened LPs to watching a friend play (T. Taylor 251).

Watching a recording of someone else playing a game challenges many assumptions about games and play. Most critics would argue that merely watching someone play a game frustrates the fundamental purpose of games, namely, their interactive and responsive mechanics-to-user input (Salen and Zimmerman 80). Another critique of LPs is their possible exploitation of game companies. Viewers can simply watch a video of a game online instead of purchasing the game themselves (Carey). This frustrates the commercialization of games when consumers can simply bypass acquisition and explore the game through someone else. The last critique leveled at LPs is that they are simply the product of a burgeoning, online entertainment industry that will do anything to get views and go viral. The “authenticity” and “sincerity” of this video genre has thus met with severe criticism (Nguyen; Ellis). The creative and cultural aspects of LPs are

MELANIE OBERG is a PhD Student and instructor in the department of English and Film at the University of Alberta. Her research focuses on video game design and narrative; particularly, what video games can “tell” the player without the use of language. She received her MA from the University of Victoria with a focus on Let's Play Videos, fan culture and the spectacle of gameplay. She is a recipient of The Queen Elizabeth II Graduate Scholarship and a two-time recipient of the Academic Graduate Excellence Scholarship. She can be reached at moberg@ualberta.ca.

Popular Culture Studies Journal
Volume 9, Issue 2, ©2021

frequently dismissed as well as the genuine work that players invest into making their videos.

With these critiques in mind, this essay is interested in outlining and celebrating this style of gameplay as accessible and inclusive to viewers who might not otherwise play the game themselves- whether that is from financial restraints, ability, or the content of certain games. I will ask what draws people to watch LPs and what keeps viewers returning again and again. To do this, I will compare two sets of LPs, set ten years apart, on the games *Amnesia the Dark Descent* 2010 and *Amnesia Rebirth* 2020 on YouTube. I will weigh these two play-throughs, looking first at what made the original game in 2010 so pivotal and move into how the format, platform and players have changed since. I chose these games and their LPs as a “fixed point” to mark how the online culture has changed around channels and viewers, how Twitch has influenced video sharing on YouTube, and how a video genre that has been dismissed as “reactionary” has endured over a decade. Finally, I want to argue that these videos, which are often criticized for being fake and performative, are simply exaggerations of who players are. They are selling you the affect that games are always fun at the cost of their own time, privacy, and enjoyment.

Definitions and Context

Ivan Taylor defines a LP as “a general term used to refer to a fan-generated content of a video game playthrough” (248). Josef Nguyen describes it as a “fan practice” that involves a performative style of commentary” (1.3). I would like to further nuance that a LP is a pre-recorded video that can be edited or manipulated before it is uploaded to a video-sharing site. Unlike live streaming game footage, a LP is an enclosed performance space. The LPer is essentially “cut-off” from interacting with their audience until the video is uploaded, unlike many live streams, which feature chat and immediate response to comments from viewers. I will talk more about streaming but for now, let me briefly mention that there is a noticeable decline in the number of LPs due to streaming sites like Twitch as well as YouTube’s tightening copyright restrictions.

Ivan Taylor traces the origins of LPs to static “screenshots uploaded to the Something Awful message forum” (248). These screenshots show scenes of gameplay with reactionary comments from the uploader. They were usually intended to highlight play aspects of the game, give tips or pointers, show Easter

eggs, or share funny moments or glitches. What began with screenshots, turned into full video and audio playthroughs, intended to highlight tips and tricks to assist other players. Earlier LPs had text layered over the game, while later editions and updates in video processing software allowed players to ad-lib commentary as they were playing. Over time, and as new games were released each year, the content of LPs also changed. LPers found niche audiences with humorous and/or entertaining commentary on games that they had not played before --and, as I hope to show with my analysis on *Amnesia*, LPs became marketed as sites of discovery and “authentic” reactions.

Bram de Rijk also observes, “[w]hat sets LPs apart from earlier phenomena such as speed runs and super play videos is that they are not necessarily focused on the gaming prowess of the LPer...Their narrative content can vary from the humorous to the educational, and the reasons for the audience to watch them differ greatly” (4). Unlike speedruns of games, where the player is an expert, most LPers arrive at games as newcomers and often fail tasks or get stuck. They repeat sections or backtrack. LPs are less about proficiency and more about exploration – inviting the viewer along as they encounter a new game together. Today, the most common style of LP is a double-window video showing the gameplay with the player’s face superimposed.

We can witness a similarly significant shift in the LPs from *The Dark Descent (TDD)* to *Rebirth*. The ten years difference between these two games makes even the similar game design and gameplay vastly different spaces for the LPs created with them. In video and recording technology alone there are remarkable gaps. Eight out of the ten LPs I watched on *TDD* 2010 do not have face cameras (the exceptions were Yamimash and Kuplinov). Interestingly, Jacksepticeye adopted a face camera in his third episode and has continued to use one ever since (“Water Asshole”). In the ten LPs of *Rebirth* that I watched, all but two of the LPers had facecams (IDP and theRadBrad opted for voice-overs). I should stress that the adoption of the ‘facecam’ is not a natural progression: LPers like Cryaotic and theRadBrad have created content for years without recording their faces. Yet it is interesting to map out how longer running LPers like Markiplier and PewDiePie have changed so rapidly in such a short time – from simple voice-overs to studio-like recording setups with hired, professional editors, longer videos (more advertising revenue), and channel branding such as banners, tag-phrases, and merchandise links.

Most of the LPs on *TDD* and all the LPs on *Rebirth* were first-time playthroughs (aside from Jacksepticeye and Tommyboypsp who claim to have played *TDD* before). While not experts at the game, each LPer brought thoughtful, humorous, and sometimes deeply personal commentary to the gameplay. The commentary or “riffing” as Nguyen describes it, keeps the audience involved and entertained (3.7). For instance, *GabSmolders*, a Dutch player who records in English, surprised herself and viewers when she understood the Afrikaans in *Rebirth* (“I UNDERSTAND HIM- Amnesia: Rebirth [3]).

In addition to these definitions, I would also like to argue that what really sets LPs apart from all other gameplay videos (streaming included) is the second-hand relationship between viewers and LPers, and the immediate and performative relationship between LPers and games. A LP features a person playing a game. Yet, prior to the LP’s circulation online, the LPer not only “acts out” the game, but also responds to and performs for an audience who is technically and physically not there. LPers must anticipate viewer critique or answer questions that might be asked. The LPer not only questions the game, but they also must anticipate and critique their own playing styles. For example, PewDiePie at the beginning of his twelfth episode on *TDD* mentions that he has been reviewing some of his older footage: “I do apologize that I...I realize I was so into it. I didn’t really say much and I, I don’t know maybe it was still entertaining for you to watch... either way. I’m gonna try to be more active this time and less scared. I don’t even know if that is possible.” Similarly, ChristopherOdd in Part 18 on *TDD* [19:10] “I really enjoyed the puzzles. Some of them were super complex though, like, in that prison area. Maybe it was just me...I got stuck. You guys were probably pissed watching it.” As Peter Dalsgaard and Lone Koefoed Hansen define it, the LPer can be viewed “as a simultaneous operator, performer and spectator” (15). This play-space is also unique from live-streaming, as again, the chat feedback is not present. The viewers interact with the LPer *after* the video is posted. The LPer must address an imaginary audience. This address to the camera-as-audience and pre-recorded nature is where most of the critique of LPs comes in: claims that this video genre is simply a “performance” or “act.” However, as I hope to show below, this performance is an act of labour that players undertake at the expense of their own enjoyment.

The play of a game is a point of translation that LPers must react to in real time, make it entertaining, play well, and make sure the stakes and story of the game are clear to the viewer, such as noticing how splashes in the water suggest a monster is near (ManFeelings). Eskelinen similarly argues that “in games we have to interpret

in order to be able to configure” (33). For LPers, this becomes an exercise par excellence, one that depends on their close attention to the game as well as “switching” to address the viewer. Watching someone else play a game reveals how well they can orient themselves between several borders. As Steven Jones asserts: “[s]uccessful gamers... have to play comfortably at the ‘threshold’ of game and world (np). The LPers that I watched vacillated between play and “reality,” navigating the fringe between the game world and the video they were creating.

Bram de Rijk classifies LPers into four separate categories: Hobbyist (posts videos part-time), (semi)professional (actively try to make LPing a career and invest in “branding” their channel), YouTube celebrities (famous or recognized for things other than LPs, but still post gameplay videos), and game media hosts (plays games to post reviews). The LPs of *TDD* and *Rebirth* mostly fall under the category of (semi)professional players who are actively making videos for their careers. The LPs that I watched included introductions that were specific to the LPer and their channel. Markiplier, when he uploaded his playthrough on *TDD* in 2012, starts his videos with either “Hello YouTube” or “Hello Everybody”, which he later finesses to always be “Hello Everybody, my name is Markiplier...” in 2020. In 2014 Kuplinov starts his video on *TDD* with a disclaimer and an age recommendation – the exact same one he uploads in 2020 for *Rebirth* in an interesting bid for nostalgia.

LPs have become a full-time job for some people: an occupation that is intensely lucrative if played for the “right” games, promoting certain products and/or content, chasing trends with the viewers, and creating channel-specific merchandise. Does it mean that it is all an act – a cash-grabbing, capitalist bid for money at the transaction of time, sympathy, empathy, and laughs? Are these players promoting a false sense of intimacy with their viewers to simply promote their brand? Certainly. It would be incorrect to say otherwise. Some channels are very conscious of this, blurring the line deliberately between their public and private lives to create more rapport between themselves and their viewers. As Nguyen writes, “Let’s Plays emphasize the constructed performance of live, spontaneous and authentic experiences...showcasing a range of feelings and responses by video game players performatively mak[ing] meaning of game play” (3.7).

Indeed, there are dangers of being too “enamored” with the production and performance of gameplay and the LPers themselves. Stuart Moulthrop points out the dangers of media transparency, or when we do not recognize that we are getting something contrived and are convinced of its “reality” (57). Similarly, Lindsay Ellis states that YouTube’s platform, and the success of a certain cadre of its

contributors, is built upon manufacturing a “realness” – of [appearing to] strip away or pull back the curtain on the work that goes into producing, recording, editing, and uploading videos – but also too on the humans behind the screens. One of the draws of watching someone play the same games repeatedly lies *not* in the gameplay but in a sense of familiarity. Ellis also goes on to say that the “product that YouTubers, Twitch streamers, and other influencers sell, is almost exclusively affect: they sell to us, the aesthetics of emotion. They fabricate intimacy (whether they are “conscious of it or not”). Ellis speaks as a video creator herself when she notes: “a part of the platform of YouTube, what some would call ‘influencer culture’ is that it’s important for creators that their audience think they *know* you. And that your job depends on maintaining that sense of accessibility” (00:29:13, emphasis in original). Most viewers are content to watch their favorite LPer and could not be bothered to learn game mechanics, nor even acknowledge the developer of the game that is being played.

However, and at the risk of sounding like a fan, I want to offer a subtle reminder that these “influencers” are themselves human. They get burnt-out pretending for eight hours a day, every day to be having a “great time”; they hold conversations with millions of people (via a camera) and are extremely self-conscious about what they say or do that is recorded and published for millions to live “forever” on the internet. To be under so much scrutiny for things like not playing well, making the game look easy, enjoying the game too much, not liking the game, being too critical, missing something, skipping parts, not editing, playing “incorrectly,” muddling words, and so on would make any sane person eventually not love creating gameplay videos. Aside from merchandise, the major thing LPers “sell” to their audience is affect – an emotional respite that is performatively humorous, entertaining, engaging, critical, and/or thoughtful (Ellis). Essentially, they “sell” you the idea that playing games for eight-plus hours a day is always fun. Lindsay Ellis calls the maintenance of this affect “emotional labor” – citing this performative space as the reason for burnout: “not only [does] YouTube’s algorithm plac[e] priority on creators who upload regularly and homogeneously, but also on the emotional labor of only showing the side of yourself that your audience wants to buy” (28:06).

It is enough to say that these influencers (noting that not all LPers have this “status” level) are gaming the system between being accessible to their viewers and remaining above the hyper-scrutiny that they offer to the Web (as most recording happens at home, this also includes where they live, partners, pets, and children as

well, whether intentionally or otherwise). All this is to say that painting these videos as just a cash-grab performance would be disingenuous. The players get tired, they get frustrated and angry when they are stuck on puzzles, and in the case of *TDD*, they get scared. Even the very act of exaggerating the emotions for the camera can itself be exhausting.

I would like to argue that the “performative” space that a LPer creates is not a fake representation of who they are, but again more of an exaggeration, a critical awareness that they could have millions of viewers and have branded (or were branded) as having a distinct style. Let us take one channel for example: Markiplier, one of the largest gaming channels on YouTube, starts his LP on *TDD* in 2012 with subdued and snarky commentary – he mocks the voice recordings in the game and playfully claims to “be so smart and strong” (“Amnesia: The Dark Descent [Part 1]”). In 2020 he has polished his “riffing” to be much more speculative, less sporadic, and more open: “This is so cool to be back in *Amnesia* again.” Yet, in trademark fashion, he adds his own sound effects and claims to be (sarcastically) “just so strong of will” (“BABY, I’M BACK!”). He is still, mostly, the same person. Markiplier, in these videos, is being himself, even if it is to an exaggerated degree.

Another misconception of LPs is that the narration “is almost exclusively a reaction to events in the game [as] either explanations of choices or considerations, visceral reactions to events or simply general opinions on parts of the game” (de Rijk 10). While most of the topics discussed by the player are obviously mediated by the game, many LPs feature extra-diegetic elements, such as “personal anecdotes, snippets of songs, referential humor, jokes, and even reactions to events outside of the game” (T. Taylor 5). Instead of being an exclusive review of the game, most LPs are like listening to someone’s stream of consciousness. T.L Taylor similarly describes livestreaming as: “A lot of [players] sharing details that are beyond their immediate playing broadcast. It actually gets a little more mundane. You sort of peek into peoples practice time. You watch them fail. You can chat with them. You can see their play-space” (00:19:07). In the gameplay that I watched on both games, LPers rarely edited their interactions with the game and they shared their thoughts, comments, critiques, and reactions as they came to mind. For *TDD* and *Rebirth*, viewers were invited to watch LPers experience something for the first time, and thus witness an “immediate” reaction. Even though the videos were pre-recorded and uploaded to the internet, viewers are entertained by this immediacy as they discover the game at the same pace as the LPer. In fact, the immediacy of an LP may be defined through this mutual discovery.

The Dark Descent

Arguably, LPs on *Amnesia*, *TDD* jump-started the popularity of watching people play video games online. The groundbreaking and terrifying game design made it uniquely popular material for the creation and publication of LPs. The game did not allow the player to fight back against the monsters that continually stalked them – not a new mechanic in 2010 but definitely compounded by the meticulous atmosphere and claustrophobic setting. In addition, the core elements or themes of the game include torture, death, and despair. Up to the game’s release in 2010, most videos on games were walkthroughs: a recording of gameplay with the host playing their way through the game with constructive and/or critical commentary. With *TDD*, however, as people played the game for the first time, the terrified screams, nervous banter, and terror of the players proved to be more popular with viewers than tips and tricks. The LPs of *TDD* provided a vicarious, sadistic, and sometimes humorous pleasure for the viewer in watching someone else be scared. And, unlike speed-runs or walkthrough videos, the spectacle of authentic emotion felt real for viewers as the players encountered the game for the first time.

The popularity of these videos (viewership being among the millions) can be again explained by Ellis’ analysis of “authenticity” on YouTube. “There is a viewer fascination with what Marie-Laure Ryan calls: ‘higher cognitive emotions’: shame, excitement, sadness and embarrassment” quotes Ellis. “Part of the viral appeal [of certain videos]...is, in part, that the emotions are so extreme...that they may be read as sincere. And, in this new marketplace of YouTube, sincerity and authenticity are the valuable commodities” (Ellis 20:59). The appeal in these videos, the reason they became so popular and so widely shared, was the sincerity and authenticity of the emotional spectacle, or what Nguyen describes as “the construction of liveness” (5.1). Viewers were attracted to the “genuine” fear that the players portrayed. This is also perhaps why certain players adopted facecams for the first time during this playthrough (Jacksepticeye WATER ASSHOLE) to maximize the conveyance of emotions (“Water Asshole”). Interestingly, ChristopherOdd does the same thing with his playthrough of *Rebirth*- adopting a facecam which is not his usual play style. Some viewers left comments that indicated that they did not like this change as it ‘broke immersion’ but user c. hox writes that they liked when he turns to the camera to address the viewer: “It’s such

a small thing that not many streamers/content creators do and it really goes a long way in creating a connection with the viewer” (“What is True Horror?”).

In 2010, and in the following two years that videos were made on *TDD*, viewers could stop, replay, and react to the player’s reactions as they jumped, screamed, or cringed in fear. Even if it was exaggerated and played-up for views, the groundbreaking design of Frictional Games’ pilot project did indeed scare a lot of players. For example, Yamimash, while playing the infamous “water part” in *TDD* asks for a second to gather himself before he pulls a lever and runs from the room:

Yamimash: All right. Shall I pull the lever now?

Friend (in voiceover): Okay now pull the lever up, and then you wanna, like. I’m gonna jump to the, uh, the next box and then jump to the next one and then I’m just booking it out the door.

Yamimash: “Um...I don’t...give me a second” [Puts face in hands]. (8:10 “Water Part”)

Pewdiepie, less theatrically, takes a break in his fourth episode of *TDD* saying, “I, Okay. I need a break, seriously. I’m gonna end this and I’m gonna take a break but I’m...gonna end the episode. This is too much for me, sorry...When I saw that monster, I...I just wasn’t ready for it” (1:57 “Amnesia: Playthrough Part: 4”)

Although perhaps a contrived act, this game, specifically the water part, has haunted many players. Based on the number of comments left on *Rebirth*, you can see the lingering effects of the original game. For example, to introduce his video ChristopherOdd reads off a letter from Frictional Games: ““We decided to make a horror experience that felt really special. We wanted to... [t]ake [players] on a journey that stood out among all the other horror games released over the past decade.’ And to me [ChristopherOdd], if you think about *Amnesia* coming out about ten years ago, and what happened after that, these guys *really* started something pretty special” (“What is TRUE HORROR?”). And IGP states that *TDD* is “a classic. Maybe not by technical definition, but that game really paved the way for modern horror games, especially in the indie scene...*Amnesia* was one of those games, that it was horrifying to play, but what really set it apart from the rest, was the way that the story was told, the atmosphere that it created, and just the way that it sucks you in” (“We’ve Waited 10 Years for This”).

The viewers, at least, believe the sincerity of the player’s fear. PianoBroha commented, “I love watching Yami get so scared when he plays, it’s so entertaining” (“Water Part”), while Jin Hua Lu enthused, “[to] see young pewds sooo scared of shadows makes me laugh” (“Amnesia: Playthrough Part: 4”) This

generated authenticity is what viewers come to watch repeatedly. Viewers will even watch a game that they already know (having played it themselves or seen another LPer complete), just to watch a different LPer's reaction.

Another reason that LPs on *TDD* became so popular was that people were genuinely afraid of playing the game. The game was too scary for most people to play when it was first released, and many people, instead of playing it themselves, watched other people from a safe remove. *TDD* may have instigated this, but it remains true today: watching someone play through a screen alleviates some of the less accessible points of games, from content to gameplay. People will watch other people play, not just to voyeuristically enjoy the spectacle of emotions but because the game itself is scary, or hard to play. LPs make *all* games easier to participate in. They also allow us to watch consoles and/or hardware that we cannot purchase. For example, when *Half Life Alyx* was released in 2020, “over 100,000 people” watched it – bypassing purchasing a VR headset which can cost from 100 to 500 dollars (Olson). As Olson observed “Streams and Let's Plays [were] the first way many folks...experience[ed] Valve's latest” (np). LPs essentially level the playing field, allowing anyone with any ability to “play” along.

Rebirth: What is different?

Between 2010 to 2012, most of the LPs that I watched on *TDD* were done by white men. In 2020, the LPs on *Rebirth* have a much higher inclusion of female players. This is not to say that women, POC, and nonbinary players did not upload videos on *TDD* but rather that they were few and far between. For *Rebirth*, specifically, queer, and nonbinary players were difficult to find, but that does not mean there is little representation on YouTube.¹ I will say that watching female players made viewing *Rebirth* a different experience for me, as the game's main protagonist is pregnant throughout the game and at one point, goes into labor alone in the desert. As Gab Smolders observed, it brought a new layer of horror to the game: “[t]his is a horror game on different level now. It's like, all my womanhood fears are in this one shot...I'm so uncomfortable” ([00:22:06] “What's Best for Amari?”). Having a diversity of players to watch opens this genre to new viewership. People of all ages,

¹ See for example: Tin Plated and Press ‘A’ to Gay, Adam Koebel, Heather Alexandra, Tye, Ellaguro, kathleenmms, Tanya Depass, Rabbit Plays Games, Simply Undrea, DomSoExtra, Melina’ Arcade and Mr Kravin. See hornet.com/stories/youtube-gaymers and videogamesincolor.tumblr.com/letsplayers.

backgrounds and experiences are looking for kinship with players, and the range of players and play styles represented on YouTube and streaming platforms are slowly but steadily increasing.

One phenomenon I noticed was the comments in 2020 seem to be nicer and more personal, addressing the player directly or speculating on the narrative and/or gameplay rather than open, blatant critiques. For example, on theRadBrad's playthrough in 2011, JMel2012 wrote: "Awww, he's so much more enjoyable [here] when humble" ("Walkthrough – Part 1"). Compare this to comments made on his playthrough of *Rebirth* in 2020 where Avery Brewster wrote: "thanks for being there making such good content I can't wait to see what's in the future" and Sabrina BRUVV: "Thank you for being my childhood, Brad". I do not particularly know why this is and do not have the space here to do a thorough and comprehensive sweep comparing all comments on all the videos; however, in the most general sense, I can see that viewers tend to be more invested in supporting the player, especially if it is a community that has been built up over a decade.

The style and substance of the LPs made on *Rebirth* also really show how far this genre has come. The quality of videos uploaded (including graphics, framerate, audio mixing and recording) are all testament to the vast improvements in technology over the past ten years. The quality of these videos is also based on the "career investments" made by LPers as they moved into video production as a full-time job (better computers/consoles, microphones, professional editors, and so on). Additionally, the style of commentary has been professionalized. Compare Pewdiepie's apologies in *TDD* to his demands in *Rebirth*: "I'm sorry for not speaking much but I'm so fucking focused" ("Amnesia: Playthrough Part 5: NOPE" 2010); "That was the first part of *Amnesia*. If you want to support this series and want more episodes, go ahead and like, comment and subscribe and all that epicness" ("Amnesia Rebirth- It's been 10 years."). There are many more calls to action ("smash that like button, subscribe and leave a comment down below") as the algorithm pushes for community engagement as a standard of measuring advertising appropriateness.

You can also see Twitch's influence with, on average, longer videos (Markiplier, John Wolfe, Gab Smolders and Pewdiepie) with less editing. In fact, Runebee's video on *Rebirth* is a Twitch stream re-uploaded to YouTube. In her video, she talks to viewers who are interacting with her stream in the past. I would not consider this a LP as the "performance" and address to the camera is not present; instead, she reacts in real time to questions or comments that viewers have.

Uploading Twitch streams to YouTube seems to be a rising trend, arguably encouraged/compounded by the increasingly stringent copyright policy on YouTube², but also because of the way that Twitch allows viewers to interact with the players in real time (often behind a paywall or tier system). As Runebee highlights, the line between the two platforms has blurred.

One LPer, Demon Rebuilt, argues that LPs are actually dying on YouTube, citing that “this is just a symptom of a larger issue. These kinds of videos, this format of producing content, doesn’t really work anymore” ([00:03:00-00:03:15] “Let’s Play Videos are Dead on YouTube”). Many of the comments agree with him, stating that they would rather just interact in “real time” with the player and watch one-off videos. Far be it from me to predict the trajectory that LPs take in the future. For now, however, there appears to be a decline in LPs and/or a merge with streaming. Episodic videos seem to be declining in favor of longer, un-edited ones, and viewers are being “converted” to the immediacy of chat interactions and the lack of editing that streams offer.

Conclusion: Critical Play-Critical Views

The viewers of LPs are participating in play – in a literal sense, by reacting, commenting, and following the player – but also by engaging with games, responding critically to what each game offers and affords, the game story, and the apparent enjoyment of the player. It is a different interaction with and around games, one that subverts the “hands-on” experience of play. This does not delegitimize this interaction – but rather prioritizes narrative and aesthetics over gameplay and mechanics. Each viewer of *TDD* and *Rebirth* came to the LPs for

² Claims around “fair-use” abound, mainly at the behest of game developers who are alarmed by videos that showcase their entire game from start to finish. In February of 2013, Nintendo historically claimed that every single video made using their games was subject to copyright (I. Taylor 249). However, after LPers argued for fair-use in the alteration of original content, Nintendo rescinded the claim within the same year (249). Bram de Rijk notes that “millions of advertisement revenue [is] moving from traditional media outlets to professional LPers” (5). By playing the games, the LPer allows viewers into the “private sphere” of the game as text. Many people will watch a playthrough of a game before buying it, and the games that are popular on video sharing sites undoubtedly have higher impact on consumers. Game companies are beginning to play by YouTube’s rules and make it easier for LPs to be uploaded. Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux observe “[a]s players share more and more gameplay by trading demo files, posting videos, and livestreaming, videogames increasingly incorporate recording, hosting, sharing and even analytic services in a race to redirect the work of watching...back into economic circuits” (66).

different reasons – whether it was to distance themselves from the content of the game, to interact with/view the player, or simply because they could not afford and/or play the game themselves. Whatever the reason, they all “played” the platform of YouTube (by choosing who to watch, which videos to like, subscribing, or leaving a comment) and “played” the game (getting a better understanding of its mechanics, art style, and limitations through the explanations and commentary that the player provided). Similarly, Boluk and LeMieux write, “[f]rom Twitch to transmedia television, both watching people play and playing with the practice of watching are forms of ludic spectatorship. Whether sitting shoulder-to-shoulder in stadium seats or watching over someone’s shoulder at the local ‘barcraft’, spectatorship is an ergodic, gamic action in and of itself” (65). Viewers are playing with the practice of watching. I am suggesting here that you do not have to play a game to enjoy or be critical of it. On the topic of critical play, Mary Flanagan writes, “As new forms of play emerge, each element of a game may foster a different sense of critical thinking, reflection and dialogue” (2). The LP is simply a different form of play, (for the viewer and the player) – one that is predicated on inclusion, performativity, community, and discussion.

Posting LPs provides an advantageous starting position for everyone to interact with the game in new and inclusive ways. For a medium usually predicated on “going it alone” with only your own thoughts to guide you, LPs provide an interesting sounding board for the player, the game, and the rest of the community watching. Throughout my analysis of *TDD* and *Rebirth*, I continually saw insightful and thought-provoking observations in the comments. For example, DarkManifest on John Wolfe’s video wrote:

I really appreciate the inclusion of the third ending, it felt like the "perfect" ending for all it was the saddest. The Empress' reign was finally ended, her nightmare world built on the back of ongoing torment destroyed, and Tasi was redeemed for originally choosing her child over the welfare of so many others by choosing the greater good over her child when given another chance. Seems like the theme of the story is selfishness vs selflessness, with every character from the crew making choices for one or the other. I thought that was nicely done.

The viewers were just as invested in understanding the game as the player was. They offered tips, story speculations, encouragement, misplaced advice, as well as praise and critique on the player’s style. In *Rebirth* especially, there were multiple references to other horror games in addition to the more obvious comparisons to

the first game, drawing connections in the story and analyzing the repeat of gameplay and symbolism from older titles: “Soma is to me, [Frictional Games] magnum opus. *Rebirth* felt like a combination of all the previous Frictional Games and that includes the dated part. My favorite part of this game was the environment and the story telling” (Tanner Hill on Wolfe “ALL ENDINGS”) and Tonka Babić: “I love Tasi, and love idea of the story, but is not best game for sure. However, I think it is unfair to compare it to Dark Descend [sic] Amnesia too much because I feel it would be impossible to do follow up to that game and have as legendary impact unless you make a completely new one game.”

As Sherry Turkle suggests, I believe we can use the “stage” of games to develop a social criticism of what games are and how they are played (377). The removed spectator position is uniquely qualified to look at the way games are being played and at how the player interprets and acts on the choices the game affords. Similarly, Nguyen writes, “Understanding how players make sense of game playing through performing personalities...offers an important opportunity for understanding how players locally and individually negotiate, revise, and make meaning about playing video games” (1.2). As an audience that is outside of the gameplay, the spectators are in a privileged position of observation. They often catch things that the player misses because they are not physically or mentally tasked with responding to stimuli. While the player struggles to hide, solve a puzzle, or engage in dialogue with the game, the viewer is free to watch, listen, and remember. In this way, the viewer and player engage in a reciprocal conversation that is unique to LPs, delayed as it is through posting the video and waiting for its reception.

I would urge viewers of LPs to watch critically – to question the content that is being provided to them and by whom – but to also embrace LPs as alternative ways to engage with and interact with games, “at a distance.” LPs are accessible, free, and fun (even as a performance). They offer dialogue and community and are at a safe remove for games that challenge the ability and psyche of the player. They are perhaps on a decline on YouTube but will simply make way for people to enjoy spectating games in other avenues. As Boluk and LeMieux conclude, “[t]he act of play can no longer be reduced to the manipulation of a keyboard, the agency of a single player, or even the operations of the software or the output on the screen. Spectatorship is not a superfluous byproduct of gaming but part of a much broader media ecology of play in which the production, performance, and perception of videogames are conflated” (60).

Works Cited

- Boluk, Stephanie and Patrick LeMieux. *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames*, U Minnesota P, 2017.
- Carey, Gabe. "Why pay to play when you can watch for free? How YouTube burns indie developers." *Digital Trends*, 28 Mar. 2016, www.digitaltrends.com/gaming/that-dragon-cancer-and-lets-play-dispute.
- Channel Awesome. "Where's the fair use? - Nostalgia Critic." *YouTube*, 16 Feb. 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zVqFAMOtwaI>.
- Cheung G., and J. Huang. 2011. "Starcraft from the stands: Understanding the game spectator." *Conference On Human Factors in Computing Systems – Proceedings* no. CHI 2011 - 29th Annual CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, Conference Proceedings and Extended Abstracts: 764.
- ChristopherOdd, "Mr Odd - Let's play *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* [Blind] – Part 1 –What Am I Doing to Myself?" *YouTube*, 23 Aug. 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=WaWz7xkRSEI.
- . "What is TRUE HORROR? – *Amnesia: Rebirth* Let's play - part 1." *YouTube*, 19 Oct. 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=polbLK2ou5E.
- Dalsgaard, Peter and Lone Koefoed Hansen. "Performing perception-staging aesthetics of interaction." *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2008, pp. 1-33.
- de Rijk Bram. *Watching the Game. How We May Understand Let's Play Videos*. Master's Thesis. Utrecht University, 2016 <https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/331065>.
- Donchev, Danny. "37 mind blowing YouTube fact, figures and statistics - 2021." *FortuneLord*. 7 Feb. 2021, <https://fortunelords.com/youtube-statistics/#:~:text=Facts%20and%20Numbers&text=The%20total%20number%20of%20people,on%20Youtube%20every%20single%20day.&text=In%20an%20average%20month%2C%208,49%20year%20olds%20watch%20YouTube>.
- Ellis, Lindsay. "Manufacturing authenticity (for fun and profit!)." *YouTube*. 11 Sept. 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=8FJEtCvb2Kw.
- Flanagan, Mary. *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*. MIT Press, 2013.
- Gab Smolders "What's best for Amari? All endings | *Amnesia Rebirth*." *YouTube*, 30 Oct. 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=DyW71Ua4Xi0.

- Hills, Matt. *Fan Cultures*. Routledge, 2002.
- Hollow. "Amnesia: Rebirth - part 1 - THIS IS FLAT OUT TERRIFYING." *YouTube*, 19 Oct. 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXvdSUny8f8.
- IGP. "We've waited 10 years for this...A true horror experience awaits us - Amnesia: Rebirth." *YouTube*, 19 Oct. 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=iGE74aq-5C8.
- Jacksepticeye, "Amnesia the Dark Descent - WHAT WAS THAT?- Gameplay walkthrough part 1." *YouTube*, 23 Apr. 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=p0uek5Z4MpM&t=88s&ab_channel=jacksepticeye.
- . "WATER ASSHOLE - Walkthrough part 3, Gameplay/commentary/facecam." *YouTube*, 23 Apr. 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uo_FmzN3_6Y.
- John Wolfe "The new Amnesia game is finally here! [Amnesia: Rebirth] [part 1]". *YouTube*, 20 Oct. 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=DeY1hVxUh8Y.
- Jones, Steven E. *The Meaning of Video Games: Gaming and Textual Studies*. Routledge, 2008.
- Klepek, Patrick, "Not Every Developer is Convinced Let's Plays are a Good Thing." *Kotaku*, 25 Mar. 2016, www.kotaku.com/not-every-developer-is-convinced-let-s-play-videos-are-1766985440.
- Kuplinov, "Amnesia: The Dark Descent #1." *YouTube*, 23 Dec. 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRaAaQX7a78.
- . "HOBAR AMHE3NR > Amnesia: Rebirth #1" *YouTube*, 19 Oct. 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwlNK3mE_s8.
- Man Feelings. "Amnesia The Dark Descent – Part 1 – COD LOL" *YouTube*, 7 Jan 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=JzFK9mHhWJ0.
- Markiplier. "Amnesia the Dark Descent | part 1| A NEW BEGINNING," *YouTube*, 26 May 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=uKjgu2nHbe8.
- . "BABY, I'M BACK! | Amnesia: Rebirth - part 1." *YouTube*, 23 Oct. 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rz5aLYMA_1I.
- Markku Eskelinen. "The gaming situation." *The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2001, www.gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen.
- Moulthrop, Stuart. "From work to play". *Electronic Book Review*, 20 May 2004, www.electronicbookreview.com/essay/from-work-to-play.
- Nguyenm, Josef. "Performing as video game players in let's plays." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 22, 2016, <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2016.0698>.

- Olson, Matthew. "The best *Half-Life: Alyx* streamers to watch if you can't play it yourself." *USGamer*, 24 Mar. 2020, www.usgamer.net/articles/the-best-half-life-alyx-streamers-to-watch-if-you-cant-play-it-yourself.
- PewDiePie, "Amnesia: playthrough: Part 2 - kill an old dude." *YouTube*, 28 Dec. 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFdoktVkKk>.
- Runebee "Amnesia: Rebirth - Full playthrough." *YouTube*, 21 Oct. 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FtKLGp0zXRU>.
- Salen, Katie and Eric Zimmerman. *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. MIT Press, 2004.
- Shadefyre "Let's play *Amnesia: Rebirth* Ep. 1 my name is Tasi." *YouTube*, 4 Nov. 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ky0_A_hifqw.
- Taylor Jr., Ivan O. "Video games, fair use and the internet: The plight of the let's play." *Journal of Law, Technology & Policy*, vol. 1, 2015, illinoisjltf.com/journal/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Taylor.pdf.
- Taylor, T.L. *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming*. Princeton UP, 2018.
- theRadBrad. "*Resident Evil 7* walkthrough gameplay part 1 – Mia (RE7)" *YouTube*, 23 Jan. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ryuTuRQD1F0.
- . "*Amnesia: The Dark Descent* – walkthrough – part 1 - scary let's play (gameplay/commentary) [PC]" *YouTube*, 19 Mar. 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iXkCx4NyvFI>.
- TobyGames, "Let's play *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* – part 1 – INTRO (Toby sucks at gaming)." *YouTube*, 11 Dec. 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDs8vDPLSRc>.
- "Top 100 gaming YouTubers." *SocialBook*. www.socialbook.io/youtube-channel-rank/top-100-gaming-youtubers.
- Tommyboypsp, "*Amnesia: The Dark Descent* [FULL]" *YouTube*, 28 Jul. 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10fkA73eSCw>.
- Turkle, Sherry. *Life on the Screen*. Simon and Schuster, 1995.
- Whitelaw, Ben. "Almost all YouTube views come from just 30% of films." *The Telegraph*. 20 Apr. 2011, www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/news/8464418/Almost-all-YouTube-views-come-from-just-30-of-films.html.
- Yamimash, "WATER PART! - *Amnesia The Dark Descent* walkthrough part 4 w/facecam & reactions." *YouTube*, 17 May 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=o54GMBIQfV8.

39daph vods. "39daph plays *Amnesia: Rebirth* - Part 1." *YouTube*, 21 Oct. 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PW1Zptr38AM>.

“No Gods, No Kings, Only Mon!”: *Twitch Plays Pokémon* as a Case Study in Folkloric Recreation

PETER CULLEN BRYAN

Folklore can be created in any space where humans interact, developing to explain natural phenomena or justify social mores. From the earliest days, video games have possessed their own folklore, ranging from rumors (*Polybius*), rules (Final Destination as the “best” *Smash Bros.* stage), or behaviors (the “Nuzlocke Challenge” in *Pokémon*) that serve to develop the culture and behaviors of gamers. The focus of this article is the fashion in which folklore and video games interact in the creation of a new experience, and further inform how learning takes place within a massive multiplayer environment, albeit one with only a single player character controlled by the audience, by utilizing *Twitch Plays Pokémon* as a case study. By better comprehending how the game was completed successfully, we can develop a keener understanding of how communal learning processes utilize folklore, and how video game learning occurs outside of the game itself.

On February 12, 2014, video streaming website Twitch played host to a crowdsourced effort to play through 1998’s *Pokémon Red*. Users could send commands through the chat room that would be reflected in the game (for instance, typing “right” would cause the in-game avatar to move right, just as it would on a normal control pad, albeit with a slight delay), as well as working out strategies through the chat. Boluk and Lemieux explain that “*Twitch Plays Pokémon* combines a single-player game and the real-time input of a hundred thousand spectators to produce a new type of crowd-sourced, massively collaborative videogame” (66). Within two days, thousands of players had joined in the game, and total views had reached 175,000; within a week, tens of thousands were involved. By the time the viewers reached the end of the game, 1,165,140 players had entered commands with some 9 million unique viewers watching the proceedings across 36 million views, totaling well over 1 billion

PETER CULLEN BRYAN is a Lecturer of English at Clemson University, where he teaches comics as literature and science fiction as futurism. He received his PhD in American Studies and Communication at the Pennsylvania State University in 2018. His areas of study include American Studies, Intercultural Communication, and 21st Century American culture, emphasizing comic art and fan communities. His first book, exploring the transcultural adaptations of Carl Barks’s Duck Comics, was published in May 2021. He can be reached at pcb144@psu.edu.

Popular Culture Studies Journal
Volume 9, Issue 2, ©2021

minutes watched (Chase). With no advertisement and no celebrity at the helm, the effort might have faded out within a few days, but instead, it grew over time: it took 391 hours, 45 minutes, and 30 seconds to complete the game in this crowdsourced fashion with total views reaching 17 million, despite numerous setbacks both in-game and out. One million players input 122 million commands in a collective effort to beat an old Gameboy game. Almost immediately after, the community started playing the sequel, building on the community and storytelling that had allowed them to complete the first game and proving successful in completing the more involved and difficult *Pokémon Crystal*.

This paper will approach *Twitch Plays Pokémon* from two frameworks: a folkloric approach examining the creation and spread of memes, and an adaptational lens that emphasizes the development of an ad hoc digital fan community that utilized those memes as a form of storytelling. This means that, while the original videos have been largely lost to time, the sequence of events has been retained, albeit in a repurposed and repackaged capacity. As such, *Twitch Plays Pokémon* provides a valuable case study in how myths develop, even when (in this case at least) they are built upon a well-established media property. To be clear, *Twitch Plays Pokémon* encompasses both the digital game on the Twitch service as well as the larger communal experience that spun out of it. Therefore, I use the term “adaptation” to describe *Twitch Plays Pokémon* because it reflects both a game played far outside of the developer’s parameters as well as a transmedia fan response that justified the events (particularly the setbacks) of the game within a folkloric canon. This nevertheless served a crucial function in organizing the effort that eventually beat the game and maintaining the morale of the thousands of players.

The imminent death of the *Pokémon* franchise has been predicted for decades. *Pokémon* was seemingly designed from its inception to be a massive hit. The original game, inspired by series creator Junichi Masada’s youthful collection of beetles, had already been a hit in Japan upon release and inspired the creation of an array of ancillary products. The franchise has proven by its very nature quite adaptable, both in the larger media landscape and in terms of how fans have used the property. *Twitch Plays Pokémon* is effectively an adaptation of the series, though the anarchic nature of the experience subverts certain elements of how video game adaptations traditionally work. While the term “adaptation” has often been understood to reflect transmedia works (play to film, for instance), Twitch broadly complicates this, effectively turning a given single-player video game

into audience-based experiences that are curated to some extent. *Twitch Plays Pokémon* changes the fundamental experience and control so significantly from the original *Pokémon Red* that it becomes an entirely new experience. Hugo Vandal-Sirois and Georges Bastin argue that “successful adaptations allow (or even force) the target readers to discover the text in a way that suits its aim, ensures an optimal reception experience...adaptations take place on the cultural or pragmatic levels at least as much as on the linguistic or textual level” (26). The creator exercised limited control over the experience beyond a few quality-of-life improvements, but the experience was nevertheless unique from any previous *Pokémon* game.

The authentic *Pokémon* experience is a straightforward turn-based roleplaying game, with an emphasis on collecting Pokémon for both strategic and completion purposes. The series has been a natural space for official adaptations (spawning a multimedia franchise of television series, films, card games, and myriad other spin-offs), but has a unique history of fan-led adaptations, ranging from self-imposed rules (solo Pokémon runs, the Nuzlocke Challenge) to full-conversion mods (*Pokémon Radical Red*, *Pokémon Uranium*). The franchise overall has a unique history in multiple media, proving well-suited to more formal adaptations. This has helped secure it within the nostalgic consciousness that created fertile ground for *Twitch Plays Pokémon*.

The arrival of the first games on American shores in 1998 coincided with a cartoon series, a card game, and a myriad of toys and tie-in products. The property was inescapable, a defining moment for the Millennial generation, and, like many fads, it soon faded into the background. David Buckingham and Julian Sefton-Green write “the computer game undoubtedly arrived first, but it seems that (as with other such phenomena) Pokémon was planned as a cross-media enterprise from a very early stage. Certainly, there were millions of children who might be counted as Pokémon ‘fans’ who never played the computer games and never will” (Buckingham and Sefton-Green 19). The property never quite disappeared entirely: new games introduced new generations of creatures, the cartoon series continued, and even the card game outlasted many of its contemporaries.

The *Pokémon* video games themselves were certainly key. Functionally, they were fairly simple turn-based roleplaying games (a genre that had grown popular in the 1980s, and remained quite dominant during the 1990s), utilizing a team of captured monsters (up to six, out of a total 150 distinct creatures) with a deep

system of strengths and weaknesses that functioned like Rock-Paper-Scissors dialed up to eleven. The release was divided across two cartridges (three in Japan) that each featured unique monsters that could be traded to other owners, or even put to the test against friends' teams. The games allow social interaction by their design, keeping it theoretically optional, but trading was necessary to acquire certain Pokémon, and player-vs.-player battling was a key aspect of its longevity (it combined nicely with the collecting/customization aspects of the games), as well as that of the identity of the franchise itself (Buckingham and Sefton-Green 23). These traits lend the Pokémon franchise a great deal of spreadability, a concept outlined by Henry Jenkins: "mass content is continually repositioned as it enters different niche communities...as material spreads, it gets remade: either literally, through various forms of sampling and remixing, or figuratively, via its insertion into ongoing conversations and across various platforms" (Jenkins, et. al 27). Jenkins frames his discussion within memes and blogs, but the larger apparatus of the Pokémon monolith extends considerably further. Fan works define the modern media franchise, be they fan fiction, YouTube responses, or more arcane efforts; Pokémon represents a specific case study where the fan creations have changed the narrative.

These relatively basic elements are the foundation of a full-fledged community. Paul Booth explains that "fans identify with the media object as part of that community's own self-identification and reproduce that fan community by applying the mores and socialization of fandom via other contexts...[fans] literally scribe the community into existence, and write that community into the extant media object" (129-30). The Pokémon fan community is complicated by the sheer variety of media that the franchise exists in, including multiple generations of games and decades of various animated series that are not necessarily adopted across all sections of the fandom. However, the core concept of collecting and battling with cute monsters remained common among the various threads of the franchise and stayed accessible to any fan. Booth argues that distinctions between producer and consumer are reductive in the examination of fan communities, positing that "consumption does not imply destruction" (132-3). Fan creation does not replace the original but functions as an extension of the original, being converted to information that can be shared and dispersed accordingly. The functionality of both fan communities and the Pokémon fandom specifically is more akin to a gift economy than a market economy, relying on social exchange over economic exchange (even in the original *Pokémon Red*, collecting all of the

Pokémon required trading with a friend with the counterpart cartridge *Pokémon Blue*). The digital sphere allows for the easier exchange of ideas, and the recreation of media texts that are more easily shared with fellow fans. The lack of economic gain is a key component of fan behavior, a function of avoiding copyright issues as much as it serves as a marker of the fan’s dedication (Jenkins, et. al, 55-6). *Twitch Plays Pokémon* relies on the original games being enough of a touchstone that at least some of the players are capable of navigating them; while it is conceivable that the Pokémon games could be successfully completed by purely random inputs given a sufficient amount of time, there was a methodology and focus inherent to the player base that kept progress relatively steady.

All video games have an active component in their consumption, *Pokémon* as a franchise complicates the narrative that it is merely a media text to be passively consumed. It functions as something more complex: David Buckingham and Julian Sefton-Green grapple with the question of what, exactly the property is, contending that is a cultural practice in the parlance of anthropology. They argue “Pokémon is something you *do*, not just something you read or watch or ‘consume.’ Yet while that ‘doing’ clearly requires active participation on the part of the ‘doers,’ the terms on which it is performed are predominantly dictated by forces or structures beyond their control” (Buckingham and Sefton-Green 12, emphasis in original). For some players, Pokémon transcends its digital bonds; it is a video game first, with all the freedom and restriction that entails, but the omnipresence of the franchise for a certain generation and the customization inherent to the franchise allowed for adaptability, particular in the development of interrelated fan communities. As per Booth, “the creation of fan communities and content all exist within this mash-up economy, as cult fans make use of them in order to promote social construction in a manner reminiscent of a gift economy” (130). *Pokémon* is unique in that it is not simply utilized as memes and fan fiction, the typical understanding of textual poaching as outlined here, but has been reconstituted as entirely new properties, ranging from audience-created Pokémon to entirely new games to detailed pen-and-paper roleplaying systems. Furthermore, the *Pokémon* fandom often plays the games with self-imposed challenges and other restrictions, creating variations within the gameplay that create something approaching a new experience.

Twitch Plays Pokémon represents an entirely new way of experiencing *Pokémon Red*, one that combines the basic functionality of Twitch (watching

other people play games) with a unique method of player control. Kevin M. Flanagan explains that “videogame adaptation presents a unique set of design and discursive challenges, since...adapters such as programmers, creative producers, and game designers must translate linear narratives or stable fictitious properties into quasi-ludic, player-controlled experiences” (442-3). This framework is especially apt here, as the idea of a player-controlled experience informs much of how *Twitch Plays Pokémon* unfolds, albeit with individual player choices impacting other player experiences, and thus informing the overall nature of the game. Flanagan outlines other key concerns: “as with other intermedial exchanges, the videogame adaptation process must pay particular attention to the affordances and constraints of different media. What is gained or lost in the movement of the rules, characters, and story from the outward realm of physical game world to the relative mystery of a digital space?” (443). *Pokémon Red* becomes a fundamentally different game experience when played on Twitch by the users, subverting both the original game as well as the nature of Twitch as a website: the audience is the player, performing for their own entertainment and in pursuit of their own goals. *Twitch Plays Pokémon* thus creates parallel adaptations: a multi-user online game and the expansive creative response occurring in other spaces (most notably Reddit, but on 4Chan, DeviantArt, Twitter, and elsewhere).

The complication is that the limited scholarly work around *Twitch Plays Pokémon* does not quite offer a clear definition of what it is; Jenny Saucerman and Dennis Ramirez frame the text within a quasi-religious context, intentionally mimicking Christian dogma, and Chris Milando positions this as an example of a new type of video game. I approach *Twitch Plays Pokémon* as an outgrowth of virtual identity and the folk traditions of the internet. The process that unfolds within this text is folkloric (creating a community through shared traditions and lore), in a matter that reflects how the process of socialization informs how video games are played more broadly.

Identity in the original Pokémon games was limited at best. For the first two generations, players could customize the name of the male protagonist only; later games allowed for a choice of genders, but still limited the capacity for players to create reflective avatars. Rather, the customization inherent in the games arose through the choice of the party of Pokémon: up to six monsters chosen from a list of hundreds, each possessing various strengths, weaknesses, and appearances. Players were left to fill in the gaps of personalities and histories of their baseball-

capped avatars, even the larger narratives of the games, aspects that were enhanced in the adaptation into *Twitch Plays Pokémon*. Booth notes “by creating personas of media characters, the fan infuses the character with new characteristics, and the fan/character amalgam becomes a mash-up of both the fictional identity of the fan” (130). The lack of personality for the player character was a selling point of Pokémon, as it allowed players to easily project themselves on a mute protagonist through their in-game choices. This proved advantageous for *Twitch Plays Pokémon*; here, the protagonist became a puppet for the community, subject to a chaotic hive mind rather than a single controller, with those same choices imbued with new meaning. The fact that countless players were able to come together, complete the game, and develop a complex narrative to explain the events that occurred during the run is unprecedented. Individual players were able to act as part of a sort of clumsy hive mind, moving through the game at a slow, if steady pace, overcoming setbacks both minor and major, and learning how to work together within a larger system (and how, in turn, to work against trolls and bots who sought to delay or outright derail progress).

The system effectively democratized and decentralized learning, akin to Guy Merchant’s discussion of folksonomy (category-tagging) and digital literacy, with folksy democratizing the creation and exchange of knowledge among certain communities (247). Merchant is primarily concerned with meaning-making, but the concept of generating knowledge collectively in digital spaces is applicable here. That approach reflects the subculture that developed around *Twitch Plays Pokémon*, with anything resembling leadership dispersed among the collective of players, with outcomes reliant on collective action. Simon Bronner explains that “folk practices can be artistic, such as the creative adaptation of a song or story, but what connects these practices to quotidian behaviors such as choosing a favorite seat and ritually arranging food on a plate is the implicative or phemic messages of activities as the outcomes of traditional knowledge” (16). This was not the same *Pokémon Red* that the players were familiar with, forcing them to rethink strategies and tactics, and even the very timing and order of their command inputs (due to the number of participants, there was a short delay in entered commands actually triggering), but still reflected ingrained behaviors. This creates superstitions around how the players act, reinforced by continued, socially enforced behaviors – pressing up and right to cross a cliff in the game, for instance (Yee 53). The Twitch participants developed a new literacy in learning to navigate this system, with the folkloric behavior a component of that success.

James Paul Gee's research into video game learning emphasizes constructions of identity in those digital spaces. Gee outlines the three identities in the Baudrillardian fashion that exist in the act of playing games as "virtual identity" (the player as the character they control), "real-world identity" (the player in and of themselves), and "projective identity" (the interface and interaction between the player and the character) (48-51). Each of these functions play a role in engaging the player, getting them to become invested in the game world, and view their in-game actions as an extension of themselves. This continuum of identities is useful both in terms of learning how to play the game and relating to the in-world events, with the result being that the player both identifies with their avatar and the choices they make within the game (Gee 53-4). Video games normally inspire players to identify with the characters they control, both to provide narrative thrust as well as emotional resonance, though that process is complicated here. Gee offers a nice summation of this system: "In my projective identity, I worry about what sort of 'person' I want her to be, what type of history I want her to have had by the time I'm done playing the game. I want this person and history to reflect my values, though I have to think reflexively and critically about them" (Gee 51). Constructions of identity in this fashion were a crucial part of the success of *Twitch Plays Pokémon*, with players becoming engaged on a less personal level than Gee outlines, with the players being dispersed and sharing control over a single avatar as "the Voices," the "projective identity" key aspect of how the game was played. Chris Milando points out that "*Twitch Plays Pokémon* is not a story about the community giving commands, nor can it be about the avatar's story, as most games are. Both entities are required and present within the narrative, and the causal link denotes that both act together." Moreover, *Twitch Plays Pokémon* inspired activity outside of the game itself, leaning heavily into the "real-world identity of players," and mutating accordingly. The lore became as much a part of the experience as the game itself, appearing as messages in chat, or even complex, distributed strategies (the "Start9" protests).

The focus here is on the first two generations (*Twitch Plays Pokémon Red* and *Twitch Plays Pokémon Crystal*), due to the direct connections in lore (the community framed the second game as a direct sequel to the first in terms of theme and narrative). The emphasis here is the development of folklore that grew to surround the events that occurred, often by accident, and the formation of a sort of religion out of the proceedings. The sheer influx of commands often meant that detrimental events could occur (though certain trolls were attempting to derail the

game), ranging from invalid commands in a battle to platforming setbacks in the overworld to the permanent deletion of valuable party members. The Reddit-based community constructed an elaborate system of explanations for why these things occurred, blaming (and praising) specific Pokémon and crafting a religion based around an innocuous near-useless Helix Fossil item. The effort reflects a folkloric adaptation of a preexisting media property, where the game itself is less important than the communal actions. Crawford and Rutter explain that “social performances can extend beyond face-to-face communication, as the internet has proved a useful medium for gamers to construct and share gaming solutions, additions, updates, and mods, as well as fictional stories or ‘fan art’ based on gaming narratives” (279). *Twitch Plays Pokémon* represents something entirely new: it is, in its essence, the base game *Pokémon Red*, just played in a unique fashion, a curious challenge that completely changed the gameplay.

Roy T. Cook’s “Canonicity and Normativity in Massive, Serialized, Collaborative Fiction” provides a useful framing for how the lore of the game develops. While he discusses collaborative fan fiction universes, the definition he puts forth applies to the process that plays out on Twitch: “massive serialized collaborative fictions are fictions that (i) have proper parts that ordered by nonarbitrary sequences, both in terms of production and reception, in terms of the diegetic ordering of the events portrayed within these fictions; (ii) are too large to be ‘absorbed’ as a unified whole; and (iii) are authored by more than one individual” (272). *Twitch Plays Pokémon* has proper parts in nonarbitrary sequences in the same fashion that the original games did: while there is some freedom, the overall path of the game is effectively set (there are various gates to progression that require completing Gyms or plot sequences before the game proceeds). The “largeness” of *Twitch Plays Pokémon* plays out within the experience itself: the game is played 24 hours a day, meaning it was not unusual for even a dedicated player to go to bed, only to wake up with a nettlesome challenge overcome, or perhaps progress undone. Cook explains “a fiction is *massive* if and only if it is impossible, extremely implausible, or unlikely that a single person can, or will, experience all parts of the fiction in a manner appropriate for the interpretation, evaluation, and so on of the fiction...the criteria for massivity are explicitly connected to our in-principle, or in-practice, inability to ‘master’ the fiction all at once – that is, on our inability to reflect on it in its entirety as a unified whole” (271). *Twitch Plays Pokémon* is too big to be created (or consumed) by one individual; moreover, the lore itself mixes elements from

Twitch chat, Reddit, Twitter, and other spaces; Reddit serves to formalize the lore elements, but that process grows from other spaces.

James Paul Gee's approach to story in video games is key here, albeit for understanding what *Twitch Plays Pokémon* does as much as what it does not do. Gee defines it as:

The story line in a video game is a mixture of four things: 1. The game designers' ('authors') choice. 2. How you, the player, have caused these choices to unfold in your specific case by the order in which you have found things. 3. The actions you as one of the central characters in the story carry out (since in good video games there is a choice of what to do, when to do it, and in what order to do it). 4. Your own imaginative projection about the characters, plot, and world of the story. (79)

In contrast to traditional video games, the story of *Twitch Plays Pokémon* is much more user generated, though the sheer number of users renders intent nebulous. In this case, the choice of the designers (either Junichi Masuda or the anonymous Twitch streamer) is nearly irrelevant, with the player choices (here coming down to which button to press and when) similarly lacking any real control. Instead, Gee's fourth element – imagination – becomes key to the experience, and a necessary function for organizing and focusing the efforts of the players. Crucially, this element of imagination and elaboration helped to build community

Most significantly, there are a multitude of authors involved: the streamer, the players, the Redditors, and a myriad of others all contribute to the overall development of the narrative, either through their direct chat inputs or through their interpretation of the events: “gameplay can also act as a resource for social performances that are not based exclusively on gaming. In particular, knowledge and information gained from digital gaming can be used to inform conversations or social interactions around other subject matter” (Crawford and Rutter 279). This process echoes the same way that folklore is created, with events being interpreted, responded to, repackaged, and finally shared with a new audience. As Boluk and Lemieux explain, “the folklore of...massively multiplayer online games is captured in logs, screenshots, forum discussions, and, now more than ever, recorded video – calcified forms of metagaming documenting the player-produced narratives and histories” (70). The process here occurs in communal spaces, just as more traditional folklore does, albeit with perhaps somewhat different purposes. Bronner states that “the action of producing or transmitted ‘lore’ is perceived or constructed as traditional, characteristically through its

repetition and variation, and connotative evocation of precedent” (17). Bronner’s definition reflects that the works based around *Twitch Plays Pokémon* fit the function (if not the form) of folklore, with narratives repeating in various forms (primarily image memes and short-form fan fiction, occasionally related to a larger audience through the Twitch chat). Notably, these creations gained a life outside of the forums and game itself, with the phrase “Praise Helix” being adopted into other digital spaces and even appearing in real-life graffiti.

Twitch Plays Pokémon presents a challenge of classification. While the first iteration is based on a ROM of the original *Pokémon Red*, it was functionally a mod, with a specific control scheme programmed in. Mia Consalvo offers a definition: “a traditional view of mods has been that they reshape a player’s experience of the original game in some way, usually to offer a player more choices or improve elements of the game (graphical, auditory, and gameplay settings) but to maintain the centrality of the game’s world and rules as the primary ‘text’ for experiences” (178). *Twitch Plays Pokémon Red* retains this mod framework, with the game content effectively unchanged, with the altered control scheme impacting the overall experience. Consalvo continues: “removing or de-centering games from what we might think of as their more central position in a game studies analysis demonstrates their contingent nature in the realm of meaning-making—and the contingent placement of any such text. When considering mods, we can see how mods and games work in concert, often with mods framing a game in certain ways, but at other times with games helping to shape what is expressed via a mod” (183). In this case, the control scheme became the story: random luck was given narrative weight. Milando elaborates: “each random act and each chaotic struggle provided fodder for new, creative interpretations. The game served as the community’s muse, who could interpret it into something more valuable and entertaining than the gameplay itself.” Essentially, this process created a paratext around the game itself, with the experience of the players (particularly the failures and setbacks) and building a collective experience. While individual commands were visible in the chat, along with the user that sent them, there were few attempts to claim credit or assign blame for specific events, as the sheer number of commands typically meant a delay upward of 30 seconds. At times, this necessitated a change in the system; the code was hastily rewritten midstream to allow users to opt for Democracy (chosen commands being voted upon) as opposed to Anarchy (commands executed in the order they were entered), which became a key fissure early on in

the fandom, persisting into subsequent generations. As with all online systems, there were trolls as well who actively sought to disrupt efforts, particularly during the heights of *Twitch Plays Pokémon Red*, though concerted disruption occurred most prevalently during the fights over Democracy and Anarchy (which involved a voting system, variations on protest votes, and a general preference toward the quasi-randomness of Anarchy).

Anarchy as a format both reinforced the group nature of the game and de-centered the individual, a process that Gee discusses around the distribution of video game knowledge within social networks (196-202). Any input could be the action that makes – or more often breaks – the current run, but the sheer number of inputs means that success and failure is communal. *Twitch Plays Pokémon* disputes understanding of how individuals typically function in the online space; John Price, discussing interactions within a Facebook group, states that “hybridized performative identity manipulates formal and informal processes to create a standardized virtual method of presenting yourself to the world. This method of performance in online environments...reimagines the role of informal and vernacular social relationships. In the online environment, folkloric processes are not only linguistic and performative, but reflect and distort ‘real world’ social behaviors” (41-2). Here, those same performances play out, but they are unlinked from identity; after all, Twitch plays *Pokémon* in this case, not any one individual. Flanagan explains that “videogames adapt, and make into adapters, at all stages of their conception, creation, distribution, and reception. Games are adapted from hypotexts, and the transformation of textual material that results from such a movement invites close analysis. They are adapted to work on different platforms, in response to different technological and genre demands” (454). *Pokémon Red* is a hypotext for *Twitch Plays Pokémon*, albeit being functionally the same ROM as the original cartridge, with the Twitch audience ultimately determining how the process is performed. The performance is a function of the input; Red uses the Helix Fossil, performing the action as instructed, which was in turn interpreted by the players as a religious communion. Milando concludes that “this created a symbiotic relationship between the game and narrative imposed on it – the gameplay needed narrative to give it purpose, while the narrative needed gameplay to provide inspiration.” To provide a structure to keep community members involved, a narrative was necessary, and the nature of the performance favored a religious reading of the events. The fractured nature of the gameplay

necessitated the construction of these quasi-folkloric narratives as a method for passing knowledge and enforcing a semblance of order.

The lore that grew to surround the events arose out of accidents and misplays like battle and platforming setbacks, as discussed earlier. These might have been chalked up to simple happenstance, but the players (and, by extension, the community based at www.reddit.com/r/twitchplayspokemon) began to construct an elaborate system of explanations for why these things occurred, blaming (and praising) certain Pokémon, and crafting a religion based around an innocuous near-useless Helix Fossil item. Saucerman and Ramirez explain that “the Helix Fossil game item cannot not be used in most gameplay circumstances, but due to the game’s chaos, there were numerous occasions when players attempted to use it at inappropriate times. This act, which initially occurred due to random combinations of input from the [*Twitch Plays Pokémon*] community, was eventually interpreted by the community to hold significance to the game’s protagonist, as if the protagonist were consulting The Helix Fossil” (78). The players crafted an entire religion out of random occurrences within the game, a religion that had little to do in relation to the game itself, or its extensive and well-developed media system. Fan author Michael Stone contends that “the Church of Helix is truly the internet’s religion, born in the sea of information and data online. It is a narrative that has surpassed and broken free from its bounds by those who devoted their time and talents to its story” (i). Out of this religion, they created a set of rules as to what actions were okay in-game, and what actions were considered against the spirit of the game itself. The lore itself is dense and expansive, and has been the subject of some limited scholarship, though the event has deeper significance.

As an example, the PC (where players deposit and retrieve Pokémon beyond the team of six) became a site of danger, after several key Pokémon were accidentally deleted, inspiring a “commandment” of “toucheth not Bill’s PC, for it is dark and full of terror” (Stone 116). Events conspired to result in a large-scale loss of Pokémon in an event dubbed “Bloody Sunday.” How blame was assigned in that event is key: the effort had been the result of an attempt to put the powerful Pokémon Zapdos in the party, the capture of which had involved a great degree of luck and planning; a relevant “commandment” was “thou shall not use a Master Ball on a Tentacool. Or a Rattata. Or any of the sort” (Stone 115). Some players saw the release of twelve Pokémon – including fan favorites “Dux,” “Cabbage,” and “DigRat” – as emblematic of Helix’s disapproval, but a counternarrative took

shape that they were a sacrifice for the good the team, or that the lost Pokémon were agents of the Dome (DigRat, in particular, was viewed as borderline villainous due to an earlier incident in which a mistimed command had set the effort back by several hours). Redditor Mantra-TF, quoted in Stone, wrote “Bill couldn’t be happier, his plan succeeded...the results, twelve Pokémon released, now Lord Dome can execute the final part of his plan; he didn’t know the details, but when victory arrived, his dreams would come true” (183). The blame was, at least within the larger narrative that developed, not placed on the actions of any specific players, nor on the avatar Red, but on the ineffable machinations of godly Pokémon. The religious component was common to much of the narrative, though the “commandments” outlined by Stone resulted from in-game events and strategies, taking on folkloric undercurrents.

The religious aspect of the Helix vs. Dome was an outlet for setbacks and mistakes, keeping morale strong for a very long (and at times seemingly impossible) feat of beating the game. A lost battle or mistimed ability could be waved away as the influence of the villainous Dome; an extended struggle to win a fight (in which the Helix Fossil was accidentally “used” a dozen times) an attempt to commune with the gods. Milano explains that “it is in the chaotic nature of a Community-Controlled game that the need for a Community-Created Narrative arises. Despite the long, tedious power-struggle for progression, players have continued to play even though progression of the game’s plot no longer mattered.” The Narrative did have some roots in the chat, but grew offsite, on a specially created subreddit at www.reddit.com/r/twitchplayspokemon. This was initially a space for strategizing, with users looking ahead to difficult moments, contemplating paths to the end, and weighing the potential final party of Pokémon. In-jokes and explanations of events soon took on a life of their own, with in-chat jokes developing into full-fledged memes within the Reddit space. Reddit in turn became the main space of battling out the lore: whether the loss of crucial Pokémon or other setbacks were the effort of evil forces (eventually personified by the Pokémon Flareon and the Dome Fossil), how major victories were remembered (including rollicking disagreements over the Anarchy and Democracy control systems), even a very detailed theology centered around the Helix Fossil, taking the shape of Judeo-Christian framed religion: “the TPP community appropriated texts and artwork from Christianity in order to frame their understanding of the chaotic events of the game...these connections to a pre-established framework helped to both strengthen the narrative within the

community, and helped new players understand basic TPP lore” (Saucerman and Ramirez 82-3). The religious styling allowed for accelerated creation of the community and rules, with the lore connecting the broad player base and creating a sense of shared culture.

Twitch Plays Pokémon Crystal is notable in that it is nominally a continuation of the narrative/belief system of *Twitch Plays Pokémon Red*, but that continuation is a subversion. Rather than expanding the belief system, the story that developed was one of overthrowing the old order, which was an element of the original *Pokémon Crystal* (players could fight previous protagonist Red and his overpowered team as a hidden boss at the end of the post-game). The narrative eschewed the overtly religious elements to focus on bringing balance, and freeing Red from the control of the “voices.” The system remained broadly the same – inputs from chat caused the avatar to move and act – though the process became somewhat more controlled and organized as the audience from the first version (interested in the novelty of the experience) shrank, with the hundreds of thousands of active players becoming tens of thousands. This contributed to a deeper, more complex lore that helped inform the strategy within the game itself. For instance, when starter Pokémon Feraligator (referred to as “LazorGator”) became too powerful (over-leveling the rest of the party to a significant degree), a segment of the player base sought to release him, spamming “tick tock release the crock” into the chat (an event later referred to as the Gator Wars). Efforts to put LazorGator back in the PC over the objections of another segment resulted in the release of a favored Togepi (called “Prince Omelette”) and Sentret (“the Admiral”), with users framing these events as a tragic assassination attempt gone wrong, continuing the overarching plot of *Twitch Plays Pokémon Red* (albeit with the characters recast as villains). There was a practical undercurrent of both moments. Strategically, one overpowered Pokémon makes it difficult to cover weaknesses, and it becomes more difficult to level up weak Pokémon later in the game. The loss of useful Pokémon, on the other hand, was a potentially major setback, though in this case, they were more fan favorites than powerful party members. It did affect a shift toward embracing LazorGator as a figure of leadership and building a party around him accordingly.

Pokémon Crystal is also directly connected to *Pokémon Red*, with an extensive post-game that (re-)explores a condensed map of the original game, culminating in a secret boss battle against the original protagonist, Red. This was quickly framed as a key focal point of *Twitch Plays Pokémon Crystal*, as the

Twitch audience debated whether the endgame should be pursued, even if it meant overthrowing the forces that had led them to success in the first generation. Cook's definition of discontinuity is useful for framing this development: "a discontinuity is fictional information that is in narrative tension to previously established themes, characterization, and so forth" (274). The shift between the two generations that recast Red, Lord Helix, and various other "good" figures from the first generation we quickly accepted and incorporated, even though they ran counter to the emotions of the previous effort. Cook argues that discontinuities can occur in new installments, where narratives and character developments can run counter to the preexisting canon (274). *Twitch Plays Pokémon Red* and *Twitch Plays Pokémon Crystal* exist in clear conversation, even as the characterization changes. The benevolent Helix of the first game became a more oppressive figure in the second game, as did the rest of the party. This shift was participatory, and not entirely agreed upon, with users putting forth different threads and explanations before one thread became accepted as canon, with the audience playing the roles of both creator and fan regarding the text. Cook's statement that "canonicity practices are participatory...canon or non-canon is often the result of a complex interaction between producer and consumer" is especially apt here, with the production of culture becoming accepted as the reality (273). As with the first game, this served a useful function of pushing the players forward, overcoming the new obstacles and pushing toward a fateful conclusion.

Further events served to connect the lore and gameplay. An effort called "Operation Love" was created by Reddit user vikingnipples that emphasized empathy and kindness during the Gator Wars. While this effort was effectively contained to the subreddit, it helped shift the rhetoric and coincided with the evolution of the Eevee ("Burrito") into Espeon, which involved a high degree of friendship. The overarching theme of *Twitch Plays Pokémon Crystal* developed into one of love and peace, overcoming past trauma through friendship and community. The folkloric elements helped the nascent community overcome early challenges but developed into a binding force for the remaining player base. This culminated in a grand finale, with the Twitch channel successfully defeating the hidden Red (modded to include the same team as the end of *Twitch Plays Pokémon Red*) atop Mt. Silver. Interestingly, this effort concluded after 314 hours, 2 minutes, 55 seconds, over three days faster than *Twitch Plays Pokémon Red*, despite *Pokémon Crystal* being a much longer, more involved game than the

original. In part, this was the result of the stronger sense of community and teamwork, of how to utilize tactics and strategies to achieve success, but it also reflects a sense of competition: not only to prove that it could be done, but to overcome the previous generation (and challenge the record of the previous generation of players). As the end game approached, the motto of the effort shifted away from “Praise Helix” and to “No Gods, No Kings, Only Mon,” a reference to *Bioshock* (2007), another game that also questioned narrative agency. The goal of the endgame was not simply to win, but to “free” Red from the voices, to undo the influence of the Helix god (and by extension the players), metaphorically reclaiming the previous victory on behalf of the community that remained (as opposed to the million-plus individuals that had entered commands in the first run). As Milando states, “this created a symbiotic relationship between the game and narrative imposed on it – the gameplay needed narrative to give it purpose, while the narrative needed gameplay to provide inspiration.” The output of creative approaches died down, in part because the audience shifted away, but it also reflects that the preparation and planning were no longer as necessary for the later iterations.

The result of this was a stronger community that persisted even as overall player and viewer numbers never reached the heights of *Twitch Plays Pokémon Red* (or even *Twitch Plays Pokémon Crystal*). The first effort was one of novelty, the sequel was the true challenge; what remained was a core community that has persisted. There have been, as of December 2020, 56 Pokémon games completed, including multiple runs of the mainline games and various fan hacks of the series. The community evolved in such a way that it began to internalize folkloric “truths”: the danger of the PC, the praise of Lord Helix, Operation Love lingering in the community, building a narrative around a “battle between gods” that bridged *Red* and *Crystal* was effectively a self-contained narrative. Subsequent *Twitch Plays Pokémon* games also incorporated narratives: a girl overcoming murderous impulses, an innocuous NPC trying to warp history, a police squad avenging a fallen member. Yet these narratives were less involved than the Helix and Dome saga, in part because there were fewer individuals creating less content around the lore as the games proceeded, as the shrinking audiences spiraled down as the series continued. The audience that remained was more experienced and knowledgeable about the games, and the games themselves were more obscure ROM hacks or even custom creations. The folkloric elements – framing the randomness as the result of divine influence, undergirding risky actions with

special significance, imbuing their actions with a communal identity – were downplayed as time moved on, though they were not forgotten. The internet, through Twitch, did what appeared impossible and beat *Pokémon Red*, and then kept going, something that might have been impossible without the folkloric undercurrent.

Works Cited

- Boluk, Stephanie and Patrick Lemieux. "About, within, around, without: A survey of six metagames." *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames*. U Minnesota P, 2017, pp. 23-76.
- Booth, Paul. *Digital Fandom: New Media Studies*. Peter Lang, 2010.
- Bronner, Simon. "Toward a definition of folklore in practice." *Cultural Analysis*, vol. 15, 2016, pp. 6-27.
- Buckingham, David and Julian Sefton-Green. "Gotta catch'em all: Structure, agency and pedagogy in children's media culture." *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2003, pp. 379-99.
- Chase. "TPP victory! The thundershock heard around the world." 1 Mar. 2014, blog.twitch.tv/2014/03/twitch-prevails-at-pokemon.
- Consalvo, Mia. "When paratexts become texts: De-centering the game-as-text." *Critical Studies in Media Communications*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2017, pp.166-83.
- Cook, Roy T. "Canonicity and normativity in massive, serialized, collaborative fiction." *The Journal of Aesthetic and Art Criticism*, vol. 71, no. 3, 2013, pp. 271-6.
- Crawford, Garry and Jason Rutter. "Playing the game: Performance in digital game audiences" *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, edited by Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington. New York UP, 2007, pp. 271-81.
- Flanagan, Kevin M. "Videogame adaptation." *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, edited by Thomas Leitch. Oxford UP, 2017, pp. 441-56.
- Gee, James Paul. *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2007.
- Jenkins, Henry, Joshua Green, and Sam Ford. *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*. New York UP, 2013.

- Merchant, Guy. “Mind the gap(s): Discourses and discontinuity in digital literacies.” *E-Learning*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2007, journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.2304/elea.2007.4.3.241.
- Milando, Chris. “Community-controlled games and the advent of the fourth-person narrative.” *Level Up Literature – Interface 2014*, 2 May 2014. web.archive.org/web/20140606210701/http://levelupliterature.com/essays/community-controlled-games.
- Price, John. “Digital thunderdome: Performing identity and creating community in a Facebook world.” *New Directions in Folklore*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2016, pp. 40-59.
- Saucerman, Jenny and Dennis Ramirez. “Praise Helix!: Christian narrative in *Twitch Plays: Pokémon*.” *Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, vol. 10, 2016, pp. 74-94.
- Stone, Michael. *The Helix Bible*. The Church of Helix, 2017.
- Vandal-Sirois, Hugo and Georges L. Bastin. "Adaptation and appropriation: Is there a aimit?" *Translation, Adaptation and Transformation*, edited by Laurence Raw. Continuum, 2012, pp. 21-41.
- Yee, Nick. *The Proteus Paradox: How Online Games and Virtual Worlds Change Us – And How They Don't*. Yale UP, 2014.

Not Going Viral: Amateur Livestreamers, Volunteerism, and Privacy on Discord

NICHOLAS-BRIE GUARRIELLO

In May 2015, Discord was released, which is an instant messaging and digital distribution platform designed for hosting and creating multiple gaming communities. Often touted as a replacement for popular software like Skype or TeamSpeak, Discord offered gamers the ability to voice chat, assign community and in-game roles, and livestream. In recent years, when one thinks of game livestreaming, Twitch.tv (Twitch) is often perceived as the premier platform for hosting and monetizing livestreams for thousands of people at any given time. The lucrative or aspirational model of Twitch conceals how the average streamer on the platform only has three active viewers in any given stream (Taylor 36). Unlike Twitch, Discord communities are usually smaller and invite-only to the specific gaming and game livestreaming servers. Essentially, the difference between popularized platforms like Twitch and smaller communities on Discord revolves around accessibility and community formation. Indeed, viewers or lurkers have always been an integral part of gaming cultures and communities to congeal (Orme 4; Britt and Britt 6). Discord facilitates an interactive livestreaming and voice chat culture where the community creates their own practices, communicative exchange, and rules of conduct for being in a particular server.

This article analyzes amateur streamers and their non-monetized streaming practices and platform use of Discord. Instead of interrogating paid streamers on Twitch or other commercialized livestreaming platforms, this article asks: how does Discord maintain an accessible and non-monetized cultural environment for casual livestreaming and community formation? This article examines three aspects of amateur livestreaming on Discord: 1) the community reward-based model and neoliberal complexities of volunteerism, 2) the impact of no copyright infringement and the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to the rise of amateur livestreamers on

NICHOLAS-BRIE GUARRIELLO (they/she) received their Ph.D. in Feminist Studies with a concentration in Communications from the University of Minnesota. They are a critical media studies scholar and digital ethnographer focusing specifically on gaming and livestreaming cultures, relationality, online labor, and political participation on platforms. During their free time, they enjoy playing on *Pokémon Showdown* and watching a variety of game livestreams on Twitch, YouTube, and Discord. They can be reached at guarr003@umn.edu.

Popular Culture Studies Journal
Volume 9, Issue 2, ©2021

Discord, 3) the privacy and accessibility as perceived by streamers and users of livestreaming on Discord.

Welcome to Discord: Overview of Livestreaming

Prior to Discord's release in 2015, most gamers used software like Skype or TeamSpeak to achieve synchronous, real-time interaction for major boss fights, in-game events, or community-hosted live tournaments. Although Discord takes up more computer storage and uses more computer RAM than TeamSpeak, Discord has an advanced API and integration that makes chatting, tagging and alerting members, and going live relatively easy. Furthermore, the sheer accessibility of being interactive with livestreaming makes Discord a popular choice for gamers and, since the COVID-19 pandemic, for teachers, study groups, and other previous in-person interactions that had to go digital. The popularity of game livestreaming in the past decade has resulted in burgeoning scholarship that interrogates platforms like Twitch, which houses the majority of moderate to widely famous streamers (Taylor 212; Woodcock and Johnson 5). Imperatively, most Twitch livestreamers do not earn money immediately, and the average streamer as of 2018 had 3 viewers (Taylor 36). Instead of focusing on popular or aspiring livestreamers, it is key to interrogate amateur livestreamers and their viewers who are not monetizing or aiming for corporate sponsorship for their content.

Indeed, most of the time Discord is used as a layperson's way of streaming. Audience or spectator interactions of other livestreaming platforms occur in a close-knit setting as audience members, unless muted or banned by a moderator, can actively talk in a voice channel while watching the stream. Furthermore, voice channels on Discord allow for multiple streams to occur concurrently and audience members to preview and then watch multiple streams based on their current desires. To be sure, the pull for merely showing content is that Discord allows one to simply go live without any technological investments, which circumvents the technological affordances of livestreams like a professional microphone, decent lighting, and a commissioned overlay that are key characteristics of a successful Twitch stream. Oftentimes, on Twitch or YouTube Gaming, streamers will have an entire profile page, overlay, and other customized emojis, which without graphic design or other digital illustration experience becomes expensive to commission. Discord provides a space to build community while maintaining a level of exclusivity, ease of access and entry, and pseudo-privateness.

Livestreaming on Discord is also crucial for fan-made and other copyrighted games, music, and videos. Often, a fan-made emulator or private server of popular games like *Pokémon*, *World of Warcraft*, *MapleStory*, or *Super Smash Bros.* are not allowed to be streamed on Twitch; however, since Discord allows servers to self-moderate and provides a pseudo-private streaming space, streamers can play and have an audience to strategize fan-made games that would otherwise infringe copyright. Although Discord is a Voice over IP – technology that allows voice calls using an Internet provider and connection – instant messaging and digital distribution platform, it exhibits qualities of a social media platform that merely allows its users to socialize, self-moderate their own content, and go livestreaming without any investment or risk of infringing copyright.

Methods

To examine how Discord is used as an amateur, interactive, and pseudo-private livestreaming platform, I participated in several game nights, movie screenings, and casual streaming of games like *Among Us*, *MapleStory* private servers, *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*, and *Pokémon* emulators across several Discord servers. Throughout this article, I rely on sentiments from conversational chats during livestreams as well as conversations typed out in voice chat text channels, which allows gamers who cannot talk or have access to a microphone to type their response instead. For this project, demographics were not collected regarding gender self-determination, sexual orientation, race, and disability in order to maintain the often-anonymous aura of Discord; however, if discussions around race, gender, and other identities occurred, I attempted to probe and converse during the stream. Most of the servers I had access to and participated in mirrored conversations of live chat, in which conversations not about the game would be glossed over or quickly changed, especially around politics.

As Terri Senft has argued in her influential work on camgirls and microcelebrity, online interactions need to be taken as seriously as physical interactions (16); Senft's provocation is amplified by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic that has shifted most of one's everyday life to the digital realm. To capture and organize my data, I used MAXQDA Data Management Software to aid in deploying a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss) in the thematic coding of all screenshots and livestreaming conversations. To protect my participants, I followed the Association of Internet Researchers Internet Research:

Ethical Guidelines 3.0 (franzke et al.). Full Discord usernames and names referred to are redacted in screenshots; avatar pictures remain if they are non-human or if explicit permission was obtained. The following codes that pertained to how Discord was being used by amateur livestreamers based on my observational data were the following (underscores symbolize related themes that occurred in unison): Donations, Community, Friends_Content, Access_Difficulty, Privacy, and Gender. My next section briefly discusses relevant literature for this project before proceeding to use the mentioned codes to discuss and analyze neoliberal volunteerism, not going viral and pandemic streaming and privacy on Discord.

Affective Labor & Amateur Gaming Communities

Critical theory has often conceptualized affective and immaterial labor as part of abstract, non-paid forms of labor. For instance, philosopher Michael Hardt defines affective labor as “the creation and manipulation of affects,” which can include and is one of many parts of immaterial labor (96). Immaterial labor encapsulates the production of non-paid or abstract work such as emotions, care work, or knowledge production (Hardt 94). Affective labor is not outside of the economic process and is a product of capital in the current economy (Hardt 90). Here, affective labor is used to understand forms of work that are time and emotionally consuming, yet do not result in any direct forms of monetary compensation. In other words, affective labor refers to the invisible or obscure forms of labor. Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize interlocking systems that determine whose labor often becomes and is expected to become invisible or obscure in the backdrop of capitalist production. Feminist scholars like Kyle Jarrett (2015) and Tatiana Terranova (2000) assert that the affective production of culture, particularly relating to digital labor, does not exist outside of entrepreneurial contexts and is deeply embedded in forms of neoliberal logics of individualism and meritocracy.

Feminist scholars, like those aforesaid, have theorized about the expanding role of affective or emotional labor in everyday life, such as talk shows, flight attendants, and, most recently, creative industries like content creators on YouTube, Twitch, or other platforms. Self-help, health, and happiness have shifted from the private (housework) sphere to the public televised sphere (Illouz 22). In *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, Alice R. Hochschild examined how emotional or affective work occurs in both the public and private spheres by analyzing flight attendants and bill collectors. Working with affect can

be physically and mentally exhausting like factory or manual work (Hochschild 261). Content creators (e.g., YouTube Influencers) are doing “passionate work” that goes beyond the standard working day as identified by Angela McRobbie. Furthermore, game livestreaming has become a recent gold rush or lucrative business venture given the large reward purses at national esports competitions (Woodcock and Johnson). In other words, content is not merely produced for visibility, but rather is a signpost of carving out a niche and a passionate job for oneself to fall within the pillars of happiness that neoliberalism requires. Indeed, popular content creators and livestreamers use their experience with how they may have had depression and anxiety to maintain the mold of passionate work as a remedy to one’s mental and physical health instead of various labor and lack of structural resources in place.

Amateur gaming communities function under various complexities of neoliberal and affective rhetoric already mentioned, however, they do so without expecting monetary compensation. Communities, generally, are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder). Amateur gaming communities often function like what Brian Britt and Rebecca Britt have called competitive communities of practice. Britt and Britt define competitive communities of practice as balancing “the tension between internal and external competition and cooperation, exploiting the benefits of each without allowing any one influence to dominate and catalyze undesirable behaviors” (5). In other words, competitive communities of practice may compete with one another to get the best gear or be a higher rank on a particular game but will still assist one another.

This competitive community of practice plays out via livestreaming on Discord as both a Let’s Play and walkthrough when other players are struggling on completing content. For instance, Figure 1 is a screengrab from a livestream where the author of this paper was unable to get out of the cave without losing all their Pokémon in battles, as healing items are prohibited in this *Pokémon* fan-made game. Although this server was holding a contest to see who can clear Insane difficulty first, with the winner receiving a special Discord tag and @ notifier, the streamer still showcased a strategy to get out of the cave unscathed. Additional members joined the livestream to discuss strategy and chat during the gameplay. As previous game studies scholarship has discovered, livestreaming viewership, especially during a pandemic, provides a variety of social interactions, exchange of

information and strategies, and various affective or emotional needs (Chen and Lin; Hilvert-Bruce et al.; Orme; Taylor).

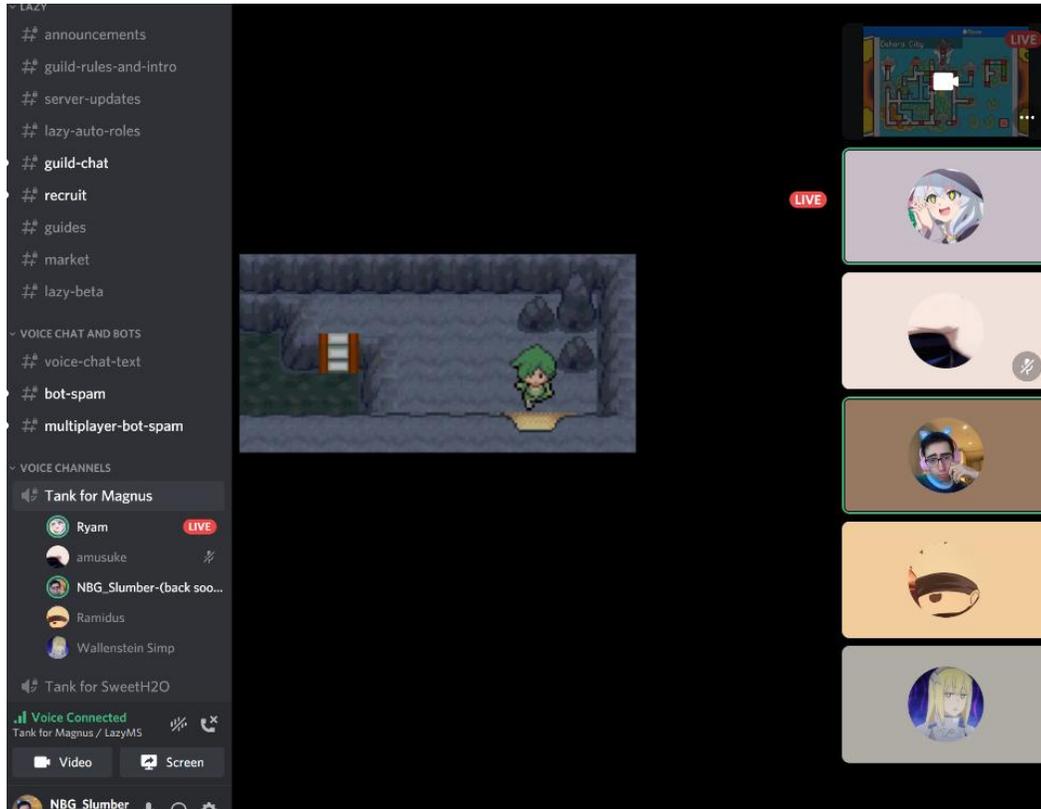


Figure 1. Screenshot from a livestream where the author of this paper requested help on how to complete a Pokémon fan-created dungeon.

Neoliberal Volunteerism: Communal Donations & Personalization

Rather than individual streamers receiving donations or monthly payments, Discord uses a server-wide boosting approach that benefits everyone on the server. Discord uses a three-tier system that unlocks more perks for the entire server community per individual donation or boost (Discord). For instance, if a server receives two boosts, the entire server community receives level one perks, which allows for the expansion of 50 additional emoji slots for a total of 100 emojis. Additionally, it gives everyone on the server 128 kilobytes per second of audio quality for voice chats, allows livestreams to be boosted to 720P and 60 frames per second.

Furthermore, it also gives a custom server invite background along with the ability to make an animated server icon that embodies one's community. Level two requires at least 15 server boosts; the entire server receives level one perks along with livestreams being boosted to 1080P and 60 frames per second. Moreover, all members can now upload files of up to 50 megabytes, which is ideal for short clips from livestreams or other in-game moments. Boosting also allows members to get an individual icon next to their name and changes based on how long they are boosting. My purpose in focusing on Discord's tiered community benefit system here resembles the overall work of community building and how invested people become in their community based on how their avatar icon, roles, or other server benefits change over time. To be sure, the perks and length of support often determine a server's activity and longevity; servers that reach levels two and three are often populous and host in-person and digital events. Finally, individuals who have boosted a particular server for several months will often be asked if they want to become a moderator (mod) for specific events or streams.

Discord provides a monthly cost option to increase and personalize one's experience across servers. The low monthly costs for Discord Nitro-Classic or Discord Nitro is \$4.99 and \$9.99 U.S. per month, respectively. Discord Nitro-Classic and Discord Nitro allows for custom emojis where people can upload or create their own emojis into the server and allows one's profile to have their own animated avatar and claim a custom tag. Furthermore, regardless of server boosting, a Nitro member will always receive two free server boosts, which means they can essentially elevate any server to level one automatically and share benefits with everyone in the server. This is important because this type of approach signals community building on Discord and for life sharing and the importance of emojis a session and customize emojis to relate to people streams.

A major perk of server boosting and monthly subscriptions in relation to community formation are custom and animated emojis. Emojis are popular digital pictograms that can appear in text messages, emails, and across social media platforms and create a communal bond (Stark and Crawford). Like custom emojis or emotes on Twitch or YouTube Gaming for subscribers, Discord emojis are endless and allows anyone within the server to access them. When one goes live on Discord, most servers will have a voice chat text channel for those who do not have a mic or the ability to talk currently so that the streamer(s) and viewers can still see and participate with those muted.

The attraction to both community server boosting and a monthly payment to Discord is ultimately bound to the server-wide rewards and personalization of emojis on a server. Luke Stark and Kate Crawford have argued that emojis embody and represent the tension between affect as human potential and as a productive force that capital continually seeks to harness through a communality of affect that is bound to market logics of capital. Emojis are used to express and exchange various modes of affect such as approval, surprise, and anger. Furthermore, emojis on many livestreaming or gaming-focused platforms are a way of building and sustaining a community. For Discord, emojis are often customized for that specific server based on livestream events, personalities of members, or other viral moments are taken from Twitch, YouTube, or other social media platforms. However, this community is formed through individualized donations or subscriptions, which are part and parcel of neoliberal subjectivity. These individualized donations may benefit the entire server through better sound and video quality and server-wide emoji use but revolves around the individual demonstrating acts of kindness that do are rewarded. Also, individual donators are more likely to be rewarded by becoming moderators of the server or having access to private channels to make server-wide decisions. A donator will often receive a designation on how long they have been boosting a server, but will also be put into their own group, which lets everyone know in the server that they have donated to support and improve the community. This segues to my next section on neoliberal subjectivity and how server-wide perks and emoji use maintain the grammar of happiness that is expected from individuals on various platforms to provide their community.

Additionally, on Discord, community forms through acts of volunteerism that sustain the grammar of happiness within neoliberal subjectivity. Here, subject formation occurs through Discord's platform via unpaid, affective investments and technological positivity. In other words, neoliberal subjectivity is concerned with constructing the individual as a rational, responsible, and positive presence on platforms like Discord. Although the community and group benefit from these donations, the need for the individual to maintain positivity and provide additional resources resonates with what Miranda Joseph has pointedly argued: community and volunteerism constructs a liberal, individualistic, willing, and choosing subject. Indeed, boosting a server is an act of volunteering to help foster the server's community and amplify livestreaming and emoji capabilities, as well as interactions for the entire server. This aligns with Joseph's provocation of volunteerism as constituting a liberal subjectivity at the site for a non-profit

organization (Joseph 113). Although Joseph is talking about non-profit governmental organizations while Discord is a profitable organization, the liberal subjectivity as discussed previously extends to the communal use of emojis and volunteerism for amateur livestreaming communities. For the livestreaming and emoji capabilities to be sustained, the individual must continue to subscribe each month and use their server boost, which is an additional cost, to that specific server. However, as with the various server levels, many smaller to moderately sized servers do not reach level three requirements.

Discord forgoes content moderation and automatically flagging content in favor of having individual servers moderate their own content. The exception is for cases of child pornography, in which images of children are automatically removed by an automated process. Additionally, any server marked as not safe-for-work (NSFW) will not work and be completely censored on iOS devices but will work on their desktop version. For content moderation, Discord servers usually rely on and assign unpaid, volunteer moderators to sanitize and prevent any hate speech via text or emojis throughout regular chat and livestream chats. These moderators are often long-time members of the server and have a temporal investment in ensuring the server's longevity. My next section will dive into the various copyright and access that is afforded via livestreaming on Discord.

Not Going Viral: Copyright, COVID-19, & Access

Those familiar with Twitch and YouTube Gaming likely understand that copyright infringements are a common occurrence of uploaded livestreams or livestream clips. Additionally, fan-made games, ROM Hacks, or private gaming servers are often not allowed to be streamed or monetized on the aforesaid platforms. Since Discord uses a server-based system that allows for a pseudo-private space or invite-only channels, amateur streamers use Discord to avoid copyright claims and removal of content when streaming. Most Discord livestreams are ephemeral and are not archived when a stream concludes unless a streamer was connected to their Twitch concurrently or were using Open Broadcaster Software or another recording method to archive and highlight gameplay. Indeed, livestreaming on Discord occurs under community-oriented practices, especially through the self-assigning of roles.

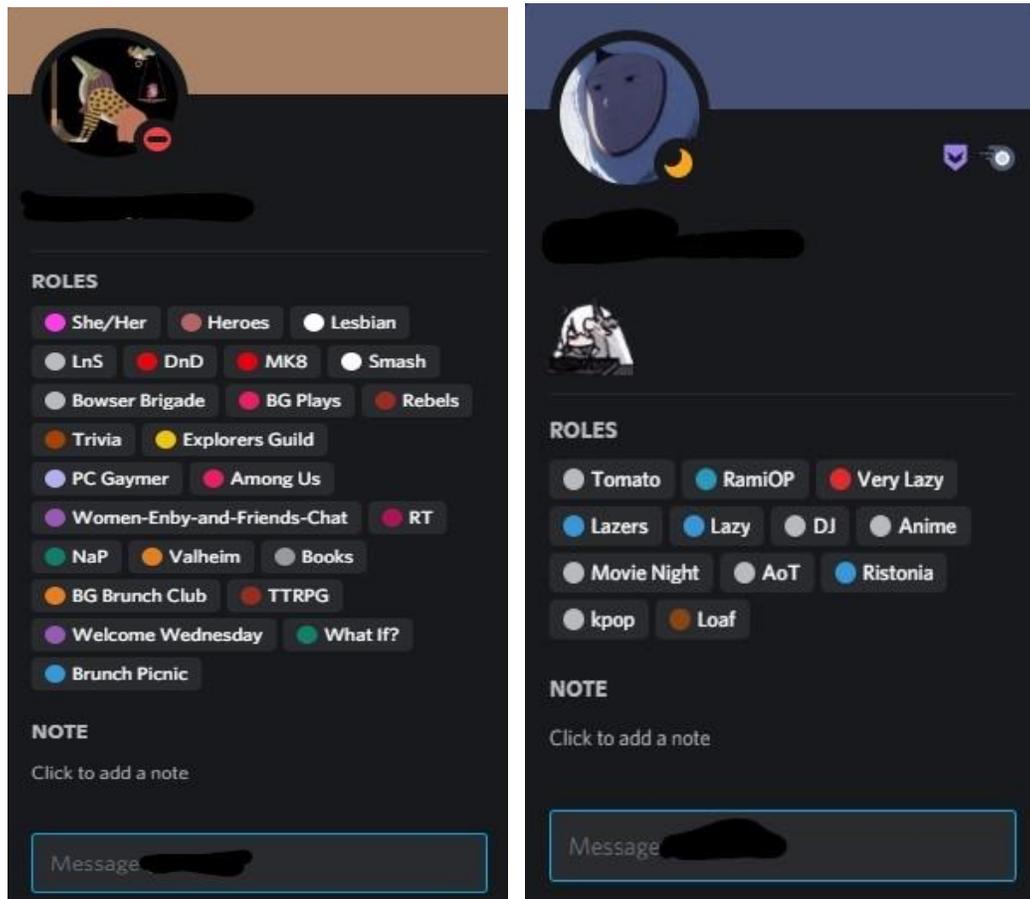


Figure 2A and 2B. Self-assigned roles in Discord allows for the personalization of alerts.

Most of the gaming servers on Discord have self-assigned roles so that one can receive alerts whenever one of their roles is tagged or if someone in that role goes live. Oftentimes, most server channels will have a separate text-only channel that will hyperlink to one's Twitch account or simply mention they are currently playing a game or sharing their screen. In Figures 2A and 2B, two profiles are taken from two different servers. Figure 2A is from a local East Coast Variety Gaymer Discord where one can label their pronouns or sexual orientation along with tags to watch Ru Paul's Drag Race, attend a public gaymer gathering, join a dedicated space and discussion about gender or sexuality, or receive a notification ping if someone goes live in a specific game. Figure 2B is from a *MapleStory* private server Discord

where various in-game events and boss raids along with community anime and movie nights are self-assigned. For instance, these self-assigned roles allow for a variety of communities within the server to congeal that are not necessarily bound to game livestreaming. Discord's screen sharing option became an alternative to screen movies, anime, and other content in addition to game livestreaming. Since Discord has a variety of features, screen sharing a movie or series on Netflix or other streaming servers would occur with relative ease without fear of a copyrighted black screen, reproducing a virtual couch space.

As a response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, Discord increased the livestreaming and screen share limit from 10 to 50 people in a channel (Locke). The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in schools going online and the loss of many jobs, which, according to the participants, allowed them to be on the platform and livestream casually and more often. With digital interactions being at an unprecedented high on Discord because of the aforementioned reasons, there were more opportunities to casually livestream movies and gameplay for a small audience. Instead of merely voice chatting about an in-game moment, boss raid, or event, folks can simply go live and engage with their friends within two clicks.

During a *MapleStory* private server stream, I asked four people why they stream daily on Discord rather than Twitch and Rina commented at length,

For people who aren't tech savvy all the programs and things you have to get set up to actually stream on twitch might [be] overwhelming. Streaming on Discord is literally like two clicks, and you can stream. I don't have the money since I lost my job at Old Navy because of the pandemic. I can't commission an artist for a cool overlay that I would like to see on Twitch. I guess I could have used a free one, but I guess it really depends on what you're looking for when you're streaming. I don't want fulfillment. I just want to stream content and have fun.

Rina's testimony revolves around access and having fun, which the other spectators agreed with. First, accessibility pertains to ease of use via financial investments, technological affordances, and being authentic. Accessibility was a consensus when I popped in several livestreams and probed about why Discord over Twitch. Having the ability to go live for free and not worry about being aesthetically pleasing were all advantages of streaming on Discord. Accessibility also means one can stream without investing, potentially scarce, financial resources into streaming equipment, custom overlays, and learning how to use various software in conjunction with Discord. Livestreaming on Discord essentially allows streamers

to not emphasize their equipment or spatial set-up to that of professional or burgeoning streamers on Twitch. Livestreamers on Discord can merely click a button, go live, and just have fun instead of focusing on moderating their language to be family-friendly and thinking about soliciting potential subscriptions or one-time donations.

Accessibility also does not compel streamers to spend several hours on content and can showcase or highlight shorter moments of gameplay that one wants their friends to watch. Second, and perhaps more importantly, “I just want to stream content and have fun” dispels the myth around livestreamers aspiring to become professional streamers. Although livestreaming has become a lucrative business, many streamers on Discord simply want to show content have it consumed by their fellow server community. Indeed, this resonates with Adrienne Shaw’s work on gaming culture being defined by the consumption and circulation of video games (42). Additionally, Stephanie Orme has argued that the shared sentiment of a livestream makes spectators just as important, knowledgeable, and valuable members of the community as the livestreamer (Orme 3). Although streamers are not earning an income on Discord, they are engaging in constant knowledge production and exchange of strategies during streams. My next and final section will explore why streamers prefer Discord’s innate privacy over Twitch’s public-facing profiles.

Why Not Twitch?: Spectatorship & Privacy

If the average number of viewers on a Twitch stream is three, then what affordances does Discord offer over the premier livestreaming platform? Indeed, even if a streamer had a few to no viewers, there is always the happenstance of becoming famous on Twitch and earning an income. Besides accessibility and producing content on Discord, amateur streamers referred to privacy concerns and the difficulty in hiding their profile and past streams from the public as well as the comfortable environment of streaming for an audience that they somewhat already know. One streamer, Chris, on a *Pokémon* focused Discord pointed out that,

Going live on Discord means privacy. You can choose whoever you want to watch your stuff because you stream for channels you wanted to join like friend discords. Since im not that much comfortable to share my gameplay with strangers.

Chris's testimony alludes to the fact that Discord does not store one's stream, unlike Twitch. Although one can disable that feature in Twitch, it is not accessible and when first creating a Twitch account, most amateur streamers are unaware that this feature exists. Furthermore, going live on Discord ensures, for most streamers, that one will generally know that the toxicity of random strangers coming into a stream will not exist. Toxicity is quelled via the pseudo-private space of Discord and potential spectators already being interested in the game's genre. Additionally, every Discord server has a set of rules and conduct created by the server admins and moderators that one must read and agree to before having access to other channels and streams. Although going live on Discord entails comfortability among one's spectators, both Twitch and Discord retain similar levels of information and analytics about its users.

The importance of comfortability and privacy around one's audience is a key reason that amateur streamers do not elect to use Twitch, yet this impacts women and femme gamers differently. Ereb, one of the only self-identified women who participated in casual conversations, emphasized Twitch's toxic culture around girl gamers as a deterrent for streaming. Ereb commented,

I would stream on Twitch if I got into it and knew how, but there's a stigma against Girl Gamers usually on that platform. So, I usually stream on Discord where there are people I am more familiar with.

Ereb's statement around the stigma against Girl Gamers on Twitch revolves around a series of policies that the platform has implemented around combating harassment towards women. However, Twitch has often victim-blamed and enforced dress codes particularly for women streamers with regards to full or partial nudity. Although male streamers can often be shirtless or have more of their chest exposed, women streamers who wear tank tops are often seen as simply trying to gain more views instead of gaming. As such and with Discord, showing one's face during a livestream is optional as the content being focused on is the game and strategizing via audio chat rather than thinking about the person's personality or aesthetic. Furthermore, a particular server's spectators will be folks who one is familiar with and who has agreed to the community-formed guidelines.

The community-formed guidelines around spectatorship and privacy also revolve around emojis as well. Some of the most versatile are the infamous Poggers or PogChamp emojis from Twitch. Prior to January 2021 and inflammatory remarks supporting the white supremacist insurrection on the United States capitol, Ryan "Gootecks" Gutierrez was the face of the PogChamp emoji on Twitch as well

as other platforms, like Discord (Verge 1). Twitch proceeded to ban this emoji, yet it still exists and circulates on Discord because of Discord's lax policy around content moderation and having moderation responsibilities fall to individual server owners and their moderators. Still, yelling poggers or responding with a poggers emoji during a Discord livestream is essentially generating an interactive model of communicative technologies that are essential to affective labor practices around privacy and community-formed guidelines.

In other words, the pseudo-private spaces of Discord servers allow conversations around potential problematic emoji use to be discussed among the server owner and admin but is often divorced from political attachments. Emojis during a livestream are apoliticized and seen as mere reactions rather than discussing politics. This is not to say that emojis like the original poggers or that a plethora of racist, anti-Semitic, or homophobic emojis do not exist throughout Discord servers; servers are ultimately responsible for determining what poses harm or potential hate to their members rather than the platform as an entity. However, the moderation and privacy afforded via the use of these emojis revolve around interactive models of engaging in streams that are essential to the free labor practices and continual server-driven content moderation that are the tenets of livestreaming servers on Discord.

Conclusion

At the time of writing, I have used Discord for over five years to chat in real-time with various gamers, gaymers, and colleagues. Additionally, since the COVID-19 pandemic and mass stay-at-home orders in 2020, I have used Discord to casually stream and watch other amateur streamers. Discord provides an accessible, non-corporate format where one does not have to set up a profile or an overlay to stream or host a movie night for their server. Additionally, server admins and moderators can create and manage their own community through a variety of roles and personalized emotes and sobriquets. Indeed, community management occurs through a variety of strategic communicative exchanges that ultimately deepens their knowledge and expertise with one another on an ongoing basis (Zimmerman 911). In other words, the communities that form and are managed on Discord are currently and mostly without corporate involvement, which creates a decentralized network of communal power for Discord servers and amateur streamers.

This paper has provided several benefits of Discord's tiered community benefit system and pseudo-private livestreaming space. Although these are seemingly inclusive practices, Discord's lax moderation policies and variety of privateness allow racism, sexism, and transphobia to run rampant on some servers. First, Discord's lax moderation policies put an onus on the server owners or administrators to have volunteer moderators remove racist, sexist, and transphobic speech and emojis. At the time of writing, only servers that are official Discord partners receive moderation support from the platform. Second, although providing private communities, white supremacist and doxing Discord servers exist. Dubiously so, members of aforesaid servers are known to infiltrate and scrape user content such as Discord handles and server chats and then post it within their home server to potentially dox or harass folks. In 2021, Discord has stated that they have deleted more than 300 servers that were dedicated to hate (Allyn); however, this does not mitigate the actions of using an open-source text and chat exporter and posting the information elsewhere. Furthermore, Discord servers are easily archived, and templates are often generated that will revitalize a deleted server quickly. Finally, if an amateur streamer wanted to potentially earn revenue, they would have to learn an entirely new platform and gain the ability to have a follower, which Discord in its current pseudo-private server spaces does not currently afford the streamer.

Throughout this article, I discussed how communal donations and personalization of individual Discord servers may be outside corporate logics that have subsumed Twitch and YouTube Gaming, yet is still bound within neoliberal subjectivity through individual volunteerism. I then moved on to discuss how streamers did not care about going viral or making an income from livestreaming, but merely producing content and engaging in the circulation of ideas. Finally, this paper contributes to recent critical discourse about livestreaming platforms by expanding the narrative beyond Twitch and YouTube and understanding how non-aspiring professional or part-time streamers conduct expectations around privacy within their community. Interrogating how livestreaming occurs in non-corporatized spaces is imperative to understand how the majority of livestreamers in smaller communities are forming everyday friendships and engaging in strategic communication. The material dynamics that structure amateur streamers and expectations of accessibility and privacy have just begun to be valued in gaming cultures.

Works Cited

- Allyn, Bobby. "Group-chat app Discord says it banned more than 2,000 extremist communities." *NPR*, 5 Apr. 2021, www.npr.org/2021/04/05/983855753/group-chat-app-discord-says-it-banned-more-than-2-000-extremist-communities.
- Britt, Brian C., and Rebecca K. Britt. "From waifus to whales: The evolution of discourse in a mobile game-based competitive community of practice." *Mobile Media & Communication*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2021, pp. 3-29.
- Chen, Chia-Chen, and Yi-Chen Lin. "What drives live-stream usage intention? The perspectives of flow, entertainment, social interaction, and endorsement." *Telematics and Informatics*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2018, pp. 293-303.
- franzke, aline shakti, Bechmann, Anja, Zimmer, Michael, Ess, Charles and the Association of Internet Researchers. *Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0*, 2020, aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf.
- Glaser, Barney G., and Anselm L. Strauss. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. AldineTransaction, 1967.
- Hilvert-Bruce, Zorah et al. "Social motivations of live-streaming viewer engagement on Twitch." *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 84, 2018, pp. 58-67.
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell. *Commercialization of Human Feeling*, 2nd ed. U California P, 2003.
- Illouz, Eva. *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*. Polity, 2007.
- Joseph, Miranda. *Against the Romance of Community*. U Minnesota P, 2002.
- McRobbie, Angela. *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries*. John Wiley & Sons, 2018.
- Orme, Stephanie. "'Just watching': A qualitative analysis of non-players' motivations for video game spectatorship." *New Media & Society*, 2021, journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1461444821989350.
- Senft, Theresa M. *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks*. Peter Lang, 2008.
- Shaw, Adrienne. "What is video game culture? Cultural studies and game studies." *Games and Culture*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2010, pp. 403-24.
- Sjöblom, Max et al. "The ingredients of Twitch streaming: Affordances of game streams." *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 92, 2019, pp. 20-8.

- Stark, Luke, and Kate Crawford. "The conservatism of emoji: Work, affect, and communication." *Social Media + Society*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2015, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2056305115604853>.
- Taylor, T. L. *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming*. Princeton UP, 2018.
- Vincent, Brittany. "Twitch selects a permanent replacement for its 'PogChamp' emote." *PCMag*. 14 Feb. 2021, www.pcmag.com/news/twitch-selects-a-permanent-replacement-for-its-pogchamp-emote.
- Wenger, Etienne, Richard Arnold McDermott, and William Snyder. *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge*. Harvard Business P, 2002.
- Zimmerman, Joshua J. "Computer game fan communities, community management, and structures of membership." *Games and Culture*, vol. 14, no. 7-8, 2019, pp. 896-916.

Moving the Show Online: An Analysis of DIY Virtual Venues

PETER J. WOODS

According to Katie Green, music venues (as both physical and cultural spaces) contribute heavily to the formation of individual and communal identities within popular music. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the inability to safely gather has temporarily shuttered virtually all music venues. In response, artists and promoters swiftly organized live streaming events as a way for musicians to perform remotely. According to James Rendell, these “portal shows” have provided an opportunity for professional artists to continue connecting with fans and generating income while mirroring the experience of attending in-person concerts for audience members. Yet Rendell’s focus does not represent the entirety of musical cultures. For example, the ideological investment in materially enacting community shared by most within do-it-yourself (DIY) music, here referring to the loosely organized and international network of nonprofessional musicians dedicated to performing and distributing music outside of traditional production networks (Makagon; Oakes), may produce a different understanding of live streaming and its role in musical communities. This leads Rendell to call on scholars to examine how “other types of artists, bands, genres and scenes may illuminate other portal show qualities, opportunities and/or shortcomings” to further understand how live streaming operates within popular musical cultures (15).

In response, I use this paper to address the following research question: how do DIY music promoters conceptualize the role of live streaming in DIY music scenes? To do so, I interviewed seven different organizers of virtual venues, or defined virtual spaces where artists routinely stream live and pre-recorded musical performances, to better understand why they organized these spaces and what they

PETER J. WOODS, PhD, is currently a research scientist in the Scheller Teacher Education Program at MIT. His work as a researcher focuses on what and how people learn through creative production with a particular interest in the creative practices of DIY noise and experimental music scenes. Recent publications can be found in the *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, *Open Cultural Studies*, and *Music Education Research*. Outside of his work as a researcher, Woods is also an active DIY musician who runs FTAM Productions and serves on the music committee at the Jazz Gallery Center for the Arts. He can be reached at peterwoo@mit.edu.

Popular Culture Studies Journal
Volume 9, Issue 2, ©2021

hoped to achieve through their efforts. Through this analysis, I argue that virtual venue organizers largely view live streaming as a cultural stopgap (albeit one that will continue to influence music communities beyond the current pandemic). While the participants reaffirmed the importance of music venues and in-person concerts, the organizers also recognized that virtual venues greatly increased the accessibility of music and expanded the boundaries of cultural production within DIY music itself. The organizers in this study therefore build on the tenets of both DIY and popular music, including the value of physical intimacy and the egalitarian approach to politics and ethics within DIY communities (Makagon; Woods, “Ethics and Practices”)

Live Streaming Concerts in the Wake of the Pandemic

Although live streamed concerts have existed for several years (see Trainer), the use of live streaming as a viable performance outlet has become significantly more important during the COVID-19 pandemic. In large part, this shift in importance has occurred because of most musicians’ previous unwillingness to perform via live streaming because of the assumed lack of authenticity or sense of “liveness” that comes with performers and audiences cohabitating a physical space (Thomas). But these assumptions do not come from nowhere. According to Ioannis Tsioulakis and Elina Hytönen-Ng, the physical embodiment of music that occurs during live performances directly contributes to the formation of music genres and the importance of live music within popular culture. In a live streaming context, that physicality disappears as artists can only interact with audiences through a screen despite musicians still playing “live.” In-person shows also allow for audience members to physically perform their identities as fans. This occurs through physical gestures (clapping, holding up lighters, etc.), dancing, and singing along to the music (Duffett; Knopke; Willis). Beyond these individual performances, “the feelings of collectivity” shared by artists and audiences often vanish in the shift to live streaming (Vandenberg et al. 5150). Live music as an influential component of popular culture, one that contributes to the formation of popular music genres and both collective and individual identities, therefore emerges from this multifaceted sense of physicality.

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the option to attend concerts in person suddenly disappeared and the physicality of live concerts vanished along with it. But rather than abandon live performance entirely, musicians turned to live

streaming to continue making music with and for each other (Onderdijk et al.). For professional musicians, this became a necessity since an increasingly large percentage of musicians rely on touring as a source of income (Zendel). In making this shift, Femke Vandenberg et al. found that artists and audiences used the shared experience of engaging in the live stream to build collective identities without physical cohabitation. Additionally, Rendell's analysis of portal shows reveals that musicians, designers and videographers recreate some of the physical affordances of music venues: the traditional spatialization of venues and the ability to converse with both audience members and artists exist within various features of digital streaming contexts (e.g., the chat feature of popular programs like Twitch). In doing so, live streaming may not completely replicate the experience of attending an in-person show, but it provides one avenue for maintaining musical communities, participatory identities, and cultural production amid social distancing.

Beyond this maintenance, most participation within live streaming concert settings does not result in the development of new forms of musical or cultural participation (despite the fact that digital mediation provides that opportunity) (Rautiainen-Keskustalo and Raudaskoski; Vandenberg et al.). Instead, participation in portal shows often leads to the attempted recreation of "established, pre-COVID-19 ritual activities, deriving from past physical experiences and verbally translated to the online environment" (Vandenberg et al. 5149). The sudden emergence of virtual iterations of established physical venues provides one example (see Canham; Long; Owens). While services like Twitch and YouTube provide musicians with the technology needed to stream their own performances whenever or however they want, many have continued to rely on the cultural model of music venues. Artists continue to perform under the banner of these virtual spaces and within the context of live streaming concerts, complete with a designated promoter/organizer who curates a lineup of other bands to play at the same place and time. How participants within popular music cultures interact with these portal shows and virtual venues, however, has not been fully explored. While scholars have conducted some research into live streaming concerts, Rendell and Vandenberg et al. both acknowledge that this specific line of inquiry often remains tied to specific musical traditions or genres (much like research into music venues themselves) and future research should continue to expand into different musical contexts. With this in mind, I now turn towards DIY music scenes to further explore one more site of research.

Ideology and Physicality in DIY Music

Defined by Kevin Wehr as simply “when ordinary people build or repair the things in their daily lives without the aid of experts,” DIY represents a broad approach to cultural production that encompasses everything from home renovations and technology design to literary publishing and crafting (1). Within the context of music, various genres and their associated communities have embraced DIY production throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, with skiffle music and the beatniks providing two early and well documented examples (Oakes; Spencer; Triggs). Yet these distinct music communities often conceptualize DIY in different ways. The rise of punk music in the late 1960s and early 1970s, for instance, infused DIY music production with a political ideology of “resistance” (to capitalism, authority, mainstream music culture, etc.) that extends into the contemporary DIY music scene (Blush; Spencer; Triggs; Verbuč). Although many scholars have positioned DIY music in opposition to popular music because of this ideology, others have shown that DIY music cultures often emerge from and within popular music contexts. According to Jones, DIY music’s “rituals and forms originate from within mainstream popular culture, and... DIY remains enthralled by music industries phenomena even as it attempts to bypass or reconfigure them” (60). Conversely, the growing musical and visual aesthetic influence of DIY music on popular culture over the past three decades reveals an intertwined relationship between these two contexts (Bestley; Oakes). While DIY represents a specific way of engaging popular music forms, it still remains part of popular culture.

Returning to the cultural politics of the punk movement, DIY music in the wake of this influential moment has historically aligned the self-sufficiency of DIY more broadly with an egalitarian sense of communalism (Blush; Reynolds). According to Shannon Perry, a DIY ethos insists “that participants become active, in whatever way possible, in challenging dominant social structures and enacting positive change in their local communities” (77-8). The DIY ethos therefore stretches beyond making music for oneself to reimagine music making and distribution outside of dominant economic models. Instead, music becomes a means towards building supportive, accessible, and self-sustaining communities (Perry; Woods, “Ethics and Practices”). This ethos then shapes the scene: rather than forming around a particular genre, DIY music (as a globally dispersed community) grows from a shared set of ideologies related to cultural production. DIY music’s

expansion beyond punk into an incredibly diverse set of musical forms during the 90s (including indie, dance music, hip hop, etc.) exemplifies this shift (Blush; Makagon; Oakes; Reynolds). Yet multiple DIY music scenes have always existed parallel to (and, at times, intertwined with) each other. For instance, the music scenes surrounding the experimental music subgenres of noise and industrial formed within the exact same channels as punk, hardcore, and post-punk (Bailey; Taylor). Rather than one single lineage, DIY music then exists as a convergence of popular musical traditions that embody a specific approach to cultural production.

To make this ideology a reality, practitioners within DIY music scenes rely on physical spaces (and specifically music venues) as a tool for building community and developing musical knowledges and traditions (Grazian; Tucker; Woods *Learning In*). To this end, DIY music mirrors the reliance on physical space for community development described by Tsioulakis and Hytönen-Ng. According to Daniel Makagon, most DIY venues fit into three broad categories: house venues, volunteer run spaces, and temporary spaces that only exist as venues for specific and limited amounts of time (e.g., a record store or skatepark hosting a show outside of their usual business hours or a spot underneath a bridge with a generator in tow). Across all categories, DIY venues embody the egalitarian politics and ethos of DIY music: the push toward a communal economic model (beyond profit driven motives) and the creative use of available resources to “make it happen” represent driving values for many DIY music venue organizers (Woods, “Ethics and Practices”).

The production of a DIY ethic then stretches beyond the organizing efforts of individuals and emerges through the material nature of DIY venues themselves. For instance, Makagon and David Verbuč argue that the lack of a stage or backstage area within most DIY venues helps produce a sense of intimacy shared between artists, audiences, and venue organizers that serves as a crucial foundation for DIY communities and creative production. By allowing audiences to exist on the same level (both physically and metaphorically) as artists, those attending DIY shows can interact with the artists and learn about making music or other aspects of DIY cultural production (Woods *Learning In*). This architectural feature then produces the material conditions needed for the “anyone can do it” mindset that historically has driven DIY culture (Blush; Reynolds; Spencer). This cannot occur if barriers prevent audiences from transitioning between viewer and producer. The intimacy generated through the physicality of DIY venues, in part, allows that to happen and further contributes to the ideological foundation of contemporary DIY music. Both

the maintenance of DIY music communities and the ability to develop identities in response to these popular music contexts therefore rests, in part, on physical venues and the interactions they house.

Live Streaming in DIY Contexts Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

Because of the importance placed on physical interaction within DIY music, the sudden disappearance of in person shows amid the COVID-19 pandemic could produce a significant impact on DIY music culture (and, by extension, popular music/culture) even if that disappearance proves temporary. If Makagon is correct and space truly does matter, then the lack of space could matter just as much. But rather than completely halt live music entirely, musicians have taken to performing via live streaming. This means that the context surrounding DIY music has changed and “when these contexts change so does the music, the music-making and the music consumption,” even if those changes are small (Wall 49). Yet for DIY music and other similar music communities, the importance placed on physicality and physical venues implies a certain level of significance in these changes (see Vandenberg et al.). To understand these changes in practice, though, requires new empirical data from the DIY music participants making these live streaming shows happen. With this in mind, I use this section to present insight from music venue organizers to address the following research question: how do DIY music promoters conceptualize the role of live streaming in DIY music scenes?

Description of Study and Research Methods. To generate data, I recruited seven different individuals who organized what I define here as “virtual venues,” or specific and defined online locations (e.g., a specific Twitch channel) that regularly hosted live streaming concerts or portal shows, in response to the pandemic (see Table 1). While the participants in this study streamed different types of performances (e.g., streaming pre-recorded videos, a “single source” video/audio feed of a solo performance or musicians performing in the same space, or a “multi-source” collaboration with geographically separated musicians playing together in real time across a network), they all self-identified as DIY promoters and enacted a DIY ethos when organizing their virtual venue. For example, the funding models implemented by the organizers mirrored those of traditional DIY spaces as described by Steven Blush, Makagon, and Verbuč: most shows were donation based and did not require audiences to pay, those that did charge upfront fees kept

prices as low as possible, and all the money collected went directly to the artists, operational costs of the space, or to various local charities.

Name	Location	Venue Name	Venue Format
Theo Gowans	Leeds, UK	Heinous Whining	Pre-recorded Video
Sam Potrykus	Boston, MA	Dorchester Art Project	Live performance (Single Source)
Jake Rodriguez	Richmond, CA	Principles of Non-Isolation in Audio	Live performance (Multi-Source)
Victoria Shen	San Francisco, CA	Evicshen Twitch channel	Pre-recorded Video Live performance (Single and Multi-Source)
Eli Smith	Milwaukee, WI	Remote Resonance	Live performance (Multi-Source)
Jason Soliday	Chicago, IL	Principles of Non-Isolation in Audio	Live performance (Multi-Source)
Andrew Weathers	Lubbock, TX	Decentralized Sonic Quarantine Network	Pre-recorded Video Live performance (Single Source)

Table 1. Information on Study Participants¹

Additionally, I focused on virtual venues that primarily booked DIY experimental music, referring to what Gilmore describes as an ideological definition that includes all musical forms that intentionally break from the tenets of Western music (e.g., free jazz, noise music, free-improv, electro-acoustic music). I chose this particular subgenre because the reliance on electronic instrumentation and nontraditional music making practices within experimental music (see Gottschalk) provides an advantage for experimental musicians over other genres in relation to live streaming: capturing and broadcasting sound from a full rock band, for instance, proves much more difficult (and more costly) than streaming the sound generated by a laptop. Because of this, a multitude of experimental music-centric virtual venues that embraced the DIY ethos of making the most of the resources one has (see Wehr) quickly emerged in the wake of the pandemic and produced a readily available population of organizers.

¹ Due to the unique nature of this population, anonymity could not be guaranteed. All participants therefore agreed to use their real names and identifying information in this study.

I also want to acknowledge my own place within this research population. As a DIY musician and concert/venue organizer myself, I have performed alongside, booked, or performed at venues run by all the participants in this study. As such, I have developed personal relationships with all the participants and consider them to be personal friends of mine. I have even performed or shown work at all but one of the virtual venues included in this study. While this may lead to some researcher bias, this familiarity also opens up an opportunity for participants to speak openly because of my established position within certain DIY music scenes.

To collect data, I conducted a single interview with each participant using a semi-structured interview approach. I modeled these interviews after Seidman's three-interview structure, despite only performing one interview per organizer. I began each interview discussing the interviewee's experience in DIY music and organizing shows or venues before moving on to their experience of and reflections on running their virtual venue. Each interview then ended with the participant reflecting on how live streaming may affect current DIY scenes and DIY scenes after the pandemic. After fully transcribing each interview, I employed an open and iterative approach to both descriptive and thematic coding (Saldaña). This allowed me to produce a conceptualization of live streaming within DIY contexts shared between virtual venue organizers. Through this analysis, I produced three larger themes related to the participant's conceptualization of virtual venues in relation to DIY music: accessibility, expanding cultural production, and virtual venues as a stopgap. I will discuss each individually within this section.

Increasing Accessibility. When discussing the issue of accessibility, the venue organizers broadly agreed that virtual venues created a much more accessible space for hosting shows. The participants related this accessibility to three sub-populations within DIY music scenes: audiences, artists, and venue/concert organizers. Regarding accessibility for artists, the participants largely focused on geographic barriers that may prevent some individuals from attending in-person shows. Theo Gowans acknowledges this when describing the experience of some of the attendees on his stream: "it was more equalizing in terms of people's physical location not being a factor. We had a few people who lived in the middle of nowhere be like, 'oh, there's never a noise gig anywhere near me that's not in London.' So it was just nice to feel like they were part of a noise gig." Beyond this geographic barrier, the participants in this study also acknowledge that virtual venues increase accessibility for people with different physical or emotional needs. According to Samuel Portykus, "the virtual realm increases accessibility. Maybe people who

can't even leave the house, they might be really psyched about virtual events." Similarly, Jake Rodriguez says, "there's a large percentage of people in the weird music world that have some amount of social anxiety and have a hard time getting themselves out to shows. You can break out of that more easily in the virtual venue because you're just some words on a screen and an icon. And I appreciate that difference." Regardless of the barrier, the participants recognized that virtual venues provide an avenue for participants who might want to attend more traditional shows but cannot, potentially expanding the borders of both local and global DIY scenes.

For artists, live streaming lifts numerous barriers associated with travelling to and performing at physical venues, creating an opportunity for performers who cannot normally go on tour (or even perform outside of their own home at all) to reach a broader audience. Andrew Weathers describes this when he says, "there's a lot of reasons that people don't tour and not everybody wants to. But I think it has been cool to see people who either don't want to or don't have access to touring to be able to present their music beyond what they reach on social media." Even for people who can tour more easily, virtual venues provide an avenue to more regularly connect with geographically separated DIY scenes. According to Jason Soliday,

most of the folks involved in this stuff are working real jobs of one sort or another. So we're, at most, touring two weeks [each year] and you're going to miss cities. If I go to the East Coast for a tour this year, that means I can't go to the West Coast, just from a logistics standpoint. If we keep these kinds of networks going through virtual shows, to me that's the best use of this technology.

Again, this positions virtual venues as a tool for expanding the borders of DIY music scenes, creating opportunities for more artists to engage in the creative production associated with this community on a larger scale.

Mirroring the accessibility live streaming provides for artists, the participants also found that virtual venues allowed them to pull from a bigger population of artists. For Eli Smith, this level of accessibility shifted his approach to booking performers: "one thing that has been really interesting has been to just think of musicians I really admire who are from out of town and ask them to be on the show. [Usually,] you're really only going to book someone if they hit you up to book a show. Otherwise, out of the blue, you're not going to have them come from wherever." Although it remains possible for people to invite out of town acts to

perform, both physical distance (as noted by Smith) and the financial costs associated with travelling discourage DIY organizers (especially those without financial backing) from doing so. Gowans spoke directly about the latter when discussing his motivations for starting his virtual venue: “there was no financial element. Especially for my bank account, that was very good, not losing however much a month. I’m not going to pay for Junko [a Japanese artist] to fly over for a gig, but if she’ll send an audio file, I won’t say no. Financially, it feels like a level playing field.” According to participants, live streaming created opportunities for more individuals to get involved in DIY music as artists, audience members, and organizers by lowering the barriers to this popular music culture.

Expanding Cultural Production. Outside of expanding who gets to participate, the organizers asserted that live streaming expands the cultural production of DIY music scenes as well. Specifically, live streaming allows performers to explore new techniques and artistic media while also providing new avenues for audience interaction. For Victoria Shen, the shift to portal shows created the opportunity to reconceptualize her musical practice:

my performances are pretty short, like fifteen minutes. I wanted to do something really long form and challenge myself, so I did an hour long electro-acoustic set. It honestly just never occurred to me to have this kind of format live. [And] when you do something more long form, you have to come up with extended techniques that I would have never explored, given the pressure of playing a live set.

Here, Shen acknowledges that the shift to virtual contexts alleviated the pressure and time constraints associated with performing in-person concerts, which led to an expanded artistic practice. Similarly, Jason Soliday’s experience improvising with other geographically separated musicians in real time also produced a new set of musical techniques:

When you’re improvising in the same room with someone else, there are other senses involved besides your hearing. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see you moving differently, and I go, “something’s going to change. I should be ready to change too.” That goes out the window when you’re playing to a screen. You lose those cues and you’ve got to focus on listening. You anticipate differently.

Because of the shifted format of multi-source live streaming performances, one in which the performers cannot always see each other as they improvise together in

real time, a new set of musical skills (what Soliday describes as “anticipating differently,” for example) take shape.

This shift in cultural production also involves incorporating other art forms into DIY music communities. Unsurprisingly, the interviewees mainly focused on incorporating film or video into musical contexts. Sam Potrykus states this succinctly when he says, “that’s one silver lining: there will be more interest and more action towards getting better video quality and video art out there.” Gowans provides an example of this shift when describing a performance by another artist that he streamed: “he did a set where he attached a GoPro next to his bike wheel [while] he was cycling around. So there was the sound of the spokes going chk-chk-chk and this strange visual of him careening around the streets. That was brilliant but of course isn’t something that would work live at all.” Again, the performance techniques of DIY musicians open up through the practice of live streaming: turning a moving bike into a musical instrument would not work as a live musical performance. Yet, within a live streaming context, this film can exist alongside other more traditional DIY music performances as the cultural production of DIY music grows.

Not only does live streaming expand the methods of cultural production for artists, but this technology also produces opportunities for audiences to both engage in and contribute to that production as well. For Shen, the shift in audience engagement aligned with her choice to stream extended performances via Twitch: “This is a really interesting way to converge those two media because game streams last for hours at a time and then you can just come in and out as you please. It’s not so book ended. So that’s where the long form sets came from.” Not only does the artist shift their practice in this example but the audience does as well. Rather than watching a performance from beginning to end, the expectation for audience members changes and viewers can come and go without disrupting the performance. Furthermore, the affordance of chat features in streaming services also provides a more active avenue for audiences to contribute to DIY cultural production. For example, Rodriguez describes a new practice that emerged in his venue: “Recently, the audiences developed this thing that they’re doing where they like to give a title to a particular portion of the live set. So they’ll timestamp it and then give a title to that particular piece of music. That’s a pretty neat development that you would only get in this sort of virtual venue where people are chatting in real time.” In titling portions of the improvised sets broadcast on this stream, the audience contributes to the experience by engaging in the active process of meaning

making that occurs within artistic performances. However, the expectation that audiences should silently listen to musicians stifles the ability for this practice to occur at in-person events.

Cultural Stopgap. Despite these benefits, the participants in this study largely framed the shift towards virtual venues as a stopgap put in place to maintain DIY music scenes through the pandemic. According to Smith, “in terms of actually still putting on shows, these events have been pretty crucial and doing a lot to sustain these scenes and enable them to have any sort of momentum at all. Even though there is something elemental missing from the virtual programming, it still seems like it’s been really vital toward sustaining people.” Expanding on this response, Rodriguez contends that one aspect of that missing elemental piece is sound itself: “I absolutely miss the physical space. I miss the physical feeling of the sound waves of a loud show. I can reproduce that with speakers that I have here, but I know not everybody is getting the same experience that I’m getting.” Alternately, Weathers describes this missing piece as a diminished ability to build connections with other DIY music participants: “I like hanging out. I like talking to people at the show. I like being able to give tapes to people and even just, post-show, go grab a burger or whatever. That is as much a part of touring as playing the show is for me. And obviously that’s not really possible. [Live streaming] doesn’t satisfy that itch.” To this end, the organizers largely agreed that the benefits of live streaming did not necessarily involve building the community itself but instead allowed the community to continue until in-person concerts could resume. For Potrykus, this means that live streaming in DIY communities will end when it is safe to attend concerts again: “It’s important to keep it going, but ultimately I’m waiting for us to be able to congregate again. I don’t have any particular wish one way or the other. I just think the virtual venue will not continue once we’re able to congregate again, for better or worse.”

However, multiple participants also saw the value in continuing to organize virtual venues alongside in-person DIY spaces. According to Soliday, the benefits of building community beyond geographic barriers holds its own specific and intrinsic value:

The community thing is important. I think it’s evolving in different ways, in parallel to real world community. There’s a bunch of English improvisers who really embraced this live streaming thing and had really active scenes beforehand. And all of a sudden, I felt like a part of their scene, even though

[we've] never met in real life. That community is important, building those connections. So, I think that'll still be there when this is over.

Rather than live streaming replacing in-person concerts or vice versa, Soliday imagines a future in which both approaches to performing co-exist and benefit each other as different types of communities form in parallel. Taking a different perspective, some of the interviewees also conceived of hybrid spaces that combined in-person and live streaming events. For Weathers, this simply means that “more people will be interested in having a real show or an in-person show and also streaming it” at the same time. For Shen, however, this hybrid space opens an avenue for new types of collaboration: “I think people are going to be projecting Zoom calls, even at in-person shows. I think there will be remote collaborations live. And if I don't see it happening, I'm going to do it.” If Shen does implement this idea, this would bring the practice of remote collaborations developed by the organizers in this study into physical venues, revealing a potential influence of live streaming on DIY music scenes once the pandemic ends.

Expanding on DIY Music Practices through Livestreaming

Placing these findings in conversation with extant literature, the participants in this study reaffirmed the importance of physical space within DIY music culture and popular music more broadly. Across the interviews, the organizers in this study acknowledged the value of physical intimacy, sound (as a physical object), and the ability to “do” community that all emerge as affordances of the materiality of music venues (Makagon; Verbuč). Conceiving of live streaming as a stopgap during the pandemic also reveals an investment in the types of community that emerge through in-person concerts and events described by Tsioulakis and Hytönen-Ng. Yet the findings in this study also reveal the value that engaging virtual contexts holds for DIY music scenes as well. By creating avenues for participants to engage novel forms of cultural production (both as artists and as audience members), virtual venues provide an opportunity for participants to build on the kinds of knowledge that define music communities, DIY or otherwise. Importantly, this sits in contrast to Vandenberg et al.'s contention that live streaming largely replicated existing rituals of popular music culture. Although that did occur to a certain degree, the organizers also made concerted efforts to reimagine what DIY music could be in a live streaming context.

Rather than contradict the importance of materiality or physicality within popular music, however, the participants' acknowledgement of the new opportunities provided by virtual venues reaffirms that importance. If, to use Makagon's phrase, space matters, then it would matter just as much if that space suddenly expanded to include a virtual context. Rather than recreate the spatialization of venues, as argued by Rendell, virtual venues and portal shows allow artists to reimagine the physicality of music venues. Through live streaming, the walls of the venue can suddenly stretch across oceans (as shown by the use of real time collaborations between geographically separated performers) and become dynamic, moving objects (via newly available performance techniques, such as attaching a camera and microphone to a bicycle). While the participants in this study do not totally abandon traditional venue spatializations, live streaming does provide one tool for reframing the physicality of music venues.

Additionally, the increase in accessibility provided by live streaming produces another tool in helping participants to enact the egalitarian politics that sit at the foundation of DIY music. While different DIY scenes and communities embody sometimes contradicting politics or ethics (Gordon), the drive for accessible and open spaces exists as a foundational aspect of DIY ethics for most participants within these music communities (and DIY venue organizers specifically) (Woods, "Ethics and Practices"). The fact that the participants in this study both recognized and celebrated the ability of live streaming to remove geographic, physical, social, and financial barriers reaffirms the importance of accessibility within DIY contexts. Furthermore, the dedication participants had to organizing their virtual venues or supporting live streaming efforts from others after in-person concerts become safe again further highlights the important role live streaming can play within DIY music's drive to increase accessibility despite the barriers described by Rautiainen-Keskustalo and Raudaskoski. The participants thereby connect current efforts to maintain DIY communities through live streaming to other studies related to the formation of globally dispersed popular music communities (and other popular culture affinity groups) via social media and other internet-based resources (Bennett and Peterson; Knopke). While some authors have argued that DIY music communities already exist and form within digitally mediated environments (see Haworth), these studies have often focused on technologies other than live streaming (e.g., social media sites). The findings from this study therefore contribute to this previous research by asserting the role that live streaming

currently plays in maintaining music communities and could potentially play once in-person concerts safely resume.

Although the participants in this study did discuss the expanded forms of cultural production afforded by livestreaming, the focus on experimental DIY music contexts (as opposed to other DIY music subgenres) does raise a question of generalizability. For instance, a certain tension exists between Jones' contention that DIY music emerges from the cultural practices of popular music and experimental music's conceptual break from Western musical tenets (see Gottschalk). While some alignments still exist, the newly developed musical practices described by participants (such as free improvisation strategies and extended techniques) may not apply to contexts outside of experimental music.

However, Rendell's research into portal shows produced at least two direct alignments with the popular music contexts he studied. First, Rendell described the use of video editing techniques during punk band Code Orange's record release show as a means toward replicating the "kinetic energy that is partially lacking due to there being no crowd and accompanying practices such as moshing, circle pits and slam-dancing" (7). Rendell therefore joins the participants in this study as positioning film and film making techniques as a novel component of cultural production within music performance contexts. Second, the use of emojis (and especially videogame-related emojis) within the chat provided a new way for audiences to respond to the performance. Again, this produces an alignment between the findings in this study and Rendell's analysis by revealing how live streaming contributed to the expansion of the ways that audiences not only engage in all popular music but actively contribute to the meaning behind and experience of live music. Although the particulars of how live streaming expands cultural production within DIY music's various subgenres may differ, the alignments discussed here provide evidence for live streaming's influence on cultural production across both the DIY and popular music landscape as a whole.

Conclusion

While this study responds to both Rendell and Vandenberg et al.'s call to investigate live streaming practices within other popular musical contexts, the findings also amplify that call and reassert the need to explore the current virtual venue and portal show landscape. While I argue here that some aspects of this study do apply to popular music contexts in general, the genre specific forms of cultural

production that emerged when artists and audiences engaged in live streaming DIY experimental music concerts imply that other musical communities and subgenres could develop their own unique and novel ways of making music. Future research can therefore build on this study by examining how musicians and audiences in other musical communities respond and adapt to live streaming contexts. Furthermore, the fact that the interviewees also predicted that live streaming and its influence will continue once in-person concerts resume sounds another call for researchers to investigate this influence, as well as in-person/live streaming hybrid models of live performance, after the pandemic ends. Live streaming holds the potential to continue shaping DIY music scenes beyond the current, digitally mediated moment. Whether DIY organizers abandon live streaming or embrace its potential to increase access and expand the borders of popular music communities, however, remains to be seen.

Works Cited

- Bailey, Thomas Bey William. *MicroBionic: Radical Electronic Music and Sound Art in the 21st Century*. 2nd ed., Belsona Books Ltd., 2012.
- Bestley, Russ. "Art attacks: Punk methods and design education." *Punk Pedagogies: Music, Culture and Learning*, edited by Gareth Dylan Smith et al., Routledge, 2018, pp. 13-29.
- Blush, Steven. *American Hardcore: A Tribal History*. 2nd ed., Feral House, 2010.
- Canham, Josephine. "How is the coronavirus pandemic changing the landscape of the local live music scene?" *Northern Noise*, 17 Jan. 2021, www.northernnoise.org/2021/01/17/how-is-the-coronavirus-pandemic-changing-the-landscape-of-the-local-live-music-scene.
- Duffett, Mark. "I scream therefore I fan?: Music audiences and affective citizenship." *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, edited by J Gray et al., New York UP, 2017, pp. 143-56.
- Gilmore, Bob. "Five maps of the experimental world." *Artistic Experimentation in Music: An Anthology*, edited by Darla Crispin and Bob Gilmore, Leuven UP, 2014, pp. 23-30.
- Gordon, Alastair R. *The Authentic Punk: An Ethnography of DIY Music Ethics*. PhD dissertation, Loughborough University, 2005, dspace.lboro.ac.uk/dspace-jspui/handle/2134/7765.
- Gottschalk, Jennie. *Experimental Music Since 1970*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

- Grazian, David. "Digital underground: Musical spaces and microscenes in the postindustrial city." *Musical Performance and the Changing City*, edited by Fabian Holt and Carsten Wergin, Routledge, 2013, pp. 141-66.
- Green, Katie Victoria. "Trying to have fun in 'no fun city': Legal and illegal strategies for creating punk spaces in Vancouver, British Columbia." *Punk & Post-Punk*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2018, pp. 75-92.
- Haworth, Robert. "Anarcho-punk: Radical experimentations in informal learning spaces." *Youth Culture, Education and Resistance*, edited by Bradley J. Porfilio and Paul R Carr, Sense Publishers, 2010, pp. 183-96.
- Jones, Ellis. "DIY and popular music: Mapping an ambivalent relationship across three historical case studies." *Popular Music and Society*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2021, pp. 60-78.
- Knopke, Ekkehard. "Headbanging in Nairobi: The emergence of the Kenyan metal scene and its transformation of the metal code." *Metal Music Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2014, pp. 105-25.
- Long, Zach. "At the hideout, streaming is the future of live music – for now." *Time Out Chicago*, 21 Aug. 2020, www.timeout.com/chicago/news/at-the-hideout-streaming-is-the-future-of-live-music-for-now-082120.
- Makagon, Daniel. *Underground: The Subterranean Culture of Punk House Shows*. Microcosm Publishing, 2015.
- Oakes, Kaya. *Slanted and Enchanted: The Evolution of Indie Culture*. 1st ed., Henry Holt and Co, 2009.
- Onderdijk, Kelsey E., et al. "Impact of lockdown measures on joint music making: Playing online and physically together." *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 12, 2021, p. 642713.
- Owens, Dylan. "Red rocks unpaused: Pandemic marketing or the future of concerts?" *The Know*, 2020, www.theknow.denverpost.com/2020/09/03/red-rocks-unpaused-streaming-concerts/244778.
- Perry, Shannon A. B. *This Is How We Do: Living and Learning in an Appalachian Experimental Music Scene*. Master's thesis, Appalachian State University, 2011, www.libres.uncg.edu/ir/asu/listing.aspx?id=8020.
- Bennett, Andy, and Richard A. Peterson. "Introducing Music Scenes." *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal, and Virtual*, edited by Andy Bennett and Richard A. Peterson, Vanderbilt UP, 2004, pp. 1-15.

- Rautiainen-Keskustalo, Tarja, and Sanna Raudaskoski. "Inclusion by live streaming? Contested meanings of well-being: Movement and non-movement of space, place and body." *Mobilities*, vol. 14, no. 4, 2019, pp. 469-83.
- Rendell, James. "Staying in, rocking out: Online live music portal shows during the coronavirus pandemic." *Convergence*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2021, pp. 1092-111
- Reynolds, Simon. *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984*, 1st edition, Penguin Books, 2006.
- Saldaña, Johnny. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 3rd edition, Sage Publications Ltd, 2015.
- Seidman, Irving. *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*, 3rd ed., Teachers College Press, 2005.
- Spencer, Amy. *DIY: The Rise of Lo-Fi Culture*. Marion Boyars, 2005.
- Taylor, Phillip. "The genesis of power electronics in the UK." *Fight Your Own War: Power Electronics and Noise Culture*, edited by Jennifer Wallis, Headpress, 2016, pp. 187-98.
- Thomas, Mark Daman. "Digital performances live-streaming music and the documentation of the creative process." *The Future of Live Music*, edited by Ewa Mazierska et al., Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2020, pp. 83-96.
- Trainer, A. "Live from the ether: YouTube and live music video culture." *The Digital Evolution of Live Music*, Chandos Publishing Oxford, 2015, pp. 71-84.
- Triggs, Teal. "Scissors and glue: Punk fanzines and the creation of a DIY aesthetic." *Journal of Design History*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2006, pp. 69-83.
- Tsioulakis, Ioannis, and Elina Hytönen-Ng. *Musicians and Their Audiences: Performance, Speech and Mediation*. Taylor & Francis, 2016.
- Tucker, Brian. "Punk places: The role of space in subcultural life." *Punkademics; The Basement Show in the Ivory Tower*, Edited by Z. Furness, Minor Compositions, 2012, pp. 203-15.
- Vandenberg, Femke, et al. "The 'lonely raver': Music livestreams during COVID-19 as a hotline to collective consciousness?" *European Societies*, vol. 23, no. sup1, Feb. 2021, pp. S141-52.
- Verbuč, David. "*Living Publicly*": *House Shows, Alternative Venues, and the Value of Place and Space for American DIY Communities*. PhD dissertation, University of California, Davis, 2014.
- Wall, Tim. *Studying Popular Music Culture*. Sage, 2013.
- Wehr, Kevin. *DIY: The Search for Control and Self-Reliance in the 21st Century*. Taylor and Francis, 2013.

Willis, Paul E. *Common Culture: Symbolic Work at Play in the Everyday Cultures of the Young*. 1st edition, Westview Press, 1990.

Woods, Peter J. "Ethics and Practices in American DIY Spaces." *Punk & Post-Punk*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2017, pp. 63-80.

Woods, Peter J. *Learning In and Through Noise: Exploring the Learning Ecologies of Experimental Music.* PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin - Madison, 2020.

Zendel, Adam. "'There are no days off, just days without shows': Precarious mobilities in the touring music industry." *Applied Mobilities*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2021, pp. 184-201.

“Just Jessica Jones”: Challenging Trauma Representation and New Trauma Metaphors in Melissa Rosenberg’s *Jessica Jones*

SEAN TRAVERS

This essay examines the representation of trauma in Melissa Rosenberg’s *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019). Rosenberg’s series has received critical acclaim, with critics commending *Jessica Jones*’ engagement with difficult topics including rape, domestic violence, and the resulting traumatic effects of these experiences; at the same time, extensive criticism has been written on the series and its representation of trauma. The most significant of these is Tim Rayborn and Abigail Keyes’ edited collection, *Jessica Jones, Scarred Superhero: Essays on Gender, Trauma and Addiction in the Netflix Series*. The collection contains a number of essays on trauma representation in *Jessica Jones*, exploring issues that include: how the series uses superpowers as an analogy for rape and sexual assault, traumatic memory and powerlessness, alcoholism, the visual strategies employed to depict trauma, and patriarchal oppression.

My essay uncovers several new ways the series depicts the traumatic experiences of marginalized groups, adding to these studies, and explores the ways in which *Jessica Jones* challenges conventional trauma representation, a topic which has yet to be examined in existing criticism. I will explore how *Jessica Jones* challenges trauma representation in two ways. First, the series undermines the dominant concept of trauma as a sudden, overwhelming event outside the range of ordinary human experience. Second, the series subverts the cultural tradition of representing ostensibly controversial types of trauma such as sexual abuse in supernatural terms; while traumatic experiences such as sexual abuse are common, they are often relegated to the realm of the supernatural in culture as a means of

SEAN TRAVERS has a PhD from University College Cork, Ireland. Her PhD thesis examines innovative representations of trauma in late twentieth- and twenty-first century American popular culture. Her research interests include popular culture, trauma fiction, horror, postmodernism, American fiction and cinema, game studies, naturalism and narratology. She has published in the *Irish Journal of American Studies (IJAS Online)* and has forthcoming publications in *The Journal of Popular Culture* and *Fantastika Journal*. She can be reached at seanjetravers@msn.com.

Popular Culture Studies Journal

Volume 9, Issue 2, ©2021

repression. Rather, I argue that *Jessica Jones* represents trauma according to feminist trauma theories, which define trauma as an ongoing experience rather than a singular extraordinary event, and that the series employs the supernatural, in the form of superhero tropes, to further explore rather than repress the psychological experience of abusive relationships on victims.

I analyze how *Jessica Jones* formulates unique supernatural metaphors to depict the following experiences: post-abuse symptoms, psychological abuse, perpetrator trauma, and structural violence such as sexism and rape culture. In doing so, this essay is significant to wider trauma studies, revealing new themes and techniques of trauma representation. Studies on trauma in popular culture frequently apply established trauma theories to popular texts. For example, Frances Pheasant-Kelly analyzes post-9/11 fantasy films such as Guillermo del Toro’s *Pan’s Labyrinth* (2006) and Andrew Adamson’s *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (2005) in terms of Michael Rothberg’s concept of multidirectional memory in *Fantasy Film Post 9/11*. Popular culture’s challenging and undermining of dominant trauma theory, and the new ways of representing trauma found in popular culture, remain under-explored topics. Dominant trauma theory needs to be challenged and undermined because it is phallogentric (see below) and prescribes both limited definitions and aesthetic models of trauma’s representation. Dominant trauma theory also often valorizes high-cultural works to the point where popular culture treatments of trauma are often dismissed (Gibbs 29), and therefore does not always effectively analyze the particular themes, techniques, and media of trauma representations in popular culture. Further, this essay is relevant to studies on American popular culture, examining how *Jessica Jones*’ trauma representation also reworks conventions of the superhero genre it writes within and how American culture has changed in its approach to sexual violence.

Trauma Studies, Phallogentrism, and Popular Culture

From the 1980s onwards, PTSD and trauma have reached “far into culture” (Gibbs 1), effecting “the rise of what is becoming almost a new theoretical orthodoxy” (Radstone 10). The dominant trauma theorist Cathy Caruth has been very influential in particular. While rehearsing a full genealogy of trauma and PTSD is beyond the scope of this article, in summary, Caruth’s trauma theory draws upon “the roots of PTSD as a concept in the experience of Vietnam veterans,” Holocaust Studies, post-structuralism and Sigmund Freud (Gibbs 3). Caruth defines trauma as

comprising the experience of a sudden, overwhelming event that is “outside the range of usual human experience” (Caruth, *Trauma* 3). Caruth claims that trauma is belated, meaning that a traumatic event is so overwhelming it cannot be assimilated into memory at the time of the event and is instead repressed and returns in the form of flashbacks and nightmares:

there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event [...] the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. (*Trauma* 4)

Caruth also defines trauma as unspeakable or unrepresentable, which means that trauma should be represented in experimental and indirect forms, that trauma “must, indeed, also be spoken in a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding” (*Unclaimed* 5). Resultantly, canonical trauma fiction tends to more strictly adhere to these aesthetic models and themes outlined in dominant cultural trauma theory. Alan Gibbs writes that “a number of reviewers and critics in the field have constructed what amounts to a critical practice based on a search for elements in literary texts which endorse accepted tenets of trauma theory,” what Gibbs calls a “checklist criticism” (38).

Furthermore, canonical trauma representations tend to be phallogentric, in part due to Caruth’s writings (Brown 104). Caruth’s definition of trauma as a sudden, overwhelming event “outside the range of usual human experience” (called the event-based or belatedness model) has come under criticism by feminist trauma scholars because it is applicable mainly to white, middle-class men and does not account for the types of trauma frequently experienced by minorities, which tend to be the more insidious, “everyday” traumas resulting from ongoing situations of distress, such as domestic violence, child abuse, poverty, and “repeated forms of traumatising violence such as sexism, racism and colonialism” (Rothberg 89). As Laura S. Brown notes:

the range of human experience becomes the range of what is normal and usual in lives of men of the dominant class; white, young, able-bodied, educated, middle-class, Christian men. Trauma is that which disrupts these particular lives, but no other [...] (104)

In turn, canonical trauma representations tend to feature white male protagonists and present traumatic experiences from their perspectives. For instance, Gibbs has identified J. D. Salinger, Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, and Tim O’Brien as

canonical trauma writers. Likewise, Renny Christopher has criticized American Vietnam writers for ethnocentricity, critiquing celebrated Euro-American writers such as Robin Moore, William Lederer, Eugene Burdick, Philip Caputo, and Tim O’Brien for stressing their own and their comrades’ suffering and ignoring that of the Vietnamese. Examples of such include Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* and Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*. In such narratives, the primary focus lies on the trauma experienced by the veterans and invading US forces instead of the trauma suffered by the civilians resulting from military action. The traumatic symptoms of the soldiers, such as guilt stemming from atrocities they have committed and their nightmares and flashbacks of these events, are foregrounded. By contrast, the far greater suffering of the civilians, such as the daily threat of rape and murder, are either briefly referred to in asides or reduced almost to the level of statistics, described along the lines of “x number of burned or decomposing bodies.” In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, for instance, Vonnegut writes highly detailed descriptions of the nightmares and hallucinations suffered by the novel’s traumatized soldier-protagonist Billy Pilgrim, while only brief referring to the digging up of rotting bodies from “hundreds of corpse mines” (204).

While numerous popular works also center on white male characters (and contain problematic tropes such as “fridging,” whereby in superhero stories a woman’s trauma is used to motivate the male superhero), popular culture since the early 2000s nevertheless involved an increased number of texts concerned with the traumatic experiences of marginalized groups, including women, ethnic minorities, and the LGBTQ+ community (Noveck). This is due to several factors, including: the increasing demand for diverse representation in contemporary popular culture and its production, the more immediate feedback on popular texts enabled by social media, and the increased creative freedom enabled by media-service providers in comparison to more traditional networks (Hastings). As Reed Hastings says of platforms such as Netflix, the company can “push the envelope with content and [allow] for innovation.”

Also significant is popular culture’s wider array of genres, particularly genres that incorporate the fantastic, including fantasy, science fiction, and horror. These genres can enable texts to generate more suitable representations for the traumatic experiences of minorities. For example, superpowers in superhero narratives can be employed as metaphors for symptoms specific to the types of trauma largely experienced by women, such as mind-control as a metaphor for domestic abuse in *Jessica Jones*, as we shall see. Additionally, I argue that popular works like *Jessica*

Jones more frequently diverge from canonical trauma representations and dominant criticism, making them more suitable to represent the experiences of the marginalized (Travers).

However, it is important to also note the long-standing and problematic tradition in American culture to repress ostensibly “taboo” topics by representing them in supernatural terms. According to Judith Herman, sexual abuse in literature has been “entirely enmeshed [...] in myth and folklore” (*Father* 3). Herman observes that “[t]he language of the supernatural [...] still intrudes into the most sober attempts to describe” traumatic experiences such as “chronic childhood trauma,” for instance (*Trauma* 98). Of course, while not all rapes and domestic abuse portrayals in popular culture are depicted using the supernatural, the types of trauma experienced by minorities, particularly women, and experiences such as domestic violence and rape, are often depicted in popular culture that is more inclined to incorporate the supernatural (such as in the popular genres of horror and fantasy). An example of such is David Lynch and Mark Frost’s *Twin Peaks* (1990-91), in which the abusive father Leland Palmer (Ray Wise) is shown to be possessed by a demon from another dimension when he rapes and murders his daughter Laura Palmer (Sheryl Lee). This can be regarded as evading family violence. Family violence in American culture is usually presented as “an external evil”, and the perpetrator either takes the form of a “marginal figure” (Luckhurst 104) or is “safely relegated to the supernatural” (117). Roger Luckhurst notes that “[t]his device means that intra-familial violence is half-acknowledged but at once covered over by exteriorising it in an abjected, monstrous figure defined as the very opposite of the family” and that “[t]his also matches the model of trauma as something done to individuals, an event that breaches the subject from outside, turning them from agents to victims” (104). The device also matches how dominant trauma theory envisions trauma as an extraordinary event to give “the illusion that it is not part of normal [American] life” (Gibbs 22).

Jessica Jones

To briefly summarize the series’ plot: *Jessica Jones* centers on a super-powered woman (Krysten Ritter) and private investigator who had a brief superhero career until she encountered Kilgrave (David Tennant), a similarly empowered man with mind control abilities that enable him to compel others into doing whatever he commands, which includes forcing victims into sexual relationships with him.

Jessica spent a torturous tenure as Kilgrave’s sex slave before eventually breaking free of his control, but the experience left Jessica suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The first season of the series centers on Kilgrave’s return and Jessica’s attempt to defeat him.

This essay focuses solely on the first season of *Jessica Jones*, as the main arc of this season is the abusive relationship between the series’ protagonist Jessica and antagonist Kilgrave. Except for the second season episode “AKA Three Lives and Counting,” Kilgrave does not feature in subsequent episodes of *Jessica Jones*, and Jessica’s relationship with this character is no longer explored, with the second and third seasons focusing on new plotlines including Jessica’s traumatic origin story and relationship with her family. The following will first examine how *Jessica Jones* challenges conventional trauma representation. I argue that the series challenges the event-based model of trauma and the cultural tradition of representing controversial topics in supernatural terms as a means of repression. Instead, *Jessica Jones* appears to formulate unique supernatural metaphors to further explore the various psychological aspects of abusive relationships in detail. I will then examine a number of these supernatural metaphors for experiences, including post-abuse symptoms, psychological abuse, perpetrator trauma, and structural violence such as sexism and rape culture.

Challenging Trauma Representation

Trauma is a significant theme in superhero narratives, with a traumatic event often used as a trigger for a turn to superheroics. According to Alyssa Rosenberg:

A theme of the [superhero] film is that these characters are in many respects [...] people who have suffered some great trauma and as a result have developed an animal alter ego who either rises above the trauma to fight for good or becomes a vengeful, embittered, and possibly insane villain, this being a classic comic-book convention. (30)

Certainly, the way comic book heroes tend to be instigated by a sudden traumatic event to use their abilities to fight crime aligns with Caruth’s belatedness or event-based model. This narrative structure is evident in *Batman*, for example. The young Bruce Wayne is affected by a singular traumatic event, the murder of his parents by a street thug in an alleyway when he was a child, and his decision to assume the Batman identity and fight crime is fundamentally a response generated by this childhood trauma. Several further dominant trauma concepts are evoked in such

depictions. These include an effort to re-grasp the traumatic event (such as how Batman fights criminals like those that murdered his parents, essentially re-enacting the traumatic event), in addition to traumatic dissociation in the form of the superheroic alter-ego. Dissociation refers to how a trauma sufferer may split off a part of their consciousness from a traumatic experience and remember it as occurring to someone else, thereby creating an “alter personality” (Herman, *Trauma* 103).

While critics such as Peter Counter, Katie Gordon, and Brandon T. Saxton note that *Jessica Jones* incorporates aspects of trauma, with Gordon and Saxton asserting that Jessica meets the full diagnostic criteria for PTSD per the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition* (DSM-5), such as flashbacks, nightmares, and alcohol disorder, how the series challenges these trauma theories and definitions of trauma has not been acknowledged. *Jessica Jones* subverts the event-based model to suit its particular depiction of trauma. As noted, the event-based model is the definition of trauma as a sudden, overwhelming event that becomes repressed and returns in the form of flashbacks and nightmares. For superheroes such as Batman, trauma is framed as a tragic side effect of their tradition, with Batman owing his entire identity and persona to witnessing his parents’ deaths and his motivating force being “to strike fear into the hearts of those who would traumatize innocents, internalizing his mental illness to the point of weaponization” (Counter).

By contrast, Jessica does not owe much to her illness beyond its symptoms, with Jessica established as obtaining her powers before her traumatization by Kilgrave. While Jessica’s powers manifested earlier after a different trauma, specifically the death of her family in a car crash of which she is the only survivor and subsequently being experimented upon while in the hospital and then adopted by a family whose mother is abusive towards her, *Jessica Jones*’ representation of its protagonist’s trauma nevertheless diverges from more conventional superhero depictions of trauma such as *Batman*. Jessica’s abuse by Kilgrave is the central traumatic event and focus of the narrative despite it not instigating her powers, while the series’ depiction of Jessica experiencing several traumatic events throughout her life is more realistically in line with the feminist model of trauma as insidious and ongoing rather than more conventionally stemming from a singular extraordinary event.

Further challenging the event-based model, Jessica is shown to experience multiple flashbacks of her traumatic experience with Kilgrave at sporadic moments

in the narrative, but these flashbacks of Kilgrave’s abuse are presented clearly; that is, they are not represented through indirect and experimental aesthetic forms. These flashbacks are represented either by having Kilgrave visually appear in a scene, incorporating a Kilgrave voice-over, or employing purple-toned lighting (purple is Kilgrave’s trademark color; in the comic the character’s skin was purple and he is also referred to as The Purple Man). In the first episode, Jessica wakes from a nightmare in which we see Kilgrave pulling back her hair and licking the side of her face. In the opening scene, Kilgrave whispers to Jessica: “You want to do it. You know you do” (“AKA Ladies Night” 00:09:39-00:09:40). At the same time, however, these flashbacks are brief, showing moments of Jessica’s life while she was under Kilgrave’s influence that imply she was sexually abused by him.

This aspect of Jessica’s flashbacks is also significant in terms of the series challenging conventional trauma representation. While fiction generally represents trauma obliquely, rape scenes tend to be represented graphically and glorify the visuals of sexual violence. In *Twin Peaks*, for example, Leland is depicted supernaturally as a demon when committing violent acts, but the scenes in which he rapes his daughter are graphic. Indeed, Rosenberg asserts that the one of the goals of *Jessica Jones* was to focus on the psychological effects of rape on survivors without resorting to graphic rape scenes: “with rape, we all know what that looks like [...] we’ve seen plenty of it on television, used as titillation [...] I wanted to experience the [psychological] damage that it does” (Hill). Jessica’s flashback scenes therefore challenge both dominant trauma theory and cultural depictions of sexual abuse.

Moreover, in the opening scene, Jessica has been hired to survey and photograph a cheating spouse and is triggered by watching a man take the woman home from a bar to which Jessica responds by reciting her childhood neighborhood street names as a coping mechanism. While this recalls the Caruthian idea that trauma can be characterized by an “increased arousal to [...] stimuli recalling the event” (Caruth, *Trauma* 4), this scene further undermines Caruth’s event-based model in that Jessica’s flashback and, indeed, the subsequent flashbacks she experiences in the series, are not belated. Jessica is never represented as having repressed her memories of Kilgrave’s abuse. Instead of forgetting these memories, Jessica is shown to use alcohol to cope with them. For instance, Kilgrave remarks when they meet later in the series that Jessica drinks too much, to which she responds that drinking is “the only way I get through my goddamn days after what

you did to me” (“AKA WWJD?” 00:12:37-00:12:38), and the series depicts Jessica excessively drinking alcohol throughout the day.

Supernatural Metaphors

In addition to challenging dominant trauma theory, *Jessica Jones* also challenges trauma fiction’s conventional employment of the supernatural. As with texts such as *Batman*, *Jessica Jones* also employs the supernatural in the form of superhero tropes in the portrayal of Jessica’s trauma but reworks them to suit the series’ particular representation of post-abuse trauma. Because Jessica’s trauma stems from sexual abuse, which is unusual in the superhero genre, we can argue that this also forms part of the series’ challenge to cultural representations of this type of trauma, as American culture traditionally employs the supernatural to conceal such controversial content. Kalí Tal, who compares American attitudes towards sexual abuse and the Vietnam War, notes that two ways America copes with trauma are via mythologization and denial (6). Likewise, Mark A. Heberle notes that similar to the national violence of American history (American political myth-making), American domestic violence has continually been subject to “mythic and ideological interpretations” (18). Instead, *Jessica Jones* employs the supernatural via superhero tropes to further explore rather than repress the different aspects of sexual abuse and the psychological effects it has on an individual, formulating unique supernatural metaphors to represent these experiences in detail and put them into strong visual context for the viewer. This idea, the series’ engagement with the superhero genre to further foreground the experience of sexual abuse and thereby challenge cultural representations of such topics, has yet to be considered. The following will explore several themes that I argue are supernatural, superheroic metaphors for experiences, including post-abuse symptoms, psychological abuse, perpetrator trauma, and structural violence such as sexism and rape culture.

Post-Abuse Symptoms. Daniel Binns notes that Jessica possesses “two disparate personalities,” the series positing its protagonist “alternately as hard-boiled antihero [...] and struggling victim” (14). However, the trope of the alter-ego is also strikingly evoked in the juxtaposition between Jessica’s possession and post-possession by Kilgrave, between Jessica while she was in a “relationship” with Kilgrave and Jessica post-breakup. Narrative flashbacks show mind-controlled Jessica as docile and feminine-dressing because Kilgrave ordered her to wear dresses that are brightly-colored not unlike the hues of traditional superhero

costumes. In both a reference to street harassment and bizarre inversion of *Batman*'s Joker, mind-controlled Jessica is also depicted as a smiling, Stepford Wife-like automaton. This contrasts with present day Jessica, who is depicted as serious and anti-social and dresses casually in a leather jacket and acid-washed jeans. The series also portrays Jessica this way after having experienced the trauma of losing her family and having powers (albeit to a lesser extent). In further contrast to traditional superheroes, Jessica's encounter with Kilgrave leads her to retire from being a superhero and open a private investigation firm, instead of trauma instigating her superheroics.

Jessica's occupation is significant regarding the series' employment of the supernatural to further explore the psychological effects of rape rather than repress it, as among the symptoms of rape victims are feelings of defectiveness (Smith and Segal). Jessica's mediocre abilities also appear significant in this regard. Jessica possesses “considerable strength” rather than super-strength (“AKA It's Called Whiskey” 00:03:43). She can stop “a slow-moving car” and describes her powers of flight as “more like jumping and then falling” (“AKA It's Called Whiskey” 00:04:03). Additionally, Jessica refuses to wear a costume and get a “superhero name,” introducing herself as “just Jessica Jones” when Kilgrave commands Jessica to tell him her alter-ego name (“AKA The Sandwich Saved Me” 00:38:11). The use of the word “just” here is important, as it recalls the culturally inherited habit of undermining women's self-confidence through the employment of words that soften their communication, resulting in women sounding defensive and apologetic rather than competent, which is especially relevant to sexual assault victims, who are subject to this type of treatment in particular.

Further, we can interpret *Jessica Jones*' eschewal of superheroics in terms of self-blame, another common symptom of post-abuse PTSD whereby the victim feels responsible for their abuse (Smith and Segal). For instance, superhero characters are frequently depicted as solitary. John DeVore points out that “superheroes are loved from a distance [...] they crouch on rooftops or float in clouds,” as evident in characters including Batman, Superman, and Spider-Man. However, such characters are shown to isolate themselves as a means of protecting loved ones from enemies. Peter Parker (Toby McGuire) says in Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* (2002), “No matter what I do, no matter how hard I try [...] the ones I love will always be the ones who pay” (01:51:34-01:51:36) and is reluctant to begin a relationship with Mary-Jane Watson (Kirsten Dunst) for this reason. By contrast, Jessica avoids others as a means of protecting them from herself due to self-blame

for what she did under Kilgrave's control (not only did Kilgrave compel Jessica into having sex with him, but he also ordered her to commit violent acts against others, the series further dramatizing the concept of self-blame and employing the supernatural to explore rather than repress the experience of sexual abuse). Jessica tells her adopted sister Trish Walker (Rachael Taylor): "I'm life-threatening, Trish. Stay clear of me" ("AKA Crush Syndrome" 00:14:32-00:14:33). Jessica also asserts that "[t]hey say everyone's born a hero. But if you let it, life will push you over the line until you're the villain" ("AKA Smile" 00:47:24-00:47:25), and that "the world thinks I'm a hero [...] maybe I can fool myself" ("AKA Smile" 00:50:08-00:50:10), believing herself to be a super-villain rather than a hero.

Psychological Abuse. Kilgrave's abuse of Jessica is also rendered in supernatural, superpowered terms. The most obvious interpretation of Kilgrave mind-controlling Jessica into a sexual relationship with him is a supernatural metaphor for an abusive relationship. As Patricia Grisafi remarks: "ask anyone who has been in an abusive relationship, and they will tell you a similar story: they have done things they didn't want to do." However, this representation is also in stark contrast to and inverts traditional depictions of domestic violence, whereby the supernatural is employed as a means of displacing the blame from the perpetrator, as critics such as Luckhurst has highlighted (104). In *Jessica Jones*, it is the victim of abuse instead of the perpetrator that is possessed by a diabolical force over which they have no control. Kilgrave puts his victims into a trance-like state, but he does not remove their emotions, memory, or consciousness when under his influence. His orders also usually include a command to feel as well as to act. In the second episode, for example, Kilgrave is shown entering a family's house, declaring: "I'm going to be your guest here indefinitely [...] you'll be delighted" ("AKA Crush Syndrome" 00:47:16-00:47:18) and the family, suddenly cheerful, invite him inside. Kilgrave's abuse victims, then, are forced to experience his commands, including rape, as something they participated in and are left doubting their perception, questioning their accountability in the assault and struggling to determine their own desires from Kilgrave's commands.

Kilgrave's powers therefore evoke rape culture and the way perpetrators may justify assault by claiming the victims secretly wanted it, as well as how rapes can be discounted because the victim's physical response to the assault is taken as consent (Weiss). This can occur when a victim freezes and disengages during the attack, or experiences physical arousal either as a defence mechanism when the painful feelings resulting from the assault are too much to bear or simply as a bodily

response to stimulation, a common but rarely discussed aspect of sexual assault. According to Suzannah Weiss, “many survivors feel as if their bodies have betrayed them for responding to unwelcome stimulation [...] imagine [feeling as though] inside something [has] betrayed you.” Jessica experiences analogous feelings, evident in the scene where she describes herself as feeling unclean and shameful to a client’s wife despite being subject to a force beyond her control: “you know what shame feels like? [...] when you’ve done something. You hurt. [...] The black oozing shit inside you, you sweat it through your skin [...] until you would do anything not to feel it” (“AKA Top Shelf Perverts” 00:05:37-00:05:40). She then briefly considers jumping under an incoming train, super-jumping onto the subway tracks and back again onto the platform. Appropriately, Kilgrave’s powers are later revealed to be a literal virus. Thus, the series unusually employs the supernatural to debunk traditional perceptions of rape by representing the perpetrator as literally tainted rather than the victim.

Kilgrave’s powers are used in the series to explore further types of psychological abuse that can occur in abusive relationships, with Kilgrave’s powers of literal mind-control being an apt metaphor for common abuser tactics, including coercive control, victim-blaming, and gaslighting (the attempt of one person to overwrite another person’s reality, a tactic employed by abusers to manipulate the victim into doubting their own perceptions and believing they are at fault for the abuser’s behavior). The superpowered representation of Kilgrave also demonstrates the traumatic experience of abusive relationships to be an ongoing and insidious experience rather than a singular extraordinary event (such as through a graphic rape scene). For instance, we are told Kilgrave held Jessica captive for several months, and flashback scenes reveal Kilgrave to have controlled all aspects of Jessica’s life. Kilgrave told Jessica what to eat (“you like Chinese” [“AKA The Sandwich Saved Me” 00:38:22]), and what to wear – further foregrounding this is his line when they first meet: “Jesus, you’re a vision [...] appalling sense of fashion but that can be remedied” (“AKA The Sandwich Saved Me” 00:37:30-00:37:32). Kilgrave undermined her self-esteem, such as in reference to her super-strength, he muses, “all the power, just like me, but not quite as good, of course” (“AKA The Sandwich Saved Me” 00:37:37-00:37:40); isolated her from her family and friends, such as when Kilgrave commanded Jessica to inform her sister Trish that everything was fine whenever she called; as well as ordered Jessica to harm herself as punishment whenever her obedience flagged. One flashback shows Jessica discovering that Kilgrave’s powers last twelve hours or until the victim is given a

new order. Jessica is free of Kilgrave's influence for eighteen seconds and considers jumping off his balcony to escape, but before she can, Kilgrave orders her to step down, in an attempt to put her under his control again. Here, Kilgrave orders Jessica to cut off her ear because she briefly hesitated when he told her to step down from the balcony, but stops her when she begins to obey: "Why didn't you listen to me? [...] You never appreciate anything I do for you. If you can't listen to me, you don't need ears. Cut them off [...] Stop. It's alright" ("AKA 1,000 Cuts" 00:29:35-00:29:40).

Kilgrave asserts that the balcony incident is evidence that Jessica wanted to stay with him. Kilgrave says that "It had been twelve hours, I timed it, I hadn't told you to do anything. And then for eighteen seconds, I wasn't controlling you and you stayed with me [...] because you wanted to" ("AKA 1,000 Cuts" 00:26:56-00:27:00) and that Jessica "didn't jump" ("AKA 1,000 Cuts" 00:29:14), despite Jessica showing him her ear scars and insisting that she "wasn't fast enough [to jump]. Getting you out of my head was like prying fungus from a window. I couldn't think" ("AKA 1,000 Cuts" 00:29:18-00:29:20). There are a number of further scenes in which Kilgrave similarly attempts to manipulate Jessica, in these instances making Jessica feel responsible for his violent acts. For instance, Kilgrave kidnaps another young woman, Hope Shlottman (Erin Moriarty), which he claims he did to send a message to Jessica. Kilgrave keeps Hope hostage for weeks, raping her numerous times, and then orders Hope's parents to hire Jessica to find their daughter (after which he compels Hope to murder her parents). Jessica finds Hope in a hotel room having been told by Kilgrave not to move for "five hours and twenty one minutes" ("AKA Ladies Night" 00:44:13). Hope is literally paralyzed on a bed screaming "I can't leave!" (00:45:08) in this scene as Jessica forces her out of the room; this is also a powerful supernatural metaphor for an abusive relationship and associated feelings of entrapment. Later, Kilgrave compels a police officer to murder Trish and orders Jessica's neighbor Ruben (Kieran Mulcare), who is infatuated with Jessica and frequently brings banana bread to her apartment (much to Jessica's annoyance), to slit his own throat. When Jessica confronts Kilgrave about these acts, saying "you've been torturing me" ("AKA Top Shelf Perverts" 00:41:52) by killing innocent people, Kilgrave tells her that he did so because he loves her, "I knew you were insecure but that's just sad! [...] I'm not torturing you, why would I? I love you" (00:41:56-00:41:58). Kilgrave claims he murdered Ruben as a favor to Jessica because she found him irritating: "Come on! You cannot pretend he didn't irritate you" ("AKA Top Shelf Perverts" 00:43:01-00:43:03).

Perpetrator Trauma. In its depiction of Jessica and Kilgrave’s abusive relationship, *Jessica Jones* also formulates new supernatural metaphors to explore perpetrator trauma. Despite criticism focusing on Kilgrave as an abuser, the perpetrator model has been surprisingly excluded from critical discussion on this character. This model of trauma focuses on the traumatic experience of the perpetrator and is both characterized by “an inversion of perpetrator/victim status” (Gibbs 19) and “linked to the notion of agency, in particular denial of agency, as a means to slough off responsibility” (Gibbs 247). Again, this kind of representation is often found in American war literature, such as *In the Lake of the Woods* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*, in which texts situate narrator-protagonists, often members of US forces and perpetrators of extreme violence, as simultaneously individuals in a position of limited agency and therefore trauma victims. According to Tal, “[t]he soldier in combat is both the victim and victimizer,” while Gibbs notes that “whatever deplorable actions in which [these individuals] are directly or indirectly involved, they are nevertheless also simultaneously victims of traumatizing circumstances over which they have no control” (167). This practice of conflating the perpetrator and victim is foregrounded and undermined in several ways in *Jessica Jones*.

As noted, Kilgrave also orders victims to commit crimes, including murder. In other words, Kilgrave not only makes his victims believe they are responsible for his actions and feel like villains but also literally turns them into villains who carry out his atrocities. During Jessica’s time under Kilgrave’s control, Kilgrave became aware that a woman named Reva Connors (Parisa Fitz-Henley) was previously in possession of a hard drive containing information on the experiments performed during his childhood that generated his powers. Having compelled Connors to give him the hard-drive, Kilgrave orders Jessica to kill Connors (“take care of her” [“AKA You’re a Winner!” 00:29:36]), which Jessica obeys by punching Connors in the chest and stopping her heart; significantly, killing Reva enabled Jessica to break away from Kilgrave’s control and escape him, evoking how victims often leave their abusive partners when they begin to hurt others, such as the victim’s children. Kilgrave frequently reminds Jessica of this event and his attempt to displace the responsibility for his actions. An example of such is when Kilgrave insists that Jessica killed Reva of her own free will, asserting, “I did not tell you to kill Reva. If you remember I said take care of her, not kill her, you chose to punch her” (“AKA WWJD?” 00:22:55-00:22:57), attempting to position Jessica as the perpetrator of this act.

The inversion of perpetrator-victim status in trauma fiction can also take the form of depicting the perpetrator-protagonist as having a traumatic past or childhood trauma, evident, for example, in the sympathetic portrayal of John Wade as a child seeking his father's love and attention in *In the Lake of the Woods*. This convention often occurs in the depiction of super-villains as well, such as in the characterization of Lex Luther (Michael Rosenbaum) in Alfred Gough and Miles Millar's *Smallville*, who is shown to be caught in a meteor shower as a child that renders him completely bald and subsequently experiencing a difficult relationship with his father. These ideas are again undermined in *Jessica Jones*, the series asserting instead that a traumatic past is neither an excuse nor motivation to traumatize others. Kilgrave tries to gain Jessica's sympathy and excuse himself from Jessica's accusations of rape: "I never know if somebody is doing what they want or what I tell them to [...] you've no idea. I have to painstakingly choose every word that I say" ("AKA WWJD?" 00:29:22-00:29:25). He then shows Jessica a video of the painful experiments performed upon him as a child by his parents: "tell me which one of us was truly violated [...] while your dad played with you on the front lawn, my dad prepped me for my fourth elective surgery [...] this power was forced upon me" (00:30:33-00:30:27). Kilgrave claims that his parents then abandoned him because of his resulting abilities. Despite this, Jessica refuses to sympathize with Kilgrave, saying, "You blame bad parenting? My parents died [in a car accident] and you don't see me raping anyone [...] your parents had nothing to do with it" ("AKA WWJD?" 00:29:48-00:29:52) (further significant is that Jessica also obtained her powers via forced experimentation after the accident). Furthermore, Kilgrave's tragic backstory is revealed precisely to be a lie to garner sympathy, which appears an overt critique of the sympathetic portrayals of violent perpetrators found in trauma fiction. Jessica finds Kilgrave's parents, who inform her that the experiments were an attempt to save him from a fatal disease, after which Kilgrave's childhood tantrums turned them into slaves. Kilgrave's parents eventually fled because he ordered his mother to hold a hot iron to her face.

Structural Trauma: Sexism and Rape Culture

The series further uses supernatural metaphors to subvert the myths that perpetuate rape culture. The series' representation of abusive relationships and rape culture extends beyond the relationship between Jessica and Kilgrave. As with many rape victims, Jessica gets blamed for Kilgrave's actions by other characters in the series,

and her experiences are subject to endless scrutiny about their legitimacy. According to CarrieLynn D. Reinhard and Christopher J. Olson, whose essay in *Jessica Jones, Scarred Superhero* analyzes *Jessica Jones*'s employment of superpowers as an analogy for rape and sexual assault in relation to Netflix's direct-to-streaming model and its audience, the series addresses “a problem that contemporary women face on a daily basis: rape culture” (83). Justin Wigard's addition to this collection similarly explores the insidious and invisible villainy of Kilgrave, arguing that this represents patriarchal oppression that Jessica must fight against. An aspect of *Jessica Jones*'s representation of rape culture that has yet to be identified by critics, however, is its representation through Kilgrave's control of other characters. Among what we could call Kilgrave's super-weapons is compelling other people to attack Jessica, such as when she breaks into Kilgrave's apartment to capture and contain him. Here, Kilgrave orders the previous residents to fight off Jessica, who emerge from the varying rooms in the building armed with baseball bats and knives. In the season finale when Jessica is in the hospital, Kilgrave compels “everyone” in the building to kill her, announcing over the intercom that Jessica is “a dangerous virus [that] has [...] spread throughout the building [...] her poison will destroy you all unless you find and kill her first” (“AKA Smile” 00:09:32-00:09:36). Again, we have Kilgrave displacing his crimes to Jessica (as it is he who emits a virus), and as with the previous scene, each of the patients and hospital staff begin searching for Jessica to assault her with medical equipment. These sequences of large groups hunting Jessica and attacking her under the orders of a man dramatizes the wider culture of victim-blaming, the mob mentality of patriarchal society who blame women for being raped and side with the perpetrator despite neither witnessing the attack nor possessing any knowledge of it. For example, acquaintances of the victim or individuals who learn about a rape in the media may accuse the victim of inviting the rape due to her clothing, alcohol intake, or commuting alone, and believe the perpetrator when they claim that they were either drunk, so overcome with sexual desire that they were incapable of controlling their actions, or the act was consensual.

Further driving home the pervasiveness of rape culture mentality, the series includes an analogous “witch-hunt” sequence whereby a similar group of individuals turn on Jessica, blame her for Kilgrave's actions, and rescue Kilgrave from Jessica's containment, except these people are not under Kilgrave's influence. Ruben's sister Robyn (Colby Minifie) blames Jessica for her brother's murder, claiming Jessica has powers of mind control and that she used her brother for sexual

favors (again, Jessica is blamed for a man's fixation with her, as it was Ruben who was infatuated with Jessica). When Robyn disrupts a Kilgrave support group set up by Jessica's neighbor Malcolm Ducasse (Eka Darville) (who Kilgrave compelled to spy on Jessica; all members of the support group have been compelled by Kilgrave in some manner), she asks: "Would this Kilgrave have hurt any of you if Jessica hadn't pissed him off? That's what I'm piecing together from all this goddamn sharing. Each of his atrocities can be traced back to her [...] [Jessica] wants to control you [...] I'm gonna [track] her down" ("AKA 1,000 Cuts" 00:33:02-00:33:06). The group agrees, breaks into Jessica's apartment, beats Jessica to the ground (Robyn shouts, "you killed Ruben, you bitch!" ("AKA 1,000 Cuts" 00:35:41) and knocks her unconscious with a wooden plank), and sets Kilgrave, whom Jessica has tied up in her room, free. Robyn tells the group, "she has a captive!" (00:36:05) and reassures Kilgrave, "you're gonna be okay [...] you're gonna be fine," (00:36:09) evoking how perpetrators, with the support of society, escape punishment for their crimes.

Kilgrave's powers of mind-control are also frequently refuted by other characters in the series. As Counter notes, "there is a stigma to having been used by Kilgrave [...] victims are silenced by their own guilt and embarrassment, as well as the incredulity of others." Similarly, Wigard observes the significance of the series' reversal of male-female comic book powers regarding its representation of patriarchy, whereby male characters typically possess an active physicality associated with their abilities, such as super-strength, and female characters usually possess some form of mental power, such as telekinesis and mind-control:

Jessica Jones represents something rather unique in the Marvel Cinematic Universe: a feminist superhero whose conflicts expose problematic aspects of gender relations in society. She has the power of super strength, yet the villainy she faces is insidious and nearly invisible, which can be viewed as representations of patriarchy. (10)

However, what has not been recognized in these analyses is the significance of *Jessica Jones*' genre.

Jessica Jones is a superhero narrative, a Marvel adaptation that takes place in the same universe as *The Avengers* and is set after the events of the first film *Avengers: Assemble* (2012), in which a team of superheroes including Iron Man (Robert Downy Jr.), Thor (Chris Hemsworth), Captain America (Chris Evans), Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson), The Hulk (Mark Ruffalo), and Hawkeye (Jeremy Renner) battle aliens that emerged from the sky in central New York.

Despite this, individuals in *Jessica Jones* refuse to believe Jessica about Kilgrave’s powers, evoking traditions of mythologization and denial when it comes to taboo topics such as rape and domestic violence, and further emphasizing the absurdity of society’s incredulity towards rape victims. For instance, Jessica’s boyfriend, Luke Cage (Mike Colter), does not believe in mind-control, despite being super-powered himself (medical experiments gave him unbreakable skin). In reference to Hope killing her parents, Luke says, “Some guy made her do it? [...] Maybe she’s nuts” (“AKA It’s Called Whiskey” 00:22:58-00:23:01). Here, Jessica attempts to convince Luke that Hope was mind controlled by referring to his “unbreakable skin,” (00:23:35) but Luke argues that “you can see my skin, you can touch it but you have no idea what the mind is thinking” (00:23:36-00:23:38). This response is significant, evoking how it is particularly difficult for abuse victims to cultivate credibility and the insidious trauma produced by structural violence such as sexism and rape culture.

The incredulity towards Hope’s claims also underscores society’s double standards regarding sexual assault and credibility. When Hope’s lawyer Jeri Hogarth (Carrie-Anne Moss) dismisses Hope’s accusations of mind-control against Kilgrave as “delusions” (“AKA It’s Called Whiskey” 00:26:21) and “unprecedented” (00:26:34), Trish argues that “the city [was] attacked by aliens [...] Buildings were destroyed. People were killed. Perhaps what happened to Hope has happened before” (00:26:36-00:26:40). However, as with real-life rape cases, Jeri recommends that one woman’s accusation is not enough to be credible, that multiple women need to come forward: “if there were other people who feel they have been controlled by this Kilgrave character they are more than welcome to contract my office but it is more likely that my client has experienced a psychotic break” (“AKA It’s Called Whiskey” 00:26:47-00:26:51). This is in striking contrast to Kilgrave, who can singularly convince hordes of people of his innocence and Jessica’s culpability with literally just a few words, regardless of whether he uses his supernatural abilities.

Conclusion

This essay examined how *Jessica Jones* challenges dominant trauma theory and formulates new supernatural metaphors, in the form of superhero tropes, to further explore the varying psychological experiences of abusive relationships. While this essay focused on the representation of abusive relationships in *Jessica Jones*, and

therefore solely concentrated on the first season in which this topic is the main theme, the series continues to employ the supernatural to further explore controversial topics, as well as challenge dominant trauma theory, in its subsequent seasons. For instance, Jessica kills Kilgrave in the first season finale, but continues to experience trauma in the second and third seasons from other events, including her traumatic origin story, the death of her mother, and the arrest of her sister Trish, the series again rejecting the dominant event-based model, as well as conventional narrative trajectories regarding the therapeutic working through of trauma. Indeed, in the closing scene of the finale, Jessica experiences a flashback of Kilgrave (as noted, the character no longer features in the series and is only briefly referred to, and in this scene Kilgrave is represented through a voice-over and his signature purple-toned lighting rather than physically appearing).

Ultimately, the aim of this essay is to both expand existing criticism on the series' employment of the supernatural, as well as add to it in terms of introducing the idea that *Jessica Jones* not only represents trauma but more innovatively challenges conventional trauma representation. In doing so, this essay contributes to wider trauma studies, uncovering new themes and techniques of trauma representation, as well as studies on American popular culture, examining how *Jessica Jones*' trauma representation also reworks conventions of the superhero genre it writes within and how American culture has changed in its approach to sexual violence.

Works Cited

- “AKA Ladies Night.” Melissa Rosenberg. *Jessica Jones*. Netflix, 2015.
- “AKA Crush Syndrome.” Micah Schraft. *Jessica Jones*. Netflix, 2015.
- “AKA It’s Called Whiskey.” Liz Friedman. *Jessica Jones*. Netflix, 2015.
- “AKA The Sandwich Saved Me.” Dana Baratta. *Jessica Jones*. Netflix, 2015.
- “AKA You’re a Winner!” Edward Ricourt. *Jessica Jones*. Netflix, 2015.
- “AKA Top Shelf Perverts.” Jenna Redback and Micah Schraft. *Jessica Jones*. Netflix, 2015.
- “AKA WWJD?.” Scott Reynolds. *Jessica Jones*. Netflix, 2015.
- “AKA Sin Bin.” Jamie King and Dana Baratta. *Jessica Jones*. Netflix, 2015.
- “AKA 1,000 Cuts.” Dana Baratta and Micah Schraft. *Jessica Jones*. Netflix, 2015.
- “AKA Smile.” Jamie King and Scott Reynolds. *Jessica Jones*. Netflix, 2015.
- “AKA Three Lives and Counting.” Jennifer Lynch. *Jessica Jones*. Netflix, 2018.

- Batman*. Tim Burton. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1989.
- Binns, Daniel. “‘Even you can break’: Jessica Jones as femme fatale.” *Jessica Jones, Scarred Superhero: Essays on Gender, Trauma and Addiction in the Netflix Series*, edited by Tim Rayborn and Abigail Keyes, McFarland, 2018, pp. 13-27.
- Brown, Laura S. “Outside the range.” *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, pp. 3-12.
- Caruth, Cathy. “Trauma and experience: Introduction.” *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, pp. 3-12.
- . *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.
- Counter, Peter. “4 reasons *Jessica Jones* is the definitive post traumatic hero.” *That Shelf*, 28 Nov. 2015, thatshelf.com/4-reasons-jessica-jones-is-the-definitive-post-traumatic-hero.
- DeVore, John. “The loneliness of superheroes.” *Medium*, 28 Aug, 2018, medium.com/humungus/the-loneliness-of-superheroes-cac2e7c8bc01.
- “Dispute Between Brothers.” *Twin Peaks*. Dir. Tina Rathborne. 8 Dec. 1990. David Lynch and Mark Frost. CBS Television Distribution, 1990-1991.
- Gibbs, Alan. *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives*, Edinburgh UP, 2014.
- Gordon, Katie, and Brandon Saxton. “AKA *Jessica Jones* & PTSD: Psychological report.” *Jedi Counsel*, 1 Oct. 2016, jedicounselpodcast.podbean.com/e/counselcast-13-jessica-jones-and-posttraumatic-stress-disorder.
- Grisafi, Patricia. “*Jessica Jones* & my experience as a survivor.” *Bustle*, 1 Dec. 2015, www.bustle.com/articles/126731-what-jessica-jones-got-right-about-my-experience-as-a-survivor.
- Hastings, Reed. “6 things you need to know about how Netflix built its powerful culture.” *Entrepreneur*, 29 June 2017, www.entrepreneur.com/article/296209.
- Heller, Joseph. *Catch-22*, The Modern Library, 1961.
- Heberle, Mark A. *A Trauma Artist: Tim O’Brien and the Fiction of Vietnam*, U Iowa P, 2001.
- Herman, Judith Lewis. *Father-Daughter Incest*. Harvard UP, 1981.
- . *Trauma and Recovery*, BasicBooks, 1997.

- Hill, Libby. "Krysten Ritter on playing anti-superhero, Jessica Jones." *Los Angeles Times*, 18 Nov. 2015, www.latimes.com/entertainment/tv/la-et-st-krysten-ritter-jessica-jones-20151118-story.html.
- Luckhurst, Roger. *The Trauma Question*, Routledge, 2008.
- Marvel's Avengers Assemble*. Joss Whedon. Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2012.
- Noveck, Jocelyn. "Pop culture in 2010s marked gains in diversity, inclusion." *AP News*. 24 Dec. 2019, apnews.com/article/ellen-degeneres-ap-top-news-sarah-kate-ellis-movies-ca-state-wire-aal1c054115fee7d1964cb601fc483f87.
- O'Brien, Tim. *In the Lake of the Woods*, Penguin Books, 1995.
- Radstone, Susannah. "Trauma and screen studies: Opening the debate." *Screen*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2001, pp. 188-93.
- Reinhard, CarrieLynn D., and Christopher J. Olson. "AKA Marvel does darkness: Jessica Jones, rape allegories and the Netflix approach to superheroes." *Jessica Jones, Scarred Superhero: Essays on Gender, Trauma and Addiction in the Netflix Series*, edited by Tim Rayborn and Abigail Keyes, McFarland, 2018, pp. 83-104.
- Renny, Christopher. *The Viet Nam War/The American War*. U Massachusetts P, 1995.
- Rosenberg, Alyssa. "What does it mean for Catwoman to be an abuse survivor?" *Think Progress*. 8 Aug. 2011, archive.thinkprogress.org/what-does-it-mean-for-catwoman-to-be-an-abuse-survivor-92ae59a86ab3.
- Rothberg, Michael. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonisation*. Stanford UP, 2009.
- Smallville*. Alfred Gough and Miles Millar. Warner Bros. Domestic Television Distribution, 2001-2011.
- Smith, Melinda, and Jeanne Segal. "Recovering from rape and sexual trauma." *HelpGuide*. Sept. 2020, www.helpguide.org/articles/ptsd-trauma/recovering-from-rape-and-sexual-trauma.htm.
- Spider-Man*. Sam Raimi. Sony Pictures Releasing, 2002.
- Tal, Kalí. *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*, Cambridge UP, 1996.
- Travers, Sean. "'Sceptical scriptotherapy and fantastical metaphors': Trauma in Brit Marling and Zal Batmanglij's *The OA* (2016-2019)." *Fantastika Journal*, forthcoming.
- Vonnegut, Kurt. *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Dial Press, 2005.

Weiss, Suzannah. “I didn’t want to be aroused by my sexual assault, but I was.”

The Establishment, 29 Aug. 2018, theestablishment.co/i-didnt-want-to-be-aroused-by-my-sexual-assault-but-i-was/index.html.

Wigard, Justin. “‘Is that real or is it just in my head?’ ‘Both’: Chronotopal representations of patriarchal villain and the feminist antihero in Marvel’s *Jessica Jones*.” *Jessica Jones, Scarred Superhero: Essays on Gender, Trauma and Addiction in the Netflix Series*, edited by Tim Rayborn and Abigail Keyes, McFarland, 2018, pp. 221-34.

Conceptual Blending in Presidential Politics: How *The Great Gatsby* Explained Donald Trump, 2015-2018

E. FLETCHER MCCLELLAN AND KAYLA GRUBER

When people confront new or unfamiliar phenomena, cognitive studies suggest the importance of metaphors to aid comprehension. Seeking to understand Donald Trump's political appeal, political and cultural commentators found *The Great Gatsby* to be a useful metaphor and framework for discussion. Sympathetic treatments of Trump compared the mogul to Jay Gatsby, whom they interpreted as a self-made, rags-to-riches wonder. Trump opponents saw Trump and Gatsby as fellow con men. Moreover, they likened the Republican candidate to Tom Buchanan, Gatsby's antagonist and the personification of white privilege.

Applying the conceptual blending theory of cognition (Fauconnier and Turner), our study examined the nature and number of references to *Gatsby* in stories about Donald Trump as catalogued in Google from June 2015, when Trump formally announced his candidacy for the Republican Party presidential nomination, until the end of 2018, the midpoint of his presidency. We found that favorable Trump-*Gatsby* comparisons were prevalent in 2015 and most of 2016. However, after Trump's election in November 2016, the *Gatsby* connections to Trump became strongly unfavorable. We attributed the increase in negative references to competition from political rivals for control of the narrative and Trump's controversial behavior as candidate and president.

Contributing to the weaponization of literary references was the polarized political climate. The "broadening of the culture wars" (Grunwald) under Trump meant that virtually everything in popular culture, from classic literature to the latest TikTok trend, was politicized. Thus, instead of promoting shared understanding among political elites and citizens, metaphors in political rhetoric may instead reinforce divisions between Red and Blue America.

E. FLETCHER MCCLELLAN is professor of political science at Elizabethtown College. McClellan can be reached at mccllelef@etown.edu.

KAYLA GRUBER is a 2018 political science graduate of Elizabethtown. An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the annual meeting of the Northeastern Political Science Association, November 2018, Montreal, Canada.

Popular Culture Studies Journal
Volume 9, Issue 2, ©2021

The Theoretical Approach of the Study

To understand how cultural references were used to explain a prominent political figure, a discussion of cognitive heuristics and, specifically, the role of metaphor is needed. Under conditions of “low-information rationality,” citizens navigate the political domain by drawing from simplified “information shortcuts and rules of thumb” (Bougher 145). Analogy, which involves applying previous knowledge toward understanding a new or unfamiliar target, is one such heuristic device. Inferences are drawn from the familiar or source to fill gaps in knowledge about the target (Fauconnier and Turner; Lakoff and Johnson).

Metaphoric reasoning is a type of analogy, using knowledge from one domain, such as sports, to understand unknown, abstract, or conceptual targets in another domain, such as politics, e.g., “Biden is the front-runner in the race for the Democratic presidential nomination.” People employ metaphors to process information efficiently and creatively, such as to achieve compression (Fauconnier and Turner). For instance, “Rosebud” may or may not have told us very much about the life of Charles Foster Kane in *Citizen Kane*, but it represented a cognitive need to compress a multitude of facts or observations about an object into a simple word, phrase, or idea.

Metaphors shape and constrain understanding by framing it within previous knowledge structures. Pre-existing frames in thought, or *conceptual metaphors*, may aid or inhibit cognitive discernment. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson suggest that conceptual metaphors unconsciously or implicitly influence the way we think and act. For example, the phrase “argument is war” induces us to think of argument more in win-or-lose terms than as a process for mutual understanding. *Framing metaphors* like “war on terror” or “anchor baby” have influenced attitudes on high-profile issues (Boeynaems et al. 126; Lederer), while the “corporation-as-person” image is embedded in the law (Lakoff and Johnson 17).

As Lori Bougher explains, the more abstract, complex, or unfamiliar the topic, the more likely metaphors will be employed. For that reason, metaphors are used extensively in academic writing and for educated audiences. Relatedly, most research on the political uses of metaphors focuses on their use by elites rather than by ordinary citizens. The influence that metaphor has upon public opinion depends on such factors as the credibility of the author, extent of deliberation, and the absence or presence of political competition (Bougher).

In our study, we analyze how a landmark in the cultural domain – F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* – was used to help leaders and citizens understand a newcomer to the political domain – Donald Trump. The structure of this metaphor is somewhat unusual, compared to classic studies in cognitive reasoning. As a literary work, *Gatsby* is familiar to a wide audience. However, the novel and its characters hold multiple meanings, as the next section explains. Thus, the source is familiar but its meaning is indeterminate.

As a target, Donald Trump is more recognizable to people than *Gatsby*. However, Trump’s announcement of his presidential candidacy in June 2015 led many observers to take a second look, asking whether Trump was a serious candidate and what kind of president he might be. In this new context, the familiar target was a political unknown.

To comprehend the cognitive process through which metaphors are joined, we turn to conceptual blending theory. According to Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, new or revised concepts are created by an integration network of small conceptual containers called mental spaces. At least two mental spaces are inputs, or specific situations or ideas, and a third container is a generic space, which comprises a structure common to the inputs. Then, the spaces are combined to create a fourth, blended space that is a new or emergent structure representing a new composition or frame. Thus, new meanings are made from old ones.

Applying the model to our study, we examine how two inputs (*Gatsby* and Donald Trump, the business tycoon and celebrity) occupying an overlapping or generic space (reinvention of personas to achieve personal goals) generate a blended space (Donald Trump the politician and president). When we “run the blend” or imagine various outcomes of the interaction among input and generic spaces, different composites of Trump the political leader emerge. We will show what these assorted blends looked like during the 2015-18 period.

The Composition of Mental Spaces

Input I: Donald Trump, Business Mogul and Showman. The first input to be discussed is Donald Trump. Prior to entering the political arena, Trump gained fame as a businessperson and showman (Calmes). Beginning in the 1970s, he has consistently been in the public eye for his properties, resorts, bankruptcies, marriages, publicity stunts, controversial opinions, and decade-long stint as star of the reality television show, *The Apprentice*.

Born to a successful real estate developer, Trump grew up without working class connections or challenges. He benefited from an elite education and avoided military service in Vietnam (D'Antonio, *Never Enough* 35-54). He attained billionaire status through high-profile projects, ruthless company practices, alliances with shady business partners, and aggressive marketing of a brand name associated with luxury and success (Swanson).

Furthermore, Trump appeared to have no guiding political philosophy. Early in his career, he donated to Democrats, expressing liberal issue positions (Murse). As Trump's political ambition grew, he became a Republican. Never known as a progressive on race (Itkowitz and Brice-Saddler), he staked strong positions opposing free trade and immigration reform and voiced doubts about President Obama's U.S. citizenship status (Barbaro).

During the 2016 campaign, Trump was aware that his personal narrative might not appeal to ordinary people. Repeatedly, he stated he built an empire by himself with the help of a \$1 million loan from his father, Fred Trump (Mosbergen). At a February 26, 2016, news conference, he said:

He [Marco Rubio] also said I got \$200 million from my father. I wish. I wish. I got a very, very small loan from my father many years ago. I built that into a massive empire and I paid my father back that loan. [...] The number is wrong by a factor of hundreds of – I mean, by a fortune. I got a small loan. I started a business. (Kessler)

Trump's claim did not go unchallenged while he ran for president. About a week after the press conference, the *The Washington Post Fact Checker* found that Fred Trump guaranteed a \$70 million bank loan for construction of the Grand Hyatt in 1978, his son's first major project in Manhattan. Donald Trump obtained additional loans and loan guarantees and could borrow millions from his inheritance before his father died, the *Post* revealed. Trump was assigned "Four Pinocchios," the Fact Checker's maximum grade for falsity (Kessler).¹

Therefore, candidate Trump had an image problem. Reputed to be a strong business leader, he needed to show that he could transfer his CEO skills to the political sphere. Furthermore, Trump had to convince people he understood their problems. If he could, Trump would benefit politically. An analysis of polls in August 2016, October 2017, and June 2018 showed one-half of those sampled did

¹ In fall 2018, the *The New York Times* revealed that, starting when he was a toddler, Trump inherited over \$400 million from artful (and possibly illegal) tax avoidance schemes (Barstow et al.).

not know Trump came from a wealthy family. Those who were misinformed about Trump's background were more likely to say he was empathetic and a skilled businessperson (see McDonald et al.).

Input II: The Great Gatsby, American Dreamer. Serving as the second input, the story and characters of *The Great Gatsby* reflected on Donald Trump's self-made claims. Why *Gatsby*? First, the novel appeals to both elites and a larger audience. The Fitzgerald masterpiece is one of the top ten titles assigned in high school English classes (second only to *The Crucible* as most required for 11th graders) (Stotsky) and has sold nearly 30 million copies worldwide (Italie). In 1998, the editorial board of *Modern Library* voted the book second to James Joyce's *Ulysses* as the finest English-language novel published in the 20th century (Corrigan 210).

Second, *The Great Gatsby* is a perennial. Each generation seems to experience a *Gatsby* revival, beginning with the World War II soldiers who received thousands of Armed Services Edition *Gatsby* paperbacks (Corrigan 234). The novel has produced five film adaptations, multiple plays and readings, a ballet, an opera, and countless artistic homages (Corrigan 266-70). Though the 2013 film version directed by Baz Luhrmann divided critics, it earned \$353 million at the box office, ranking among the top 20 grossing movies in the U.S. and globally that year.²

Third, *Gatsby* became a useful tool by which political and cultural elites could understand Trump's appeal to less-educated voters. Comparing Trump, the reputed wheeler-dealer, to Jay Gatsby, the dreamer and achiever, Trump's promoters and admirers wanted voters to believe that Trump was the vehicle by which they too could achieve the American Dream. To many, the transformation of James Gatz, born to a poor farm family in North Dakota, into Gatsby, big shot and social magnet to the beautiful people of New York City, is a tribute to individual enterprise and the power of reinvention.³

However, Jay Gatsby was also an impostor who became rich through bootlegging and connections with organized crime. Similarly, mobsters allegedly helped Trump acquire and build his properties in Manhattan and Atlantic City

² Per www.boxofficemojo.com/year/world/2013.

³ Another facet of the rags-to-riches narrative of the book is that, for all his wealth, Gatsby remained an outsider to New York high society. Even if Gatsby's financial dealings were above board, he was new money and not to the manor born. This fit the Trump saga of the striver from Queens who sought to gain acceptance from but was rejected by the Manhattan establishment, which disdained his crudity, ostentatiousness, and hunger for publicity (Coppins).

(Johnston). Russian connections enabled him to survive bankruptcy and, as some suspected, win the presidential election (see Jamieson). Thus, unflattering links between Trump and Gatsby-the-phony could emerge

A more obvious *Gatsby* association that Trump opponents could make is with Tom Buchanan, the brute reactionary who represents old wealth and white privilege. Buchanan is enamored of “scientific” racism, believing that whites are superior to blacks. He disparages the upstart Gatsby (Fitzgerald 130), who is trying to take away his wife Daisy, on whom Tom cheats frequently. Given Trump’s multiple marriages and affairs, statements and programs targeting immigrants and persons of color (Scherer), and policies that rewarded the rich, it wouldn’t be hard for Trump detractors to make the connection with Buchanan.

On the other hand, the attributes of Buchanan that appall many people may appeal to others. One third of adult Americans favored Trump’s harsh characterizations of persons arriving to the U.S. illegally or seeking asylum (Langer). Many shared Trump’s derisive attitude toward political correctness (Montanaro). Trump backers believed they were themselves victims of policies favoring the disadvantaged, such as affirmative action. More than a few supported the welfare state, except for those parts perceived to benefit the “undeserving” (Brownstein).⁴

The Generic Space: Reinvention, Fortune, and Fame. Each input – Donald Trump and *The Great Gatsby* – was widely known to many if not most Americans when Trump launched his quest for the presidency. Trump and James Gatz attempted to reinvent themselves into new characters, leveraging their fame and fortune to help them achieve their respective goals. For Trump, it was winning the presidential election or, if he lost, strengthening his brand and profit potential. For Gatz, it was winning the hand of Daisy Buchanan, despite time and social distance, by becoming Jay Gatsby. However, both personas contained complexities of character, motivation, and action, so that blending the two mental spaces was likely to produce multiple and conflicting images of the new or emergent space, Trump the political candidate and leader. This sets the stage for our study.

⁴ An additional Gatsby-Trump connection reflects the current culture. The story’s narrator, Nick Carraway, is the moral center of the book (Corrigan 172-5). However, he, like Gatsby, is Midwestern and a cultural outsider. Originally unimpressed, Nick becomes attached to his mysterious neighbor. By taking sides, Nick abandons objectivity and forces us to decide whether to trust his observations, much as citizens today must choose between different versions of reality presented by the polarized media.

Methodology And Expectations

This analysis examined the number and nature of references to *The Great Gatsby* in stories about Donald Trump as catalogued in Google from June 2015, when Trump formally announced his candidacy for the Republican Party presidential nomination, until the end of 2018, the midpoint of his first term in office. The combined search terms, “Trump” and “Gatsby,” were used. Excluded from the findings were paid postings, such as ads inviting vacationers to spend “*Great Gatsby* weekends” at a Trump resort.⁵ We separated Trump-and-*Gatsby* mentions into “Blogs,” which were mostly posts by individual scholars, and “Online Publications,” which included news services, online magazines, and scholarly journals.

In all, 35 stories or posts, collected mainly in November 2018, connected Trump to *Gatsby*. Many of these articles came from prominent columnists and literary scholars. Some come from outlets like *The Atlantic* and the *The New York Times*, while others appeared in widely circulated blogs. It is important to note that this study explored only articles or posts on the Google search engine. Not examined were Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and other forums, each of which may have contained postings on Trump and *Gatsby*. Consequently, we may have missed messages from specific pro- or anti-Trump groups or *Gatsby* fan colonies. We chose Google for its capacity to identify postings with broad appeal.

Applying content analysis to the selected items, we categorized Trump-*Gatsby* relationships in the media as positive or negative. A “positive” reference meant that a *Gatsby* character, plotline, or quote was applied to reveal a favorable trait about Trump or to explain Trump’s appeal to the general or working class public (billionaire, deal-maker, entertainer, “tells it like it is,” disruptor, charismatic, etc.). A “negative” reference indicated that an author used a *Gatsby* figure or phrase to describe an unfavorable Trump trait or analyze why the public did not support the

⁵ Not directly related to the novel, the “Great Gatsby Curve” states that the more unequal a society’s distribution of incomes, the less intergenerational social mobility exists (Corak). The name describes the extent to which, in a given society or community, succeeding generations can climb the economic ladder as Jay Gatsby did. Mentions of the Gatsby Curve, most of which were found in academic sources, are not included in the analysis. Immediately after the election, supporters praised Trump for understanding the decline of social mobility among the working class (Dubner). After Trump took office, critics assailed him for pushing policies that worsened inequality and placed the U.S. on the wrong end of the curve (Krugman).

president (bankruptcies, racist views, misogynist, “doesn’t care about folks like me,” policies favor the rich, profiteer, etc.).

Entering the study, our general expectation was that the mixture of Trump-*Gatsby* references in the media would begin positively. We anticipated seeing mostly favorable connections between candidate Trump and Jay Gatsby as Trump supporters aligned The Donald with working-class interests. Then, through the 2016 delegate selection process and the general election campaign, we expected that negative *Gatsby* mentions – either Trump-as-Buchanan or Trump-as-Jay-Gatsby-the-impostor – would increase. This reflected reactions from the campaigns of rival candidates in the Republican Party and Trump’s Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton, in the general election.

After Trump’s election, most allusions to *Great Gatsby* figures, either Jay Gatsby or Tom Buchanan, were predicted to be negative, based on his inflammatory behavior and policies. We anticipated a strong response to the Trump presidency from academics to the extent that Trump affronted certain values that scholars share, such as tolerance for difference and respect for expertise. As the following account of the process up to the 2018 midterm elections will show, the data largely confirmed our hunches.

Running The Blend: Findings and Analysis

Stage One, 2015: Introducing the Candidate. When Donald Trump announced his presidential candidacy in June 2015, it did not take long for *Gatsby* references to appear. When *The Atlantic* questioned supporters that summer about why they aligned with Trump, one reader replied, “Donald Trump personifies a modern-day, extremely brash Jay Gatsby, clawing feverishly for that elusive ‘green light’ at the end of Daisy Buchanan’s beckoning dock.” He added, “Those of us who buy into Trump’s vision, nearly to the point of blind trust, are loudly professing our disgust with the current immoral situations that taint and threaten our blueprint of the American dream” (Friedersdorf).

Writing for CNN in September 2015, Trump biographer Michael D’Antonio argued that the Republican candidate had the “charm of a rascal.” Like Jay Gatsby, Harold Hill (the flim-flammer of *The Music Man*), and outrageous bigot Archie Bunker, Trump possessed “mischievous traits that Americans find irresistible.” In a group interview with other Trump biographers in fall 2015, D’Antonio shared how Trump resembled the subject of Fitzgerald’s novel:

The first thing I think that you credit him with is this creation of himself, which is very American, this idea that I'm going to imagine what I'm going to be, I'm going to tell the world that I'm it before I am it, and then the world is going to help me become it. And he did it. (Glasser and Kruse)

Trump used charisma and his looks to achieve unimaginable wealth, D'Antonio gushed, "seek[ing] every advantage and exert[ing] a special influence over women" (D'Antonio).

Stage Two, 2016: The Republican Nominee for President. Some of Trump's critics viewed him as a pale imitation of Gatsby. Writing in spring 2016, as Trump was closing in on the Republican presidential nomination, Dana Allin of the International Institute of Strategic Studies wondered whether the Trump show was a "reality-TV version of *The Great Gatsby* – except that F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Gatsby* was truly, if shadily, self-made, not the mediocre steward of an inherited fortune..." (Allin 222).

Long before *The Apprentice*, Trump was a celebrity figure who flirted with politics. Around the time of the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, where Trump became the Republican nominee, Elisabeth Schäfer-Wünsche and Christian Kloeckner of the University of Bonn noted that celebrity culture is "a unique manifestation of our sense of American social mobility: they provide the illusion that material wealth is possible for anyone." Trump has "long fulfilled the role of demonstrating that the rise to wealth does not need to be preconditioned by good taste or manners." They continued:

Despite his privileged background, Trump has always styled himself as the brutish nouveau riche, a Gatsby figure of the late 20th century with parties that are always too big and loud, with an appearance that appears to be too shrill. Trump's anti-intellectualism and peddling of conspiracy theories has long served for him to cultivate a mediated fan community deeply distrustful of the elite he has always been a part of. (Schäfer-Wünsche and Kloeckner)

As the 2016 election approached, *Great Gatsby* mentions in print and online media became more negative. English professors compared Trump to literary villains such as Tom Buchanan. Daniel Torday, professor of creative writing at Bryn Mawr, drew a darker parallel:

What [Buchanan] ultimately does over the course of that novel is manipulate people in the goal of his self-interest. Myrtle's death and Gatsby's death – both events are the result of Tom's having run rampant

over people’s lives. It’s hard to imagine a character that overlaps more clearly with this year’s GOP candidate. (Dunn “Migrants ‘Harm UK’”) Unfortunately for Trump, these antagonistic comparisons would continue into his presidency.

Findings for Stages One and Two, 2015-16. The results of Google searches for 2015 and 2016, presented in Table 1, showed five positive references for Trump as Jay Gatsby in 2015, after Trump announced his candidacy and before the 2016 primaries and caucuses. When Trump emerged as the front-runner for the Republican presidential nomination, negative connections between Trump and *Gatsby* characters arose. Trump and Jay Gatsby were described in unflattering ways, or Trump was compared to Tom Buchanan. Negative mentions continued through the fall 2016 campaign. At the same time, positive linkages between Trump and Jay Gatsby persisted. For all of 2016, there were five positive Trump-*Gatsby* associations made and eight negative *Gatsby* references.

	2015			2016			
	Blog	Online Pub	Total		Blog	Online Pub	Total
Trump-Gatsby							
Positive	0	5	5		1	4	5
Negative	0	0	0		1	4	5
Trump-Buchanan							
Positive	0	0	0		0	0	0
Negative	0	0	0		2	1	3
Total +/- References, 2015				Total +/- References, 2016			
Positive	0	5	5	Positive	1	4	5
Negative	0	0	0	Negative	3	5	8

Table 1. Trump-*Gatsby* references in blogs and online publications, 2015-16

Stage Three, December 2016-April 2017: The President-Elect and the First 100 Days. Following Trump’s surprising election victory and efforts to form a government, the unfavorable *Gatsby* allusions continued. Commenting on the extreme wealth of the members of the Trump Cabinet, *Guardian* columnist Nomi Prins said, “Trump’s *Great Gatsby* government will be a gift to the rich” (Prins). Georgetown professor Maureen Corrigan, author of a book on *Gatsby*’s lasting

popularity, contended that Jay Gatsby would never have voted for Trump, though the two have much in common:

After all, Jay Gatsby and Donald Trump share so much: a brazen flair for con artistry, a nouveau riche taste in home décor [...] and even a skewed vision of a lost golden age. ‘Make America Great Again’ is but a blunter iteration of Gatsby’s signal line: ‘Can’t repeat the past, why of course you can!’. (2paragraphs)

However, Gatsby would also recognize the Buchanan in Trump, Corrigan claimed, and Gatsby loathes everything Tom Buchanan stands for:

Swollen with arrogance, proud of his unearned authority, Tom strides around spouting half-chewed climate change theories⁶ and racist ideologies. [...] Tom, like Trump, can’t keep his hands off women; in fact his meaty paws do more than grope. Recall Daisy’s broken pinky finger; Myrtle’s broken nose. Contrast those images with Gatsby’s hands stretching out in aspiration toward that green light at the end of Daisy’s dock. Because Jay Gatsby is above all else a dreamer he could never endorse an ignorant brute like Tom Buchanan/Donald Trump. (2paragraphs)

Commenting 100 days into the Trump administration, Noreen Herzfeld of Saint John’s University and College of St. Benedict saw Trump as both Gatsby and Buchanan but believed the latter was the more controlling figure. Like Gatsby, who changed his name, Trump recast the family heritage from German to Swedish. Though he downplayed his privileged upbringing, Herzfeld notes, Trump echoed Gatsby’s display of conspicuous wealth in service of a curated image of himself (Hayes et al.).

At the same time, Trump’s slogan, “Make America Great Again,” and his inaugural address, in which he spoke of “American carnage,” reminded us of Tom’s gloom about the future. Reading a book called *The Rise of the Coloured Empires*, Buchanan declared, “Civilization is going to pieces.” He tells Nick Carraway, “The idea is, if we don’t look out the white race will be – will be utterly submerged” (Fitzgerald 12-1). The president’s invocation of Mexicans bringing crime and drugs, the need for a border wall, the ban on immigrants from Muslim-majority countries, and the alleged three million illegals who voted fraudulently formed a pattern of racial animosity that resonated with Tom’s fear (Hayes et al.).

Finally, Herzfeld retrieved Nick’s judgment about the Buchanans:

⁶ “It seems that pretty soon the earth’s going to fall into the sun – or wait a minute – it’s just the opposite – the sun’s getting colder every year” (Fitzgerald 118).

They were careless people, Tom and Daisy – they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they made... (Fitzgerald 179)

Observing the bankruptcies that left investors and workers holding the bag and the constant flow of lies that Trump's advisors must rationalize, Herzfeld noted how the president's survival came at the cost of the lives and reputations of the people who served him. She hoped his supporters, as well as the rest of the nation, would not become the next victims of his carelessness (Hayes et al.).

Stage Four, 2017-18: The Next 600 Days and the Run-Up to the 2018 Midterm Elections. As the Trump presidency unfolded in the succeeding months, *Gatsby* references exhibited several patterns, nearly all of which were critical of the president. A Resistance movement emerged as Trump took office. Resistance protestors expressed hope that Trump's leadership project would fail. A *Time* op-ed posted after the January 21, 2017, Women's March included Trump among the great con men of fiction and non-fiction, including Bernie Madoff, the Wizard of Oz, and *Gatsby*. Impostors such as these take us in, but, eventually, we regain our capacity for disbelief, the column argued. The tricksters are exposed and meet an inglorious end. The unstated hope was that Trump would meet a similar fate (Jones and de Jong).

In May 2017, the essayist Rebecca Solnit characterized Trump as a grifter and buffoon with insatiable appetites who, to his surprise, got his wish to become the most powerful man in the world. Like the privileged Buchanans, there was no one to tell him when he was wrong, foolish, or cruel. However, Trump is finding out that the presidency is not all-powerful, Solnit argued. Commands to build a border wall, repeal Obamacare, or shut down an inquiry into his campaign's collusion with the Russians were not obeyed. Instead, Solnit states, Trump is the "most mocked man in the world." One way or another, like the fisherman's wife who wished for everything, he will end up with nothing (Solnit).

The second pattern of post-2016 Trump-*Gatsby* connections reflected fear that President Trump might deliver for his culturally conservative followers and the U.S. would pursue a meaner, more Buchananized path. Historian Sarah Churchwell explained that when the original *Great Gatsby* was published, the America First movement surfaced as not only a desire for the U.S. to free itself from foreign entanglements but also a racist version of Americanism. Churchwell did not believe Trump's adoption of the slogan "America First" was a coincidence. It revealed that

the true purpose of Trump's leadership project was ethnic purity. As she put it, Trump is what Tom Buchanan would be if he ruled the world – another Mussolini (Churchwell).

Another scenario imagined during the Trump years was that Trump would enrich himself, his business cronies, and the gilded elements of the Republican coalition, disillusioning his working class supporters. The yearlong effort to repeal the Affordable Care Act and the passage of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act in December 2017, the latter heavily weighted to reward corporations and the rich, exposed the extent to which Trump duped the white working class, Trump critics asserted. To one literature professor, Trump was a slicker Gatsby, profiting from selling the American Dream to a nation of suckers who invested in his failed business ventures and enrolled in Trump University. Under his presidency, a “long and painful disillusionment” was inevitable (Bates).

According to *The Atlantic* editor Rosa Inocencio Smith, an animating goal for Trump was the negation of Barack Obama's presidency. Trump's story is Buchanan's, Smith argued, a cautionary tale about power under threat, “and of how that power, lashing out, can make truth irrelevant” (Smith). When Gatsby threatened Tom's comfortable existence with Daisy, Buchanan attacked Gatsby's origins much as Trump questioned Barack Obama's birth certificate. Referencing scholarship suggesting that Fitzgerald intended Gatsby to be a light-skinned black pretending to be white, Smith amplified Trump's need as president to erase the legacy of his predecessor (Smith).

An alternative prospect that appeared in the first half of the Trump presidency was that, regardless of whether Trump succeeded or failed, his relentless assault on truth (Kessler et al.) will deepen the loss of faith in institutions, diminish respect for the rule of law, and destroy norms of civility and decency toward one another. In her book *The Death of Truth*, the former *The New York Times* chief book critic Michiko Kakutani claimed a “new nihilism” had infected American politics and culture. The “sense that life is random and devoid of meaning, combined with a carelessness about consequences” – illustrated by the rise of fake news – was predicted by the reckless behavior of the Buchanans (Kakutani 155).

Americans have always had a tremendous capacity for make-believe, observed the *The New York Times* columnist David Brooks. Jay Gatsby is a classic American hero, said Brooks, because “he constructed a fantasy version of himself and attempted to live it” (Brooks). Considering Trump's talent for concocting fantasies, Brooks asserted that the danger to democracy is when the president “build[s] an

alternate virtual reality and sucker[s] us into co-creating it.” Living in the Trumpian soap opera made it “less likely we are to know where we are or what we should do” (Brooks).

One of the president’s biggest cheerleaders was his former White House Director of Communications (for all of 11 days), Anthony Scaramucci. Born in Port Washington on Long Island, just minutes from the East Egg location of Tom and Daisy’s mansion, Scaramucci intertwined his rags-to-riches story with that of the president and Gatsby in his book, *Trump: The Blue-Collar President*, published just before the 2018 midterm elections (Scaramucci).

Growing up middle class, Scaramucci graduated from Harvard Law School and was a successful investor and financial consultant on Wall Street. However, his life changed when, at the age of 32, he met Trump, whom he idolized. “For a blue-collar guy, working in finance, who wanted to rise through the economic classes and reach for the Gold Ring,” Scaramucci said, “Mr. Trump was the Great Gatsby” (153). Eager to show that Trump was self-made, he cited Trump’s multiple bankruptcies as evidence of the president’s brilliance and toughness (155).⁷

Scaramucci’s hero worship was a useful reminder that, for all the controversy surrounding Trump, the president retained the support of 40-45% of the electorate throughout his first two years in office (A. Dunn). White, less-educated workers, more likely to be male, remained the core of his political support (Harris), even as Democrats swept the midterm contests and took control of the U.S. House of Representatives (Duffy et al.).

Findings for Stages Three and Four, 2017-18. The 2017 and 2018 findings of links between Donald Trump and *The Great Gatsby* took a decidedly unfavorable turn, as displayed in Table 2. Only two positive *Gatsby* references, one in each year, appeared. Fifteen negative mentions, split nearly evenly between 2017 and 2018, materialized. Overall, as Table 3 shows, positive linkages between the president and *Gatsby* were most frequent early in his candidacy. More negative than positive connections registered as the 2016 elections approached. Most references to *Gatsby* took place in 2016. Since Trump became president, nearly all *Gatsby* references with Trump were negative.

⁷ By summer 2019, Scaramucci said he could no longer support the president (Helmore).

	2017			2018			
	Blog	Online Pub	Total		Blog	Online Pub	Total
Trump-Gatsby							
Positive	0	1	1		0	1	1
Negative	2	3	5		0	3	3
Trump-Buchanan							
Positive	0	0	0		0	0	0
Negative	0	3	3		0	4	4
Total +/- References, 2017				Total +/- References, 2018			
Positive	0	1	1	Positive	0	1	1
Negative	2	6	8	Negative	0	7	7

Table 2. *Trump-Gatsby* references in blogs and online publications, 2017-18

Total +/- References, 2015-16 Positive	10	Total +/- References, 2017-18 Positive	2	Total +/-References, 2015-18 Positive	12
Negative	8	Negative	15	Negative	23

Table 3. Total positive and negative *Trump-Gatsby* references, 2015-18

Discussion

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it provides an illustration of conceptual blending theory. In this case, the source input was an acclaimed novel and the target was a tycoon/celebrity known for injecting himself into political controversies. Both the protagonist of *The Great Gatsby* and Donald Trump attempted to reinvent themselves in order to achieve challenging goals. Using *Gatsby*, a literary work with multiple meanings, to understand a notorious figure such as Trump yielded a multitude of blends for Trump the aspiring political leader and president. This is what Fauconnier and Turner call elaboration, in which we explore, often playfully, the possibilities of blending inputs.

Second, conceptual blending is itself a metaphor for how the mind makes meaning of the unfamiliar. Broadly speaking, it was a metaphor for the process by which voters attempted to make sense of Donald Trump as possible and actual President of the United States. Those involved in the business of political

persuasion understood this process and constructed colorful adjectives, analogies, metaphors, memes, and other linguistic devices to forge emotional connections, positive or negative, with the Republican (Tiffany). Linking Trump to *Gatsby* was one way to influence people's attitudes about Trump's character, connections to common people, his approach to problem-solving, and how he would conduct himself as president.

Third, we saw how the blending process is highly selective and contingent. Different sides of the political and culture wars chose different interpretations of the novel to suit their arguments about the would-be and actual president. The conceptual blends of Trump multiplied and changed as he assumed different roles. When Trump began his quest for the presidency, Trump-*Gatsby* connections reflected favorably on him. Promoters and supporters cast Trump as a self-made man, man of the people, anti-establishment upstart, and a charming rascal, all of which could be applied to Jay Gatsby.

As Bougher suggests, political competition, aided by Trump's confrontational behavior as candidate and president, added new, negative frames to the Trump brand (149). After Trump began his presidency with provocative policies toward immigrants, references to Jay Gatsby's shadowy rise to prominence and Tom Buchanan appeared. During the first two years of the Trump presidency and the run-up to the 2018 midterm elections, *Gatsby* allusions from Trump opponents framed Trump as a wannabe dictator, white supremacist, tool of the .01 percent, corrupt profiteer, Obama legacy eraser, gaslighter, and destroyer of truth and morality.

Fourth, it is important to note that the escalation of *Gatsby*-Trump references took place in the context of increased political and cultural polarization in the U.S. Developing since the 1960s, a sharp public divide on values and issues such as abortion, gay rights, and church-state issues formed by 1990 (see Hunter). After the 2000 Bush-Gore election, the idea of a partisan Red State-Blue State split was cemented in the public consciousness. During the Bush II and Obama presidencies, there materialized a 60-70% partisan difference in presidential approval. During the Trump administration, nearly 90% of Republicans endorsed Trump's performance in office, while less than 10% of Democrats approved (A. Dunn).

According to Michael Grunwald, Trump broadened the culture war by scanning current events for issues that would aggravate cultural resentment. Racial issues were often at the forefront. Thus, illegal immigration, NFL athlete kneeling, and political correctness became interconnected. Previously nonpolitical happenings,

such as the importance of science and expertise, the value of a college education, and, more recently, vaccinations were politicized (Grunwald).

In this political vortex, accelerated by social media, it was only natural that popular culture items and icons such as *Gatsby* would be consumed.⁸ During the 2016 presidential campaign, Internet memes connected Bernie Sanders with wise old men from the *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *Harry Potter* franchises. *Game of Thrones* heroes and villains framed images of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Both before and after the election, Trump was frequently associated with the *Batman* sociopath Joker (Hunting). The award-winning musical *Hamilton*, with its diverse casting of the American Founders and its celebration of immigrants (“We get the job done”), symbolized the contrast between the Obama and Trump approaches to race relations (Lind). A summer 2017 production of *Julius Caesar* in Central Park, featuring a Trump lookalike as the assassinated dictator, sent the conservative media into a frenzy (Shapiro 204-21).

The appropriation of *Gatsby* by pro- and anti-Trump forces was notable for its focus on social class, particularly blue-collar whites. Also significant was the profound shift, at least in the mainstream media, from positive to negative *Gatsby*-Trump connections as Trump’s role shifted from candidate to president. As Trump’s image became more fixed in the public mind, we found slightly fewer references to *Gatsby* as the 2018 midterm elections approached. It may be that a particular metaphor’s use is more frequent and impactful when the target is most unfamiliar, such as Trump before the election and during his first year as president.

Use of *Gatsby* metaphors illuminated but also constrained the debate over Trump. The president was framed as an avatar of the American Dream, a scam artist, or a racist and sexist thug, with little subtlety in between. Furthermore, it is fair to say that discussion of the applicability of *Gatsby* references to the Trump phenomenon was conducted mainly among political and cultural elites, given the widespread but nevertheless limited public awareness of the novel. Significantly, unlike the activation of fan communities during the 2016 campaign (Booth et al. 59), we did not come across mobilization of a *Gatsby* fan base for or against Trump during the period examined.

⁸ Literary scholars anticipating the worst of Trump turned to dystopian novels such as *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *1984*. Trump enthusiasts imagined the president as Howard Roark in *The Fountainhead*. Recognized for their prophetic qualities were Sinclair Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here* and Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America* (Bethune). Appropriation of cultural texts for political purposes is nothing new. For example, Shapiro notes how Shakespeare’s plays were at the center of debates over slavery in the U.S. (Shapiro).

Interestingly, *Gatsby* had the potential to unite competing political factions. All the writings we found appeared to accept the book as a mainstay in the American literary canon, despite the culture war in the humanities and the emergence of identifiable Red and Blue popular cultures (Poniewozik). However, the contemporary interpretations of *Gatsby* entered well-defined fault lines, reinforcing rather than transcending the Red-Blue divide. This was true not only for Trump, but also for *Gatsby*-Obama linkages during the presidency (Freeman-Coppadge) and post-presidency (Dowd) of Trump's predecessor.

Limitations to the study's design and analysis exist. The findings depend on Google's algorithms and approved websites. Our research did not examine social media platforms where out-of-the-mainstream sites might be more likely to reside. To the extent that humanities professors are not Trump-friendly, it is likely that the paper reflected anti-Trump bias. Individual blogs by academics tended to publish more negative references (83% negative) than did online publications (62% negative), presumably edited by third parties. In addition, the empirical analysis is suggestive and not conclusive, due to the relatively low overall number of Trump-*Gatsby* linkages. Still, the results should encourage scholars to explore further how literary and popular culture references are used to shape political narratives.

Furthermore, the metaphorical approach to political rhetoric and, in particular, conceptual blending theory have limitations. Conceiving cognitive processes in terms of an input-output network, as the conceptual blending model defines, is a crude simplification of how the human mind operates (Ritchie 39-40). For example, knowing how long an individual will dwell on the meanings of a figure of speech is difficult to gauge. Some may dismiss a metaphor quickly or not understand it at all. On the other hand, an image of, say, a girl in a white dress with a white parasol getting off a ferry may haunt someone for a lifetime (Chin).

Just interpreting one metaphor or blend could take up a volume of description, depending on who is doing the interpreting and the discourse context (Coulson and Oakley 178). In our analysis of *The Great Gatsby*, there is rich material for further exploration of contemporary politics, economics, and culture. For instance, *Gatsby* is set in the Roaring Twenties, inviting comparisons with the opulence and inequality of the 2000s.

Or take the central question of the novel – is it possible to repeat the past? To many, Jay Gatsby was a tragic figure who died chasing a dream. To others, his quest was a fool's errand. Trump's project to Make America Great Again raises similar, profound issues. Can America repeat the past? What part of the past is

worth repeating? At what cost? And, after Trump is finished, whenever that time will be, what will be left of America's promise to her people, "the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us" (Fitzgerald 180)? Putting it metaphorically, will Trump be remembered as Jay Gatsby the tragic hero, Gatsby the fraud, Tom Buchanan, or a unique blend?

Works Cited

- 2paragraphs. "Why the Great Gatsby would have voted for Clinton, not Trump." *2paragraphs.com*, 10 Jan. 2017, 2paragraphs.com/2017/01/why-the-great-gatsby-would-have-voted-for-clinton-not-trump.
- Allin, Dana H. "Donald Trump's America." *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, 2016, vol. 58, no. 2, pp. 221-8.
- Barbaro, Michael. "Donald Trump clung to 'Birther' lie for years, and still isn't apologetic." *The New York Times*, 16 Sept. 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/09/17/us/politics/donald-trump-obama-birther.html.
- Barstow, David, Susanne Craig, and Russ Buettner. "Trump engaged in suspect tax schemes as he reaped riches from his father." *The New York Times*, 2 Oct. 2018, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/10/02/us/politics/donald-trump-tax-schemes-fred-trump.html.
- Bates, Robin. "Trump is Gatsby (but a lot meaner)." *Better Living through Beowulf*, 9 Mar. 2017, www.betterlivingthroughbeowulf.com/trump-is-gatsby-only-meaner.
- Bethune, Brian. "A dystopian reading list for the Donald Trump era." *Maclean's*, 26 Jan. 2017, www.macleans.ca/culture/books/a-dystopian-reading-list-for-the-donald-trump-era.
- Boeynaems, Amber, Christian Burgers, Elly A. Konijn, and Gerard J. Steen. "The effects of metaphorical framing on political persuasion: A systematic literature review." *Metaphor and Symbol*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2017, pp. 118-34.
- Booth, Paul, Amber Davisson, Aaron Hess, and Ashley Hinck. *Poaching Politics: Online Communication During the 2016 US Presidential Election*. Peter Lang, 2018.
- Bougher, Lori D. "The case for metaphor in political reasoning and cognition." *Political Psychology*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2012, pp. 145-63.

- Brooks, David. "Donald Trump's magical fantasy world." *The New York Times*, 24 May 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/05/24/opinion/trump-tom-wolfe-philip-roth.html.
- Brownstein, Ronald. "Federal anti-poverty programs primarily help the GOP's base." *The Atlantic*, 16 Feb. 2017, www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/02/gop-base-poverty-snap-social-security/516861.
- Calmes, Jackie. "Donald Trump: Life before the presidency." *University of Virginia Miller Center*, millercenter.org/president/trump/life-presidency.
- Chin, Richard. "Seeing 'Citizen Kane' again now that I'm older." *nextavenue*, 10 June 2015, www.nextavenue.org/seeing-citizen-kane-again-now-that-im-older.
- Churchwell, Sarah. "America's Mussolini?" *Spiked*, 28 Sept. 2018, www.spiked-online.com/2018/09/28/behold-fascist-america.
- Coppins, McKay. "The outer-borough president." *The Atlantic*, 30 Jan. 2017, www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/01/the-outer-borough-president/514673.
- Corak, Miles. "How the Great Gatsby curve got its name." *Economics for Public Policy*, 4 Dec. 2016, www.milescorak.com/2016/12/04/how-the-great-gatsby-curve-got-its-name.
- Corrigan, Maureen. *So We Read On: How The Great Gatsby Came to Be and Why It Endures*. Little, Brown and Co., 2014.
- Coulson, Seana, and Todd Oakley. "Blending basics." *Cognitive Linguistics*, vol. 11, no. 3-4, 2000, pp. 175-96.
- D'Antonio, Michael. "Donald Trump's Gatsbyesque charm." *CNN.com*, 16 Sept. 2015, www.cnn.com/2015/09/15/opinions/dantonio-trump-gatsby-music-man/index.html.
- D'Antonio, Michael. *Never Enough: Donald Trump and the Pursuit of Success*. Thomas Dunne Books, 2015.
- Dowd, Maureen. "Behold Barack Antoinette." *The New York Times*, 14 Aug. 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/08/14/opinion/barack-obama-birthday.html.
- Dubner, Stephen J. "Is the American Dream really dead?" *Freakonomics*, 18 Jan. 2017, freakonomics.com/podcast/american-dream-really-dead.
- Duffy, Jennifer, David Wasserman, and Ally Flinn. "50 interesting facts about the 2018 election." *The Cook Political Report*, 20 Dec. 2018, cookpolitical.com/analysis/national/national-politics/50-interesting-facts-about-2018-election.

- Dunn, Amina. "Trump's approval ratings so far are unusually stable – and deeply partisan." *Pew Research Center*, 24 Aug. 2020, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/08/24/trumps-approval-ratings-so-far-are-unusually-stable-and-deeply-partisan.
- Dunn, Tom Newton. "Migrants 'harm UK': Donald Trump says Britain is 'losing its culture' because of immigration." *The Sun*, 12 July 2018, www.thesun.co.uk/news/6766947/donald-trump-britain-losing-culture-immigration.
- Fauconnier, Gilles, and Mark Turner. *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities*. Basic Books, 2003.
- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. 1925. Scribner, 2004.
- Freeman-Coppadge, Jonathan. "Teaching *Gatsby* under Obama was eerie. Teaching it under Trump is crushing." *Huffington Post*, 30 May 2017, www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/teaching-gatsby-under-obama-was-eerie-teaching-it_us_58ff5702e4b0c13feaa5c83b.
- Friedersdorf, Conor. "What do Donald Trump voters actually want?" *The Atlantic*, 17 Aug. 2015, www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/08/donald-trump-voters/401408/#Trump%20Is%20Jay%20Gatsby.
- Glasser, Susan B., and Michael Kruse. "Trumpology: A master class." *Politico*, May/June 2016, www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/04/donald-trump-2016-campaign-biography-psychology-history-barrett-hurt-dantiono-blair-obrien-213835?o=0.
- Grunwald, Michael. "How everything became the culture war." *Politico Magazine*, Nov./Dec. 2018, www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/11/02/culture-war-liberals-conservatives-trump-2018-222095.
- Harris, Adam. "America is divided by education." *The Atlantic*, 7 Nov. 2018, www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2018/11/education-gap-explains-american-politics/575113.
- Hayes, Nick, Noreen Herzfeld, Louis Johnston, Jim Read, Kathleen Cahalan, and Derek Larson. "Political turmoil and personal refuge: Trump presidency at 100 days and beyond." *Avon Hills Salon*, 1 June 2017, avonhillssalon.com/2017/06/01/political-turmoil-and-personal-refuge-trump-presidency-at-100-days-and-beyond.
- Helmore, Edward. "Scaramucci says he can't support Trump: 'He sounds more and more nonsensical'." *The Guardian*, 12 Aug. 2019,

- www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/aug/12/anthony-scaramucci-trump-republicans.
- Hunter, James Davison. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Control the Family, Art, Education, Law, and Politics in America*. Basic Books, 1992.
- Hunting, Kyra Osten. 2020. "The role of popular media in 2016 US presidential election memes." In *Fandom and Politics* edited by Ashley Hinck and Amber Davisson, special issue, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 32. doi.org/10.3983/twc.2020.1785.
- Italie, Hillel. "Everyone invited: 'Great Gatsby' copyright to end in 2021." *AP News*, 22 Jan. 2020, apnews.com/article/27697da003ea226a4f66c3923fd84b9c.
- Itkowitz, Colby, and Michael Brice-Saddler. "Trump still won't apologize to the Central Park Five. Here's what he said at the time." *The Washington Post*, 18 June 2019, www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-still-wont-apologize-to-the-central-park-five-heres-what-he-said-at-the-time/2019/06/18/32ea4d7e-9208-11e9-b570-6416efdc0803_story.html?utm_term=.1727e2fe05ba.
- Jamieson, Kathleen Hall. *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President*. Oxford UP, 2018.
- Johnston, David Cay. "Just what were Donald Trump's ties to the mob?" *Politico Magazine*, 22 May 2016, www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/05/donald-trump-2016-mob-organized-crime-213910.
- Jones, Landon and Pia de Jong. "America loves a con man." *Time*, 31 Jan. 2017, time.com/4654406/america-trump-con-man.
- Kakutani, Michiko. *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump*. Tim Duggan Books, 2018.
- Kessler, Glenn. "Trump's false claim he built his empire with a 'small loan' from his father." *The Washington Post*, 3 Mar. 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2016/03/03/trumps-false-claim-he-built-his-empire-with-a-small-loan-from-his-father/?utm_term=.bd751a7c4812.
- Kessler, Glenn, Salvador Rizzo, and Meg Kelly. *Donald Trump and His Assault on Truth: The President's Falsehoods, Misleading Claims and Flat-Out Lies*. Scribner, 2020.
- Krugman, Paul. "Socialism and the self-made woman." *The New York Times*, 28 Feb. 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/02/28/opinion/ivanka-trump-social-mobility.html?em_pos=small&emc=edit_ty_20190301&nl=opinion-

- [today&nl_art=1&nlid=16313782emc%3Dedit ty 20190301&ref=headline&te=1.](#)
- Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. U Chicago P, 2003.
- Langer, Gary. “64% oppose Trump's move to build a wall; On asylum, just 30% support stricter rules.” *ABC News*, 30 Apr. 2019, abcnews.go.com/Politics/64-oppose-trumps-move-build-wall-asylum-30/story?id=62702683.
- Lederer, Jenny. “‘Anchor baby’: A conceptual explanation for pejoration.” *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 57, 2013, pp. 248-66.
- Lind, Dara. “Donald Trump’s feud with the cast of *Hamilton*, explained.” *Vox*, 21 Nov. 2016, www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2016/11/21/13699046/trump-hamilton-pence-apologize.
- McDonald, Jared, David Karol, and Lilliana Mason. “‘An inherited money dude from Queens County’: How unseen candidate characteristics affect voter perceptions.” *Political Behavior*, vol. 42, 2020, pp. 915-38.
- Montanaro, Domenico. “Warning to Democrats: Most Americans against U.S. getting more politically correct.” *NPR*, 19 Dec. 2018, www.npr.org/2018/12/19/677346260/warning-to-democrats-most-americans-against-u-s-getting-more-politically-correct.
- Mosbergen, Dominique. “8 times Donald Trump claimed he was a self-made man.” *HuffPost*, 3 Oct. 2018, www.huffpost.com/entry/trump-self-made-man-myth_n_5bb46528e4b028e1fe38ebaf.
- Murse, Tom. “Was Donald Trump a Democrat?” *ThoughtCo*, 10 June 2020, www.thoughtco.com/was-donald-trump-a-democrat-3367571.
- Poniewozik, James. “Donald Trump lost his battle. The culture war goes on.” *The New York Times*, 14 Dec. 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/12/14/arts/television/donald-trump-culture-war.html.
- Prins, Nomi. “Trump's Great Gatsby government will be a gift to the rich.” *The Guardian*, 2 Dec. 2016, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/dec/02/donald-trump-cabinet-positions-wealthy-key-interests.
- Ritchie, David. “Lost in space: Metaphors in conceptual integration theory.” *Metaphor and Symbol*, vol. 19, 2004, pp. 31-50.
- Scaramucci, Anthony. *Trump: The Blue-Collar President*. Center Street, 2018.

- Schäfer-Wünsche, Elisabeth, and Christian Kloeckner. "Politics of celebrity: The case of Donald Trump." *Lecture Series: The Road to the White House*, University of Bonn, 19 July 2016, www.nas.uni-bonn.de/Events/esw-ck_script.
- Shapiro, James. *Shakespeare in a Divided America: What His Plays Tell Us About Our Past and Future*. Penguin Press, 2020.
- Scherer, Michael. "White identity politics drives Trump, and the Republican Party under him." *The Washington Post*, 16 July 2019, www.washingtonpost.com/politics/white-identity-politics-drives-trump-and-the-republican-party-under-him/2019/07/16/a5ff5710-a733-11e9-a3a6-ab670962db05_story.html?utm_term=.18224e0c767e.
- Smith, Rosa Inocencio. "How *The Great Gatsby* explains Trump." *The Atlantic*, 24 Sept. 2018, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/09/how-the-great-gatsby-explains-trump/562673/?utm_source=feed.
- Solnit, Rebecca. "The loneliness of Donald Trump." *Literary Hub*, 30 May 2017, lithub.com/rebecca-solnit-the-loneliness-of-donald-trump.
- Stotsky, Sandra. "Literary study in grades 9, 10, and 11: A national survey." *Forum: A Publication of the ALSCW*, no. 4, Fall 2010, alscw.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/forum_4.pdf.
- Swanson, Ana. "The myth and the reality of Donald Trump's business empire." *The Washington Post*, 29 Feb. 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/02/29/the-myth-and-the-reality-of-donald-trumps-business-empire/?utm_term=.8b56e52f7074.
- Tiffany, Kaitlyn. "The internet won't be the same after Trump." *The Atlantic*, 30 Oct. 2020, www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2020/10/trump-internet-memes-section-230-disinformation-reddit/616890.

Apocalypse Now: Performing Imperialism and the Apocalypse

AMANDA DAWSON

Jean-Paul Sartre wrote, “What we see is neither real, because after all we are looking at actors acting, nor unreal, as everything that happens makes us aware of the reality of the war in Vietnam” (Alter viii). Storytelling based on historical events simultaneously allows for audiences to be drawn into, and separate from, those events. This is especially true for stories (fiction or non-fiction) about the Vietnam War. The war was pumped into households across the world as the first televised war. In the last decade of the war and the decades that followed, there was a rush of books, plays, and films, which tried to capture the horror and drama of the war in Vietnam. Often, when people think of the war images pop into their minds. Images of a child covered in napalm, a Buddhist monk engulfed in flames, and the visual and sound of the Huey are some of the most reproduced imagery of the time.¹ But the images from famous Vietnam War films, such as the Russian roulette scene in *The Deer Hunter* (1978), the “Born to Kill” helmet from *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), and the “Ride of the Valkyries” Huey scene in *Apocalypse Now* (1979), also seep into the visual zeitgeist of the war. While audiences watch these stories for entertainment, they also see the realities of war represented. To view Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* through the lenses of imperialism and the apocalypse allows for a deeper investigation of the performative quality of the actors, their performance, and the final product – the film.

In theatre and performance studies the concept of “performative” emerged in Judith Butler’s work on gender, but the use of “performative” is applicable here as well. Performance, in Butler’s work (and in the work of Richard Schechner), is defined as twice behaved behaviors + an audience. Butler adds to this definition in her discussion of the body: “(a) that its appearance in the world, for perception, is

¹ Huey is the nickname for the military helicopter Bell UH-1 Iroquois that first appeared in combat in the Vietnam War.

AMANDA DAWSON, PhD, is an Assistant Professor and Head of the BA Theatre Arts Program at Utah State University. Professionally, Amanda works as a dramaturg and director. Her research focuses on representations of war, specifically the Vietnam and Iraq/Afghanistan Wars, and theatre pedagogy. She can be reached at amanda.dawson@usu.edu.

Popular Culture Studies Journal
Volume 9, Issue 2, ©2021

not predetermined by some manner of interior essence, and (b) that its concrete expression in the world must be understood as the taking up and rendering specific of a set of *historical* possibilities” (521, emphasis added). This history of imperialism and apocalypse are present in both the actors’ bodies and the “body” of the film as they perform for audiences. In this way, the historical significance of *Apocalypse Now* (and what the film represents) is also performative. The Vietnam War was unlike any war before or since and “a defining feature of the war story had been its essential simplicity, its childlike unself-consciousness, its lack of explanation” (Engelhardt 275). This article goes beyond past scholarship to question what are the representations of imperialism via performance within the film, but also the performance of the film? And what role does ambivalence or “childlike unself-consciousness” play in both “performances”? How does the horror of apocalypse relate to imperialism in the film? Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* “makes us aware of the reality of the war in Vietnam” through the performance of imperialism and the apocalypse (Alter viii).

Apocalypse Now is one film in a long list of Vietnam War films which include *The Green Berets* (1968), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Platoon* (1986), and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987).² *Apocalypse Now* stands out from this list. Arguably, each film functions as a commentary on war and those comments are often a negative critique of the United States involvement in Vietnam. *Apocalypse Now* is arguably less self-censored than Vietnam War films that came before it, and perhaps after it. Gilbert Adair’s posits *Apocalypse Now* as the “full frontal” Vietnam War film (9). Engelhardt notes that *Apocalypse Now* is a “quagmire film” which “offered audiences their only chance to experience from a peasant’s viewpoint the annihilating terror of attacking U.S. helicopters. With its sardonic view of the war effort and its crazed length, it seemed an object lesson in why the war should not be refought by Hollywood” (277). In Adair’s book, *Vietnam on Film: From the Green Berets to Apocalypse Now* (1981), he shares an anecdote about a friend who confessed that he put more faith in the moon than in Vietnam, “because he could see the moon but he couldn’t see Vietnam” (11-2, italics in original). Despite the evening news reporting images, stories, and videos from the war, many Americans still felt as though it was incomprehensible. Coppola’s film attempts to show the war in Vietnam, but it also “had to be about *something else*” (Adair 146, italics in

² There are many films that focus on the Vietnam War, but for the purposes of this paper I will only be investigating *Apocalypse Now*. That is not to say that other films would not work with this methodology, but for the length of this paper, *Apocalypse Now* is sufficient.

original). *Apocalypse Now* is *something else*. Vietnam War stories in film, television, literature, and on stage presented audiences “with more disturbing imagery about their culture, soldiers, and institutions of authority than ever before,” especially *Apocalypse Now* (Huebner 243). While the narrative of the film is fiction (like most Vietnam War films) as well as an adaptation, it still allows for this investigation of the reality of imperialism and the apocalypse. The combination of these ideologies in this film serves as a site of a departure from other Vietnam War films as it highlights American imperialism through its own performance of imperialism.

According to Edward Said, imperialism is the “process or policy of establishing or maintaining an empire” (9). Said writes that an empire is a relationship “in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society” (9). Imperialism encompasses cultural, political, and economic influences and control (Ritzer 69). Raymond Williams describes “American Imperialism” as a “primarily economic denomination associated with the global reach of capitalism but not having the political form of ‘colonialism’” (Tomlinson, 4). Imperialism is inherent in war especially in a “war of aggression” such as the Vietnam War, which displaced and oppressed people (Association D’Amitie Franco-Vietnamienne). In this way, I use imperialism as a means to investigate the performative nature of: the characters, the actors who played them, the making of the film, and those who made it.

Similarly, I utilize “apocalypse” to explore the film and its performance. Death, destruction, oppression, and loss are all wrapped up in the idea of the apocalypse. Any discussion of the apocalypse must always be in conversation with the “original” apocalypse from the Book of Revelation in the Bible (as well as in other non-Christian religious texts).³ The Greek word *apokalypsis* is not related to the end of the world, but instead refers to a revealing or uncovering. The definition of the word apocalypse, as I interpret it, has two elements: the reveal and the complete destruction. The reveal comes from the Biblical apocalypse; the idea of revealed knowledge and newfound awareness. It implies that something is hidden or not known and when it is revealed what follows is destruction. Apocalypse almost always references the end – the end of time or the end of the world. The end then leads to, in religious terms, the afterlife or spiritual realm. In some ways it is a

³ The term “apocalypse” comes from the Greeks meaning “uncovering” or “revealing,” but the *original* apocalypse is considered as the one found in the Bible.

promise of hope; after this death and destruction something new will come. It is the end in order to have a new beginning.

Performing (Playing) Imperialism

Margaret Morse cites Homi Fern Haber who equates “any form of unity with terror” and thus “totalization – or any assertion of structure or identity is equated with totalitarianism and viewed as an instrument of repression” (164). Totalitarianism is often a tool of imperialism. This quote from Haber also points to an important notion: terror unifies. There are examples of this throughout history. A particularly prominent recent example was the coming together of the American people in the wake of the attacks on September 11, 2001. The terror of what happened and the fear of what could happen unified the country in many ways. Both revelation and destruction can be viewed as the outcome of unifying terror (imperialism). There are many reasons America got involved in Vietnam which include the French Indochina War in the 1950s, the fear of the Domino Theory (if Vietnam is lost to communism, then communism will spread), the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964, as well as the performance of power, among others. French imperialism led them to Vietnam and the same could be said for American imperialism. The war that often accompanies acts of imperialism results is a form of the apocalypse. The apocalypse (war) can be, or is, the result of imperialism.

Nora M. Alter introduces the phrase “playing imperialism” to describe the performance of Vietnam War plays on stage (26). Alter utilizes the term to refer not only to the “implicit ‘imperialistic’ perspective from which the American plays tend to *view* the war, more or less consciously, but also to a similar perspective from which they *restage* it, more or less unconsciously – in most cases to the exclusion of other perspectives that might be *less* subjective, *less* complicitous with the dominant ideology of the United States” (26, italics in original). Alter proposed that the “America staging of the Vietnam War [specifically in theatre] was a form of ‘playing imperialism’” (26). Just as Alter examines plays about the Vietnam War (*Viet Rock* in 1966, *MacBird* in 1967, *The Trial of the Catonsville Nine* in 1970, and others) and applies the ideas of “playing imperialism,” here I apply this methodology to *Apocalypse Now*.

Apocalypse Now performs (or plays) several forms of imperialism. Cinematographer Vittorio Storaro, “contended that Coppola ‘wanted to express the main idea of Joseph Conrad, which is the imposition of one culture on top of

another,” which is present throughout the film (Norris, 211).⁴ There are several examples of imperialism examined here: overall American imperialism (as it is portrayed in the film), the performance of imperialism by the characters Kurtz (Colonel Walter E. Kurtz performed by Marlon Brando) and Willard (Captain Benjamin L. Willard played by Martin Sheen), and the film’s performative imperialism.

American Imperialism. Where and how does imperialism emerge? From nationalism? From the culture? As John Tomlinson writes in *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction* (1991), “Culture is entirely – even definitively – the work of human beings” (23). The first spoken line of *Apocalypse Now* comes from Captain Willard. “Saigon. Shit!” (00:04:24-00:04:25). “I’m still only in Saigon... Every time I think I’m gonna wake up back in the jungle” (*Apocalypse Now*, 00:04:27-00:04:41). While Saigon is not home, it also is not the “jungle.” This implies that Saigon is safer, easier, or better than the rest of Vietnam. In this way, Saigon becomes a new normal, a new sense of safety. The people sent to fight in this war, at least in this portrayal, are not convinced of their country’s imperialistic practices.

A key component of the film is the performance of the us versus them mentality by highlighting the “otherness” and “foreignness” of the Vietnamese and Cambodians. The visual and aural representations of “foreign” are constructed in the film. There is a clear dichotomy of American versus non-American even though most of film is set in Vietnam and Cambodia. As Willard moves up the river on his mission to find Kurtz, the visual and aural differences become more apparent and more “foreign.” This reinforces Conrad’s, and also Coppola’s, belief that the farther upriver the men travel the deeper they go into the heart of darkness. At the start of the river, the men are water-skiing behind the boat while laughing and listening to The Rolling Stones. There are Vietnamese fishermen and people working on the shores. As they continue upriver there are less and less encounters with the locals

⁴ *Apocalypse Now* is based Joseph Conrad’s short story, *Heart of Darkness* (1899). The story and themes of Conrad’s narrative is closely followed in the film, with the major exception of the context and, therefore, the location. Conrad’s story is set on the Congo River in Africa and highlights European imperialism. Both Conrad and Coppola received criticism for their works. The 2000 edition of *Heart of Darkness* edited by Cedric Watts is just one of edited versions of the 1899 original. In this edition, Watts cites critics who claim that *Heart of Darkness* is a tale of authenticity, while others praise it for being an amazing part of modern fiction, and some claim that Conrad was racist. Regardless of criticisms, *Heart of Darkness* is widely read and provided the source material for *Apocalypse Now*.

and the music stops. The boat keeps moving up the river until they stumble across a USO supply depot where the USO show is being set up. At the depot, soldiers are able to restock on cigarettes, soda, beer, and ammunition and they are able to partake in a Playboy Playmate USO performance. Norris writes, “The exaltation of individual freedom and dignity, traditionally sacrificed in the military, is further undercut by the USO show’s display of mindless male frenzy and violence” (214). The soldiers in the boat continue upriver as they get closer and closer to Cambodia.

Another layer of the performance of imperialism is the issue of race and the United States military. The Black-White binary is also seen in the film with the American soldiers just as it was throughout the Vietnam War. War is an act of imperialism, and the United States is no stranger to war. Scholars Paul B. Rich, author of “Racial Ideas and the Impact of Imperialism in Europe” and Jan P. Nederveen Pieterse, author of *Empire & Emancipation: Power and Liberation on a World Scale* (1989), among others, site the relationship between race and imperialism. Both in different contexts outline the impact of historical imperialism on historical and modern racism. Pieterse argues, “Racism is the psychology of imperialism” (223). Through the history of US-involved wars, the military has relied on the performance of black and brown bodies to help protect US interests. Black men were fighting in US conflicts as early as the 1700s. Jay David and Elaine Crane argue in the introduction to their edited volume, *The Black Soldier: From the American Revolution to Vietnam* (1971):

For two hundred years the black soldier has fought for his own personal freedom as well as for his country. It is no longer a question of proving ability; the black soldier has proved his heroism. Today the issues are acceptance as a human being and an American citizen and being granted the dignity and the privileges those identities imply. (15)

Almost 200,000 Black men fought in the Civil War, while close to 300,000 Black men fought in the Vietnam War. The United States military needed numbers (bodies) and therefore “began to court increasing numbers of potential black recruits” to fight in Vietnam (Engelhardt 248). While *Apocalypse Now* shows the camaraderie between the soldiers, which in many cases is a true representation of soldier relationships, but the opposite is also true. One black soldier said, “I wasn’t fighting the enemy. I was fighting the white man” (Engelhardt 248). I would need an additional article to cover the entirety of the Black-White binary in the film, but it is important to note: none of the Black soldiers who start on the boat with Willard survive. While in fact only one white soldier, Lance, survives with Willard, *all* the

Black soldiers die long before Willard arrives in Cambodia. The film goes beyond demonstration the death of Cambodians and Vietnamese, but also the death of Black American soldiers. War is a point of division and codification for American nationalism. And *Apocalypse Now* complicates this as Willard is fighting “them” (Cambodians and Vietnamese) and “us” (Kurtz). It becomes a civil war: Willard vs. Kurtz. This is the central relationship in the film though they do not meet until well into the story. Towards the start of the film US Captain Willard is summoned to a headquarters in Nha Trang and is given orders to find and kill US Colonel Kurtz; to “terminate Kurtz’s command” (*Apocalypse Now*, 00:17:52). They do not say “kill,” but the desired result is implied. This film emphasizes when nationalism (as well as patriotism and duty) turns into imperialism. The result of performing imperialism is war or perhaps, vice versa.

Character Imperialism. The performance of imperialism in *Apocalypse Now* is underscored in the fight for what Willard and Kurtz believe is right. Are there “right” answers in war? Or are there only better options depending on what side you are on? Can war, and therefore, imperialism ever end in anything other than an apocalypse, like the title of the film implies? John Milius, screenwriter for *Apocalypse Now*, explains, “I had the title to call it, *Apocalypse Now*, because all the hippies at the time had these buttons that said ‘Nirvana Now,’ and I loved the idea of a guy having a button with a mushroom cloud on it that said, ‘Apocalypse Now,’ you know, let’s bring it on, full nuke” (Norris 209-10). A “full nuke” would go beyond imperialism to full destruction, death, and the apocalypse. Willard’s removal of Kurtz is the “full nuke” option for the military leadership. But is that the “right” choice or the better option? The film continually provides moments of mirror-like reflections of Willard and Kurtz, which highlights the connectedness of these two men and their missions. For example, Willard puts his face in his hands and rubs his head, an act previously done by Kurtz. This dual physical performance of despair and frustration allows the audience to question the differences and similarities between Willard and Kurtz who seek nirvana and imperialism, if not apocalypse.

Kurtz’s imperialism, and therefore resulting colonialism, is performed by his takeover in Cambodia. But is it imperialism? Or is it madness? Kurtz is searching for something: understanding? Atonement? Control? Escape? The character of Kurtz is an intelligent, educated, career officer in the United States Army. He attended West Point, earned a Master’s degree from Harvard, served in the Korean War (1950-1953), worked at the Pentagon, and then was sent to Vietnam. During

his time in Vietnam (as well as before and after) the war was somewhat of hot potato passed from president to president, administration to administration. And his role in Vietnam was similar to that of the thousands of real “advisors” who were sent there to report on failures of the United States military polices and involvement from 1950-1975. This again pulls on Sartre’s quote about making “us aware of the reality of the war in Vietnam.”

Kurtz also is representative of a trope found in war stories of the “old” soldier who wants to feel useful and applies to reenlist or to join Special Forces. His request to join Special Forces is initially denied due to his age but is later accepted. Kurtz is then sent to Vietnam again to join Project GAMMA (a real Special Force), which is tasked with intelligence operations in Cambodia. In addition, he is asked to build and lead an army of Montagnard (an indigenous group in Vietnam) warriors to help defeat the enemy. The tribesmen are later referred to as “his [Kurtz’s] children” and “his people” (01:47:12; 01:50:36-01:50:39). Kurtz sets up camp at an abandoned Cambodian temple. This is where the audience finds Kurtz throughout the film, in the shadows of what is now his temple. In these scenes, Kurtz is seen as worshipped and valorized. At times he is seen as an example of the strength of the United States military and at other times he is viewed a mad leader of this indigenous group, both are arguably performances depending on the audience. Kurtz methods are described as barbaric and brutal. Shuting Sun writes, “Instead of sanitized civilized violence Kurtz opts for direct violence” (70). When he allowed photos of his “world” to be taken by the Photojournalist (to be released to the public) the military decides to shut him down. Kurtz explains, “You have to have men who are moral...and at the same time who are able to utilize their primordial instincts to kill without feeling...without passion...without judgement...without judgement! Because it’s judgement that defeats us” (02:13:27-02:14:02). His tactics and the results satisfied the leadership until the images are revealed to the critical public eye. Sending the message that the performance of imperialism is fine, unless it is on camera, which is why Willard is sent in.

Captain Benjamin L. Willard was part of a special operations unit called the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam – Studies and Observations Group (MACV-SOG). But like many, he is tired of the war. Following the release of the photos the leadership now views Kurtz as an insane, loose cannon. In *The Legacy: The Vietnam War in the American Imagination*, Michael Shafer describes Willard as “a quester knight who must face and text the shadowy civilian/military authorities” who give him the mission (193). He joins the Navy river boat patrol,

and they head upriver. Willard's quest up the river teaches him the danger of the "other." As Willard moves upriver "the more meaningless and morally vacant a nightmare Vietnam becomes" (Shafer 193). Chef (Frederic Forrest) says, "never get out of the boat" and this line is almost immediately repeated by Willard (via voiceover) after a threatening interaction with a tiger in the jungle (00:55:25-00:56:29). The boat becomes American soil. And once they leave American soil, they are in danger due to the "other." Early in the film, Willard encounters Lieutenant Colonel Bill Kilgore (Robert Duvall) who says, "Fucking savages" (00:45:13). Kilgore, the military, and the media reinforce the stereotype that "other" is savage and Willard buys into this notion. Willard's imperialism is essentially an extension of American imperialism. Willard is doing his military duty (whether ethical or not) and becomes consumed by it, which is perhaps the same path Kurtz attempted to follow.

As Willard, Lance (Sam Bottoms), and Chef arrive upriver to their destination, it is silent as they move through war-painted Cambodian filling canoes. As the Photojournalist (Dennis Hopper) appears through the crowds on shore, Willard, Lance, and Chef are welcomed. The images of the sculptures and the rituals being performed create a scene of otherness and foreignness. These images go beyond image of war and Vietnam to an even darker and worse place. Willard meets Kurtz and when Kurtz asks why Willard has been sent to him, Willard says, "They told me that you had gone totally insane, and that your methods were unsound." Kurtz asks, "Are my methods unsound?" Willard answers, "I don't see any method at all, sir" (01:57:28-01:58:01). Willard is successful in killing Kurtz. The Montagnards then kneel to Willard. He appears to push against American imperialism, but then creates his own version of it.

Film's Imperialism. Coppola makes a cameo early in the film when Willard arrives at an Army base. Kilgore walks Willard through the base and they pass a scene of chaos: helicopters flying overhead, soldiers dancing to The Rolling Stones, a pastor holding a service next to a church (that is being built or torn down, it is unclear), and television news crew with Coppola's character shouting, "Don't look at the camera! Just pretend you're fighting!" (00:27:36-00:27:48). This begs the question of authenticity of the war narrative, but also with the news narrative. Were (are) US citizens being show the "truth" about the war? Ella Shohat and Robert Stam discuss, in *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, the trope of the "camera gun" in context

with the “aggressive use of the camera by the agents of the colonial powers” (107).⁵ In this way, the camera is its own form of imperialism by choosing what images to “shoot” and what images not to “shoot,” which is the job of a filmmaker like Coppola and the photojournalist character. The media has a significant impact on the perception of war back home. This performance doubles back on itself as audiences then question the truth of Coppola’s film via his cameo. Linda Dittmar examines the appearance of television crews in both *Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket* writing that these moments articulate “the filmmakers’ awareness of the ubiquitous role reportage plays in the process of imaging the Vietnam War” (3). What it meant for the news media or the soldiers who fought is different than what it meant for Coppola or for the Photojournalist character.

In the telling of the story of the Vietnam War, is imperialism inherent? In 2007, Keith Solomon wrote the article, “The Spectacle of War and the Specter of ‘The Horror’: *Apocalypse Now* and American Imperialism” for the *Journal of Popular Film and Television*. Solomon highlights the reliance on technology to conduct war and to replicate it in film and television, which in turn creates a “spectacle of war.” This transforms the audience into “supporters of the imperial project” (Solomon, 25). The film challenges the audience to answer the question: war, what is it good for? Solomon goes on to write, “By accepting images of the war as a form of entertainment, the viewer thus becomes both colonizer and colonized” (25). Perhaps an alternative reading of the film could reveal that the viewer becomes more educated about (and therefore more able to respond to) American imperialism which occurred during the war. Or the opposite could also be true – continued ambivalence? If Solomon is correct and the viewer acts as a colonizer then what agency is ascribed to the filmmakers? Are those involved in the production the colonizers?

I agree with Solomon in that the film, and story, reek of imperialism at all levels from production to narrative. Coppola and his crew spent 238 days on location in Manila, Philippines.⁶ Ezra and Rowden write, “a term like ‘on location’ actually highlights the dislocation of most films from any representational relationship to or acknowledgement of the economic ‘home’ that is making it possible” (8). Philippines and United States have a long history, which includes the Philippine-American War (1898-1910) in which Filipino’s fought for independence from the

⁵ They site this concept from Étienne-Jules Marey “fusil cinématographique.”

⁶ Filming was scheduled to last six weeks.

United States. The first battle of the war was the Battle of Manila, where Coppola chose to film *Apocalypse Now*. After the war, the Philippine-US relationship improved so much so that the two became allies, which is part of the reason Coppola was allowed to film there. The 238 days of filming is just one example of how the film became, in terms of clichés, “bigger than itself.” Being “on location” for that amount of time inevitably impacts the economy, if not the culture.⁷

The time spent in the Philippines became one level of imperialism and not only because of the excessive filming timeframe.⁸ In the documentary, *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse*, one of the producers describes building the scenery for Kurtz's temple. The film hired 600+ local workers in the Philippines for \$1 a day. One producer flippantly questioned whether they were taking advantage of the local people. In addition, several hundred people of Ifugao from Luzon were brought in to play the Montagnard warriors.⁹ Ifugaos not only act as the Montagnard warriors, but also performed as decapitated heads (*Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse*). The “heads” had to stand in boxes in the ground with their heads sticking above the ground for eight to twelve hours a day while filming the scenes which took place outside Kurtz's temple. The use of the locals as “foreign” warriors and severed heads not only represents the performance of imperialism within the world of the film, but also the performance of the film.

Media, in all forms, plays a significant role in the discussion of imperialism. In Jeremy Tunstall books, *The Media Are American* from 1977 and *The Media Were American* from 2008, he examines the American takeover of media and the downfall of American media. In the introduction to the second book, Tunstall points out that the US “remains unique in that most Americans are exposed almost entirely to their own nation's history, culture, and mythology” (xiv). Most American's knowledge of the Vietnam War comes from an American perspective. Even how the US refers to the war, as the “Vietnam War” is a representative act of imperialism. In Vietnam, the war is often referred to as the American War and some (in the US and in Vietnam, among other places) call it the Second Indochina War. In the US,

⁷ One of the legacies left behind in the Philippines was a growing culture of surfing. In April 2013, the BBC did story on *Apocalypse Now* and its influence to the surfing culture in the Philippines. The surfers viewed the films influence as positive.

⁸ On average, most films take 3-5 months to film.

⁹ Luzon is a province in the Philippines. The Ifugaos perform as the “Mountain people”/Montagnard warriors in the Cambodia scenes of the film.

people often shorten the title by referring to the war as just “Vietnam.” The culture within in the US has taken agency away from the country by utilizing the term “Vietnam” synonymously with the war which occurred there. Tomlinson also argues the importance of media as a form of cultural imperialism and “cultural imperialism is dependent on an analysis of the *relationship between the text and audience*” (44, italics in original). *Apocalypse Now* addresses the relationship between text and audience by holding a mirror up to the American public (and government, military, etc.), yet audiences are still able to deny or even ignore the imperialism presented directly in front of them.

Civilian access to war exists only via the media and perhaps personal recounts or personal research. As Andrew Huebner writes, “The popular press, novels, newsreels, magazines, museum exhibits, photographs, radio shows, television broadcasts, government films, and Hollywood movies carried portraits of war to the American home front during and after three major overseas conflicts: World War II (1941-45), the Korean War (1950-53), and the Vietnam War (1964-73)” (1). The media creates representations of war which cannot be erased. Audiences may conflate the reality of the Vietnam War with films like *Apocalypse Now*. The film performs in such a way that it “turned the real-life specificity of U.S. imperialism into an abstract and philosophical cinematic meditation on good and evil, light and dark” and in the process, “American society was treated to a film that represented not so much Vietnam-era America as America’s idealized view of itself post-Vietnam, that is, from the enlightened perspective of a historical hindsight that could sublimate contradictions” (Dittmar, 147). This historical hindsight also applies to how the film is viewed today – with the nostalgia of the images and sounds that have become iconic.

Apocalypse Now combines numerous forms of media within the film, including film, television, news, and music. Timothy Corrigan (*Cinema Without Walls*) writes, “cinematic engagements with that historical watershed event of Vietnam often aspire to the condition of nostalgic songs (from the sixties) and operatic spectacles as the very structuring principle of their representations,” including *Apocalypse Now* (39-40). Perhaps one of the most memorable moments of the film is when Kilgore leads his cavalry, in this case helicopters, in a seemingly unnecessary attack on a Vietnamese village.¹⁰ The scene progresses with a soundtrack of a Wagnerian opera, “Ride of the Valkyries” from *The Valkyrie* (1870), which replaces the sixties

¹⁰ “Seemingly” because at the end of that scene a woman throws a grenade into one of the helicopters.

tunes that had previously served as a backdrop. Corrigan writes, “these soldiers as spectators absolutely need to transcend that historical moment to live in it” citing Lyotard’s postmodernism “it is necessary to admit an irreducible need for history...not as the need to remember or to project...but on the contrary as a need to forget” (39). This is where not only the filmmakers come in, but also photojournalist in war and their representation in *Apocalypse Now*.

Apocalypse

In an interview, Coppola described *Apocalypse Now* as “a film experience that would give its audience a sense of the horror, the madness, the sensuousness, and the moral dilemma of the Vietnam War” (Adair 145). The title of the film, *Apocalypse Now*, embodies the qualities Coppola describes with the horror of the current war (what feels like the end of the world), happening now. Imperialism, in many ways, emerges from a place of horror and fear: fear of the other, fear of the unknown, and fear of loss of power. Therefore, the two lenses – imperialism and apocalypse – go hand in hand. When Coppola set out to direct *Apocalypse Now*, he wanted to “address as many aspects of war and human nature as possible” (Schumacher 203). Fear, terror, and horror reside in both war and human nature. The comparison of war to the apocalypse seems to provide fruitful insights on the reality of war.

An argument can be made that war and ideas of the apocalypse are inextricable. The view from civilians and the military, in war, is the same – death and destruction all around. While some may argue that the goal of war is not an apocalypse, it can seem to be a byproduct. There are countless books about the Civil War, First World War, Second World War, among others that frame wars as apocalyptic. There is a six-part documentary series from 2009 entitled *Apocalypse: The Second World War*, which shows wartime images and film of the destruction of the war. The word apocalypse is also connected to nuclear war; often referred to as “nuclear holocaust” or “nuclear apocalypse.” Therefore, there is no doubt that by the time of the Vietnam War potential apocalypse is part of the zeitgeist.

The apocalypse in *Apocalypse Now* can be read in several ways including the war itself as an apocalypse, but also in the minds of men like Kurtz and then author, Willard. Frank P. Tomasulo who writes, “If *Apocalypse Now* does indeed tell a universal story about a never-ending conflict between Eastern primitivism and Western civilization, then it may unconsciously be fueling American fears of a

barbarism and a future war more horrific than anything known in Vietnam” (Dittmar, 155). Again, fear is a motivating factor. The fear easily turns into terror and horror. This is foreshadowed during an early scene where Willard is drunk in the hotel. Gilbert Adair notes in *Vietnam on Film*, “In this sequence, Vietnam is *literally* what it will become figuratively in the rest of the movie: less a precise geographical (or geopolitical) area than a phantasmagoric landscape etched on the inner eye” (148, italics in original). The end of the film leaves the audience to question whether or not Willard will call in the air strike as planned, which Kurtz calls for in his journal, “Drop the bomb. Exterminate them all!” (02:22:10-02:22:16). As one writer notes about the imagery of napalm (also dropped from above) in *Apocalypse Now*, “The exploding napalm also represents a contemporary correlative for one of the film’s mythic substrata, the original Apocalypse, the New Testament’s Book of Revelation” (Dittmar 156). There is a continual image of apocalypse coming from above with napalm, bombs, and the Huey’s in war and specifically in this film. This references imagery of the horrific biblical apocalypse raining down from above (from heaven? From God?).

Conceptually, terror and horror of the apocalypse are represented throughout the film – the “madness” in the soldier (like Kurtz and Willard) and in the violent acts they perform. These concepts become literal when Willard arrives in Cambodia and meets Kurtz. Kurtz says to Willard, “Horror and moral terror are your friends, if they are not, they are enemies to be feared” (02:10:31-02:10:40). In John Nelson’s article, “Four Forms for Terrorism: Horror, Dystopia, Thriller, and Noir” (from Ezra and Rowden’s *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader*) he describes horror and terror in this way, “Horror appalls and revolts; yet horror can also revolutionize, provoking fresh perspectives and effective inventions. For good or ill, horror provokes extreme responses that range from willful oblivion to apocalyptic reckoning. Terror disrupts and stops action by the victims; horror interrupts and radicalizes it” (185). Nelson goes on to write, “Horror is the overwhelming dread-and-disgust that initially puts someone or something else at the center of assault” (Ezra and Rowden, 185). Kurtz’s dying words to Willard (after Willard attacks him with a machete) are, “The horror...the horror.” Following this, Willard discovers the journal calling for him to “drop the bomb” (02:22:10-02:22:16).

At this point in the film the village in Cambodia is changed. It is altered by Kurtz’s presence and imperialism and therefore the apocalypse of war. Willard’s presence and the killing of Kurtz distort it again. Willard grabs Lance and climbs

aboard the board the boat with no acknowledgement of what just occurred. A voice from the radio comes through, “PBR Street Gang this is Almighty, over...,” Willard turns the radio off and starts down river (02:16:13-02:16:21). Again, the audience is left wondering what Willard’s actions will be and if the air strike will be called in.

Conclusion

An event as apocalyptic as the Vietnam War cannot help but to reveal something about human nature and war itself. After discovering what is revealed, “no one can, in good faith, elude the conclusion that the Government of the United States is guilty of the crime of aggression against the Vietnamese people” (Association D’Amitie Franco-Vietnamienne). The film and its performance challenge audiences to recognize the atrocities of the Vietnam War. Suid cites an interview with Coppola, in which Coppola said, “My film is not an attempt to mock, criticize or condemn those who participated in the war. My film is merely an attempt to use the theatrical, dramatic form to examine the issues of war, which certainly must be among the important events in our history” (338). While I believe Coppola was successful in these attempts, it is clear he failed to recognize his own acts of imperialism through the making of *Apocalypse Now*.

Film performs a unique role in popular culture as it often demonstrates ideas, beliefs, and practices of a cultural moment. It is a tool to reflect on the past, current, and potential future moments. It is a tool to educate, express, and entertain. Film is of a time and place and *Apocalypse Now*, an iconic piece of popular culture, attempts to perform these roles. It is an adaptation of another piece of storytelling, it educates audiences on the horrors of the Vietnam War (though the story is fictional), and it works with, and in opposition to, other 1970s/1980s Vietnam War films. Additionally, *Apocalypse Now* holds within it not only an investigation of the Vietnam War, but also points to other sites of popular culture such as classic literature, rock and roll music, surfing, and even *Playboy Magazine*. Due to its popularity and controversy, analysis of this film in scholarship from 1979 to today provides a methodology of how to look at objects of popular culture. *Apocalypse Now*, along with the many other Vietnam War films (including recent films such as *Da 5 Bloods* (2020)) it contributes to the continual study and analysis of not only film and film making practices, but also the war itself.

The legacy of the performative nature of *Apocalypse Now* is present in its continued popularity as well as being a touchstone for younger generations as a means of grasping for understanding of the war in Vietnam. The Vietnam War attempted to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people and government, but it was also a fight for the American soul. What does it mean for the US to be involved in this type of war? And in reference *Apocalypse Now*, should this struggle be “refought,” or more narrowly reperformed in film? The film altered the way audiences viewed Conrad’s original narrative, the war in Vietnam, cinematic storytelling, and the culture and industry in the Philippines. While the filmmakers and actors perform imperialism, the film does remind (if not restore) the responsibility of the US for violence in Vietnam, and did so, with the help of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.

Works Cited

- Adair, Gilbert. *Vietnam on Film: From the Green Berets to Apocalypse Now*. Proteus Publishing Co, 1981.
- Alter, Nora M. *Vietnam Protest Theatre: The Television War on Stage*. Indiana UP, 1996.
- Apocalypse Now*. Directed by Francis Ford Coppola, performances by Martin Sheen, Marlon Brando, and Sam Bottoms. United Artists, 1979.
- Association D’Amitie Franco-Vietnamienne, editors. *Chronology of the Vietnam War: Book One (1941-1966)*. Democratic Republic of Vietnam Commission for Investigation of the U.S. Imperialist’ War Crimes in Vietnam, 1968.
- Bloom, Harold. *Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness*. Chelsea House, 1987.
- Butler, Judith. “Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory.” *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4, 1988, pp. 519-31.
- Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. Edited by Cedric Watts. Everyman, 2000.
- Corrigan, Timothy. *Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture After Vietnam*. Rutgers UP, 1991.
- David, Jay and Elaine Crane. Eds. *The Black Soldier: From the American Revolution to Vietnam*. William Morrow and Company, 1971.
- Dittmar, Linda and Gene Michaud. Ed. *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*. Rutgers UP, 1990.

- Engelhardt, Tom. *End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation*. U Massachusetts P, 2007.
- Ezra, Elizabeth and Terry Rowden, editors. *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader*. Routledge, 2006.
- Heart of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse*. Directed by Fax Bahr, George Hickenlooper, George Zaloom, performances by Eleanor Coppola and Francis Ford Coppola. Triton Pictures, 1991.
- Huebner, Andrew J. *The Warrior Image: Soldiers in American Culture from the Second World War to the Vietnam Era*. U North Carolina P, 2008.
- Morse, Margaret. "Home: Smell, Taste, Posture, Gleam." *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place*. Ed. Hamid Naficy. Routledge, 1999.
- Nederveen Pieterse, Jan P. *Empire and Emancipation: Power and Liberation on a World Scale*. Praeger, 1989.
- Norris, Margot. *Writing War in the Twentieth Century*. UP Virginia, 2000.
- Rich, Paul B. "Racial ideas and the impact of imperialism in Europe." *The European Legacy*, vol. 3, no. 1. 1998, pp. 31-44.
- Ritzer, George. *Globalization: A Basic Text*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. Knopf, 1993.
- Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (3rd ed.). Routledge, 2013.
- Schumacher, Michael. *Francis Ford Coppola: A Filmmaker's Life*. Crown Publishers, 1999.
- Shafer, Michael D., editor. *The Legacy: The Vietnam War in the American Imagination*. Beacon Press, 1990.
- Shohat, Ella and Robert Stam. *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. Routledge, 1994.
- Solomon, Keith. "The spectacle of war and the specter of 'the horror': *Apocalypse Now* and American Imperialism." *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 35, no. 1. 2007, pp. 22-31.
- Suid, Lawrence H. *Guts and Glory: The Making of the American Military Image in Film*. UP Kentucky, 2002.
- Sun, Shuting. "Imperialist ideology and Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now*." *English Language and Literature Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2. 2019, pp. 64-72.
- Tomlinson, John. *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction*. Continuum, 1991.
- Tunstall, Jeremy. *The Media Were American: U.S. Mass Media in Decline*. Oxford UP, 2008.

Tunstall, Jeremy. *The Media Are American*. Columbia UP, 1977.

The Coffeehouse, The Diner, The Bar: The Rise and Fall of Television's Favorite Third Places

EMMA J. GIST

In the concluding scene of the wildly popular sitcom *Friends* (1994-2004), Rachel asks Chandler and Monica, who have just completed packing up their apartment in anticipation of a move to the suburbs, if they need to go to their new house right away or if they have time to get coffee. "Sure," responds Chandler, and as the central cast walks through the threshold of the apartment for the last time he adds, "Where?" (00:48:18). The studio audience laughs as the episode – and the series – concludes. The joke here, which even casual viewers are equipped to catch, is that Chandler has no reason to ask where the friends will get their coffee because the answer is obvious. For a full decade, from its premier in 1994 to its 2004 finale, viewers watched the six titular characters live their lives around the hub of Central Perk, a conveniently located and regularly visited coffeehouse. Although the characters move to a variety of apartments throughout the series, trading each other as roommates around Manhattan, Central Perk remains a constant meeting place, an impossibly reliable and neutral home-base where the friends may gather as a collective.

In the popular television landscape of the turn to the 21st century, the function of Central Perk in *Friends* is hardly unique. The titular bar of *Cheers* (1982-1993) set the colloquial standard for a convenient, accessible, television common space: this standard was later met by other such examples as *Seinfeld's* Monk's (1989-1998), *Frasier's* Café Nervossa (1993-2004), and *Gilmore Girl's* Luke's Diner (original run 2000-2007). These places serve as common meeting ground the characters of their respective series gather spontaneously, at which they expect the unplanned company of people they know, and in which they feel comfortable (and expected) to linger. This "third place" (Oldenburg) television trend thrived up

EMMA J. GIST is a doctoral candidate in Comparative Literature at Louisiana State University. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Comparative Literature from the University of Chicago and a Master of Arts in Teaching from the University of Southern California. She works as a coordinator and instructional coach specializing in project-based learning for Humanities Amped, a non-profit organization that supports students and teachers in Baton Rouge public schools. Emma's research interests include Bakhtinian theory, the history of English education, and multimodal literacies. She can be reached at egist2@lsu.edu.

Popular Culture Studies Journal
Volume 9, Issue 2, ©2021

through the early 2000s but was ultimately short-lived: in the years following the previous examples, third places as central elements of popular television series have become much less common. Television third places, then, seem to have met a specifically situated cultural need at a particular time.

In *The Small Screen: How Television Equips Us to Live in the Information Age*, Brian Ott argues that 1990s television supported viewers in learning to navigate the rapid, anxiety-inducing changes that characterized the turn of the millennium. Drawing on the sample set of television series listed previously, I extend from Ott's work to argue that the television trend of the third place is evidence of specific Information Age anxieties about disconnection and placelessness. Further, I attribute the decline of this trend to the rise of Internet-based computer-mediated communication (CMC) and social networking platforms, which have come to function as "virtual third places" (see Soukup; Horrigan; Lawson; Aldosemani et al.; Moore et al.) that at least partially meet the need for community and connection traditionally filled by physical third places.

Ray Oldenburg's "Third Place"

Ray Oldenburg, author of *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*, defines third places as sites of "regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work" and writes that such places comprise "the core settings of informal public life" (16). Oldenburg enumerates several specific characteristics of third places that frame their capacity to provide ideal conditions for spontaneous, enjoyable, social interaction. Through measurement against these characteristics, we can qualify fictional places like Central Perk, Café Nervosa, Cheers, Monk's, and Luke's as evident, albeit idealized, representations of Oldenburg's third place.

First, Oldenburg describes the social value of third places as "*neutral ground* upon which people may gather" (22). He writes that these are places "where individuals may come and go as they please, in which none are required to play host, and in which all feel at home and comfortable" (22). This "neutral ground" qualification distinguishes third places from the first place, or the domestic space of home. In the example of *Friends*, although the six central characters are often shown gathered at one another's apartments, nearly every episode also features visits to the coffeehouse. The characters enter alone or together and leave one at a

time or in pairs: the nature of their third place requires no single person to be responsible for the others, freeing all to exist in the space equally.

Relatedly, Oldenburg's third place also functions as "a leveler," an inclusive space that renders irrelevant the status markers that apply in other places, including especially the second place: work. Oldenburg writes that in most day-to-day circumstances, people normally interact according to roles assigned to them for objective purposes. He writes that these hierarchical relations are most applicable at work, but that "a place that is a leveler also permits the individual to know workmates in a different and fuller aspect than is possible in the workplace" (Oldenburg 24). In the example of *Frasier*, at Café Nervossa radio personality Frasier Crane and his producer Roz relate to each other as friends, sharing gossip and personal aspects of their lives with one another. Despite their various and unrelated jobs (actor, paleontologist, chef), the *Friends* characters enter Central Perk with an equal right to occupy the space. Even when the third place is or becomes certain characters' workplace, the working characters are nevertheless still welcomed to participate in the third place-based conversational experiences of the others, which Oldenburg asserts is the primary activity, or "*sine qua non* of the third place" (28).¹ Specifically, Oldenburg explains that people visit and linger in third places for social engagement, to connect with each other, and to share ideas. Although Monk's and Luke's, as diners, primarily function as businesses that serve food, the characters in *Seinfeld* and *Gilmore Girls* respectively never visit these businesses just to eat but also to engage in conversation with other characters.

For third places to feature conversation among regulars as the main activity, one that often continues long after patrons have finished their meal or coffee, they must flexibly serve purposes beyond those for which they are primarily designed. Instead of encouraging people to cycle out, efficiently making room for new paying customers, true third places allow, even encourage, lingering. Oldenburg explains that newer establishments "are more wedded to the purposes for which they were built" and that chain businesses are more likely to have "policies and personnel that discourage hanging out" (36). Thus, he explains, older establishments, those with a plain, low profile, are more likely to become third places. Accordingly, places like

¹ Moore, Gathman, and Duchenaud offer a useful critique to Oldenburg's definition, pointing out that "third places must be second places for someone (that is, places of work). For patrons to enjoy the 'unplanned, unscheduled, unorganized, and unstructured' visits to third places, someone must do the work of supporting them (Oldenburg 1991:33). Neither the beer nor the coffee will pour itself" (238). Sam Malone and Rachel Green, then, may pour beer and coffee respectively without threatening the third place status of Cheers and Central Perk.

Central Perk, Café Nervossa, and Luke's feature in the pilot episodes of their shows as locally based, securely established locations already frequented by the characters. In fact, the pilot episodes of *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, and *Gilmore Girls*, as well as *Cheers*, open in their third places, establishing the importance of these places to the stories and characters from the series' very first scenes.

Further, Oldenburg explains that the most successful third places are easily accessible: they must be in proximity to one's residence so that visits are convenient and so that the patrons are likely to know each other. Third places are "those to which one may go alone at almost any time of the day or evening with assurance that acquaintances will be there" (Oldenburg 32). This characteristic is tied closely with the requirement that the third place be reliably populated with regulars. Oldenburg explains that people visit third places because of the energy created by the collective of other visitors and their relationships with each other. The urban setting of stories like *Seinfeld* and *Friends* allows for third places that are centrally located near the characters' residences in a way that is authentic to dense urban layouts in which businesses and residences intermix. Even the small-town diner of *Gilmore Girls*, though, is located within walking distance of main characters Lorelai and Rory's home. Its central location in town makes it conveniently accessible to many of the show's other primary characters. Because these third places are easy to access, they are reliably populated at any given time with members of the community and provide reliable, ongoing opportunities for neighbors to develop bonds with one another.

Finally, Oldenburg describes that the prevalent mood in third places must be playfulness, and that they should function as a "home away from home" (38) with the comfort of a domestic space without being a domestic space. The now iconic Central Perk couch and coffee table, furniture more associated with private living rooms than businesses, visibly establishes this "home away from home" atmosphere for both the characters and the viewer. Although other customers populate the coffeehouse at its tables and chairs, the central *Friends* characters most often sit on the couch and in seats around the coffee table (an arrangement that mirrors the domestic space of the upstairs apartment) and act accordingly, speaking casually with one another much as though they were enjoying the privacy of home.

The inclusion of third places in popular narrative television programs represents a late 1980s through 2000s trend of celebrating the qualities that Oldenburg describes. Settings like Central Perk and Luke's become characters in themselves: viewers come to rely on these coffeehouses, diners, and bars as gathering places in

which familiar and beloved characters spend time not only with each other but with the viewer. These places are a fictional manifestation of a comfortable, secure place that exists to serve the social development of each story's community. The thriving nature of these places in their television contexts, however, stands in stark contrast to the fate of third places in late 20th century reality.

Third places have historically featured prominently in American culture. Karen Lawson, in a brief overview of this history, writes that "The inns of colonial society were transformed into the saloons and general stores that sprung up with the country's westward expansion. Later came the soda fountains, coffee shops, and diners, which, along with the local post office, were centrally located and provided, along with churches, the social anchors of community life" (125). This historical pattern of third place abundance begins to shift, however, in the mid-20th century.

Beyond discussing the nature of third places, Oldenburg traces the context and outcomes of their rapid disappearance from American life: he attributes this shift in large part to the postwar development and expansion of suburbs, writing that:

Life in the subdivision may have satisfied the combat veteran's longing for a safe, orderly, and quiet haven, but it rarely offered the sense of place and belonging that had rooted his parents and grandparents. Houses alone do not a community make, and the typical subdivision proved hostile to the emergence of any structure or space utilization beyond the uniform houses and streets that characterized it. (Oldenburg 4)

Postwar subdivisions, as Oldenburg describes them, were not designed to include third places and thus established inherently fragmented modern communities. He laments, "There are no sad farewells at the local taverns or the corner store because there are no local taverns or corner stores" (Oldenburg 4). Oldenburg underscores the loss of the soda fountains and lunch counters that formerly functioned as community gathering places and cites the trend of converting garages into recreation rooms, spaces for youth to gather, to meet this need (18).

Oldenburg summarizes the sense of disconnection and placelessness among individuals in a society without third places, identifying that:

The problem of place in America manifests itself in a sorely deficient informal public life. The structure of shared experience beyond that offered by family, job, and passive consumerism is small and dwindling. The essential group experience is being replaced by the exaggerated self-consciousness of individuals. American life-styles, for all the material acquisition and the seeking after comforts and pleasures, are plagued by

boredom, loneliness, alienation, and a high price tag. America can point to many areas where she has made progress, but in the area of informal public life she has lost ground and continues to lose it. (Oldenburg 13)

According to Oldenburg's analysis, this particular set of social concerns is historically situated among developments unique to the second half of the 20th century and the time immediately prior to the new millennium.

Information Age Anxieties

In *The Small Screen: How Television Equips Us to Live in the Information Age*, Brian Ott discusses several other anxieties unique to the era of the Information Age and argues for the function of television as an avenue through which viewers could learn to adapt to the destabilizing changes of the era. Ott begins by positioning the Information Age historically, emphasizing the massively influential developments in information production and dissemination that characterized the turn of the 21st century. Ott defines information as "the vast array of semiotic material produced and circulated in society," clarifying that "information includes everything from the messages we read on billboards and conversations we have with our friends to the images we see on television and film and the music we listen to on the radio" (28). To emphasize the unprecedented explosion of information unique to this era, Ott quotes H.C. von Bayer's claim in 2004 that "humans and their machines will create more information in the next three years than in the preceding 300,000 years of history" (qtd. in Ott 30). Further, Ott points out that the length of time between the development of the phonetic alphabet and movable-type printing technology was over six times as long as the time between printing and mass electronic communication (5), making the transition to the Information Age "dizzily quick by historical comparison" (5). Computers and the Internet represent remarkably influential developments in communication technology, the progress of which is staggering: Ott explains that "So rapid have been the advances in computing power that in 1994 the typical person wore more computing power on his or her wrist than existed in the world before 1961 (Morrison and Schmid 1994: 171)" (qtd. in Ott 35).

This development in computing power and related communication technologies has impacted contemporary society by influencing the amount of information produced, by shifting who is able to produce and share information, and by increasing the ease with which information is circulated and spread across even

very large distances. In combination, these factors have led to an overwhelming abundance of information that in turn contributes to widespread cultural anxieties. As an example, Ott writes that, prior to these developments, the reality of physical separation between communicators necessitated time lags between information production, transmission, and processing. While in-person communication occurs synchronously, distance communication has, until recently, been asynchronous: a letter is written, a letter is mailed, a letter is read, with each step occurring at a different moment in time. Most asynchronous processes of communication, however, have been replaced by the faster-than-synchronous communication enabled by contemporary technology (e.g., computers, television, satellites). When communication is faster-than-synchronous, information is produced and shared at a rate faster than it can possibly be processed. As examples Ott presents the ease with which we might “download a library-worth of information from across the globe” (32) or the way that news programming, “with it[s] graphics, scrolling text, and talking heads, offers information more rapidly than it can be received by the typical viewer” (32).

Together, these remarkable developments of the Information Age contribute to five specific anxieties that Ott names: “feeling overwhelmed, feeling placeless, feeling frenzied, feeling guilty, and feeling fragmented” (47). These anxieties, particularly placelessness and fragmentation, mirror those that Oldenburg claims develop in the absence of third places. Traditionally, third places provide community members with space to engage in uncomplicated, synchronous conversational communication. They exist as reliable institutions within communities that tether people to one another in a shared space, and, by not demanding the responsibilities of home or work, they enable and encourage socialization for its own, human sake. The unprecedented explosion of information, paired with the isolating nature of a modern life void of dedicated third places, initiates, then, a search for ways to cope in this new world.

Citing Kenneth Burke and Barry Brummett, Ott presents public discourse as a method through which people name, discuss, and work through social anxieties, including anxieties caused by major paradigm shifts (5). In the context of the Information Age, Ott claims that television is uniquely positioned as an ideal medium for such discourse for two reasons. First, television represents an

accessible, nearly completely ubiquitous communication method.² Secondly, he posits that the simultaneous, rather than sequential, structure of television narratives “privileges a different way of knowing” (Ott 9) more in keeping with the nature of the Information Age. That is, rather than sequencing information in the linear fashion of print media, the visual approach of television engages simultaneous presentation. In addition to visual media’s presentation of multiple signs at once that are read by the viewer in any order, Ott also describes editing techniques that introduce “gaps, breaks, and ruptures” (9), both of which differentiate television from the linear coherence of traditional print media (9). As a medium, television does not resist the paradigm shifts of the Information Age but instead rides its wave of abundance. Ultimately, Ott argues that the public discourse featured in the popular television programming of the 1990s supported viewers in navigating shifting social conditions (55). He presents categories of hyperconscious television, which acknowledges and parodies its own position, and nostalgic television, which gazes back towards the rapidly receding past. Both of which, he claims, help equip viewers for life in the present.

The prevalence of featured third places in popular television programming of the period between the 1980s and the 2000s aligns with and extends Ott’s argument: in an era when people are losing or have lost the real-life touchstones of community gathering spots, and when an overwhelm of information is forcing feelings of isolation, television viewers seek comfort in narrative worlds that have preserved intentional space for conversation and community. This desire is named directly and addressed by *Cheers*: airing throughout the 1980s, this series no doubt maintained its immense popularity into the 1990s because it not only recognized the modern conditions of placelessness and isolation but also offered an antidote.

The *Cheers* opening sequence begins with an exterior shot of the namesake bar as cars and pedestrians pass. The image freezes before fading into an illustration of the same exterior, this time framed by a horse-drawn carriage and people dressed according to the fashions of the 19th century. The lyrics declare, “Making your way in the world today takes everything you got,” naming the temporal distinction between the two visually represented time periods: “today” is presented in opposition to an idealized version of “yesterday.” Articulating the purpose of third places as places set apart, the lyrics continue, “Taking a break from all your worries

² Television skyrocketed from a presence in 9% of US homes in 1950 to an astonishing 95% by 1970 (Ott vii).

sure would help a lot” before asking, “Wouldn’t you like to get away?” A viewer experiencing the Information Age anxieties previously described is primed, then, to agree with the song’s declaration that “Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name, and they’re always glad you came” (Portnoy and Angelo). Viewers of the show *Cheers* are invited weekly to spend half an hour at the bar Cheers, a fictional third place that perfectly meets all of Oldenburg’s criteria. Cheers is “neutral ground” for conversation. If, as the song lyrics say, it is a place “where you can see troubles are all the same” (Portnoy and Angelo), it must also be a leveler. Viewers of *Cheers* may linger there, and they may come and go as they please, always assured that this place will be populated by locals whom they recognize. Week by week viewers become familiar with the standard cast of characters, come to know all their names, and are invited to imagine, in a type of fantasy, that their own name is known in that place as well. Because each episode is released and consumed one by one at regular intervals, according to the conventions of network television and the circumstances of the show’s original airing, viewers develop a sense of regularity and ritual, entering the world of this familiar place presented as only the medium of television can achieve: visibly and audibly, and therefore immersively. The act of regularly watching *Cheers*, which is set almost exclusively within the walls of its namesake, simulates for viewers the increasingly inaccessible and elusive experience of third places.

The other television shows in the representative sample, *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, *Frasier* (a series which spun off from *Cheers*), and *Gilmore Girls*, all feature third places that function similarly to Cheers the bar. In each case, the fictional third places presented in the televisual context become the “hyperreal” of Jean Baudrillard, disconnected from any actual referent (Baudrillard 6). Viewers do not feel emotionally connected to the atmosphere of places like Central Perk or Luke’s because they are reminded of third places they know and frequent but because the fictional settings function as a stand-in for an environment to which the viewer has no actual access in the reality of their day-to-day lives. In fact, these fictional third places live up to Oldenburg’s definition in a way that no real place actually could: we would be hard pressed to find a real-world third place in which institutions of power (including but not limited to class, race, and gender privilege) are authentically, but temporarily, dismantled in the “leveling” way that Oldenburg describes (Soukup 430). The pattern of featured, beloved, perfect third places across popular television narratives demonstrates a socially constant interest in the

third places that were absent from contemporary American life but desired by Americans when these shows originally aired.

Since the publication of *The Great Good Place* in 1989 and again in 1999, third places have not necessarily experienced a resurgence. Residential neighborhoods remain physically distant from businesses, and people are still discouraged from lingering just to talk when they take up space that could be occupied by a customer who will make a new purchase. On television, though, third places no longer feature with the frequency that marked the 1990s and 2000s. This shift away from what appears to have once been a staple of popular narrative television indicates some sort of social change that cannot be explained by the return of third places to communities because they simply have not returned.

Virtual Third Places

The same Information Age technological and social changes that contributed to the era's common anxieties also enabled the establishment and widespread use of Internet-based computer-mediated communication. In his book *Digital Places: Building or City of Bits*, Thomas A. Horan explores the influence of technological innovation on the design of physical spaces. While he describes adaptive and transformative designs that take new technology into account (7), he also observes, in what we might consider an extension of Oldenburg's position, that "our electronic experiences appear to be flourishing while communities of place seem to be withering on the vine" (Horan 63). Horan surfaces new questions (and anxieties) that have emerged as the Information Age has slid into the "digital revolution" (5). He writes:

Seemingly unconstrained by temporal or spatial limits, the rapid and continuing emergence of Internet-based technologies, networks, and services brings with it entirely new dimensions of electronically mediated experience and communication. Will this virtual landscape make our cluttered public realm obsolete, so that we will no longer need to venture outdoors, content instead to surf the ubiquitous World Wide Web for all forms of work and pleasure? Will traditional cities meet the same fate as drive-in theaters? (Horan 5)

Rather than operating purely as a threat to current physical spaces, though, Internet-based technologies also offer an opportunity to reclaim the communal, social connections fostered in our now endangered third places. Howard Rheingold in *The*

Virtual Community lends in support of this claim a decade of observations of user inclination toward CMC-based community building. He writes, “I suspect that one of the explanations for this phenomenon is the hunger for community that grows in the breasts of people around the world as more and more informal public spaces disappear from our real lives” (Rheingold xx). The third places may be vanishing, but people’s collective desire for social engagement is as strong as it has ever been. Innovations in Internet-based technology and computer-mediated communication methods have created new spaces within which users are finding virtual community (see Lawson; Horrigan).

In her book *The Culture of Connectivity*, José van Dijk attributes the development of social media to the interconnected development of Web 2.0 functionality and the shifting nature of “sharing.” As Internet users became able, through Web 2.0, to create information with unprecedented ease, they likewise became interested in publishing it. She explains that previously private speech acts (e.g., “talking to friends, exchanging gossip, showing holiday pictures” (7)) now function, through social media and networking, as public utterances (van Dijk 7). Christina Ortner, Philip Sinner, and Tanja Jadin outline Internet-based social media and networking historically, tracing their development from as far back as the local email capabilities of the 1960s. They discuss the influence of Web 2.0 in the mid-1990s but ultimately cite the advent of Facebook in the mid-2000s as the point at which social networking became a dominant Internet activity (378). Van Dijk writes that in December 2011, “82 percent of the world’s internet population over age 15 [...] logged on to a social media site” (4), a statistic that highlights social media as one of the Internet’s most accessed uses. Further, Ortner et al. attribute the rise in ubiquity of social media use to the nearly parallel development and popularity of the smartphone: as a portable, Internet-accessible device in near constant use for most people who own one, the smartphone has influenced the design of and expectation surrounding social media interfaces; at the same time, social media increases smartphone use, resulting in a cycle of mutual perpetuation (Ortner et al. 380).

Further, van Dijk writes that “The very word ‘social’ associated with media implies that platforms are user centered and that they facilitate communal activities, just as the term ‘participatory’ emphasizes human collaboration. Indeed, social media can be seen as online facilitators or enhancers of *human* networks – webs of people that promote connectedness as a social value” (11, emphasis in original). In her analysis of Facebook in particular, van Dijk discusses the notions of “friending”

and “sharing” and the new meaning they have developed in the context of online communication generally as well as Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg’s specifically articulated goals of making the world more social (45). Although van Dijk’s project is ultimately focused on the collection and exploitation of users’ data, she describes how the process of “sharing” and the norms that have developed around it have influenced the publication of content that was previously considered more appropriate for private audiences. Historically, this sharing of information, pleasantries, family photos, and the like may have occurred in one’s home or, just as likely, in the context of a third place. In the context of both physical third places and digitally rendered social networks, social engagement and community are created through the human experience of sharing, not by the structures that house people or their data.

Viewed as structured environments in which individuals are able to make connections, engage in conversation, and expect to encounter other people they know, social networking platforms seem to present themselves as digital versions of third places. Charles Soukup explores this possible categorization in his article “Computer-Mediated Communication as a Virtual Third Place: Building Oldenburg’s Great Good Places on the World Wide Web.” Soukup weighs computer-mediated communication, including structures like chatrooms and multi-user domains (MUD), against Oldenburg’s list of third place criteria and draws a nuanced conclusion. On the one hand, he finds that:

if CMC contexts such as MUDs provide a “social refuge” from the stress of work and home life, this computer-mediated interaction reflects Oldenburg’s imagery concerning his great good places such as pubs and coffee shops. Functionally, both third places and computer-mediated environments such as chatrooms and MUDs are essentially social spaces outside professional and familial roles for the purpose of informal social interaction. (Soukup 424)

However, he also points out that CMC is not, for the most part, anchored to a single physically oriented community. That is, like-minded users may gather according to similar interests, but, as they are likely spread across the country or even the globe, they are not physical neighbors like the regulars at the third places Oldenburg describes (Soukup 428).³ Further, Soukup articulates that CMC contexts are

³ Soukup also questions the truly accessible nature of the online spaces he addresses, but it is worth noting that he further points out that Oldenburg’s claim that third places are “levelers” in which social status and hierarchy are not applicable is likewise not actually characteristic of physical third

essentially simulations, explaining that “In a sense, people are merely ‘pretending’ to be in a ‘real’ place while they sit at their computer screens, much like people pretend to be at a ‘real’ French café when dining in Disneyland” (426; see also Rheingold 11).

Ultimately, Soukup suggests the qualifying term “virtual” to describe the nature of CMC contexts as third places, explaining, “While CMC shares specific characteristics with traditional third places, the interaction is ‘virtual’ or transcends space and time and alters identity and symbolic referents via simulation. This is an important distinction, because it provides a more realistic representation of the experience in a computer-mediated third place” (432). Thus, Soukup acknowledges that CMC and physical third places share many of the same functions, suggesting that the virtual third place may be made to stand in for a physical one if no such physical place exists. If we are to understand virtual third places as effectively simulations, then, we may reach even a step beyond Soukup’s claim to conclude that virtual third places are able to fulfill the same or similar roles to the third place simulations we access through the narrative immersion offered by our televisions.

Similar research on massively multiplayer online (MMO) games has revealed the potential for Internet-users to build community in virtual third places. MMO games, or virtual environments that host thousands of players, offer an opportunity for nuanced analysis of virtual community building because they are based in synchronous communication between users that mimics real life encounters (Moore et al. 230). From their analysis of social interactions among MMO players, again weighed against Oldenburg’s criteria, Constance Steinkuehler and Dmitri Williams conclude that “By providing spaces for social interaction and relationship beyond the workplace and home, MMOs have the capacity to function as one form of a new ‘third place’ for informal sociability much like the pubs, coffee shops, and other hangouts of old” (886). Steinkuehler and Williams dispel the myth of online gaming as an isolated, individual activity by presenting an analysis of gaming’s conversational elements and explaining that “Text-based interaction in such worlds is incessant and ubiquitous” (893). They write, “Game play is not a single, solitary interaction between an individual and a technology” but rather that “in the case of MMOs, game play is more akin to playing five-person poker in a neighborhood tavern that is accessible from your own living room” (904). Nicolas Ducheneaut,

spaces in the clean way Oldenburg suggests. Soukup asks, “Are these traditional third places to which Oldenburg refers truly without status and accessible to everyone? [...] Do our deeply-rooted notions of ‘race’ and class disappear when walking into a bar or barber shop?” (430).

Robert J. Moore, and Eric Nickell build on the work of Steinkuehler and Williams by narrowing their focus to cantinas in the MMO game *Star Wars Galaxies*, environments within the game world designed to reflect real-life third places. Ducheneaut, Moore, and Nickell likewise conclude that “online games are promising environments that could be designed to replace or, at the very least, supplement the third places of the physical world. [...] We have seen that most of the positive aspects of third places can be transferred to games, provided significant attention is paid to avoiding design pitfalls that have already been documented with physical places” (164). The relevance of these findings extends beyond the specific mechanics of MMOs to other social networking contexts, which likewise function to connect people to one another virtually even when they are separated physically.

Importantly, this research demonstrates not only the possibility but the ongoing existence of virtual third places in a world bereft of physical third places. It is also worth noting that Soukup as well as Steinkuehler and Williams initially describe the nature of third places by referring not to physical third places but rather to the third place examples that a contemporary reader is most likely to recognize: the third places of narrative television. Steinkuehler and Williams clearly allude to the theme song (and thus the setting) of *Cheers* in their title “Where Everybody Knows Your (Screen) Name,” and Soukup references the fictional Boston bar as a point of comparison to chatrooms when he writes, “As a ‘place’ where a tightly-knit small group of regulars consistently return for spirited and spontaneous talk, chatrooms have been compared to the most popular mediated depiction of a third place, the television show *Cheers* – a place where everybody (at least everyone who is a regular patron) knows your name (Browne, 1997)” (Soukup 425). These references acknowledge that third places have featured so prominently in television subject matter that they have become our primary cultural touchstones for the concept. Contemporary programming, though, offers no such critical mass of examples. While third places certainly existed on television before *Cheers* (Soukup references *The Andy Griffith Show*’s barber shop and Al’s Drive-In from *Happy Days*) and do appear in more recently popular shows, they are not featured with the same regularity as the third places of the era in between. For instance, JJ’s Diner in *Parks and Recreation* and Poor Richard’s in *The Office* are both examples of later third places. Neither, however, feature in their respective narratives with the frequency and reliability of earlier examples like Central Perk or Luke’s, and neither comes close to meeting the standard set by *Cheers* or Oldenburg. Ultimately, television’s

favorite third places seem more or less localized to the years surrounding the turn of the century.

Conclusion

If television third places were acknowledging and providing equipment to navigate Information Age anxieties of placelessness, isolation, and a lack of community from the 1980s through the 2000s, these anxieties must have eased by the 2010s. If the disappearance of real-life third places throughout the second half of the 20th century contributed to these anxieties, then the advent, acceptance, and spread of social media has served to establish a sense of community and reduce the need for television third places. It is not the independent operating of various media that we see here, but rather their interaction. Considering this point of interaction allows us to interrogate popular media as a response to cultural needs and invites us to consider whether we recognize the response they offer as sufficient.

No doubt viewers are still enticed and comforted by the home-away-from-home, neutral spaces that encourage community and conversation featured in shows like *Friends* and others, as evidenced by their popularity both in syndication and on streaming services. Perhaps we remain drawn to these shows because we continue to value third places in the way that Oldenburg claims, or because we consider the online alternative to be an inadequate simulation. Perhaps it is our lingering desires that have led to pop-up manifestations of television's favorite third places in the physical world, still simulations but simulations that are at least tangible. Take, for instance, the October 2016 conversion of over 200 coffeeshops into temporary Luke's Diner locations in anticipation of the *Gilmore Girls* reboot (Luckel). The popular reception of this marketing strategy could reveal an unconscious collective realization that virtual third places are not enough and might signal the beginnings of a nostalgic cultural interest in reviving physical third places as community centers.

Or perhaps our communities are now too far reaching to be adequately served by a location-specific meeting ground. After all, do we visit a pop-up Luke's Diner to be there, or to take pictures to share with our friends (or followers)? In our contemporary moment, Chandler's question of where the group should get coffee might have no obvious answer, and a move to the suburbs, away from walkable coffeehouses and bars and diners, might still feel like a loss. In equal likelihood, though, the introduction of physical distance might not seem quite so bad if the

friends know that they can, whenever they choose, speak to and see one another instantaneously, at any time of day, on devices they can carry in their pockets.

Works Cited

- Aldosemani, Tahani Ibrahim, Craig Erschel Shepherd, Ibrahim Gashim, and Tonia Dousay. "Developing third places to foster sense of community in online instruction." *British Journal of Educational Technology*, vol. 47, no. 6, 2016, pp. 1020-31.
- Angell, David, Peter Casey, and David Lee, creators. *Frasier*. Grub Street Productions and Paramount Network Television, 1993.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, U Michigan P, 1997.
- Burke, Kenneth. *The Philosophy of Literary Forms: Studies in Symbolic Action*. Louisiana State University Press, 1941. Cited in Ott, Brian L. *The Small Screen: How Television Equips Us to Live in the Information Age*. Blackwell, 2007.
- Charles, Glen, Les Charles, and James Burrows, creators. *Cheers*. Paramount Network Television, 1982.
- Crane, David, and Marta Kauffman, creators. *Friends*. Warner Bros. Television, 1994.
- David, Larry, and Jerry Seinfeld, creators. *Seinfeld*. Castle Rock Entertainment, 1989.
- Ducheneaut, Nicholas, Robert J. Moore, and Eric Nickell. "Virtual 'third places': A case study of sociability in massively multiplayer games." *Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW): The Journal of Collaborative Computing*, vol. 16, no. 1-2, 2007, pp. 129-66.
- Horan, Thomas A. *Digital Places: Building Our City of Bits*. The Urban Land Institute, 2000.
- Horrigan, John B. "Online communities." *Pew Research Center*, 2001, www.pewresearch.org/internet/2001/10/31/online-communities.
- "The Good Son." *Frasier*, created by David Angell, Peter Casey, and David Lee, season 1, episode 1. Grub Street Productions and Paramount Network Television, 16 Sept. 1993.
- "The Last One." *Friends*, created by David Crane and Marta Kauffman, season 10, episode 17 and 18. Warner Bros. Television, 6 May 2004.

- Lawson, Karen. "Libraries in the USA as traditional and virtual 'third places.'" *New Library World*, vol. 105, no. 3/4, 2004, pp. 125-30.
- Luckel, Madeline. "Netflix is turning more than 200 cafés into Luke's Diner from *Gilmore Girls* today." *Vogue*, 5 Oct. 2016, www.vogue.com/article/luke-s-diner-gilmore-girls-pop-up.
- Moore, Robert J., E Cabell Hankinson Gathman, and Nicolas Ducheneaut. "From 3D space to third place: The social life of small virtual spaces." *Human Organization*, vol. 68, no. 2, 2009, pp. 230-40.
- Oldenburg, Ray. *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*. Marlowe and Company, 1999.
- Ortner, Cristina, Philip Sinner, and Tanja Jadin. "The history of online social media." *The SAGE Handbook of Web History*, edited by Niels Brügger and Ian Milligan, Sage, 2018, pp. 372-84.
- Ott, Brian L. *The Small Screen: How Television Equips Us to Live in the Information Age*. Blackwell, 2007.
- "The Pilot." *Friends*, created by David Crane and Marta Kauffman, season 1, episode 1. Warner Bros. Television, 22 Sept. 1994.
- "Pilot." *Gilmore Girls*, created by Sherman-Palladino, Amy, season 1, episode 1. Dorothy Parker Drank Here Productions and Warner Bros. Television, 5 Oct. 2000.
- Portnoy, Gary, and Judy Hart Angelo. *Where Everybody Knows Your Name*. Applause, 1982.
- Rheingold, Howard. *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. The MIT Press, 2000.
- Sherman-Palladino, Amy, creator. *Gilmore Girls*. Dorothy Parker Drank Here Productions and Warner Bros. Television, 2000.
- Soukup, Charles. "Computer-mediated communication as a virtual third place: Building Oldenburg's great good places on the World Wide Web." *NEW MEDIA & SOCIETY*, vol. 8, no. 3, June 2006, pp. 421-40.
- Steinkuehler, Constance A., and Dmitri Williams. "Where everybody knows your (screen) name: Online games as 'third places.'" *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 11, no. 4, July 2006, pp. 885-909.
- van Dijk, José. *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*. Oxford UP, 2013.

Singing Truth to Power: Folk Music and Political Resistance in Steven Conrad's *Patriot*

LYNN D. ZIMMERMAN

“The duty of a true patriot is to protect his country from his government.” –

Thomas Paine

“Guard against the impostures of pretended patriotism.” – George Washington

Steven Conrad's 2017 comedy-drama series *Patriot* concerns John Tavner, a deep cover CIA officer tasked to impersonate an engineer, deliver bribe money, and thereby influence an Iranian election for American interests. Though known to the Agency, these actions are off the books, risky, and, to everyone's frustration, colossal failures. Mishaps plague Tavner's operation and drive plotlines that catalog his herculean efforts to save the mission. The ensuing chaos compels viewers to navigate a peculiar and absorbing world that is singular in its unpredictability. Critical reviews of *Patriot's* two seasons have been overwhelmingly positive and cite its oddness as particularly important to its message. Some critics like John Perch in his piece “Amazon's *Patriot*: An Audience of One,” quickly homed in on the philosophical implication of the series, contending that the show offers “a nihilist commentary on the futility of human endeavor itself” as it presents a universe wherein “[t]hings go wrong, constantly, but in the most plausible ways, and no one's particularly evil.”

Other critics, such as Rob Lowman of *The Los Angeles Daily News* single out the main character's fraught relationships with those nearest him as particularly intriguing: “it's weird but it's the *human* moments that propel *Patriot*.” Many critics like Matthew Gilbert of the *Boston Globe*, speculate that the series' exceptional quality arises from its writers' creative daring: “*Patriot* is a show for viewers who enjoy tonal risk-taking, who are prepared to accept that you can't hit a home run unless you take a swing. The plain, generic title of the series does no justice to the

LYNN D. ZIMMERMAN, PhD is a Professor of English and Independent Scholar. She is a native of Lorain, Ohio and earned her doctorate in English at Kent State University. Her research interests include English literature, modern and contemporary novel, horror fiction and popular culture studies. Her work has appeared in the *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*; *New German Review* and *St. Austin Review*.

Popular Culture Studies Journal

Volume 9, Issue 2, ©2021

creativity on display.” Virtually all reviewers conclude, as Ben Travers of *Indie Wire* does, that “what sets *Patriot* apart is its peculiar sense of humor,” and that humor usually hinges on each episode’s careful arrangement of musical numbers. Indeed, in writing *Patriot*, Conrad composes an innovative piece of entertainment, contrapuntally aligning farce, tragedy, action and spectacle to produce what is in effect the Ballad of Officer Tavner.

One of the show’s endearing quirks lies in the fact that the stoic Tavner is also a folk singer who employs his original music in a therapeutic fashion. His lyrics simultaneously reveal and counteract the stressors of his secretive, violent life. To his CIA handler’s chagrin, John’s confessional and public performances endanger not only his personal safety but, more important, national security. His lyrics explicitly recount the details of operational fiascos, and characters’ lives turn on the multivalent nature of the language he chooses. John’s folk lyrics allow him a linguistic means to reconsider and redefine patriotism as both an ideological concept and lived experience. What’s more, the “music of the people” offers him a modicum of solace even as it challenges the vagaries of spy craft and prevarications of American foreign policy. Tavner’s experience as a non-official cover (NOC) field officer forces him to reckon with his sense of self as both a patriotic American and a moral being. To understand John’s psychic inventory process, the audience must consider how the entertaining voice of his lyrical compositions serves also as a voice of political dissent.

To that end, Conrad’s series interrogates the interplay of a nationalistic voice, that of Tavner’s father, the CIA, and the American government they serve, and a patriotic voice, that of John’s conscience as informed by loyalty to his family and nation. These competing voices operate at cross purposes yet coalesce to create a dialogical hybrid, an ever-shifting amalgamated American voice which finds expression in the CIA officer’s folk music. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Mikhail Bakhtin’s consideration of heteroglossia, the diversity in voices, viewpoints, and discourse styles, offers a lens through which we can examine the political significance of *Patriot’s* contesting voices. Bakhtin claims that language’s dialogical constitution means multiple social languages necessarily intersect, as language is “heteroglot from top to bottom; it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past...and between different ideological groups in the present” (*The Dialogic Imagination* 288). For Bakhtin, languages are always reflexive and evaluative, each serving as a “particular point of view on the world and of oneself. . . enabling a person to interpret and evaluate

his own self and his surrounding reality” (*Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics* 47). An individual’s point of view matters immensely, because social languages’ reflexive and evaluative properties mean they possess power which can create and shift values in political discourse.

The Power of Song

In *Patriot*, John’s lyrical compositions arise from his encounters with intersecting languages, expressions of nationalistic and patriotic voices which each reflects at once part of the identity of the other. By way of this reflection, his hybridized song lyrics expose the tension between the competing pulls of principle and distinctive values each language professes; this exposition is significant because, as Fred Evans discusses in his book, *The Multi-Voiced Body*, language hybridity has phenomenological import: “[w]e never encounter ourselves apart from a dialogue, either within ourselves or with others. We are always involved in an exchange. . . much goes on inside and outside us besides speech, but we register things in terms of what we can or cannot say about them” (57). Evans explains that hybridity is readily apparent in our everyday experiences: “we sometimes hear ourselves sounding like our parents or other figures that are significant for us [...] these voices contend for audibility within the soul” (58). In *Patriot*, the nationalistic voice of father and nation ceaselessly challenges the patriotic voice of John’s conscience and duty, and its language calls for blind obedience regardless of the consequences. John, a good soldier, ruefully complies; he commits atrocious acts and in doing so experiences profound trauma. His sorrow compels him to confess his gruesome exploits and folk music provides a ready forum.

In this context, Thomas Tavner, John’s father and CIA handler, looms large in his psyche, because he speaks to his son with the authority of both father and state, a conflation which proves formidable as his voice aims to silence John by discouraging his musical pursuits. In the pilot episode, “Milwaukee, America,” Thomas Tavner discusses with a fellow officer the problem with his son’s songs: “The songs, oh, they’re pretty good. Um, I mean, I’m his dad, so maybe I’m biased, but they’re pretty good, but they’re becoming more *honest*. Which is probably good for folk singers in general but not a good thing if you’re one who works in intelligence” (emphasis added, 00:05:00-00:05:27). The truthfulness of John’s lyrics and not the actions they relate is the issue Thomas finds problematic, and therefore his word choice, “honest,” has multiple implications. On the surface,

Thomas is concerned his son might inadvertently reveal CIA secrets, but in fact, he's truly disturbed that John is not following the agency's script. John's honest language belies the Agency's adherence to prescribed legal protocols for covert foreign dealings. Hence, the languages of father and son collide in their desire to relate differing accounts of their espionage work, and therefore both stake claims on the discourse of storytelling.

Competing claims complicate language use. Bakhtin explains that "[t]he word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intentions, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 294). John adopts and adapts the language of folk music, because it is a medium whose generic conventions best enable his particular semantic and expressive intention when recounting a given examples of the Agency's criminal activities. In the folk forum, his lyrics demarcate his half of the "word in language" by relating his NOC mission's recurring failures to an audience. He divulges ghastly experiences to show in "his own accent" how the CIA's current enactment of American foreign policy actually provokes, not quells violence in the Middle East. By doing so, John's songs repudiate his father's nationalistic voice and its version of events by intoning the discord between "authoritative and internally persuasive discourses" (*Speech Genres* 89).

For all its persuasiveness, John's patriotic voice is regretful, despairing and lonely. His artistic expression is warped by PTSD and clouded with suicidal ideation. Yet within this psychic miasma, his melodies still prove palliative. In *Listening to Music in Psychotherapy*, M. Butterson explains that aspects of patients' inner states are held in their choice of music (3). By choosing folk music, Tavner can self-soothe as he mulls over how often duty to his Agency's leaders conflicts with duty to his country's citizens. The importance of language's self-reflexive nature is significant as it relates to governmental institution, because it is through self-reflexivity that "social structures can be transformed into objects of discussion and possible change" (Evans 160). Revealing injustice and agitating for meaningful change are the hallmarks of American folk music. Leon Litwack, the renowned folk music scholar, explains that this genre allows artists to reach into "the interior of American lives, to get at peoples long excluded from the American experience, many of them losers in their own time, outlaws, rebels who - individually or collectively - tried to flesh out and give meaning to abstract notions of liberty, equality and freedom" (qtd. in *American Roots Music*). The politically charged

nature of folk discourse exemplifies the value creating power of language Bakhtin extolls. Calling attention to injustice, “folk musicians embody the spirit of freedom and the refusal of constraint while drawing on the lived experience of ordinary men” (Litwick). Herein lies one of Tavner’s problems; although he is an ordinary man, his work demands extraordinary, often ruthless actions. His NOC missions must always proceed without regard to what the Agency deems acceptable losses.

Viewers learn this fact in the first episode of season 1 when, in an Amsterdam public square, John chooses to sing about the floundering Iranian mission.¹ His song “Birds of Amsterdam” plays as soundtrack for a bizarre, nightmarish flashback to the botched assassination attempt of an Iranian scientist. This scene marks the first instance in the series where the audience hears John’s folk music provide lyrical self-reflection about the value and cost of his work. Crooning on a park bench with an acoustic guitar, he lists the myriad ways his operation failed (00:05:55-00:07:50):

In June two thousand and eleven
The United States learned Iranian president
Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was fucking around
With new centrifuges
Egyptian physicist Mohammad Wahwa El-Mashad
Was hired to produce the catalyzed uranium
I was tasked to shoot Mashad
While he was on vacation
To keep Iran from activating
Short-range nuclear weapons
To destroy Israel
I got some really bad intelligence
Shot an old male hotel maid
Who was just making the physicist's bed (“Birds of Amsterdam” lines 1-14)

John’s lyrical recounting of his mission shows him striving to express the logic of it. He lists names, dates, locations, and particulars concerning the operation’s rationale, and his word choice, for instance “tasked,” reflects the professional

¹ John’s music also has a distinctive aesthetic, one that is rendered in melancholy, stream of consciousness narratives. In a 2017 interview, Michael Dorman, the actor and musician who plays John Tavner, discussed his process for composing John’s music. He claimed melodies and lyrics came to him organically while he imagined what John might be feeling in a given moment (Build Series).

demeanor his job necessitates. But this cool, detached language is, in the words of Bakhtin, “half someone else’s” – in this case, the nationalistic language his CIA handler/father speaks. John’s patriotic voice tentatively emerges when he notes that the man he mistakenly killed was “old,” “a maid” and “just making a bed.” The choice of these specific descriptors is important because they morally qualify his part in the killing; they signify the weight of his transgression because the crime is compounded by not only the maid’s age and innocence, but also the mundane nature of his bed-making. Lines 15-20 then move on to recount what follows the maid’s murder:

I was arrested by the secret king’s police
 I got a fair dose of white torture which is supposed to
 Completely erase your sense of self
 I’m showing several signs of increasing mental instability
 Talking to my wife would be... well
 That would be awfully nice. (“Birds of Amsterdam”)

Here John’s attention shifts from the maid’s murder to tactical assaults on his own body and mind. Experiences with “white torture”² in Egypt, though he does not describe them, clearly damage his psychological well-being. He recognizes his vulnerability when referencing his “mental instability,” and then his thoughts immediately and understandably shift to desiring his wife’s comfort. In her article, “Towards a Conceptual Framework for Resilience Research in Music Training and Performance,” Patricia Holmes observes that the “musician’s intrinsic engagement with music drives the need to sustain an exceptional investment of personal resources – mental, emotional and physical” (4) when composing and performing. Moreover, “by the very nature of their art, musicians are vulnerable – when performing, their internal state becomes externalised in order to create meaning, as they make reference to their underlying personal, artistic intention” (4). Holmes’s assessment points to the double-edged, hybrid nature of John’s folk music; his composing and singing, driven by the intent to make meaning, usually position him

² “White torture,” also known as “clean torture” or “no-touch torture” aims to break down a prisoner’s psychological stability. Techniques such as sensory deprivation, sensory overload, cultural humiliation, and isolation function to erase personal identity with the goal of making captives pliable for interrogation. See Leach’s discussion of the psychological ramifications of extreme torture.

as emotionally defenseless in performances.³ In “Birds of Amsterdam,” his lyrical shift from the political (his failing mission) to the personal (his wife), signifies a turning away from the CIA’s nationalistic voice, whose directives imperil his mind and body, to the patriotic voice that speaks the language of everyday people, such as his wife. The latter voice understands the human cost of the former’s demands, and John’s latent recognition of this manifests in lines 21-27 of his musical performance:

You can't just go back to the US after
 You target a guy on their behalf
 And some genius parked me in Amsterdam
 I've just been getting baked, just looking up at birds
 Wondering why there aren't male hotel maids in other countries
 You never see that, never see that
 Never see that. (“Birds of Amsterdam”)

As in the opening lines of “Birds of Amsterdam,” near the song’s end John’s focus moves back to acknowledging the strictures of the job, in this case his temporary exile from America. Ultimately, his voice trails off as he reflects on the scarcity of male hotel maids, but his guilt reverberates in the three repetitions of “never see that.” This declarative sentence speaks the language of his patriotic voice, indicting his father and the Agency, by mourning the victims of the criminal behavior few Americans know or see.

Holmes’ study helps shed light on the dynamic between musical performance and language hybridity which underpins the political discourse in “Birds of Amsterdam.” She writes that

[m]usicians are undoubtedly vulnerable when they expose their whole being in public performance ... but vulnerability and other potentially stressful aspects of performance (for example, intentional risk taking) can also be sources of hedonistic satisfaction – that is, related to innate psychological needs – and are thus powerful sources of motivation for the performer ... [i]t is therefore possible that, through the catalysts of courage and risk

³ On the benefit of incorporating patients’ music choices in therapeutic sessions, see Blimling 117-23.

taking, vulnerability becomes, itself, the agent of transformative experience.

(8)

John's town square performance risks a great deal, but his song reflects movement toward transformation as his lyrics consider how his Agency's global agenda gravely affects individuals he encounters in his work. His preoccupation with killing the maid marks a preliminary rejection of his father's nationalistic ethos by way of a newly defined patriotic voice, one that values individual human lives and not just nation states. In this manner, his language's value-creating power emerges in the reflexive and evaluative qualities John's folk music affords; his impulse to publicize the Agency's crimes, and thereby repudiate the nationalistic voice's skewed values, intensifies as his operation's body count grows.

John turns once more to public singing after his second failed attempt to recover the Iranian bribe money in episode 2 of season 1. In this debacle, he again kills a poor man, a Brazilian immigrant, after breaking into his apartment to retrieve the cash. Deeply depressed, John performs his piece, "Charlie Foxtrot,"⁴ in a crowded European café. As in "Birds of Amsterdam," the first 3 lines of "Charlie Foxtrot" begin with a recitation of facts: "Brazilians make up Luxembourg's labor force / They work as cooks or at the airport / And they're so poor they live six guys to one apartment apparently too" (00:43:00-00:44:34). After observing the context of his victim's life, he then poses a rhetorical question in lines 4 through 8, asking his audience to consider an impoverished immigrant's temptation to steal a large sum of money:

So you wouldn't hold it against one
 If some money just rolled on by
 And he just rolled on with it
 On his little European scooter
 Now would you? ("Charlie Foxtrot" 4-8)

This question is ostensibly leveled at the audience, but the lyrics above and in the song's next lines underscore John's guilt about how the Agency's operational demands can result in the unintentional killing of non-combatant citizens:

I mean you wouldn't stab his brother for doing that

⁴ John's choice of title is revealing: "Charlie Foxtrot begins as a euphemism in 1960's US military slang for a poorly-managed operation during the Viet Nam war" (Site Admin). The C and F from the NATO phonetic alphabet corresponds to "Cluster Fuck," and as a CIA officer, John is fluent in the jargon.

Unless you had extenuating circumstances
 That would allow you to justify it somehow.
 If you really didn't work where people think you work,
 Like an industrial pipe and engineering firm,
 You really work for —. (00:43:00-00:44:34)

This café performance is poignant for several reasons. The audience feels John's palpable guilt when he fumblingly tries to rationalize killing the Brazilian by explaining his NOC identity. Furthermore, as with his previous performance, Tavner seems especially bothered by his victim's identity. Hotel maids and immigrants represent the very folk his musical genre should champion and his song affirms that truth. John's patriotic voice clearly verifies that it is common folk who suffer most from his government's inept, corrupt maneuvering. As William Roy asserts in *Reds, Whites, and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music, and Race in the United States*, folk music's power "springs directly from the people – [it is] something that's pure and innocent and not ruined by industry and modern life" (46). Indeed, in *Patriot*, John's compositions resonate with power and purity because they expose the grave injustice of particular and personal operational failures. He bears witness to the real-life suffering his Agency sets in motion and his lyrical retelling of those acts delegitimizes the nationalistic voice's alleged moral code. What's more, the hybrid quality of his lyrical language provides him space to evaluate his complicity in Agency crimes. In this way, singing becomes an act of penance.

The confusion and regret John conveys in "Charlie Foxtrot" also reveal his flagging allegiance to the nationalistic voice's language. As stated before, Bakhtin contends that the heteroglot quality of languages enables the co-existence of ideological contradictions. This contention holds true in "Charlie Foxtrot," insofar as John's lyrics tease out the real-world implications of ideologies operating at cross purposes. However, the abrupt end of his lyrical confession, represented by the trail of dashes in line 13, is critical to recognize because it marks a point where the semantic intentions of John's words are compromised. In this crucial moment, John's patriotic voice is literally silenced by his brother, Rick, who grabs his shoulder and whispers in his ear a reminder about what he cannot say in public. Rick rightly fears John will destroy his NOC cover by singing the end of line 13: "you really work for --- [*the CIA*]" (emphasis added). Like Thomas Tavner, Rick

too works for the American government but as a member of congress.⁵ In his professional capacity, Rick serves as another representative of the nationalistic voice. Though the end of “Charlie Foxtrot” is cut short, John’s lyrics clarify that the Agency’s collateral damage – the murder of innocents – does not sit well with his conscience. More significant, lyrical confession does not absolve him of his contribution to that harm. After all, he is the one who shot the maid and stabbed the immigrant.

It is also worth stating that John’s music, though therapeutic, offers no panacea to his psychic pain, let alone robust resistance to government corruption. His songs demonstrate the precarious practice of trying to reconcile the ideological variance between the nationalistic and patriotic voices, both paradoxically juxtaposed and demanding his attention. This point is rendered darkly comedic in season 2, episode 3 when we learn John and a British MI6 officer, self-named Spike, were captured in Egypt and tortured with folk music. Locked together in a small metal crate, the men are forced to listen continuously to Don McLean’s “American Pie,” for weeks (00:00:10-00:01:30).⁶ Their captors’ dual use of McClean’s song echoes John’s struggle with negotiating the hybridity informing his lyrical compositions. The Egyptians enlist the iconic folk anthem, whose theme appropriately traces the loss of innocence, in an attempt to dismantle John’s identity as an American and his sense of self as a human being. Bakhtin’s explanation of the double-voiced utterance works well here to clarify the psychological import of the Egyptians’ strategy. The double-voiced utterance “has a twofold direction – it is directed both toward the object of speech, as in ordinary discourses, and toward another discourse, toward someone else’s speech” (*Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics* 195). The Egyptians deftly manipulate the folk song by inserting a new semantic intention into its message and the experience of hearing it, a maneuver which subverts the original aim of McClean’s lyrics.

His captors compound their psychological torment by ratcheting up the men’s physical suffering. Crammed in a small crate that is ringed by speakers, they must endure the tune blasting from a tape cassette at an ear-splitting volume. In this

⁵ Rick, though a governmental official, differs significantly from Thomas who plans all aspects of CIA operations. In contrast, Rick is naïve and clueless about his family and government’s dealings; his fecklessness illustrates the problems of civic ignorance and apathy.

⁶ This is the “white torture” referenced in “Birds of Amsterdam.” Torture by music was developed by the CIA during the Cold War. See McCoy for more on this history.

context, the folk spirit of “American Pie” mocks the ideals John labors to defend, while the hapless Spike suffers alongside him by virtue of MI6’s complicity in the CIA scheme. Spike labels their plight the “American Pie Scenario.” He reminds John that the song has a run time of eight minutes, thirty-three seconds with a forty second rewind time between each play (00:00:10-00:01:30). It is only in those rewinding gaps that the intelligence officers can hear or speak to each other, and significantly, when they do, they try to reaffirm one another’s identities. The MI6 officer no longer remembers his name and adopts the moniker “Spike” as a placeholder. John does manage to remember his name, barely, but by the time of his release he’s overwhelmed by PTSD.

Once freed, John’s songs’ hybridized lyrics continue to sound the jarring notes of conflicting ideologies. In season 2, episode 3 his torn loyalties finally erupt during a folk concert – his biggest venue by far – in a duet performance of “Afternoon Spray” (00:46:14-00:48:51). While singing the love song, his mind wanders to his NOC civilian boss, Leslie Claret, and his admiration of the man hijacks the tune’s lyrics. Claret is important to John as a father figure who does not speak in the language of Thomas Tavner’s nationalist voice. On the contrary, Leslie is a forthright, exacting man, who speaks with honesty and models integrity. As such, he represents the ideal, albeit romanticized, American John admires:

My boss Leslie is like your grandfather
 That you like less than your other grandfather
 'Cause he's kind of a prick and says things like
 Keep your hair cut
 But he just cares about things you should care about
 Like doing your work right and showing up on time
 Keeping your word and old-world craftsmanship
 And he's probably a better man
 Than your more casual grandpa
 Here's to old school
 I think you're grandpa number one
 And I just wanted to tell you that
 I'll probably mess you up somehow anyway
 Later. (“Afternoon Spray” 10-24)

In these lines, John’s patriotic voice intersects with Thomas’s nationalistic one to challenge the veracity of its discourse by delivering an explicit description of legitimate American values. Appreciatively, John states that Leslie keeps his word.

Leslie's discipline, honesty, and integrity represent the very qualities his father and Agency lack, and John sees these "old school" ideals as deserving to be recognized and toasted. John's high praise, the intention of his language, juxtaposes his father's in a distinct way; the tribute indicates "an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses" (Evans 23). Ironically, through its reflexive form, John's praising language in "Afternoon Spray" also works to express his demoralization. As line 22 indicates, John knows that the man he admires most, the one who speaks with a true patriot's voice, will inevitably be harmed by his underhanded work. This in fact proves to be the case as John ruins Leslie's sobriety, guts his career, and fractures his family. In this way, the unraveling of Leslie's life signals the unraveling of the American dream.

The unsettling trajectory of *Patriot's* plot justifies some critics' assessment that its ultimate message is bleak. John Perch contends that the series represents a sad allegory about America's decline at home and in the global theater ("Amazon's *Patriot*"). Dark as it is, John's saga nevertheless offers a glimmer of hope. Season 2 ends with him successfully completing his recovery mission. With this accomplishment, John's song lyrics once more slightly shift focus. His compositions now strive for harmony between the intersecting voices whose divergent languages compete for his soul, and the intent of those languages matter. Bakhtin makes clear that hybridization lacking intent occurs when languages do not explicitly come together in an utterance; rather, "the other voice is *tacitly* at play in the present utterance" (Evans 68, emphasis mine). In season 2, episode 8, John's aptly titled song "Be the One" illustrates this kind of play (00:22:30-00:25:31):

You can't be halfway gone
 You can't be halfway alone
 You can't be half a mother
 You can't be half a father, half a son
 You have to be the one
 You have to be the one
 You have to be the one ("Be the One" 1-7)

At first glance, John's assertion that he has to "be the one" appears to signal his acceptance that only he can save his father and the operation.⁷ A second look at

⁷ John's attempts to recover the stolen cash before an Agency audit discovers and reports the misappropriation of taxpayer money to Congress. If found out, Thomas Tavner would be indicted

lines 3 and 4 additionally reveals Tavner's awareness of the reasons for his family's fragmentation: John's father is incapable of fully loving his son; John's mother is primarily devoted to her career; and John is unable to speak to either of them about his pain.⁸ Thus, it makes sense that in lines 5 through 7 his lyrics repeat a desire for unity. It may be too late for his family, but he might yet be able to find oneness in his own life:

You can't be halfway home
 You can't be halfway done
 You can't be half a mother
 Half a father, half a son
 You have to be the one
 You have to be the one

You have to be the one ("Be the One" lines 8-14)

In their reinforcement of unity, John's lyrics tacitly censure his father's language and the appalling, divisive acts the nationalistic voice requires him to commit. The intent of the Agency's message however influences political discourse because it carries the full power of the government's authority. When Thomas reports his mission's proceedings to his superiors, he redacts any mention of civilian deaths; the stories of murdered innocents are simply voiced-over in his retellings.

In his core, John cannot abide his part in this injustice. He wants to protect American citizens, the folk of his audience, but to do this effectively his patriotic voice must move from a discourse of dissent to one of action. Unfortunately, this proves unlikely to come to fruition. By the end of *Patriot's* second season, John's psychological deterioration is compounded by a physical mutilation that does not bode well for his character. In season 2, episode 8, his father requires him to smuggle the recovered bribe money out of Europe, and to do so, John must literally deface himself. At John's request, Leslie Claret uses pliers to pull three of his teeth so Tavner can avoid face-recognizing surveillance systems by way of a gap-toothed smile and swollen cheeks (00:01:20-00:02:03). Even more disturbing, in the series final episode, "Escape from Paris," he and a friend exchange severed fingers in a

and likely sent to federal prison. Hence, John is under intense pressure to safeguard his father's freedom along with the Agency's reputation.

⁸ John's mother, referenced in line 3, is the Secretary of Transportation but appears infrequently. She, like Thomas and Rick, also represents the nationalistic voice. Her title lends comedic spin to the crisis as her son and ex-husband cannot safely or effectively transport the tainted money.

slipshod transplant procedure, so John can avoid fingerprint detection at border crossings (00:33:30-00:33:53). The scheme works, but both men's fingers quickly turn necrotic. Consequently, it's unsurprising then that Rick repeats to his father: "I'm worried he's going to go to pieces. John. I'm worried he's going to fall to pieces" ("Escape from Paris" 00:37:30-00:38:18). John pays a steep and ghastly price to escape Europe, experiencing his own collateral damage in his body's dismemberment and his mind's disintegration. Only music appears to mitigate the extent of the latter's damage.

Conclusion

In John's folk songs, competing voices interplay constantly and each articulates its own linguistic belief system. Their dialogic exchanges in his lyrics "are their mode of existence, and constitute the social body" of his reality (Evans 256). In theory, these interactions have the potential to catalyze political change. As evidenced in John's songs, change appears to depend on the patriotic voice publicly meeting that of the nationalistic in volume and conviction. John's lyrical compositions allow him a space to consider how the intention of the nationalistic voice runs afoul of his conscience which wants to demonstrate loyalty to a government worthy of it. His music, like all folk music, seeks "empowerment, freedom in a social structure" by "preserving traditions in a protean world, maintaining values, and finding strategies for seeking justice" (Wolfe qtd. in *American Roots Music*).

This desire to preserve traditions and seek justice via folk music has deep roots in American popular television and movies. Shows like *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *Hee Haw* offered viewers comedic send ups of hillbilly stereotypes, but they also produced folk performances that spoke to the very serious concerns of poverty and prejudice in Appalachia. The former's theme song "The Ballad of Jeb Clampett,"⁹ and the latter's "Gloom, Despair and Agony on Me"¹⁰ explicitly address hardships

⁹ "The Ballad of Jeb Clampett" was composed by Paul Henning and recorded first by the bluegrass musicians Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs. The song lyrics read:

Come and listen to a story 'bout a man named Jed
 Poor mountaineer, barely kept his family fed
 Then one day he was shootin' at some food
 And up through the ground came a bubblin' crude. (1-4)

¹⁰ Performed by Roy Clark; Gordie Tapp; Grandpa Jones and Archie Campbell. The chorus reads:

plaguing individuals within a discrete marginalized community. More recent entertainments, such as *O Brother, Where Art Thou* and *Justified* draw, respectively, on folk songs like “I am a Man of Constant Sorrow”¹¹ and “You’ll Never Leave Harlan Alive” to do the same.¹² *Patriot*, however, differs from the previous examples. The lead character’s use of the people’s music stands apart as his folksongs are not only original, confessional, and dissenting but also serve as a call to action against an insidious form of nationalism. John’s songs, that is, are much more than laments, and through the careful study of popular culture, in this case folk music and a popular series, audience members can scrutinize their roles, the effects of their voices, as American voters and citizens.

In this way the title of Conrad’s show is misleading. John Tavner’s public performances reveal that his patriotism is not grounded in service to the CIA, his father, or America’s current presidential administration, because those voices profess a fatally flawed model of governing. In opposition, Tavner’s patriotic voice sings in dissent through this dialogic, calling attention to a corrupt government that

Gloom, despair, and agony on me-e!
 Deep dark depression, excessive misery-y!
 If it weren't for bad luck, I'd have no luck at all!
 Gloom, despair, and agony on me-e-e! (1-4)

¹¹ “I am a Man of Constant Sorrow” was written and published by Dick Burnett in 1913. The opening lyrics read:

I am a man of constant sorrow
 I've seen trouble all my day
 I bid farewell to old Kentucky
 The place where I was born and raised
 For six long years I've been in trouble
 No pleasures here on earth I found
 For in this world I'm bound to ramble
 I have no friends to help me now. (1-8)

¹² “You’ll Never Leave Harlan Behind” written and performed by Darrell Scott in 1997. The opening lines read:

In the deep dark hills of eastern Kentucky
 That's the place where I trace my bloodline
 And it's there I read on a hillside gravestone
 "You'll never leave Harlan alive." (1-4)

has strayed inexcusably far from its ideological roots. His songs prod listeners to contemplate the core principles the American Declaration of Independence and Constitution extol. Moreover, their lyrics require his audience to judge the means by which our government promotes and performs democracy on the global stage. In short, John's music exhorts us to ask ourselves, what does it mean to be a patriot?

Works Cited

- “Afternoon Spray.” *Patriot*, written by Michael Dorman, performance by Michael Dorman and Jim Becker, season 1, episode 5, 24 Feb. 2017. *Amazon Prime Video*.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Ed. and Trans. Caryl Emerson. U Minnesota P, 1984.
- . *The Dialogic Imagination*, Ed. and Trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson. U Texas P, 1981.
- . *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, Ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Trans. Vern McGee. U Texas P, 1986.
- “Be the One.” *Patriot*, written and performed by Michael Dorman, season 2, episode 7, 9 Nov. 2018. *Amazon Prime Video*.
- “Birds of Amsterdam.” *Patriot*, written by Steven Conrad and Michael Dorman, performance by Michael Dorman, season 1, episode 1, 3 Nov. 2015. *Amazon Prime Video*.
- Blimling, G.P. *The Effect of Integrating Music Listening with an Attachment- and Affective-Focused Short-Term Psychotherapy in an Individual with Relational Trauma: The Case of “James.”* PhD dissertation, Rutgers University, 2016.
- Build Series. “Michael Dorman & Terry O’Quinn discuss the show, *Patriot*.” *YouTube*, 22 Feb. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=5sZwxj7dwak.
- Butterton, M. *Listening to Music in Psychotherapy*. Radcliffe Publishing, 2008.
- “Charlie Foxtrot.” *Patriot*, written by Steven Conrad, performance by Michael Dorman, season 1, episode 2, 24 Feb. 2017. *Amazon Prime Video*.
- Conrad, Steven, creator *Patriot*. *Amazon Prime Video*, 2015, www.amazon.com/Patriot/dp/B017APUY62.
- Evans, Fred J. *The Multi-Voiced Body: Society and Communication in the Age of Diversity*. Columbia UP, 2008.
- Goodman, Tim. “*Patriot*: season 2: TV review.” *The Hollywood Reporter*. 8 Nov. 2018, www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/patriot-review-1159350.

- Hee Haw*. Produced by Youngstreet Productions. CBS. 1969-1971.
- Holmes, Patricia. "Towards a conceptual framework for resilience research in music training and performance." *Musical Performance Research*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2017, pp. 114-32.
- Justified*. Developed by Graham Yost. FX. 2010.
- Leach, John, "Psychological factors in exceptional, extreme and torturous environments." *Extreme Physiology and Medicine*, 1 Jun. 2016, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4890253.
- Litwack, Leon. "Into the classroom." *American Roots Music*. PBS, 9 Oct. 2001, www.pbs.org/americanrootsmusic/pbs_arm_into_the_classroom.html.
- Lowman, Rob. "Patriot finds the daffy humor in a sad singing spy's life." *The Los Angeles Daily News*, 1 Mar. 2017, www.dailynews.com/2017/02/23/patriot-finds-the-daffy-humor-in-a-sad-singing-spys-life.
- McClellan, Don. "American Pie." United Artists Records, 1971.
- O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Written, produced, and directed by Joel and Ethan Cohen. 2000.
- Perch, John. "Amazon's *Patriot*: An audience of one." *Overthinking It*, 26 Jul. 2017, www.overthinkingit.com/2017/07/26/amazons-patriot-audience-one.
- Roy, William. *Reds, Whites, and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music, and Race in the United States*. Oxford UP, 2010.
- Site Admin. "Military phonetic alphabet & call signs for letters." *Armytimeconverter.com*, 25 Feb. 2018, armytimeconverter.com/military-call-letters-table-phonetic-alphabet.
- The Beverly Hillbillies*. Produced by Filmways. CBS 1962-1971.
- Travers, Ben "Patriot Review: Amazon unveils an enticingly strange anti-spy story, unique save for one other show." *IndieWire*, 1 Mar. 2017, www.indiewire.com/2017/02/patriot-tv-show-review-amazon-anti-spy-story-1201786302.
- Wolfe, Charles. "Into the classroom." *American Roots Music*. PBS, 9 Oct. 2001, www.pbs.org/americanrootsmusic/pbs_arm_into_the_classroom.html.

“Hey, What’s the Matter with Your Friend?”: Disability and Productive Staring in *The X-Files*

MITCH PLOSKONKA

Originally running for nine seasons from 1993 to 2002, *The X-Files* has notched over two hundred episodes, two movies, and two reboot seasons. The show gained a devoted following for exploring themes and challenging systems of power that had not been explored or challenged on television. Among the most frequently cited critical angles was its upending of traditional gender roles in the procedural drama, while also generating a zeitgeist-defining mistrust of governmental secrecy and technological progress while promoting cultural paranoia. In addition to the ways *X-Files* has been mined for its sociocultural legacy, it is also a valuable case study in how popular culture reinforces and challenges ingrained values of ability and disability. While the study of disability on television typically – and rightfully – focuses on the casting choices of abled and disabled actors and the authenticity of the disability experience, disability studies in science fiction has been more willing to broach theoretical avenues that have hitherto been met with aversion by the disability studies community.

Specifically, the historically dominant use of disability as a metaphorical prop or plot device – what David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder call “narrative prosthesis” – has been correctly regarded as a damaging trope to the rights and representation of disability in film and literature. Science fiction scholars argue, however, that narrative prosthesis can sometimes be interpreted as a potentially redeemable method of exploring the metaphorical role of disability in challenging normality and issues of biopower in ways that are more nuanced and productive than previously thought. The series uses its overarching alien colonization plot – what are called its “mythology” episodes – to engage issues of technological and scientific issues related to eugenics and the shifting perception of what is biologically normal and valuable. In addition, individual, self-contained episodes – “monster-of-the-week” episodes – contain a diverse and nuanced collection of the

MITCH PLOSKONKA holds a PhD at Michigan State University and teaches at Cuyahoga Community College. His work can be found in *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* and *The Selected Papers of the Ohio Valley Shakespeare Conference*, as well as in *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* and *Mississippi Quarterly*. He can be reached at mwploskonka@gmail.com.

Popular Culture Studies Journal
Volume 9, Issue 2, ©2021

different ways that a science fiction television series can comment upon and disrupt prevailing perceptions of disability in popular culture.

In Katie Ellis’s *Disability and Popular Culture*, she invokes a distinction made by John Fiske, who was himself drawing on Roland Barthes, between the “readerly” and the “writerly” text. While “readerly” texts are usually popular in content and audience and invite passive consumption with a relatively fixed process of interpretation, the “writerly” text “challenges the reader to constantly rewrite it, to make sense of it” (10). While Barthes reserved the “writerly” distinction for those producing avant-garde work, Fiske adds a third category: the “producerly” text. These are popular “writerly” texts that may accommodate usual meanings but can also expose and question those meanings in a popular context. In Fiske’s words, the “producerly” text “offers itself up to popular production; it exposes, however reluctantly, the vulnerabilities, limitations, and weaknesses of its preferred meaning.” “Producerly” texts are ones that set out to reproduce typical meanings but contain “voices that contradict the ones it prefers” (10). The “producerly” text is beyond its own control. As it relates to disability in popular culture, such texts are disabling and enabling; they reinforce and disrupt. Science fiction is an area well suited for the producerly text. Indeed, Ellis concludes that “while this book has not been about science fiction specifically, I kept finding myself returning to the genre for the important debates it introduces around disability, minorities, inclusion, technology and the economy” (165). *The X-Files* is an example of a science fiction “producerly” text that confronts the usual meanings of disability in popular culture even as it explicitly endorses them. The show is an important intersection of disparate topics, where popular television meets the theoretical innovation of science fiction disability studies.

“Strange Discourse:” *X-Files* Scholarship

Since *The X-Files* began garnering significant Nielson ratings, scholars have noticed the strange paradox of the series: It bridges the usual disconnect that between a widely popular show and a show with a dedicated and zealous cult following. Coming to prominence at the beginning of the internet age, *X-Files* was one of the first cultural artifacts to receive sustained attention on the internet. Perhaps fueled by the show’s ambiguous and unorganized “mythology” arc, fans flocked to computers to take part in what Joe Bellon called “the strange discourse

of *The X-Files*.”¹ The show was at the forefront of the creation of online communities of like-minded individuals, and scholarship has tended to focus on the powerful discourse the series has generated. Adrienne McLean’s explains the “revolutionary transformations caused by new media,” and the X-Philes’² “need for real connection” (9). Such scholarship has proven prescient (or at least lasting), as the recent reboots were spearheaded by a series of grassroots cyber campaigns.³

Besides fan culture and technology, *X-Files* scholarship has done well to dissect the series’ impact and channeling of the ‘90s zeitgeist. Such scholarship focuses on the “nearness” of the series, or how science fiction is brought to a realistic, terrestrial level. As Theresa Geller notes, the show refused “to set its alien conspiracy in the future, in outer space, but rather ground it in the reality of U.S. history” (64). The grounded nature of the series allows for what Frederic Jameson calls a “defamiliarization” of “our experience of our own *present*” (151, emphasis added). Scholars have explicated the series’ urgent commentary on its historical moment by discussing settler colonialism and ethnocidal imperialism as it is depicted through abduction (Geller). Others situate the series within emerging discourses of ‘90s culture, including UFO culture and its dissemination (Delasara). Overt references to “Deep Throat” and the Watergate scandal, finally, provide viewers ample sociocultural references from which to situate the series’ ideology.

¹ Matt Allair gives a comprehensive study of the history of *The X-Files* in “*The X-Files: A History of the Fandom*.” He comments on the impact the series had on internet discourse, “if *Star Wars* had made it fashionable to like science fiction, which many argue it did, then *The X-Files* allowed subjects like the paranormal and UFOs to be openly talked about on the web, when prior to that such subjects were spoken of in hushed tones.”

² “X-Philes” are a tight-knit, discursive, mostly online community. Christine Wooley reads the online fan community of X-Philedom as reflecting the ideology of the series—“its investment in intersubjectivity as contextualized by both the show’s conspiratorial tone and unclosed narratives; The productivity of online *X-Files* fandom, including the very terminology through which X-Philes describe themselves, further suggests how we can refine our understanding of the styles of engagement with popular culture that the relationship ‘between me and the show’ represents” (30).

³ On Chris Hardwick’s podcast, *Nerdist*, Gillian Anderson expressed interest in resurrecting the series and cited Duchovny’s supposed willingness as well, prompting a spirited and unprecedented Twitter campaign that eventually reached the desks of Fox executives—the normal shakers with the power to realize a reboot. But it was the Internet and community of fans, the latent “X-Philes,” that perpetrated the movement and all but guaranteed the studio a healthy viewership. *X-Files* was one of the very first fanbases to use the internet to rally support for a series. Since its ending, different websites, fundraising sites, and other ventures have tried at revitalizing the series (Alair).

X-Files uses its generic trappings to comment on past and present concerns, and in the process, helps define and reinforce the zeitgeist.

In addition to the show’s focus on fandom and its sustained discourse, Bellon highlights its “subversive, liberating” qualities that do “more than teach us to distrust authority; it teaches us to trust ourselves” (152). Gender readings of disability and postcolonial readings of the series necessarily incorporate issues of biopower (gender analysis will receive deeper treatment later on), but few scholars seriously unpack the physical representation of bodies in the series – how those bodies are depicted, reacted to, and manipulated. One who does is Linda Badley, who discusses the role of the body in the show:

The truth may be “out there,” as *The X-Files*’ mantra asserts, but the alien (the other, the unknown) is found in or in relation to the body, albeit the body in multifarious and fantastic manifestations: decomposed, regenerated, transgendered, mutated, hybridized, implanted, cloned, or doubled, invaded, possessed, colonized, vanished, vaporized, exsanguinated, cannibalized, dissolved and ingested, zombified, harvested, commodified. (148)

Badley gestures to the myriad ways the human and alien body is manipulated in the series. Crucially, she grounds readings of power in the corporeal subject. Encompassed in the list, but not explicitly named, is disability. Just as *The X-Files* uses science fiction to address issues of colonialism, and just as the body is a powerful site of meaning-making, the show offers complex, though problematic, representations of disability in various forms.

While *X-Files* scholarship has not addressed the series’ use of disability, there have been noticeably negative reactions from popular sources. One blogger was “deeply disappointed” in how *X-Files* portrayed the titular character’s mental disability in the first season episode “Roland.”⁴ Another article, discussing the attitudinal barriers for people with disabilities, begins by maligning a conversation from the episode “Quagmire,”⁵ wherein Mulder, discussing Captain Ahab’s

⁴ “Roland” tells the story of Mulder and Scully’s involvement in a case involving an intellectually disabled janitor, Roland, who becomes a suspect in a series of murders involving the scientists who are working on a new jet engine prototype. As it turns out, Roland is the twin brother of one of the project’s former scientists, who was periodically taking control of Roland’s body to take revenge on the former colleagues that ostracized him from the project.

⁵ “Quagmire” follows Mulder and Scully’s investigation into the existence of “Big Blue,” a Loch-Ness-type monster supposedly responsible for a string of disappearances around its Georgia lake.

prosthetic leg, makes a flippant comment about the experience of disability, implying that because society holds people with disabilities to separate standards, it would be far easier to prove oneself in the world. The author interprets this exchange to mean that “Mulder would be considered lazy or a failure if he didn’t work, whereas with a disability, he would have an excuse for slacking and would be called ‘courageous’ for merely holding a job, let alone succeeding.” A final, troubling legacy of *X-Files*, disability, and popular culture is the memorialization of the episode “Home,”⁶ which portrays mental and physical disability in an incestuous and murderous backwoods family. This representation endorses historically problematic ideas of disability as representing character flaws and inherent evil, as well as the dangerous belief that disability is an entirely genetic problem, one that should be eradicated for the safety of society. While such concerns are well founded, they let the more subversive, “producerly” instances of disability representation go unnoticed.

Disability in Television and Science Fiction

Popular criticism of *The X-Files* is microcosmic of the usual approaches disability scholars take with regards to popular television; they are primarily concerned with casting decisions and accuracy of representation. The majority of popular sources agree that representations of disability have made great strides in recent years. According to *Disability Scoop*, “the number of characters with disabilities on prime-time television this year [2019] is set to hit a record high. There will be 18 regularly-appearing characters with disabilities on prime-time network shows during the 2018-2019 season, accounting for 2.1 percent of portrayals.” In addition to statistical data, shows like *Speechless* and *Switched at Birth* have helped shift portrayals of disabled characters that have historically been depicted as pity-evoking “Tiny Tims” and vengeful “Captain Ahab.” Despite progress, disability prognosticators are quick to add that there is a long way to go, citing shows like *13 Reasons Why* and *Atypical* as shows that promote dangerous stereotypes of mental illness or cast able-bodied actors in disabled characters’ roles.

The agents’ *Moby-Dick* conversation is thematically relevant, given their search for a mythical water monster.

⁶ Any internet search for the best *X-Files* episode will turn up “Home.”

Scholarship on disability in television deals with similar topics, though it focuses more on how popular entertainment is used in the social construction of ability and disability. Most scholars agree with Paul Darke that popular culture “defines parameters of normality” and that TV shows in particular have a profound influence on how disability is viewed. From there, interpretations vary wildly, from those that are critical of prodisability themes (Weinberger and Greenbaum) to those interested in the well-being of people with disabilities (Zhang and Haller), who laud all attempts at bringing disability into public discourse. In the end, there is a consensus on the basic premise that while popular culture can reinscribe stigmatization and stereotypes, it also has the potential to produce cultural artifacts that disrupt stereotypes, from *Gray’s Anatomy* (Wilder) to *The Simpsons* (Fink).

Despite fruitful analysis, disability studies treatment popular television tends to not deviate from what it rightly sees as the most urgent, activist-oriented issues of disability in popular culture. In science fiction, however, disability scholars are making important moves related to the abstract, metaphorical potential of disability. Historically, disability as metaphor has been almost always destructive for the disabled character. Mitchell and Snyder call the literary tropes associated with disability metaphor “narrative prosthesis,” referring to the “perpetual discursive dependency on disability” that manifests in literature “as a stock feature of characterization and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device” (222). Disability primarily serves to enhance the characterization of the able-bodied. Physical or mental disability metaphorically mirrors thematic or personality abnormality and degeneration. The presence of disability signals that something is amiss and needs to be fixed. Lennard Davis argues that “the preponderance of disability metaphors stems from an ableist culture that has conditioned people to be distracted by disability in a narrative not explicitly about disability” (Schalk 140). Thus, the metaphor ends up signifying something unrelated to the actual disability, and by so doing, reinforces the objectification and marginalization of disabled characters. And yet, to dismiss all disability metaphors as harmful dismisses the potential of metaphors that do take on meanings relevant to the culture and experience of disability. More recently, scholars working with race and postcolonialism have excavated disability metaphors that contain both concrete – applicable to the rights and activism of the disabled – and metaphorical meanings (Quayson). This challenge to prevailing attitudes towards disability metaphor has also been influential in the study of disability in science fiction (Boyd).

When combined with disability in television, the analytical potential of science fiction disability takes on even greater significance. If popular television is instrumental in establishing the boundaries and definitions of normality, and “producerly” texts work to undermine established assumptions from within the popular culture apparatus, then a science fiction “producerly” text can disrupt – even if it upholds – ableist assumptions in ways that other genres and previous interpretations of disability in popular culture cannot.

“Mythology” Episodes and New Eugenics

Disability scholar Lennard Davis was instrumental in unpacking the constructed concept of normality. Describing the “imperative of the norm,” Davis explains that the modern concept of the normal, and thus the modern concept of the abnormal, took form with the advent of modern statistics. For the first time, scholars could accurately measure what is average, or normal, and thus determine what falls outside of the acceptable standard deviation – what is not normal. Armed with “scientific” proof of biological variability, statisticians would go on to influence a generation of eugenicists who would use statistics as a justification for continued inequality along lines of race, gender, class, and ability. Indeed, the modern definition of disability came to be defined as a biological body that falls outside the acceptable range of statistical variability.⁷ As such, the so-called scientific basis of prejudicial eugenic policies rested on the connection between marginalized groups and the belief that they are biological outliers. The pervasive beliefs of Francis Galton and his eugenicist disciples – including, in America, leaders like Theodore Roosevelt – rested on the fundamental assumption that unwanted populations were disabled. When landmark decisions such as *Buck vs Bell* upheld the legality of forced sterilization, they were made on the assumption that sterilization would eliminate outliers and prevent their spread. In effect, the eugenics movement institutionalized the belief that the state had a moral mandate to raise the average. In addition to harnessing ableist rhetoric, eugenics was presented as a cutting-edge, technologically innovative program. *The X-Files* utilizes the conceptual freedom of its genre to repackage this history for an updated cultural moment – new anxieties, new technologies, and new bodies.

⁷ For more on this, see Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization*.

The “mythology” episodes cover the series’ over-arching investigation into governmental and extraterrestrial conspiracies to colonize Earth with aliens and alien-human hybrids. While the exact plot becomes increasingly muddy as the series continues, there are elements that remain steadfast. One of these is the widespread use of biopower⁸ and the attempt on the part of the antagonists to, like eugenicists before them, raise the average of human ability. In a show that often expresses distrust for technological innovation, choosing instead to show the destructive capabilities such innovation can bring,⁹ the philosophical motivation of the entire series’ villains is that humans are fundamentally flawed and limited. Human biology is insufficient to confront the inevitable colonization of extraterrestrials. Through manmade and alien technology, clandestine parties conspire to change what is normal. As a result, old definitions of normality and abnormality are adjusted. If what is considered normal is raised several standard deviations, then what was once normal is just as abnormal as those usually considered aberrant. Likewise, if definitions of “able-bodiedness” become even more stringent, then definitions of disability become increasingly malleable. The series depicts a new eugenics that forces once-able-bodies to confront an unattainable new normal.

An early example of this new eugenics occurs in the season 1 episode, “Eve.” Mulder and Scully uncover a government sanctioned human cloning project designed to create genetically modified super soldiers. The project goes awry, and unanticipated results doom the project, but the impulse to alter human ability remains throughout the series. The Syndicate, a covert organization that is the show’s main antagonist for most of its run, invests generations of resources in splicing human genetics with that of aliens. Despite their machinations, however, attempts to redefine human ability are usually thwarted, either by Mulder and Scully, alien intervention, or their own scientific hubris. As a result, the series is skeptical about the feasibility of such a project and reveals a deep-seated anxiety

⁸ As introduced and theorized by Michel Foucault in *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*. Indeed, Foucault’s relevance in interpreting *The X-Files* gestures towards valuable future work on the series.

⁹ Not all technology is presented in a negative light, it should be noted. The “Lone Gunmen,” who eventually received their own short-lived spin-off series, use technology to aid Mulder and Scully in their pursuits. It should also be noted, however, that the Lone Gunmen often utilize technology to combat the destructive technology created by higher powers. Indeed, they are perhaps the most paranoid and mistrusting characters of the series. The Lone Gunmen, in this sense, demonstrate the responsible, ethical use of technology.

over traditional markers of ability, disability, and super-ability. As old standards of normality and abnormality change, so does the ability to recognize, and control, abnormal bodies. *X-Files* argues that the eugenic impulse still infects systems of power. Old eugenics established parameters of normality; new eugenics shows those parameters to be volatile and subject to change based on the political, technological moment.

This anxiety is frequently depicted through the conflation of super-ability and disability. In “Eve,” for example, biological modification does produce super-abled clones. The subjects have increased physical and mental capabilities, far above what is traditionally considered normal or average. The sudden disparity between abled and super-abled, however, leads to a crisis of categorization. For the traditionally able-bodied, super-abled clones appear to be mentally *disabled*, leading to their incarceration in a mental hospital. For super-abled clones, the traditionally abled are then perceived as disabled, leading to their extermination (murder) of those they deem unwanted. For both sides, the sudden disarranging of usual markers of ability results in a universal impulse to categorize the abnormal as disabled.

This trend is born out throughout the series. Time and again, characters with super-abilities are deemed disabled and subjected to the usual methods employed by the able-bodied to deal with the disabled: marginalization, extermination, and the most frequently used in the series, institutionalization. In “D.P.O.,” for example, a socially marginalized but otherwise abled character experiences “acute hypokalemia,” which allows him to make lightning strike at will. Unsure of how to prosecute him, the episode ends with him being confined to a mental hospital. In the second season episode, “Aubrey,” a super-abled child is caught killing a series of FBI agents, the result of genetic memories which have been passed to her from her vengeful father. She too is placed in a psychiatric ward. The list of episodes where institutionalization is the common reaction to a confounding super-ability goes on. “Pusher,” “Duane Berry,” as well as the aforementioned “Eve,” all feature the misreading – or purposeful misdiagnosis – of super-ability as disability as a means of controlling unruly and unusual bodies. In the world of the series, of course, many of the incarcerated *are* serial murderers, so their institutionalization reads as understandable and necessary; although it is interesting that a number of these serial murderers – the aforementioned “Aubrey” and “Roland,” for example – are conduits for the murderous intentions of other characters. The disabled body is used as a vessel, a plot device for the purposes of the able-bodied. The larger

trend of presenting the disabled as violent killers shows the series’ investment in traditional stereotypes of disability representation. These inaccurate misinterpretations – or deliberately harmful representations – destabilizes normal markers of ability and disability.

“Humbug” and Feminist Disability Theory

In addition to the overarching disability metaphor of the series, *The X-Files* also features self-contained episodes that offer unique angles on issues of disability and gender. Indeed, gender is an area frequently discussed in *X-Files* scholarship. Traditional male-female television duos feature a dominant, authoritative, and action-prone male with a more passive, emotionally empathetic female, such as *Law and Order: SVU*. *X-Files* uses this space to explore gender issues and subvert traditional gender authority. It is Scully that adheres to authority; she is chosen by the powers that be to spy on Mulder. Scully is the “eager, objective, scientific professional” (Bellon 149). She is not squeamish or passive. She frequently must rescue Mulder and play the part of the by-the-book authority figure. Conversely, Mulder is an intuitive, emotional, empathetic counterpart to Scully’s logic and rationality. He gets emotionally invested in his cases, whereas Scully strives to remain detached. Mulder’s entire career investigating the paranormal is a reaction to the disappearance of his sister, who he believes was abducted, despite the professional ridicule it brings him. Gender roles are resignified in *The X-Files*, but they are also upheld. Mulder shows a stereotypically masculine interest in pornography, sports, and a “reckless lack of concern for Bureau procedure” (150). Scully undermines her own scientific rationality by showing flashes of deep, religious faith. In what Wilcox and Williams call “gender liminality,” Scully and Mulder “walk a heroic path along the border, each engaging the other in struggles with masculine and feminine, rational and nonrational, mind and body” (120). Specific to Scully, Lisa Parks argues that Scully “negotiates her relationship to the monstrous in a way that empowers her . . . she uses scientific and legal practices to interrogate and to expose the limits of their masculinized traditions” (122).

Gender scholars are not entirely in line with such a liberating vision of gender in the series. Beth Braun describes gender’s major manifestation in the series as “a

fear of the ‘bad mother,’ or female sexuality in general” (93).¹⁰ Primarily analyzing the film *Fight the Future*, Braun describes a fear of the womb that equates fertility with monstrosity. Mothers are conflated with aliens and supernatural fears are conflated with fear of sexuality, specifically female. These associations become fraught when considered alongside disability. One of the first to connect disability and gender, Aristotle described the female body as “mutilated,” monstrous, or, in modern terms, disabled (Garland-Thomson).

“Humbug,” is a powerful critique of an ableist, male-dominated society. The episode was groundbreaking in several ways: It is one of the first overtly comedic episodes in the series, one of the series’ first use of self-reflexivity, and it introduced the writing of Darin Morgan, who, though he only wrote six episodes (two in the recent reboot seasons), is credited with penning *The X-Files*’ funniest, most challenging, and most heralded episodes. Finally, and most importantly, Morgan’s episodes are deeply interested in the mediation and awareness of *The X-Files* image, its tropes, and its own power structures.¹¹ This section engages aforementioned questions of gender and introduces disability as another way to interpret the series’ self-reflexivity and challenge of both society’s power structures as well as its own ideologies. To this end, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s theory of staring is applied to a brief exchange between Agent Scully and a man with a conjoined twin. The exchange literally exposes aberrant bodies, conflates female and disabled bodies, and establishes a productive stare that works to dismantle normative, hegemonic power as well as the series’ own perception of gender and normalcy.

Morgan’s episodes tend to focus much less on Mulder and Scully, instead choosing to develop one-off characters that are typically reserved as narrative plot points. One of the main sources of subversion in the episode is its comedy. Being the first overtly comedic episode, the series’ creators were concerned about

¹⁰ Braun critiques gender in *X-Files* by comparing it with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a similarly supernatural, gender bending television show that was airing simultaneously. Like *X-Files*, Braun believes that both shows “reflect many of the same concerns: a fascination with the mystery and danger of sexuality and the notion that, underneath our civilized demeanors, we all have the capacity for evil” (94). Furthermore, like *The X-Files*, *Buffy* has garnered a significant critical following and maintains a strong, active fanbase.

¹¹ On Kumail Nanjiani’s podcast *The X-Files Files*, Darin Morgan explains how he approached the characters of Mulder and Scully, “the one thing I thought was bullshit was that Mulder and Scully were just too good looking to be presented as outsiders. Mulder would never have problems being accepted or being treated like I did” Kumail, whose podcast analyzes episodes and interviews cast and crew, and has a loyal fan base in its own right, was rewarded for his efforts by being cast in the upcoming mini-series.

jeopardizing the tone of the show. The comedy is integral to the episode’s progressive themes. For example, when Jim Rose’s character asks Scully, “can you imagine going through your whole life looking like that?,” the camera cuts to Mulder in a super-hero pose, hair blowing and a leg propped up; comedy leads to criticism. Darin Morgan remains unhappy with the episode, citing an unexplainable “awkwardness” that makes it “unwatchable” to him (Nanjiani). But it is that awkwardness that makes the episode so potent and jarring, which is most acutely experienced in a particularly awkward scene. Morgan has been accused of hating *The X-Files* and hating Mulder (Nanjiani). But what he attempted to do was to “point out the absurdities about whatever the episode is about. I point out the absurdity of the series” (Nanjiani). Comedy is how Morgan accomplishes his goal. The episode was a commercial and critical success, and the once concerned executives were eager for more comedy. The final product is an episode that is critical of its own system and challenges the series to recognize its absurdity. The use of comedy and self-reflexivity became a hallmark of the series, with many similarly toned episodes following in its wake.¹²

In the episode, Scully and Mulder are investigating a mysterious death at a sideshow community. In a telling and well-crafted shot reverse sequence, Scully is awakened by a man with a conjoined twin, Lenny. Scully answers Lenny’s knock wearing a robe. Lenny, who lives nearby, is also wearing a robe. When Scully answers the door, she first makes eye contact with Lenny before dropping her gaze to his stomach, where the loosely fitting robe has revealed his conjoined twin. Using medium shots up to now, Scully’s brow tightens, her lips purse, and her staring takes on a startled appearance before cutting abruptly to the first close up of the conjoined twin. The camera then cuts to Lenny’s face, where he too is not looking at Scully’s face but at her partially exposed breast, also the result of her loosely donned robe. Paralleling the previous shot, the camera pans up to Scully’s face, where she is still noticeably staring at Lenny’s stomach. Realizing what she’s doing, she quickly moves her eyes to Lenny’s face, who is also awkwardly shifting his gaze from Scully’s chest to her eyes. In an unspoken moment of mutual discomfort, both characters look down at their revealed bodies before rushing to cover themselves.

¹² In addition to Morgan’s other episodes, some other examples of comedic episodes include: “Small Potatoes” (season 4, episode 20); “Bad Blood” (season 5, episode 12); “X-Cops” (season 7, episode 12); “Je Souhaite” (season 7, episode 12).

Lenny and Scully stare. For feminist disability scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “staring registers the perception of difference and gives meaning to impairment by marking it as aberrant,” and “creates an awkward partnership that estranges and discomforts both viewer and viewed” (56-57). Staring adds to the obsessed and intense conflict society has with the disabled body. It represents a person’s active participation in the marginalization of a group, which, in this case, is disability. As a feminist disability scholar, Garland-Thomson is concerned with the similar relationship society has with the female and disabled body. The two are often conflated in the eyes of hegemonic power, and the individual struggles of the female and disabled bodies can be united to combat the oppression of two groups that “have always been stared at” (56). In the brief exchange between Lenny and Scully, “Humbug” establishes a productive stare that exposes the similar discomfort of being a woman and being disabled by subverting the established role that Scully plays and exploiting the equating of feminine and monstrosity by coupling her breast with a conjoined twin.

The episode calls into question the gender power structures of the series by combining the shared discomfort of disabled and female bodies. In this way, it exposes the absurdity of Mulder’s position as the Outsider. In essence, the episode brings the real world back into the series. It comments on the fact that, if *X-Files* is “subversive” or “liberating,” it is still unrealistic fiction. It recognizes that there is a real world beyond the shifted, bizarre world of the series, a world where Mulder is still a pinnacle of heteronormativity and Scully and Lenny are still, to different degrees, abnormal. The episode undercuts scholars who see gender liminality in the series as a positive, liberating challenge to gender dynamics, though Wilcox and Williams still cite this moment in their analysis. It suggests that while re-assigning gender may be a powerful tool in the show, it has not gone as far as it could. Mulder will never be the outsider; he will never realistically be the Other. Finally, to scholars that read a fear of the womb and dangerous sexuality into the series, “Humbug” is a jarring agreement. In this scene, Lenny’s conjoined twin – who, in keeping with usual portrayals of disability, turns out to be the killer in the story – is equated with Scully’s breast. Even though Gillian Anderson became a sex symbol in the 1990s, the series itself rarely sexualized Scully.¹³ The sudden exposure of her

¹³ Scully is rarely sexualized. In “Pilot,” she is shown changing in front of Mulder, but the series quickly decided to adopt a desexualized image of Scully, using costuming and writing to cover and ignore her body. Mulder is more sexualized, though his too is an inactive one. His obsession with the Truth leaves him little time for physical intimacy. A noticeable exception is “War of the

breast and its immediate conflation with a murderous disability creates a shocking affirmation of fear of sexuality *and* disability. By highlighting the mutual (socially perceived) deviance of female sexuality and physical aberrance, the moment calls into question the established fears of the series. The moment is Darin Morgan’s method of uncovering a possible fear that has lurked beneath the surface since the show’s beginning, a fear of addressing sexuality and physical difference, a fear akin to Freud’s thoughts on fetishism. *The X-Files* worked hard to minimize Scully’s sexuality, and if there is a disabled, or physically different body in the series, it is usually a source or conduit of evil. By literally uncovering the two, Scully and Lenny represent the still-present, still unaddressed sexuality and disability of the series. Darin Morgan’s writing exposes a gap in *The X-Files*, and he challenges the series to address its own power structures.

The scene also draws further attention to the gender power structures of the series as a whole. Mulder is the feeling, emotional outcast that is quick to accept absurd circumstances and is eager to explore new things. In “Humbug,” Scully is the accepting one. She eats a bug to connect with the animalistic Conundrum, and accepts the humanity of the “freaks” in the town, temporarily departing from her rational, science-centric worldview. The carnival setting results in, for Scully, a carnivalesque upending of norms. Moreover, after their exchange, Scully and Lenny are bonded for the remainder of the episode. They empathize with each other. Scully feels great remorse for Lenny when it is revealed that his alcoholism and disability have caused multiple murders. She cares far more than Mulder, which undermines the Mulder-as-feeling/Scully-as-unfeeling dichotomy. Scully feels a connection of Otherness with Lenny, one that Mulder, Morgan subtextually argues, could not possibly understand. While great pains are taken to depict Mulder as “spooky,” and outside the norm, he still does not possess those characteristics that mark a body as deviant. He is not disabled and he is not a woman. Scully and Lenny have both seen the other’s unseeable identity, their fleshy truth. The exposing exchange binds the two and conflates their mutual aberrance. They establish a productive stare that creates respect in their shared difference. The moment re-re-signifies gender in the series.

Finally, the scene’s cinematography, narrative context, and diegetic setting all add significant weight to the exchange. Scully answers the door from a high angle; she is looking down at Lenny – who peers up at Scully from a low angle – from the

Coprophages,” when Mulder has an intimate fling with a beautiful entomologist; the episode was written by Darin Morgan.

doorway of her trailer. When her eyes rest on Lenny's conjoined twin, Scully's gaze is made more conspicuous by the length her eyes must travel. They are noticeably lower than if she was looking at his face. Conversely, Lenny would have to raise his eyes to meet Scully's, but his look is noticeably straight forward. His alarm at her exposed breast is made more apparent by the verticality of the shot. Furthermore, the purpose of the scene gives weight to the meaning of the exchange. Ostensibly, the only narrative goal of the scene is to inform Scully that there has been another murder. This follows the typical formula of an *X-Files* episode, but it also grants the writer a variety of ways to stage it. Someone else in the trailer park could have informed Scully that someone else had been murdered. For instance, Lenny or someone else could have told Mulder. The fact that Morgan chose to write the exchange between Scully and Lenny signals a conscious decision to have an uncomfortable, divulging moment between the disabled and female body. Finally, the moment is accented by the community. In a haven for sideshow performers, abnormality is normal. But Lenny is not used to seeing a fully able-bodied woman, and Scully is not used to seeing a man with a conjoined twin. Thus, they both react genuinely to what is a realistic sense of shock at being exposed to an aberrant other. In this way, the setting and plot of the episode underscores the genuine discomfort of being exposed to something that is abnormal. In a place where the unseeable is seen every day, the mutual shock of Scully and Lenny gives greater weight to the conflation of disabled and female bodies and the self-reflexive meaning found therein.

Darin Morgan would go on to write "Clyde Bruckman's Final Repose" and "Jose Chung's From Outer Space," two of the most beloved episodes in the *X-Files* canon, and two of the most complicated meta-narratives ever aired on network television. But it was in "Humbug" that he developed his trademarked self-awareness. The episode is the only one to directly address the shared experience of disabled and female bodies, and one of the few episodes to explicitly sexualize Scully. In the process of challenging the series' perceived "subversive" qualities, Morgan subverts the show. He challenges the series to address its fear of sex, difference, and sexual difference; he points out the absurdity of Mulder and Scully as beautiful outsiders, and credit must be given to the series that would produce and air an episode critiquing itself. Contained within *X-Files* is a range of approaches popular television and science fiction television in particular can take with regards to representing disability. At times, the series produced episodes featuring disabled characters that were, as Fiske would call them, "readerly" texts, pieces of popular

entertainment that reinforce usual meanings. In the case of disability, this manifested as disabled characters being portrayed as mere tools to be used by the better abled or as a direct, violent campaign against the possibilities of a disability community. Analysis could end here, and *X-Files* becomes yet another destructive reinforcement of dangerous stereotypes. However, just as some “readerly” texts unwittingly become “producerly” texts, *X-Files* turns institutional skepticism back on itself by re-orienting traditional markers of ability and disability and self-reflexively questioning its own use of cultural power. *The X-Files* is true to their word. If its mission is to question everything, to never stop searching, part of that involves staring back at itself.

Work Cited

- Allair, Matt. "The X-Files: A history of the fandom." *Den of Geek*, 9 Nov. 2015, www.denofgeek.com/tv/the-x-files-a-history-of-the-fandom.
- “Attitudinal barriers for people with disabilities.” *National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability*, 18 Nov. 2016, www.ncwd-youth.info/publications/attitudinal-barriers-for-people-with-disabilities.
- “Aubrey.” *The X-Files*. Fox, 1995.
- Badly, Linda. “The rebirth of the clinic: The body as alien in *The X-Files*.” *Deny All Knowledge: Reading The X-Files*, edited by David Lavery et al., Syracuse UP, 1996, pp. 148-67.
- Bellon, Joe. “The strange discourse of *The X-Files*: What it is, what it does, and what is at stake.” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1999, pp. 136-54.
- Boyd, Nolan. “The altered shall inherit the Earth: Biopower and the disabled body in Texhnolyze.” *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 45, no. 1, 2018, pp. 91-110.
- Braun, Beth. “The ambiguity in *The X-Files* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.” *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2000, pp. 88-94.
- “Clyde Bruckman’s Final Repose.” *The X-Files*. Fox, 1995.
- Delasara, Jan. *PopLit, PopCult, and The X-Files*. McFarland, 2000.
- Davis, Lennard. “Introduction: Disability, normality, and power.” *The Disability Studies Reader*, Routledge, 2016, pp. 1-16.
- "D.P.O." *The X-Files*. Fox, 1995.
- "Duane Berry." *X-Files*. Fox, 1994.

- Ellis, Katie. *Disability and Popular Culture: Focusing Passion, Creating Community, and Expressing Defiance*. Ashgate, 2015.
- "Eve." *The X-Files*. Fox, 1993.
- Fink, Moritz. "'People who look like things': Representations of disability in *The Simpsons*." *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2013, pp. 255-70.
- Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization*. Vintage, 1964.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, vol. 1*. Editions Gallimard, 1978.
- Geller, Theresa. *The X-Files*. Wayne State UP, 2016.
- "Gillian Anderson by The Nerdist." *The Nerdist*, 2015, nerdist.com/tags/gillian-anderson.
- Heasley, Shaun. "TV including more characters with disabilities." *DisabilityScoop*, 9 Nov. 2017, <https://www.disabilityscoop.com/2017/11/09/tv-including-disabilities/24410>.
- "Home." *The X-Files*. Fox, 1996.
- "Humbug." *The X-Files*. Fox, 1995.
- Jameson, Frederic. "Progress versus Utopia; Or, can we imagine the future?" *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1982, pp. 147-58.
- "Jose Chung's From Outer Space." *The X-Files*. Fox, 1995.
- Loveday-Brown, Andrea. "Why I'm deeply disappointed in how *The X-Files* portrayed my child's disorder." *The Mighty*, 27 Jan. 2016, themighty.com/2016/01/im-upset-how-the-x-files-depicted-pitt-hopkins-syndrome.
- McLean, Adrienne L. "Media effects: Marshall McLuhan, television culture, and 'The X-Files.'" *Film Quarterly*, vol. 51, no. 4, 1998, pp. 2-11.
- Mitchell, David, and Sharon Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. U Michigan P, 2001.
- Nanjiani, Kumail. "Interview with *X-Files* writer Darin Morgan." *Kumail Nanjiani's The X-Files Files*. Feral Audio, 2014.
- Parks, Lisa. "Special agent or monstrosity? – Finding the feminine in *The X-Files*." *Deny All Knowledge: Reading The X-Files*, edited by David Lavery et al., Syracuse UP, 1996, pp. 121-34.
- "Pilot." *The X-Files*. Fox, 1993.
- "Pusher." *The X-Files*. Fox, 1996.
- Quayson, Ato. *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation*. Columbia UP, 2007.

"Roland." *The X-Files*. Fox, 1994.

Schalk, Sami. "Interpreting disability metaphor and race in Octavia Butler's 'The Evening and the Morning and the Night'." *African American Review*, vol. 50, no. 2, 2017, pp. 139-51.

“War of Coprophages.” *The X-Files*. Fox, 1995.

Wilcox, Rhonda, and J. P. Williams. "'What Do You Think?': *The X-Files*, Liminality, and Gender Pleasure." *Deny All Knowledge: Reading The X-Files*, edited by David Lavery, Syracuse UP, 1996, pp. 99-120.

Wooley, Christine A. "Visible fandom: Reading *The X-Files* through X-Philes." *Journal of Film and Sound*, vol. 53, no. 4, 2002, pp. 29-53.

Love is (Color)Blind: Constructing Race Non-Visually on Reality TV

KENDALL ARTZ

Netflix's 2020 dating show *Love is Blind* follows a long tradition of reality shows claiming to break through superficiality to help create "real" romantic connections. One contestant, Barnett, explains why he felt the need to try something different, "I always go for pretty girls. It's shallow to say but it's the truth. I hope this leads to something more real" ("Is Love Blind?" 00:14:35-00:14:38). What is unique about *Love is Blind* is the way Barnett and the other contestants must go about forming relationships. "There was [sic] some good voices," Barnett says after his first round of meeting the female contestants, "I think Jessica had a nice voice. That's probably the sexiest" ("Is Love Blind?" 00:17:05-00:17:08). The reason that Barnett must place such emphasis on the other contestants' voices is because of the central premise of *Love is Blind*: none of the contestants are able to see one another unless they become engaged to be married.

Love is Blind has been a sensational hit for Netflix, briefly becoming its most-viewed program in the United States (Weinstein 1). The show brings together more than a dozen men and women and physically separates them from one another. The only interactions that contestants may have with contestants of the opposite gender is through entering one of two small, conjoined rooms, called "pods," and speaking to one another through an opaque, glowing, glass wall. As host Vanessa Lachey explains, "Your value is often judged solely on the photo on your dating app. But everyone wants to be loved for who they are, not for their looks, their race, their background or their income" ("Is Love Blind?" 00:02:45-00:02:52). Instead, what *Love is Blind* seeks to answer is a seemingly simple question, "Is love truly blind?"

Contestants go about finding their potential love connections through a variety of different techniques. Many engage in in-depth conversations with their partners searching for similar personality traits. As one contestant says, "They can't see how

KENDALL ARTZ is a PhD candidate in the American Studies program at the College of William & Mary. His work lies on the intersections of whiteness studies and ethnography, being particularly interested in the ways white Americans live and experience race, especially in seemingly 'colorblind' environments. He can be reached at kartz@email.wm.edu.

Popular Culture Studies Journal
Volume 9, Issue 2, ©2021

fly I am, they can't say 'Oh, he's handsome.' They can't say 'Oh, I like chocolate skin and beards.' They have to rely on my personality" ("Is Love Blind?" 00:05:50-00:05:56). But this ideal is quickly confounded as contestants try to imagine the appearance of the person on the other side of the wall. Barnett, for example, tries to identify the "sexiest" voice, naming Jessica as the initial object of his interest. It becomes clear that it is not only looks that can be deceiving as the audience discovers that Jessica dons a different voice in the pods than she does when speaking with the other female contestants or in the show's numerous asides.

While Jessica was able to successfully deceive Barnett with her voice, there are some attributes to which contestants seem especially attuned. Race emerges as a central theme in the show, even as it touts itself as an experiment about creating relationships without any knowledge of physical appearance. By eliminating visual contact, the show purports to eliminate race – and all other supposedly visual characteristics – as a factor in finding love. *Love is Blind* thus takes on the challenge of many liberal promoters of colorblindness, literally removing vision as a factor. This ideal is never fully realized as contestants find new ways to identify race, relying on the sound of their partner's voice, as well as cultural identifiers such as names and professions. In fact, by placing so much importance on erasing race as a meaningful aspect of who someone is, the show transforms race and its imagined physical characteristics into the most important component of identity, especially in romantic relationships. The drama that the show portrays relies largely on the possibility that contestants find a partner to whom they would not otherwise be attracted, and the possibility that contestants may find love despite racial differences. This paper aims to examine exactly how the show approaches this goal and what it reveals about how race is made to appear natural, decipherable, and "real" through the medium of reality television. Through the marking of certain attributes as racial and then making those identities hypervisible, *Love is Blind* successfully erases whiteness as a meaningful marker of identity while simultaneously identifying race as a natural way of "seeing" the world, even in a non-visual setting.

While *Love is Blind* is billed by Netflix as a dating show like no other, it draws upon many of the tropes and stereotypes of reality television in general, falling within the genre by nature of its claim to represent "the real" (Holmes and Jermyn 5). *Love is Blind*, even given its clearly manufactured setting, reflects an image of reality that at some level claims to depict the world as it truly is. Ultimately, the extent to which the show is accurate to the lives of "real" people or "real" situations

is irrelevant. As one pair of scholars observe, “rather than asking the increasingly tautological question ‘how *real* is Reality TV?’ we perhaps need to grasp its powerful appeal and claim to ‘the real,’ while at the same time acknowledging the highly contested and self-conscious space in which this takes place” (Holmes and Jermyn 12, emphasis added). Of interest is not whether the contestants were influenced by production or to what extent they create lasting relationships, but rather the ways that *Love is Blind* attempts to craft for its audience an understanding of the world that is imagined to be real. Race, too, is constructed as “real” in the context of *Love is Blind*, despite the show’s claims to the contrary. Behind the walls of the pods, certain contestants realize the ideal of dating as individuals free from physical constraints, while others remain ontologically fixed bodies, unable to break free.

As Stuart Hall has observed, race is a floating signifier that variously marks, prohibits, or extends certain bodies and social possibilities. This means that the “reality” of race is constantly undergoing redefinition according to context rather than stable markers of belonging. For the purposes of this essay, what is significant are the ways that the “colorblind” spaces of the pods mark certain individuals as Other due not to their essential attributes, but through the ways certain speech mannerisms and cultural differences come to stand for imagined membership in a larger racial group. This racialization is not indiscriminate, but is selectively applied to the show’s non-white contestants, especially those marked as Black. In fact, nearly every one of the contestants on the show falls to one side of the Black/white divide, making Blackness hypervisible to ensure the success of the experiment for white contestants. In this way the show upholds a Black/white paradigm of race relations that ultimately further alienates its Black contestants as “impossible bodies” while allowing its white contestants to seemingly transcend race. The mutually supportive technologies of the show – the camera and the pods – not only mirror larger structural classifications of race, they also redefine them as natural, nonvisual, and susceptible to common-sense identification. As race has no stable referent, it cannot be said to reside solely in physical appearance. Instead, the constructions of race in *Love is Blind* reveal the ways that race is constructed through a multi-sensory embodied experience of cultural similarity and difference. Through the techniques employed in *Love is Blind*, whiteness comes to stand as neutral at the expense of Black identity.

While race is a central theme of the show, it is notable that the ways race is primarily discussed is through its perceived absence. This ideal is realized for some

contestants, who do not explicitly discuss their own race or the race of their partner. In these cases, both contestants invariably present as white. This outcome mirrors the perceived invisibility of whiteness frequently discussed by whiteness studies and Critical Race scholars (e.g., Dyer; hooks; Roediger), but this conclusion obscures as much as it reveals. Often overlooked in these analyses is an account of the ways in which whiteness *becomes* invisible. The depiction of whiteness as always already invisible runs the risk of redoubling its power. Instead, it is important to identify the ways both structural and individual expressions of whiteness must be constantly reimagined and reconstructed. Sara Ahmed has written that whiteness “is a category of experience that disappears as a category through experience” (150). What she means by this is that the perceived invisibility of whiteness requires work to create and maintain. As an ongoing process, it is possible to examine in *Love is Blind* the ways this invisibility is accomplished and maintained.

Invisible Fantasies

Colorblindness has long been a purported aim of reality television, even as shows make ample use of racist stereotypes. So-called “colorblind casting” disguises the ways production companies search for and continue to exploit stereotypes of Jezebel, Sapphire, and mammy characters, and limit the roles that people of color, especially Black women, can play (Goepfert 8). *Love is Blind* utilizes and redefines these racialized and heteronormative tropes, making certain characters hypervisible as spectacles for consumption. As such, certain attributes are brought to the forefront to make the show and its contestants intelligible to a wide audience. Gender, for example, is one identity not hidden behind the walls of the pods. In fact, romantic relationships between men and women are a given of the show, and contestants may be assured that they do not risk any potential romantic relationships with contestants of the same gender or sex. Race on *Love is Blind* is always co-produced through the assumption of gendered identity and vice versa. The ways that contestants interact and are presented to the audience are familiar and nonthreatening in their reenactment of established norms of romance.

The “reality” in reality television purports to display the world as it is, but it in fact reifies existing beliefs and hierarchies, depicting certain racialized and gendered roles as natural ways of behaving in and understanding the world, creating reality as much as displaying it (Moorti and Ross 205). At the same time, audiences

are free to reinterpret these displays to their own ends. Viewers from across gender, race, and class lines often understand reality TV in radically different ways, both because of different interpretations of cultural forms and expressions, and due to the varying sensitivity to the “hidden transcripts” that allow marginalized individuals to shape discourse around race on television (Acham 6). Further research has shown that due to this wide range of subjective experience, audiences across racial lines reflexively interpret reality TV for their own ends, despite the manufactured nature of the “reality” portrayed. Even when watching shows like CBS’s *Big Brother*, which portrays raw, uncut footage of strangers living in a communal house, viewers are aware and often critical of the mediated experience of such shows (Rose and Wood 289). In most shows, the settings, dilemmas, and even the people themselves are far removed from the everyday experiences of viewers, yet many audience members continue to find parallels to their own lives within the fantasy. Far from tainting the experience, viewers who embraced and acknowledged the contradictory aspects of reality television experienced the shows as more “satisfyingly authentic” (Rose and Wood 294). The knowledge that a situation was influenced by editing or production did nothing to lessen its impact. These shows create a paradox in which they do not merely show reality as viewers think it is or wish it would be, they show a reality that viewers know is not real and enjoy because of this knowledge. Viewers are free to selectively interpret what is important or not reflexively, finding meaning for their own lives and circumstances. This phenomenon has been labeled “hyperauthenticity,” or authenticity that is comfortably able to incorporate fantasy elements (Rose and Wood 294).

Philosopher Slavoj Žižek makes a similar observation in his discussion of fantasy and ideology. He argues that an “ideological edifice” that seeks to convey and structure knowledge must “articulate its inherent antagonism in the externality of its material existence” (2). By creating its own opposition, it is the nature of power to structure the conditions through which it may be resisted. Reality television forms a similar kind of “ideological edifice” that embraces and promotes its own inauthenticity in order to appear “hyperauthentic” and allow a wide variety of people to find meaning in its fantastical premise. In other words, it is those aspects of reality television that are clearly manufactured that contrast and bolster those elements that are meant to appear natural. What the fantastical allows is the understanding of the contradictions of reality television without its complete collapse into irrationality and absurdity. Fantasy is not only the suspension of disbelief but the ability to simultaneously believe and disbelieve: to search for the

“hyperauthentic.” The fantasy of *Love is Blind* enables the show to overcome the inherent contradictions of colorblindness as depicted in a visual medium by positioning certain individuals as impossible subjects in-and-of themselves.

Lauren, a Black female contestant, explains away the importance of the physical aspect of relationships formed on the show. “White or Black, tall or short, too young or too old?” (“Is Love Blind?” 00:56:20-00:56:25) she asks rhetorically, dismissing each of these characteristics in turn, but in practice, physical appearance continues to be in the forefront of some contestants’ minds. Jessica, a white woman, names each of these factors in a potential suitor before declaring them unimportant, “I came in here open to doing this experiment, but I really didn’t think that I would connect with someone off the bat like that. With Mark it was just instant. We’re different race, we’re different age, but we’re definitely cut from the same cloth.” (“Is Love Blind?” 00:08:35-00:08:45). After meeting Mark in person Jessica quickly comes to feel differently. Mark is shorter than she is, and she confesses that she doesn’t find him physically attractive. She also decides that he is too young for her. Consequently, after becoming engaged to Mark and being allowed to meet the rest of the male contestants, Jessica begins to pursue Barnett, who is much taller, closer to her age, and white. In fact, in each of the relationships that last until the end of the show, the contestants claim to be physically attracted to one another. Physical appearance plays a large role in their romantic connections, but the show makes Jessica seem shallow and to have failed the experiment. The impossibility that Jessica disguises is the extent to which all the contestants rely on physical appearance to form lasting connections. Instead, the show depicts Jessica as incapable of finding love without physical attraction, disguising the fact that no contestants who found love on the show were disinterested in the physical appearance of their partners.

Jessica’s fiancé, Mark, is somewhat of an anomaly on *Love is Blind* in that he is one of the few contestants who does not easily slot into a Black/white binary. “Both my parents are from Mexico,” he explains in an aside, “I’ll never forget my first date with one of my girlfriends in high school. She had told her dad that I was Mexican and he opened the door and he goes, ‘Oh, you’re not what I expected’” (“Is Love Blind?” 00:07:34-00:07:40). Mark’s description of his family preemptively describes his own race and the extent to which he exemplifies stereotypical Mexican physical attributes. In this way Mark directly ties his Mexican identity to dating, while also making the claim for the unimportance of his race. Here, Mark describes his race as something that may be overcome; Mark can

find love despite his race. At the same time, Mark's standard American accent and his claim that his physical appearance does not match what is "expected" of someone of Mexican descent complicates how he is depicted on *Love is Blind*. Mark does not fit within the show's construction of race as an essential physical characteristic because he does not look, talk, or act Mexican. The ambiguity with which the show portrays Mark's race is demonstrated by the fact that never in his relationships does his race remain unstated as it does for white contestants, but neither do his romantic partners contemplate life in an interracial relationship as do contestants entering into Black/white relationships. Mark's presence challenges the Black/white binary established by the casting of other contestants and raises difficult questions in terms of whether race is primarily a cultural or essential attribute. To what extent does Mark represent the Other? Would race prevent Mark and Jessica from dating outside the pods? Are they an interracial couple? The show has no easy answers for these questions and instead focuses on the drama caused by Jessica's attraction to Barnett. The show reserves its primary claims about race and colorblindness for the interactions between Black and white contestants.

The emphasis that the show places on Black and white as the most meaningful of racial identities is made clear by the interracial relationship that forms between Lauren and Cameron. As will be discussed shortly, other contestants call Lauren's race into question, but the audience never sees any such conversation with Cameron, a white man whom she eventually marries. In a post-show interview, Lauren went so far as to say that she hadn't ever asked about Cameron's race, "I really didn't know what Cameron was. I felt like I was going to be thrown for a loop. It was hard to tell for me just from his voice. I kind of figured he was Caucasian, but I didn't know for sure. I was ready for an element of surprise though" (Penn). The connection that Lauren and Cameron find is meant to prove the success of the colorblind aspect of the experiment, but in the same breath the emphasis that the show places on Lauren and Cameron's different races once again shows the importance race assumes. After becoming engaged and meeting one another face-to-face for the first time, Lauren muses that "being in an interracial relationship will be difficult" ("Will You Marry Me?" 00:05:06-00:05:08). The implication in these words is that prior to meeting one another physically, neither Lauren nor Cameron were in an interracial relationship. The deafening silence with which Lauren and Cameron approach one another's race within the pods is contrasted with the ways they proclaim their sustained ignorance. "This environment has allowed me to date outside my race without even knowing,"

Lauren says (“Will You Marry Me?” 00:02:02-00:02:05). Cameron explains that he believes the show helps to eliminate race entirely, “As a scientist I’m a believer in this experiment that’s removing the confounding variables of ethnicity, race, background, and the big one being physical appearance. None of that matters” (“Is Love Blind?” 00:10:04-00:10:12). In contrast to Jessica and Mark, Lauren and Cameron’s relationship appears to be truly “colorblind” because neither contestant knows anything of the other’s race. Whether Lauren or Cameron suspected one another’s race is beside the point. Instead, what is notable is how the show depicts Lauren and Cameron’s relationship as something manufactured by the nonvisual space of the pods to depict the racial categories of Black and white as essential and diametrically opposed.

Race historian Linda Martín Alcoff writes that the Black/white paradigm is not “descriptive” but “prescriptive” (9). In other words, much like white invisibility, seeing race in Black and white is not a natural way of imagining race relations in the United States but requires work to construct and maintain. As Alcoff notes, this binary is used by politicians, pundits, and scholars alike to influence discourse surrounding the racial makeup and meanings of race in the United States (16). *Love is Blind* reinforces this binary but also repurposes it for its own ends. The show’s selection and depiction of contestants who for the most part fall to either side of the Black/white divide falsely portrays the racial makeup of the United States in a way that gives whiteness undue weight and depicts Blackness as its opposite, rather than allowing for the complexity of the United States’ racial spectrum. These casting and editing decisions play upon the long tendency of reality television to utilize existing tropes and characters, erasing those who do not fit and typecasting those who do into stereotypical roles. The ambivalence with which *Love is Blind* depicts Mark’s self-described race is revealing of the show’s reliance upon a Black/white binary to depict race for viewers. Mark’s romance with Jessica is not “interracial” in the same way as Cameron and Lauren’s relationship, and this difference is paradoxically shown in the continued portrayal of Cameron and Lauren as mutually ignorant of the other’s race. Through Cameron and Lauren’s self-conscious disavowal of racial knowledge, the show proclaims the success of its experiment. However, this result is only notable if Cameron and Lauren’s races would have stopped them from dating without the help of the pods. *Love is Blind* thus reinscribes Black and white identities as incompatible, capable of forming a relationship only through external intervention. The apparent colorblindness that the show promotes serves to give new meaning to the significance and imagined

incompatibility of Black and white individuals. Cameron and Lauren, according to the narrative of *Love is Blind*, find love despite their racial differences. This is not a commonsense conclusion. Not all differences are given the same weight, and Mark and Jessica, for example, spend little time discussing the significance of race in their relationship. In contrast, Cameron and Lauren's races are made meaningful in their opposition to one another. In this way the show reasserts a Black/white binary that appears natural and commonsensical even as the show claims to challenge it. The success of the show's experiment relies on the ability of certain individuals to transcend these naturalized identities. To do so, the dual technologies of the pods and the camera mark Black contestants as racialized bodies, their ability to present as individuals always already impossible.

Impossible Bodies

Some contestants are marked as impossible almost before they even have a chance to speak. Barnett simply asks his pod partner for her name. "My name is Diamond," she responds. "Diamond? Okay. How you doing, Diamond?" Barnett says with a laugh. "That's my real name. I heard it in your voice, questioning it," Diamond says, frowning at the wall that separates her from Barnett. "So, which strip club do you work at?" Barnett asks, before hastily adding, "I'm kidding!" ("Is Love Blind?" 00:18:00-00:18:21). Through this interaction Barnett marks Diamond, a Black woman, as culturally distinct and even stigmatized as a stripper before she is ever given a chance to distinguish herself as an individual. It is not Diamond's complexion or the sound of her voice that Barnett uses to racialize her, but rather a cultural marker of difference that allows him to categorize Diamond as a readily understandable stereotype. Diamond is also distinguished by her profession – a dancer in the NBA. "Being a professional dancer, it has led to some ups and downs especially in dating. There have been some guys out there who only want to talk to me for my looks, or only want to talk to me because of what I do in life. I want to be with someone who is going to really get to know me for who I am because honestly my mom didn't name me Diamond for nothing. Like she named me Diamond for a reason" ("Is Love Blind?" 00:23:05-00:23:17). Diamond's description of her dating life outside of *Love is Blind* shows that she is treated in much the same way in the pods as she is in her everyday life, even when physical appearance is removed as a factor.

Barnett's identification of Diamond as a stripper because of her name is not an innocent or random association. Instead, he is drawing upon his own knowledge of what a name means using class, gender, and racial stereotypes. Even without the visual confirmation of Diamond's race, Barnett has categorized her into an existing trope. He connects Diamond to a stereotype of hypersexuality that has historically marked Black women as promiscuous "Jezebels." The Jezebel stereotype has had a storied legacy on reality television, in which shows like *Maury* and *The Bachelor* have repackaged racist historical portrayals of Black female sexuality for modern audiences by depicting Black women as promiscuous and temperamental (Boylorn). It is possible that Barnett was not drawing explicit conclusions about Diamond's race, but the gendered, socioeconomic, and racial implications of names in the United States cannot be separated from one another (Gaddis 480).

Barnett's judgment, whether explicitly racial or not, has impacts on Diamond, who notes the ways her looks and profession define her from without. The show allows the audience the visual "confirmation" that Barnett is denied, seemingly verifying his assumptions about Diamond's role as fulfilling a certain stereotype that requires both racial and gendered attributes. Barnett – whose name is arguably more unusual than Diamond's – is not similarly marked due to his name. He is successfully able to exist as a disembodied voice, fulfilling the promise of the show while making that promise impossible for another contestant. This is the contradiction that allows *Love is Blind* to exist as "reality" in the minds of viewers. The fantasy of literal colorblindness obscures the extent to which Black contestants are repeatedly racialized and marked as bodies rather than individuals. Because the show fulfills its promise for some contestants, those who are left out are naturalized as "impossible," the fact of their race reified as an essential attribute that cannot be transgressed, even in a seemingly colorblind setting.

Frantz Fanon writes of the experience of being marked not as an individual but as the member of a larger Black body. He explains, "I am a slave not to the idea others have of me, but to my appearance" (Fanon 165). Before being distinguished as an individual, Fanon is overdetermined from without as one of a type. Similarly, Diamond is assumed to be a stripper not because of the idea that Barnett has formed of her as a person, but because her name has put the image of a particular body in his mind that is then conveyed to the audience, eradicating her individuality before she is even able to speak. It is not her physical appearance by which Diamond is marked, but the appearance of her perceived cultural difference.

In addition to cultural factors such as names, the contestants' voices are used to imagine a certain type of body. While Jessica puts on a manufactured "sexy" voice that evokes her attractiveness, Black contestants like Lauren are questioned and marked in reference to the sound of their voices. One white male contestant named Jon decides to interrogate Lauren regarding her race. "If I had to guess I'd say you're African American," he says. "What makes you think I'm African American?" she shoots back. "Just your voice," he replies. At this the show cuts to Lauren's talking head, "Who cares what my complexion is? I'm a woman, that's all you need to worry about, that I don't have a penis." Back in the pods Lauren answers Jon flatly, "Actually, no, I'm white." "Are you?" Jon says, explicitly accusing Lauren of attempting to pass. Lauren mouths "no," and writes a note in her notebook, ostensibly crossing Jon from her list of potential suitors ("Is Love Blind?" 00:12:40-00:13:15). In this interaction, we can see how race is created intersubjectively and mediated through the technologies of both the pod and the camera. Both Lauren and Jon, when alone in their respective pods, resemble Fanon's description of habitual behavior that Ahmed calls the "body-at-home." Ahmed goes so far as to argue that the body-at-home is naturally raceless and only becomes identified as raced through intersubjective interactions (153). At the same time, habitual racialized experiences are still present, affecting the ways individuals react to and interact with their environments (Yancy 48).

Existing structures of racial classification and meaning are brought to bear in new ways within the pods, with contestants reenacting fields of power relations in a curated environment that, while unique, is still comprehensible and serviceable as normative whiteness (Guenther 192). Within the charged discursive space that the pods create, the importance of race is at the forefront of many contestants' minds. Jon, for instance, is alerted to the danger of a non-white body passing as an individual by Lauren's voice. Even then, race does not take place solely in Jon's head. He explicitly accuses her, marking Blackness as hypervisible – and hyperaudible – as a stigmatized identity that must be accompanied by confession. To not reveal Lauren's race, Jon seems to say, is for her to hide romantic and social baggage. She must be willing to find love despite her race, never as an equal partner in a romantic relationship. Jon's accusation marks Lauren as Other but also reifies Jon's white identity as neutral. He does not feel compelled to reveal his own race, nor does Lauren ask. Instead, Jon's whiteness is made powerful and meaningful through its hidden and accusatory position.

Philosopher George Yancy offers another illustration of the phenomenon of race marking through nonvisual means. Yancy describes the sounds of car doors locking as an example of an embodied racial experience. As Yancy walks down the street, the clicks of locks that he hears while passing cars act upon his body and sense of self simultaneously. With whites safely locked within the car, he as a non-white body is excluded and sealed off. These clicks mark him as dangerous and foreign, not only physically, but psychically as well. Each click redefines his being by an external action, one that he must interpret and reconcile within his own subjective reality. But the Othering of Black bodies is not a one-directional process. At the moment of the locking the white actors define themselves. Yancy writes, “Those whites in their cars, through the sheer act of locking their doors, perform their white identities as in need of safety, as in need of protection.” Perhaps without even realizing the significance of their actions, the whites that Yancy passes on the street, through one simple action, inscribe racial meanings on both their bodies as well as Yancy’s: “*Click* (prey). *Click* (innocent). *Click* (pure)” (49, italics in original). The click of a locking door sets off a reverberation that is not restricted only to Yancy’s perception, but molds and defines his body, their own white bodies, and the experience of inhabiting racial space in everyday life. These sounds are not meaningful in-and-of themselves, but are assigned meaning by their interpreters, who incorporate sounds into an existing repertoire of experience and context.

As Jon’s questioning indicates, voice is one such sound that has become deeply imbued with racial meaning. Numerous experiments into the ways Americans perceive race audibly have shown that people from across racial backgrounds are able to accurately pick out Black and white speakers based solely on their voice (Thomas and Reaser 57-9). What these studies demonstrate is not the common-sense nature of race, but rather the way the construction of race is not confined solely to the visual field. Unfortunately, the ways that visual, auditory, and other sensorial cues intersect in the construction and identification of race is often overlooked by scholars, despite the ways this multisensory interpretation of the world is used across media to reify race as a naturally occurring and observable phenomena. As Sachi Sekimoto writes, “the continuous re/invention of race capitalizes on our existing and active sensory capacities, making it seem as if our act of perceiving race is a primary experience, while we are actually perceiving the effects of racism” (83). The seemingly objective engagement of human senses with the external world can appear to facilitate an uncensored experience of reality. It is said that seeing is believing, but so is hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting.

Sensorial experience is learned (e.g., Feld), and where Blackness is concerned white Americans are especially attuned to ferreting out racial Otherness through sensing it as a seemingly quantifiable entity, not from a neutral observation of the world, but through the interpretation of socially learned markers.

In his sweeping examination of the sensorial construction of race in the United States, historian Mark Smith argues that anti-Black racism has always been a multisensory regime of power through which whites were trained to detect possible indicators of racial Otherness. In the postbellum United States, Smith argues that the increased potential for the breakdown of racial boundaries meant that visual perception was often not enough to accurately identify one's race. In the following several decades, the "great age of passing," white noses, fingers, tongues, and ears became transformed into delicate instruments of racial identification (Smith 67). With the establishment of seemingly scientific means of racial identification through the one-drop rule and formalized ancestry records, white senses were augmented, but not replaced. Today, race is imagined by many to be a visual, physical indicator of ancestry, but race remains multisensory.

Even those who cannot see continue to identify sight as the primary indicator of race. In a survey of dozens non-sighted individuals, Obasogie finds that even amongst respondents who cannot "see" race, it is imagined to be primarily defined by color. For these non-sighted respondents, race was still a meaningful marker of difference, with one individual even breaking off a potential romantic relationship upon discovering their partner was Black. The ways these respondents reported that they experienced race, of course, was not visual, but through touch (hair and skin texture), sound (voice), and smell. Obasogie concludes, "The very presumption that race is visually self-evident is part of a constitutive social process that produces a visual understanding of race at the same time that it masks its own existence by making race seem obvious" (597). While it is true that the seeming visual certainty of race naturalizes and essentializes race as biological, even the visual markers of race do not have meaning in-and-of themselves. As one respondent noted, nonvisual interpretations help one to answer the question "what would I see if I looked at you?" (Obasogie 597). Fanon reminds us that what one sees when one looks at a racialized body is actually a bevy of meanings far beyond the physical (165). Race is a marker of what can be known about an individual before they are distinguished as a person. Race is "placed before" the individual (Yancy 54).

While the contestants on *Love is Blind* must identify one another non-visually, the audience is not similarly limited. Contestants, while physically hidden from one

another, are visible to the audience, who are free to compare the veracity of contestants' racializing of one another with the physical appearance of the contestants themselves. Due to the multiple ways that certain contestants are marked and stigmatized as non-white, the visual confirmation that viewers receive makes race appear natural and undisguisable. The ability for a non-white individual to pass as a disembodied voice is made to appear impossible by their continued "outing" throughout the course of the show. This is the contradiction through which the show makes race appear tangible and discoverable; even though the races of the contestants are disguised from one another, the audience is privy to the "reality" of race.

To again draw upon the work of Žižek, "what precedes fantasy is not reality but a hole in reality, its point of impossibility filled in with fantasy" (xiv). The "point of impossibility" to which he is referring is the ultimate conclusion at which a belief cannot be maintained. Fantasy is what allows this boundary to be transgressed. In *Love is Blind*, despite – or perhaps because of – the obfuscation of physical attributes, race is still salient. Far from an essential attribute that is carried solely on the skin, it is clear that race is constructed through intersubjective relations that mark certain cultural and auditory factors as meaningful in relation to a pre-existing regime of power relations. This, then, is the point of impossibility that the show must traverse in order to give meaning to its claims of enabling colorblind love *despite* essential differences. The show's goals of allowing contestants to transcend race relies on its contestants' racialized identities, identities that must necessarily be constructed by the show itself. In place of this "hole in reality," the show posits another claim: that certain contestants are always already raceless, while others are simply impossible. As Mark Smith points out, "Blackness, whites had to believe, was always vulnerable to sensory detection" (7). In *Love is Blind*, Blackness is brought into stark relief through the importance that is placed on it as something to be disguised, investigated, and found out.

What allows the show to make the claim that certain bodies are impossible is the ease with which certain contestants can shed their race. The promise of *Love is Blind* is to allow for romantic connection between two individuals – not two raced bodies – and for some, this becomes a reality. The nature of the pods themselves allows for white contestants, who are not culturally or audibly marked as Other, to allow their race to go unnoticed, and thus to stand as neutral or even "raceless." (Garner 4). Lauren describes her relationship with Cameron as if she were able "to meet this man who I feel like fell out of the sky. I feel like he was made in a factory,

like he was specifically put together for me” (“Will You Marry Me?” 00:00:30-00:00:33). Cameron’s race does not “precede” him; it “trails behind” (Ahmed 156). In other words, the pods serve to disguise Cameron’s white identity, allowing him to meet Lauren as an individual, a privilege that Lauren herself is not always afforded. As Sara Ahmed reminds us, the invisibility of whiteness is not a necessary or natural position, it is a process. As such, we can observe the ways the marking of the show’s Black contestants as impossible and hypervisible facilitates the creation of white identity as the only one that can appear as if it “fell out of the sky.”

Where then, does race take place? Traditional Cartesian separation between body and mind would suggest that the perception of race occurs somewhere inside our skulls, as a conscious or unconscious evaluation of an essential physical attribute held by others, but the technology of the pods empowers and obscures white identity in order to eliminate the possibility of Black invisibility. To understand the multisensory and mutable constructions of race we must allow for the possibility that race is a relational way of being-in-the-world that is constructed at the meeting point between subjective experience and the givens of the world (Lee 2). Racialized embodiment is developed and practiced to the point that whiteness, and often the ways whites think of race in general, is pre-conscious, or simply reactive. But this does not mean that it is natural. Instead, race is reconstituted and recreated in everyday interactions that solidify whiteness as the normative condition of existence.

Because white contestants are not forced to confront their own race, the pods allow for the erasure of whiteness. While appearing to disguise race as a physical indicator of identity, the pods in fact facilitate a particular discursive space in which race retains its meaning but must be uncovered through nonvisual means. White contestants are hyperaware of possible indications of racial Otherness, marking non-white contestants through their speech patterns, voice, and cultural indicators of difference. These investigations and interrogations not only exert creative power on the non-white body, they also define the boundaries of the Self as white. It is the hypervisibility of certain contestants as non-white bodies that allows whiteness assume the position of the normative, default identity. Thus, the show transforms whiteness into a prerequisite for romance, dating, and individuality. White contestants are not questioned; they do the questioning. They do not admit race; they seek it out. Race is an essential tool of invisibility, itself allowing for the possibility that certain contestants may be allowed to fulfill the show’s promise of

individuals distinct from their bodies. Ahmed argues that in normative white spaces white bodies “extend” their shape (158). Within the manufactured physical spaces of the pods the whiteness of contestants extends to allow certain contestants to act as individuals without bodies. For non-white contestants on the other hand, it is this very invisibility that makes non-white identity appear pathological.

While it may appear that Jon instigated the interaction regarding Lauren’s race and that had he simply been more tactful – like Cameron for example – Lauren’s Blackness would have gone unmarked, unnoticed, and able to pass as invisible, this conclusion simply reveals the fantasy of *Love is Blind*. The show uses the hypervisibility of Black contestants to make possible white contestants’ racial transcendence, pathologizing Blackness to the extent that its erasure appears impossible. The ongoing investigation of race that exists throughout the show is made to appear contrary the goals of *Love is Blind*, and to only arise as an “issue” due to the improprieties of contestants. Had Lauren only disguised her voice like Jessica, had Diamond’s name and profession not marked her as problematic, had Jon and Barnett simply showed more tact in their questioning, perhaps, the show seems to suggest, Black contestants would have been able to achieve “racelessness” as well. But it is important to remember that no interaction on the show exists in isolation. Each and every date, conversation, and relationship is edited into a singular narrative, one that imparts certain knowledge to audiences even while claiming to approach reality. Mark’s depiction as Mexican despite his lack of stereotypically Mexican attributes is evidence of this fact. Although there are no explicit visual or auditory markers of Mark’s Mexican identity, the show precludes the possibility of his “passing” as raceless in the eyes of the viewing audience by foregrounding his own statements about his background. Through its selective application of colorblindness, the show itself positions race as a natural and essentialized aspect of identity, even as it imparts racial information to the audience.

The physical structure of the pods – letting in sound but nothing else – appears to show race to be uncoverable even in nonvisual interactions. Certain contestants seem to be always already racial and hypervisible. But the eye of the camera gives audiences the ability to glimpse behind the scenes, facilitating the visual construction of the contestants’ raced bodies alongside the narrative construction of contestants’ races. The discovery and investigation of race that takes place in the pods is confirmed to be accurate through the audience’s simultaneous construction of the race of various contestants. The show thus acts as a medium between the

contestants' interactions and the audience's gaze to entrench race as an essential attribute only possessed by certain contestants. As Obasogie discovered in his investigation of non-sighted individuals, the imagined existence of visual confirmation of race serves to make racial identity appear an essential and natural condition of human beings. *Love is Blind* accomplishes two constructions simultaneously; it seemingly confirms the ability of whites to discover race in even nonvisual interactions and reifies as natural the physical appearance of race through its use as evidence to verify nonvisual indicators.

Conclusion: Fantasy and Nightmare

As a necessary component of its claim to "the real," *Love is Blind* structures the very reality it seeks to portray, one in which race is tangible and identifiable. This is no small claim. As incisively depicted in the 2018 film *Sorry to Bother You*, the insistence on positive racial identification in fact papers over the terrifying possibility of racial incomprehensibility in a society structured by white supremacy. In the film, the protagonist, a Black telemarketer played by Lakeith Stanfield, finds himself struggling to make sales over the phone until his coworker, played by Danny Glover, lets him in on the secret of success. "Use your white voice," Glover says with a grin. Suddenly, Stanfield finds himself able to outsell anyone else in the company, even his white coworkers, and is quickly promoted to upper management. Stanfield's "white voice" is almost supernatural in its ability to make sales to white customers. His success demonstrates not only the multisensory construction of race, but also precisely articulates what for whites is the nightmare scenario of Black invisibility. This scenario seems to suggest that when Blacks can pass as raceless, they may not only achieve some semblance of equality, but also that they may displace whites from the top of the racial hierarchy. As we can see in Smith's work on slavery and the senses and rearticulated in contemporary media, the (mis)identification of Blackness has always had dire consequences in the psychological imagining of white people.

This is the nightmare that *Love is Blind* seeks to disguise and erase. The physical appearance of the contestants is hidden from one another but is not and never can be hidden from the audience. Without the seemingly natural physical evidence of race, the comprehensibility of the show's message of colorblindness loses all meaningful impact; race and its identification would remain in the forefront of viewers' minds. *Love is Blind* erases this uncertainty for its viewers. The audience

is thus able to invest in the idea of “colorblind” relationships without ever having to experience or witness them. The white audience can only imagine Jon’s questioning of Lauren’s race to be shallow because of the insider information that the show allows into Lauren’s appearance. Had Lauren’s complexion and its naturalized racial meaning been invisible to the audience, Jon’s questioning would have taken on an entirely different meaning. Many audience members would likely have encountered the same questions about Lauren’s race. This is the true paradox at the heart of the show; it is only through the knowledge of race and its seemingly natural visual accompaniment that race can be meaningfully said to be erased. The fantasy of *Love is Blind* disguises the inherent contradiction that race can only come to be understood as unimportant through the complete subjugation of non-white bodies to the (normatively white) media gaze. The audience does not experience the possibility of Black invisibility because the dual technologies of the camera and the pods render Black contestants hypervisible, identifiable, and nonthreatening. This erasure allows for the simultaneous conclusion that some bodies can effectively transcend race. Those who are marked as normal, neutral, and raceless in the pods are white, and whiteness comes to stand as a prerequisite for romantic relationships. Non-white contestants are never able to achieve this ideal, remaining ontologically fixed bodies, overdetermined from without by both the probing questions of white contestants and the gaze of normatively white viewers.

Love is Blind may be unique in its presentation, but the show’s attempt to portray a stable social reality is nothing new. Like many reality shows, it does work by drawing upon existing racial and gendered hierarchies and stereotypes and making them appear foundational. The show repurposes pre-existing social relationships to create fabricated but meaningful scenarios that reinscribe racial difference and white superiority. Recognizing this racial difference is meant to demonstrate the success or failure of contestants’ commitment to colorblindness, but in doing so, *Love is Blind* creates both the impossibility of Black invisibility in the pods, and, more importantly, essentialized race in the “real” world. What is in actuality a small sample size in a carefully curated environment comes to stand for much larger themes of interracial romance and visibility in the United States as a whole. Across reality television, racialized, gendered, and classed tropes are utilized for dramatic effect and are disguised as the essential attributes of contestants, rather than the constructions of the very media portraying them. This foundational essentialism is what allows reality television to make cultural claims that extend far beyond its runtime. When reality is manipulated, it is those very

things that are taken for granted that come to appear more stable, natural, and essential than ever before. These constructions are never fully settled; the constant reinvention of reality television into new formats such as *Love is Blind* is necessary because essentialism is inadequate in crafting stable identities. The excess of meaning that cannot be contained by simple stereotypes or tropes allows for both the reading of “hidden transcripts” as well as the necessity of future reality shows, further fantasies, that create and explain new and changing social relationships in the United States and the world. It is up to future scholars and audiences alike to identify and examine the implications of these new fantasies, and to recognize the powerful depiction of “the real” that reality television both claims and creates.

Works Cited

- Acham, Christine. *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and The Struggle for Black Power*. U Minnesota P, 2004.
- Ahmed, S. “A phenomenology of whiteness.” *Feminist Theory*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2007, pp. 149-68.
- Alcoff, Linda Martín. “Latino/As, Asian Americans, and the Black-White binary.” *The Journal of Ethics*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2003, pp. 5-27.
- Boylorn, Robin M. “As seen on TV: An autoethnographic reflection on race and reality television.” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2008, pp. 413-33.
- Dyer, Richard. *White: Essays on Race and Culture*. Routledge, 1988.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Grove Press, 1952.
- Feld, Steven. “A rainforest acoustemology.” *The Auditory Culture Reader*, edited by Micheal Bull and Les Back, Berg, 2003.
- Gaddis, S. “How Black are Lakisha and Jamal? Racial perceptions from names used in correspondence audit studies.” *Sociological Science*, vol. 4, 2017, pp. 469-89.
- Garner, Steve. *Whiteness: An Introduction*. Routledge, 2007.
- Goepfert, Ava. *Colorblind Love and Black Love on Purpose: Black Feminist Thought, Casting, and the Invisibility/Visibility of Black Womanhood on Television*. Colorado State University. Master’s thesis, Colorado State University, 2018.

- Guenther, Lisa. "Seeing like a cop: A critical phenomenology of whiteness as property." *Race as Phenomena: Between Phenomenology and Philosophy of Race*, edited by Emily S. Lee, Rowman & Littlefield, 2019.
- Hall, Stuart. *Stuart Hall: Race the Floating Signifier (1997)*, uploaded by Thepostarchive, 10 Feb. 2021, www.youtu.be/PodKki9g2Pw.
- Holmes, Su and Deborah Jermyn. *Understanding Reality Television*. Routledge, 2004.
- hooks, bell. "Representing whiteness in the Black imagination." *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*, edited by Ruth Frankenberg, Duke UP, 1997.
- "Is Love Blind?" *Love is Blind*. Created by Chris Coelen, season 1, episode 1, Kinetic Content, 2020.
- Lee, Emily S. "Introduction." *Living Alterities: Phenomenology, Embodiment, and Race*, edited by Emily S. Lee, SUNY Press, 2014.
- Moorti, Sujata, and Karen Ross. "Reality television: Fairy tale or feminist nightmare?" *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2004, pp. 203-31.
- Obasogie, Osagie K. "Do blind people see race? Social, legal, and theoretical considerations." *Law & Society Review*, vol. 44, no. 3-4, 2010, pp. 585-616.
- Penn, Charli. "Lauren from 'Love Is Blind' answers the questions every Black woman is asking." *Essence*, 27 Feb. 2020, www.essence.com/love/lauren-speed-love-is-blind-interracial-dating.
- Roediger, David R. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. Verso, 1999.
- Rose, Randall L., and Stacey Wood. "Paradox and the consumption of authenticity through reality television." *Journal of Consumer Research*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2005, pp. 284-96.
- Sekimoto, Sachi. "Race and the senses: Toward articulating the sensory apparatus of race." *Critical Philosophy of Race*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2018, pp. 82-100.
- Smith, Mark Michael. *How Race Is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses*. U North Carolina P, 2006.
- Sorry to Bother You*. Directed by Boots Riley. Significant Productions. 2018.
- Thomas, Erik R., and Jeffrey Reaser. "Delimiting perceptual cues used for the ethnic labeling of African American and European American voices." *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2004, pp. 54-87.
- Weisenstein, Kara. "Despite its progressive facade, 'Love Is Blind' still fixates on traditional ideas of marriage." *Mic*, 7 Mar. 2020, www.mic.com/p/despite-its-

[progressive-facade-love-is-blind-still-fixates-on-traditional-ideas-of-marriage-22601280](#).

“Will You Marry Me?” *Love is Blind*. Created by Chris Coelen, season 1, episode 2, Kinetic Content, 2020.

Yancy, George. “White gazes: What it feels like to be an essence.” *Living Alterities: Phenomenology, Embodiment, and Race*, edited by Emily S. Lee, SUNY Press, 2014, pp. 43-64.

Žižek, Slavoj. *The Plague of Fantasies*. Verso, 1997.

We Ate Them to Destroy Them: Carnivores, Cannibals, and the Critique of Mass-Market Feminism in the Age of Consumption

EMILY NASER-HALL

“I thought it was all because of eating meat. [...] I thought all I had to do was stop eating meat and then the faces wouldn’t come back. But it didn’t work. [...] The face is inside my stomach. It rose up from inside my stomach. [...] But I’m not scared anymore. There’s nothing to be scared of now.”
-Yeong-hye speaking in *The Vegetarian* (Kang 122)

As of October 2020, the Instagram account *Celebrities Eating Things* has over 160,000 followers. This inexplicably popular account posts photographs, as the name indicates, of celebrities in the act of eating and allows followers the opportunity to rate the photos, although the criteria for these ratings remain elusive. Of the account’s more than 160 posts, a majority depict women. Thanks to *Celebrities Eating Things*, anyone with an internet connection can view pictures of Kourtney Kardashian eating a salad, Susan Sarandon opening a packet of mustard with her teeth, or Michelle Obama devouring a taco. Why do we care about what and how women eat, and why do we feel compelled to brand them with a quantified rating to communicate whether we approve of their eating habits? Given that human food practices exist in relation to material, cultural, and gender-based considerations, we can conclude that the rituals and structures we establish around eating say something about us as individuals and as a society. Acts of consumption, the choices we make about what to eat and how much to eat, enable us to construct an identity. Furthermore, in a late capitalist marketplace economy in which consumers enjoy seemingly unlimited choices without socially articulated

EMILY NASER-HALL is a third-year PhD student in the Department of English at the University of Kentucky. She earned a BA from Tulane University, a Juris Doctor from DePaul College of Law, an LL.M. in National Security Law from Georgetown, and an MA in Literature from Northwestern University. She practiced immigration and international law, and published articles on refugee policy and natural disaster preparedness in national law review journals. Her research interests include the post-1945 American literature, feminist narratives, and affect studies. She can be reached at Emily.Naser-Hall@uky.edu.

Popular Culture Studies Journal
Volume 9, Issue 2, ©2021

restrictions,¹ our consumptive choices take on an additional hue, as choices made from an economy of infinite possibilities become more significant than those made under duress or restrictions. Late capitalism depends on consumerism, so we can refer to the marketplace in which we function as an “economy of consumption.” Food practices, as literal consumption, form a particularly salient point of entry for critiquing the economy of consumption. After all, we are what we eat. But do we really enjoy unhindered choice in the economy of consumption? Are we free to consume whatever we desire, whenever we want, in as large or small of quantities as we like? The sheer existence of *Celebrities Eating Things* tells us no. As this befuddling Instagram account demonstrates, women in particular fall victim to social critique and castigation if their consumptive choices do not align with socially prescribed culinary or dietary practices. Women who consume always risk, with every decision to consume, being branded as gluttonous monsters. Han Kang’s 2016 novel *The Vegetarian*, Alexandra Kleeman’s 2017 short story “Lobster Dinner,” and Julia Ducournau’s 2016 film *Raw* expose the myth of the free consumptive choice narrative by demonstrating how women who participate in the postcapitalist economy of consumption are rendered transgressive, abject, and monstrous.

The question of the female body in the neoliberal era of choice, postcapitalism, and consumption has been widely debated within the field of gender and women’s studies, with scholars and cultural critics such as Susan Bordo, Melissa A. Goldthwaite, and Andi Zeisler resisting mainstream “pop” feminism’s emphasis on the body as a site for autonomous self-construction free from patriarchal control. However, such critiques have not adequately addressed the ways in which fictionalized accounts of female struggles with food highlight the abjection that underlies the contemporary woman’s relationship with her biological body. This work unravels the tidy postfeminist narrative of gender equality as evidenced through free consumptive choice and reveals its lurking tendency to convert consuming women, even women who consume “properly”, into monsters. By dismantling this alignment between consumption and equality, we can more clearly

¹ Late capitalism or postindustrial capitalism forms Ernest Mandel’s third stage of capitalist expansion, following market capitalism and monopoly/imperialist capitalism. Upon the entry into late capitalism, areas of society that were previously unaffected by the logic of the market, such as media, the arts, education, and critical theory, became subject to laws of capitalism and the globalization of consumerism. Late capitalist subjects become alienated from those aspects of life that they might consider authentic or real because they are engaging with symbolic representations such as commodities, or simulated experiences rather than real, tangible objects.

understand the social and economic pressures, or, more accurately, traumas that haunt women in the so-called postfeminist age. Representations of meat consumption in modern literature and film, with special attention to the role of female carnivorousness and cannibalism, in *The Vegetarian*, “Lobster Dinner,” and *Raw* reveal how grotesque tales of meat eating critique the postfeminist narrative of female choice and economic consumption. The connections between meat consumption and expressions of female sexuality in these works, juxtaposed against postfeminist assumptions concerning choice and sexual agency as the hallmarks of gender equality, demonstrate how these works unveil such narratives as delusory presumptions that ignore the material and societal constraints on female consumption. Kang, Kleeman, and Ducournau employ hyperbolically gory accounts of women devouring meat products, whether animal or human, as an allegory for female carnality and sexual agency to excoriate mainstream, neoliberal, and postcapitalist assumptions concerning female embodiment and the freedom of commercial choice. By closely examining the relationship between meat consumption, sexual appetites, and consumerism, we can examine the strategies through which contemporary accounts of female appetites critique the illusion of choice that characterizes consumer feminism.

The Act of Consumption in the Postfeminist Era

The term postfeminism initially arose in the 1980s to describe in general terms the theoretical and popular backlash against the second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s (Bolotin 29; Jones 314).² I situate these texts within the broad framework of contemporary postfeminist discourse, either as representational of postfeminist concepts and values or as critical of the discourse’s assumptions. In all these works, female characters struggle with the challenges and proposed solutions with which postfeminism occupies itself, particularly the deconstruction of second-wave

² Susan Bolotin is credited with introducing the term “postfeminism” into popular discourse. In her 1982 *New York Times Magazine* article “Voices from the Post-Feminist Generation,” she interviewed women who agreed broadly with the goals of feminism, but did not identify as feminists, whom they perceived as angry, bitter, and man-hating. Susan Faludi’s 1991 book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, substantiates this popular interpretation of the stereotypical second-wave feminist. Heavy media attention on such cultural narratives as the “man shortage,” the “infertility epidemic,” and “female burnout” forwarded the notion that women in the 1980s and 1990s were in fact significantly less happy now that they had supposedly won the fight for equality (Faludi xv).

feminism's reliance on binary thinking, gynocentrism, and essentialism and their vision of sexuality (Hall and Rodriguez 882).³ However, a complication arises with the very term postfeminism. Postfeminism has become something of a buzzword among contemporary literary and cultural critics who concern themselves with questions of femaleness and femininity, or the current state of gender politics. Among the numerous critics who use the term, either to describe their particular breed of theory or to dismantle the positions and assumptions of other critics whom they classify as postfeminist, the term postfeminism still lacks a comprehensive, universal definition.

We must first explore how the broad term postfeminism applies to the three texts at hand. Postfeminism as used in this paper falls into the "death of feminism" camp, which assumes that feminism, which means the political and legal objectives of the second wave, has been achieved (Hall and Rodriguez 879; Bacchi 37; Aronson 17).⁴ It considers the advances made in the areas of reproductive rights, the right to work, and the attitudes toward gender and sexuality as clear indicators that second-wave feminism's political goals have been met (Epstein 1). As a result, contemporary iterations of feminism no longer need the same overtly political focus that dominated the second wave (Hall and Rodriguez 884).⁵ Women can generally exercise their right to determine their own reproductive destiny; they can work

³ One interpretation of postfeminism as a discourse emerges from women of color feminists, transnational feminists, and postcolonial/decolonial feminists. These emerging communities critiqued first- and second-wave feminism for its exclusive focus on white, middle-class women and racist or exclusionary politics. Claudia Wallis, Urvashi Vaid, Naomi Wolf, Gloria Steinem, bell hooks, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak specifically note WOC feminists' rejection of second-wave feminism and their positioning of their objectives within a postfeminist or fourth-wave feminist framework.

⁴ Indeed, the prefix "post" to the term "feminism" implies a certain closure of an obsolete or completed project. Angelia McRobbie argues that this "post" undermines second-wave feminism's achievements by creating the illusion that such equality has been fully achieved and that the new generation of feminists could now turn their attention to other, often less political, concerns. Other scholars, including Tanya Ann Kennedy, Rosalind Gill, Patricia R. Boyd, Mary Douglas Vavrus, Imelda Whelehan, and Katherine McClintock question the political objective of affixing "post" to "feminism" — along with other similarly dismissive terms as "postracial" and "postcolonial" — to brand feminism as always-already successful and therefore unnecessary.

⁵ For example, in their paper "I Am Not a Feminist, But..." Joan K. Buschman and Silvo Lenart identified one-third of their interviewed women as "postfeminist" because they believed that the second-wave women's movement had virtually eliminated discrimination, thereby negating the need for further collective action. Instead, women should be charged with individual efforts to promote their own professional and personal advancement.

outside the home for relatively equal pay; and they can marry the partner of their choosing regardless of gender identity. As Phoebe, arguably the most feminist of the group, complains in a late season of *Friends*, “We can drive, we can vote, we can work. What more do these broads want?” (“Soap Opera” 00:35-00:39).

What does postfeminism have left to fight for? Postfeminism replaces the battlefields of law and politics with the social and cultural fronts (McRobbie 256; Banet-Weiser 152).⁶ As a doctrine, it views choice as the hallmark of both gender equality and feminism’s success (Projansky 67; Isbister 6; Tasker and Negra 2). While some critics like Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra focus on freedom of choice with respect to work, relationships, and parenting, a powerful undercurrent within this branch of postfeminism links this emphasis on choice instead with consumer freedom. Georgina Isbister notes that popular postfeminism utilizes “images of consumer success (the purchase of high fashion and beauty) as a means of achieving transformation into empowered femininity,” which has become “the new idealized image of female subjectivity” (8). We can observe this emphasis on choice in myriad diverse arenas, from the rhetorical framing of the right to have an abortion as the “right to choose” to the 2017 CoverGirl Cosmetics shift from its famous “Easy, Breezy, Beautiful” tagline to the new slogan, “I Am What I Make Up” to perhaps the most egregiously commodity-driven postfeminist artifact, HBO’s *Sex and the City*.⁷ Given their equal participation in the American political economy, women in the United States can now turn their attention to enjoying full participation in the cultural economy. The choices that a woman makes in the cultural realm, from her clothes to her taste in music, operate as a form of self-

⁶ This connection between feminism (post or otherwise) and popular culture forms its own body of scholarship within feminist theory and cultural criticism. Andi Zeisler’s comprehensive study *Feminism and Popular Culture* and Jack Halberstam’s *Gaga Feminism* provide broad overviews of both the representations of feminism within popular culture and feminism’s uses of popular culture as a means of disseminating its agenda. More specific studies of this intersection include Anna Lebovic’s “Refashioning Feminism: American *Vogue*, the Second Wave, and the Transition to Postfeminism”; Jason Middleton’s “A Rather Crude Feminism: Amy Schumer, Postfeminism, and Abjection”; Stephanie Patrick’s “Breaking Free? Domesticity, Entrapment, and Postfeminism in *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*”; and Katherine Bell’s “Obvie, We’re the Ladies!: Postfeminism, Privilege, and HBO’s *Newest Girls*.”

⁷ It is nearly impossible to engage in any kind of comprehensive research on postfeminism without running into at least one article on Carrie Bradshaw and her Imelda Marcos-style shoe obsession. Georgina Isbister’s “*Sex and the City*: A Postfeminist Fairy Tale”; Angela McRobbie’s “Postfeminism and Popular Culture”; Gigi McNamara’s “Coveting Sarah Parker: When Postfeminism Meets Commodity Fetishism”; and Jane Gerhard’s “*Sex and the City*, Feminist Media Studies” form just a small portion of the critique of *SATC*’s rampant consumerism.

expression. Through exercising their right to free choice, women can dress how they want, wear as much or as little makeup as they desire, have plastic surgery, work in any field they choose, get married and have children or eschew the marriage/family paradigm. Every one of these choices says something about the woman's essential nature, something about *who she is*. Freed from the political and legal confines that restrained earlier generations of women and against which second-wave feminists fought, the postfeminist woman can exercise her liberation through these choices.

Given this overlap between contemporary postfeminist narratives and the idea of choice as the hallmark of gender equality, we can see how postfeminism has come to represent a uniquely consumerist discourse. To distinguish this particular branch of postfeminism from its broad mother discourse of "death of feminism" postfeminism and separate it entirely from the field of postfeminism that arises from women of color and post/decolonial feminists, I refer to this consumer capitalist "feminism as free market choice" narrative as "consumer feminism." This conceptualization of feminism as a commodified discourse forms one of the defining features of consumer feminism as it manifests in popular culture. Amanda M. Gengler, for example, notes the inclusion of such feminist buzzwords as "empowerment," "self-determination," and "independence" in between articles on makeup application and instructions for interacting with boys in *Seventeen* (68).⁸ In her 2017 book *We Were Feminists Once*, Andi Zeisler analyzes the mass-market commodification of feminist language in popular culture. In what she coins as "marketplace feminism", Zeisler tracks the inclusion of feminist rhetoric and terminology in such disparate places as *Cosmopolitan*, Beyoncé concerts, and advertisements for underwear, energy drinks, and cleaning products. Such a proliferation of feminist terms and pro-woman ideology in popular culture and the mass market has certainly broadened feminism's audience. Zeisler states, "It's undeniable that media and pop-culture representations – even surface-skimming

⁸ Gengler joins other cultural critics in assessing the instances of "postfeminism" or the intersection of feminism and commodification or consumerism in popular culture. For example, Elane J. Hall and Marnie Salupo Rodriguez engage in content analysis of 90 popular and research sources to develop a comprehensive definition of the postfeminist argument in their study "The Myth of Postfeminism." Rosalind Gill and Ana Sofia Elias examine commodity fetishism in the "Love Your Body" discourse in "'Awaken Your Incredible': Love Your Body Discourses and Postfeminist Contradictions." Furthermore, Sarah Projansky considers representations of postfeminist girlhood on teen magazine covers in "Mass Magazine Cover Girls: Some Reflections in Postfeminist Girls and Postfeminism's Daughters."

ones – of social movements can change attitudes” (xv). She cites organizations like Know Your IX, Hollaback!, Girls Who Code, and SPARK, whose existence she attributes to depictions of feminism in pop culture and the media and their subsequent influence on grassroots activism and organizing.

However, many feminist theorists question the advisability of framing the struggle for gender equality through capitalist or consumerist terms. Nikki Lisa Cole and Alison Dahl Crossley argue, “[S]ince consuming is a singular act of identity formation and expression, we question whether women’s empowerment through consumption at the individual level undermines the possibility of gendered social change at the collective level” (2).⁹ They note the historical connection between women’s independence in the United States and discourses of wealth accumulation, centering their critique of this connection on the realization that the accumulation of wealth and consumer goods remains firmly tied to the dominance of patriarchal hierarchy. Advertising cloaks its purely profit-driven motivations in the language of feminine independence, hailing women as strong, self-sufficient, economically independent, and sexually driven. Campaigns such as the CoverGirl slogan promote the connection between a woman’s ability to choose her consumer products and her creation of her own identity. However, consumer feminism does not indicate any progress of actual feminist political or social objectives because these forms of feminism are less about women’s rights and more about the perpetuation of the deeply patriarchal system of capitalism.¹⁰

⁹ Consumer feminism functions as a perpetuation of the status quo, whether that status quo concerns exploitative capitalist economies, political patriarchies, or violent racial regimes. Works such as Tanya Ann Kennedy’s *Historicizing Post-Discourses: Postfeminism and Postracialism in United States Culture*, Jess Butler’s “For White Girls Only? Postfeminism and the Politics of Inclusion,” and Sarah Banet-Weiser’s “What’s Your Flava? Race and Postfeminism in Media Culture” investigate the ways in which postfeminist discourses reproduce gender, race, and sexual inequalities.

¹⁰ The inherently patriarchal nature of capitalism forms one of the foundational themes of second-wave socialist and Marxist feminism. For example, Nancy Fraser analyzes the ways in which the “political” and the “economic” spheres of life fall into the public, and therefore male, realm, while “domestic” or “personal” spheres fall under women’s domain. The relegation of domestic institutions to female control depoliticizes, and therefore devalues, those concerns. Kathi Weeks supports Fraser’s conclusion, arguing that the logic of separate spheres “posits a radical difference between men’s work and women’s work” that implies that women’s labor matters less than men’s (238). Crucially, Zillah Eisenstein uses the phrase “capitalist patriarchy” to describe “the mutually reinforcing dialectical relationship between capitalist class structure and hierarchical sexual structuring” (5).

The discipline of feminist food studies enables us to connect the broad concern of consumer feminism with metaphorical consumption with physical and material questions of literal consumption, particularly as those forms of consumption overlap thematically in contemporary literature and film. Investigating the relationship between women and food, with particular attention to the material conditions and cultural messaging about food and eating, can inform a broader consideration of the consumptive habits or pressures under which women operate. Food studies scholar Sherrie A. Inness notes the growing attention among feminist scholars to food-related messages about embodiment, culture, economics, and gender roles that women receive and the forces that shape or craft those messages. Inness claims, "Eating is an activity that *always* has cultural reverberations. Food is *never* a simple matter of sustenance. How we eat, what we eat, and who prepares and serves our meals are all issues that shape society" (5). Deborah Lupton echoes this conclusion: "Conceiving of the experience of embodiment as socially produced and of food and eating practices as always mediated through social relations, requires a sophisticated awareness of the ways in which society, subjectivity, and the body are interrelated" (6). From Alexis Baker's study of representations of nourishment and female bodies in Holocaust art to Rebecca Ingall's critique of the controversial diet book *Skinny Bitch* through the lens of the Bakhtinian grotesque, feminist scholars have engaged with cultural reverberations underlying the relationship between women and food consumption and developed a rich body of scholarship that greatly expands the early feminist considerations of women and food which tended to focus solely on eating disorders.

We can view texts that depict women eating or consuming as part of the overarching project of analyzing the social forces that shape and control the female body. However, texts such as these critique this narrative by demonstrating how women do not, in fact, possess total freedom of consumptive choice, or how this supposed freedom remains fraught with gendered tensions. When Yeong-hye gives up meat in *The Vegetarian* or Justine sneaks away to a roadside diner to eat kebabs in secret in *Raw*, they reveal the limitations of postfeminist assumptions about free, unlimited choice by eliciting horrified reactions to their consumptive choices. As these texts show, women such as Yeong-hye, Anne-Marie, and Justine do not possess total consumptive freedom and therefore lack the entirely free ability to construct their own bodies, as postfeminist scholarship would have them believe. Instead, the texts expose how women may only exercise freedom of consumptive choice within a socially established set of limitations. When Yeong-hye, Anne-

Marie, and Justine choose to consume food and thereby construct their bodies in a way that transgresses these limitations, society rejects them, castigates them, and inscribes their bodies as abject and monstrous.

A Body from Which All Desire Had Been Eliminated – Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian*

Han Kang’s 2015 novel *The Vegetarian* begins with the following observation by protagonist Yeong-hye’s husband, Mr. Cheong: “Before my wife turned vegetarian, I’d always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way” (Kang 11). Yeong-hye had always been an entirely satisfactory wife; she prepared meals, spoke very little, and never embarrassed her husband. One night, however, she has a dream, the description of which is the only instance of interiority that we receive from Yeong-hye. In a narrative told in turn by Mr. Cheong, Yeong-hye’s brother-in-law, and her sister, In-hye, we learn about how Yeong-hye’s decision to stop consuming meat and animal byproducts alienates her from her husband, drives her family to unspeakable levels of sexual and physical violence, and ultimately results in her involuntary commitment to a mental institution. Given that we only receive glimpses at Yeong-hye’s own perspective throughout the novel’s first section, we must instead filter depictions of her through the traditional patriarchal and societal forces represented by her husband, brother-in-law, and sister. Each section of the narrative depicts the speaker’s struggle to comprehend Yeong-hye’s vegetarianism, reveals Yeong-hye’s descent into a grotesque and fantastic form of abjection, and ends with a scene that depicts some form of forced penetration, whether by force feeding or rape. What initially appears to be a simple dietary decision, something that postfeminist criticism would claim Yeong-hye is free to make as an equal consumer, becomes the impetus for Yeong-hye’s violent expulsion from her family and society.

While each of the novel’s three sections details the family’s difficulty in comprehending Yeong-hye’s vegetarianism, chronicles Yeong-hye’s increasing monstrosity, and describes the various ways in which Yeong-hye is expelled from mainstream society, the first section narrated by Mr. Cheong offers the most probing critique of the postfeminist narrative concerning freedom of consumptive choice. Because we learn of Yeong-hye’s decision to become a vegetarian and her subsequent transformation into an abject plant-like monster from Mr. Cheong, whose voice functions as the mouthpiece for mainstream society, the first section

provides the most salient means of assessing the societal reaction to a woman's decision not to participate in the consumptive economy. We see through Mr. Cheong how transgressive such a decision is.

Prior to choosing a vegan lifestyle, Yeong-hye displays few transgressive impulses. Mr. Cheong does note in his narrative that Yeong-hye exhibits one unusual tendency: she refuses to wear a bra. He describes the first time he discovered her penchant for going braless when he responded with arousal and excitement at the sexual possibilities Yeong-hye might have been communicating: "In order to judge whether she might possibly have been trying to tell me something, I spent a minute or two looking at her through new eyes, studying her attitude. The outcome of my studies was that she wasn't, in fact, trying to send any kind of signal" (Kang 13). Mr. Cheong immediately assumes that Yeong-hye's decision not to wear a bra on a date must indicate her sexual availability to him. He finds that Yeong-hye opts not to wear a bra purely for reasons of comfort; whether she wears a bra has nothing to do with him or her sexual desire for anyone. When Yeong-hye explains how uncomfortable and constricting she finds wearing a bra, Mr. Cheong dismisses her, claiming, "[C]onsidering I knew for a fact that there were plenty of other women who, unlike her, didn't have anything particularly against bras, I began to have my doubts about this hypersensitivity of hers" (Kang 14). On other instances, Yeong-hye removes her clothes and performs daily activities topless for no reason other than being comfortable or responding to a heat wave. Mr. Cheong cannot comprehend that Yeong-hye might be making a fashion decision solely for her own comfort, without any intention of using her free consumptive choice to communicate her sexual availability to men. This "unusual" tendency of Yeong-hye's provides an early indication of how her husband, her family, and South Korean society as a whole will come to view her vegetarianism. Within a postcapitalist marketplace in which Yeong-hye possesses the freedom to purchase any kind of lingerie she chooses, Yeong-hye instead chooses not to purchase any at all.

Mr. Cheong's bewilderment returns when he awakens one morning to find Yeong-hye throwing away all their meat products. When he asks Yeong-hye what she is doing, she simply responds with a line that she repeatedly offers as her only justification: "I had a dream" (Kang 16). Mr. Cheong responds to Yeong-hye's meat purge with a violence that far exceeds the needs of the moment:

I hurriedly stumbled my way through the plastic bags and grabbed her wrist, trying to pry the bags from her grip. Stunned to find her fiercely tugging

back against me, I almost faltered for a moment, but my outrage soon gave me the strength to overpower her. Massaging her reddened wrist, she spoke in the same ordinary, calm tone of voice she'd used before. "I had a dream."
(Kang 18)

His anger at Yeong-hye's rebellion against the household and societal norm of eating meat intermingles with his anger at what he perceives to be his wife's waste: "So all because of some ridiculous dream, you've gone and chucked out all the meat? Worth *how* much?" (Kang 20, emphasis in original). Yeong-hye's mother reacts similarly when Yeong-hye vomits up black goat that her mother tricked her into eating: "You, Yeong-hye, do you know how much this is worth? Would you throw it away? Money scraped together with your own parents' sweat and blood!" (Kang 55). Yeong-hye's vegetarianism therefore represents not only an incomprehensible act of self-determination outside traditional dietary structures, but also signifies a revolt against the postcapitalist consumptive economy. This act of beginning to construct the self outside the confines of this economy startles and horrifies Mr. Cheong: "How on earth could she be so self-centered? I stared at her lowered eyes, her expression of cool self-possession. The very idea that there should be this other side to her, one where she selfishly did as she pleased, was astonishing" (Kang 21).

Mr. Cheong's violent reaction seems grossly out of proportion with the circumstances. To him, Yeong-hye throwing away the family's meat signifies more than just a dietary choice; this one decision indicates a growing her transgression, her choice not to participate in mainstream conceptions of female consumption. Mr. Cheong responds with anger, violence, and a declaration that his wife is "insane" and has "completely lost it" (Kang 19) because Yeong-hye is now unwilling to eat the same dishes that she and her family have been eating for years. As his wife's vegetarianism persists, he wrestles with what he thinks is a ludicrous decision to refuse to consume a common food product for no reason other than a dream. He claims, "If it had all been just another instance of a woman's giving up meat in order to lose weight then there would have been no need to worry" (Kang 23). Others express similar attitudes about the unnaturalness of abstaining from eating meat or the socially acceptable reasons for vegetarianism:

As far as I was concerned, the only reasonable grounds for altering one's eating habits were the desire to lose weight, an attempt to alleviate certain physical ailments, being possessed by an evil spirit, or having your sleep disturbed by indigestion...Meat eating is a fundamental human instinct,

which means vegetarianism goes against human nature, right? It just isn't natural...People who arbitrarily cut out this or that food, even though they're not actually allergic to anything – that's what I would call narrow-minded. (Kang 22, 31)

Yeong-hye gives up meat not to lose weight or expel a demon, but for an unstated personal reason that Mr. Cheong cannot understand. As such, he construes her vegetarianism as “nothing but sheer obstinacy for a wife to go against her husband's wishes as mine had done” and worries that “there was something more going on here than a simple case of vegetarianism” (Kang 22, 23).

Mr. Cheong and Yeong-hye's family reject Yeong-hye's fear that participating in the consumptive economy of meat eating will turn her into a monster. Faced with a transgressive woman who, when faced with all the choices in the world and the supposed freedom to make any choice she wants decides not to consume at all, Mr. Cheong and Yeong-hye's family respond with extreme violence. When Yeong-hye refuses to have sex with her husband because she claims, “The meat smell. Your body smells of meat” (Kang 24), Mr. Cheong rapes her repeatedly. When she will not succumb to omnivorism, he asks her family to stage an intervention. Yeong-hye still refuses to eat meat at a family dinner, so, in an act of penetration that amounts to oral rape, her father holds her to the ground and shoves pork into her mouth. Just as Mr. Cheong considers Yeong-hye's continued vegetarianism as an act of marital defiance, her father views Yeong-hye's refusal to consume meat as a rebellion against paternal, and by extension patriarchal authority: “Don't you understand what your father's telling you? If he tells you to eat, you eat!” (Kang 45).

By this point, Yeong-hye's dreams have become so overpowering and she so fears her own growing abjection and monstrosity that she physically rejects the meat her father forced on her. She spits out the pork and slashes her wrists, spraying blood over her family and turning her gore-soaked dreams into reality. The boundaries between inside and outside, between Yeong-hye's body, the bodies of the animals she ate, and the bodies of her family have vanished. She has become abject, animalistic, and utterly incomprehensible to her husband and her family. Surgeons manage to stitch Yeong-hye's skin back together, but they have only managed to re-contain the consuming monster. In the haunting final scene of the first section, Yeong-hye escapes from the hospital and Mr. Cheong finds her sitting beside a fountain, topless and clutching a dead bird. He says, “It was a small white-eyed bird, with feathers missing here and there. Below tooth marks that looked to

have been caused by a predator's bite, vivid red bloodstains were spreading" (Kang 60). Yeong-hye's husband, family, and society at large, in their failure to compute how a woman with free consumptive choice could decide to remove herself from the economy of consumption, have violently expelled her and forced her to re-incorporate her animalistic monstrosity.

Pale, Clean, and Queasy: Alexandra Kleeman's "Lobster Dinner"

In contrast with Yeong-hye, whose awareness of the abjection she faces by ingesting another creature's flesh forces her into a confrontation with a society that does not comprehend her refusal to participate in the consumptive economy, Anne-Marie complies with the strictures of the consumptive choices available to her as a contemporary woman, yet transforms into a monster in Alexandra Kleeman's short story "Lobster Dinner." Anne-Marie describes an idyllic day at the Cape that turns gruesome and deadly when an army of lobsters emerges from the ocean to attack innocent beachgoers. Under the advisement of her nameless boyfriend, Anne-Marie eats the lobsters alive to stop their onward assault. The scene of violence ultimately converts into a romantic interlude in which Anne-Marie and her boyfriend profess their love for one another over the lobsters' bloody corpses. By conflating eating, death, and romantic love, Kleeman constructs a brief narrative of the social confines in which a supposedly postfeminist woman must function and reveals the inherent and inevitable monstrosity that threatens any woman who participates in the consumptive economy.

The story commences after Anne-Marie and her boyfriend have forestalled the lobster attack. They lounge on the beach amidst the bloody shells and carcasses, ruminating on the act of violence that they just perpetrated. This scene immediately intermingles violence and romantic love: "We ate them to destroy them but suddenly we felt sad and empty and overly full. I turned to you and for the first time told you I was in love. The lobsters were dead in a pile and with a froth on their shells they waited and watched us undress each other" (Kleeman 19). Anne-Marie justifies her actions, arguing that she and her boyfriend had to consume the lobsters to stop the attack. However, she notes that afterward they felt "sad and empty and overly full" (Kleeman 19). On first glance, this seems oxymoronic: the sadness is understandable following so much death, but how can one feel both empty and overly full? In the first of many contradictory statements, Kleeman uses opposition to reveal the tension between a woman's proper participation in the consumptive

economy and the crisis she faces when she realizes that this economy does not in fact offer the complete freedom of identity and individual choice that consumer feminist narratives would have her believe. Anne-Marie consumes the lobsters not because she wants to eat lobster, but because she must eat them “to forestall our own destruction,” even though “it became clear that nothing would” (Kleeman 19-20).

Kleeman describes the economy of consumption in which Anne-Marie must operate with a flashback to the previous evening, in which Anne-Marie had dinner at a seafood restaurant with her friends. She intersperses Anne-Marie’s friends’ dinner orders with grotesque recipes that highlight the unspoken violence at the center of the consumptive economy. For example, when Susan orders Lobster in Cream Sauce, with the caveat that the server must “make certain the seafood is of local origin: we have all traveled too far to dine on imported creatures” (Kleeman 21), the recipe for Susan’s dinner selection bluntly states, “Cut the bodies in slices and lay the shells at the sides, the heads facing up toward you, directly toward you, and pointed away from the sea” (Kleeman 21). Similarly, a recipe for lobster *a la Bordelaise* reads, “A lobster is sweetest and full of the richest flesh right before a molt, when the shell is at its most protective. Before it has shed its sense of safety” (Kleeman 22). The recipes, with their instructions to cut the bodies, face the heads toward the chef and away from the sea, and slaughter the lobsters at the moment when they feel the most invincible, underscore the violence at the heart of human consumptive practices. The brutality of the kitchen, where the lobsters are slaughtered and the chefs are forced to confront the massacre they committed, contrasts sharply with the tranquility of the dining room. At the heart of the kitchen, that prototypical site of consumption, lies a veritable abattoir, made all the more horrifying for its utter commonplaceness. Anne-Marie seems to sense the violence of the kitchen and orders “a cup of corn chowder, with a small salad” (Kleeman 22). Her friends chide her, tempting, “Why not live a little, eat the best? After all, you are what you eat” (Kleeman 22). They serve as society’s voice, enticing Anne-Marie into the mainstream consumptive economy by encouraging her to “eat the best,” which in this case means ingesting a once-living creature that has been savagely slain as a sacrifice to that icon of traditional luxury and romance, the lobster dinner. When confronted with the cliché tautology “you are what you eat,” Anne-Marie thinks, “But I am not” (Kleeman 22). Like Yeong-hye, Anne-Marie fears that by consuming a creature that has been murdered for her own enjoyment,

she will incorporate that animal's flesh into her own and thereby become animalistic.

The next day when the lobsters attack, Anne-Marie chooses to consume the lobsters that she avoided at dinner. Her decision to consume arises not from a genuine desire to eat shellfish, but rather from survivalist need. The lobsters initiate their offensive by crawling onto the shore and literally forcing the beachgoers to consume them: "They fight their way into the mouths and down the airways of vacationers of all ages, indiscriminate" (Kleeman 23). The victims of so many romantic meals and luxurious dinners on the Cape force the humans that consumed them to suffocate on their own abject gluttony. "Eat or be eaten" contorts into "Eat or choke on how much you eat." When faced with this choice, Anne-Marie's boyfriend points her to the only possible answer: eat. She recalls:

And you are running toward me while the lobsters are killing us all. [...] You reach me and then you whisper in my ear that we must kill them all. I nod slowly as you grab one of the largest in your hands and tear it in half. You hold one of the halves out to me, it drips blue on the warm, soft sand. I take it in my hands tentatively, like it could hurt me, and I bite down. (Kleeman 23-4)

The carnage that follows this forced decision to consume is staggering. Anne-Marie recalls the bodies that gush "blue blood, frothing all over the gulls that swoop in to eat from its belly, eat of its belly, it was too tender to move and it is emptying quick" (Kleeman 21). The blue blood stains her hands, and she listens to a haunting, mysterious murmuring that seems to come from the shattered lobster shells. Her boyfriend similarly exhibits new grotesque transformations: "I closed my eyes, stroking your leg and your large right claw, and I was at rest at last" (Kleeman 20). Anne-Marie sits among the corpses that she consumed purely for survival and feels herself becoming monstrous. She thinks, "So full. Full of lobster meat and the sadness of the lobster meat. Full of the feeling of having cracked hundreds upon hundreds of precious shells. Full of the sound and the sight of destruction, the lobsters dead in a pile, some of them with lipstick marks on their empty husks" (Kleeman 24). Anne-Marie ultimately deciphers the lobsters' whispers, not by listening to the corpses or any survivors of the massacre, but by hearing the voices "coming from deep within my belly, the voices not yet at rest" (Kleeman 24). The lobster flesh that she has incorporated into her own body taunt her with one repeated word: "Next Next Next" (Kleeman 24).

The lobsters, the victims of her mandated act of grotesque consumption, warn Anne-Marie that the cycle will not cease. She will continually be forced to engage in acts of consumption that turn her into a blood-soaked monster because the supposed freedom to choose that she enjoys as a postfeminist woman is not actually freedom at all – it is a mandate. When she chose not to consume, she faced the judgment of her friends. When she did consume, she did so because her only other option was to die. The story ends with a final horrifying image of consumption masquerading as a romantic gesture. Anne-Marie says, “And as he leaned in to kiss me, my eye saw his open mouth grow larger and larger until it seemed it could swallow me whole” (Kleeman 24). In the short tale, Kleeman unmasks the violence and monstrosity that lies at the heart of the culinary and sexual consumptive economy. Even though Anne-Marie participates in the carnivorous ingestion of flesh and thereby operates within the hidden limitations of the consumptive choices available to women, she still becomes monstrous. Yeong-hye withdraws from the economy of consumption and transforms into a monster anyway; Anne-Marie reveals that even participating in that economy “correctly” will inevitably result in monstrosity.

I’m Sure You’ll Find a Solution, Honey: Julia Ducournau’s *Raw*

Finally, moving along the scale from Yeong-hye’s decision to withdraw from the consumptive economy to Anne-Marie’s socially mandated and survivalist participation in consumption, we arrive at Julia Ducournau’s New French Extremist film *Raw*. The film chronicles Justine’s transformation from a vegetarian veterinary student to a cannibalistic, abject, sexually predatory monster. *Raw*’s setting at an acclaimed veterinary school provides the perfect ground zero for Justine’s conversion. Julia Kristeva notes of the relationship between animalism and abjection, “The abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays to the territories of *animal*. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder” (12-3). Against the backdrop of an institution whose sole purpose is to train people to care for animals, Justine gets in touch with her own animalism. Prolonged shots of animals undergoing treatment underscore the progression of Justine’s cannibalism. For example, after Justine consumes her first meat product, an extended, shadowed shot shows a black horse that is chained to a

machine and forced to run on a large mechanical track. The animals undergo gruesome procedures such as this one to test their health and fitness, but the grotesqueness of these “treatments” highlights the insidious violence that lies within socially acceptable, or even prescribed, practices.

In addition to providing an apropos setting for a tale of abjection and animalistic cannibalism, the veterinary school offers another means of critiquing the economy of consumption. As a first-year student, Justine must undergo initiation, an informal yet elaborate system of hazing through which she will gain membership in the school’s community. The veteran students force Justine and her first-year cohort to participate in extensive and humiliating rituals that invoke each student’s basic abjection as a means of shaming them into knowing their place. The first-year students pose for their official class photograph as older students douse them with buckets of blood. When Justine fails to comply with the mandatory club dress code for a day of classes, a veteran forces her to wear a diaper. The older students couch the abuse by equating compliance with belonging: “Your profs will make you the best vets out there. Your elders will make you family. But first you must learn. Learn to be a team, to obey, to be good rookies.” The loaded term “family” acquires additional meaning because one of the elder students at the center of the hazing ritual is Justine’s sister, Alexia. The crucial ritual, to which Justine initially protests, requires the rookies to eat a raw rabbit kidney. When Justine refuses to eat meat, Alexia retorts, “Are you serious? It’s nothing. Everybody does it. [...] Don’t start the year by chickening out. They’re watching.” Alexia then eats two rabbit kidneys and forces a third into Justine’s mouth. Under the dual influence of school family and literal family, Justine succumbs to the economy of meat consumption.

Unaccustomed to ingesting meat, Justine’s body initially rejects the kidney. She develops a raw, painful rash that her physician diagnoses as a symptom of food poisoning. When Justine explains the circumstances that caused the poisoning, her doctor asks, “Someone tells you to eat raw rabbit kidney, and you do?” Justine responds, “I said no,” to which the doctor retorts, “Did they force you?” Justine answers semi-truthfully: “No.” The physician seems to acknowledge the Hobson’s choice that Justine faced and seems close to critiquing the consumptive ritual that Justine underwent, but then merely prescribes a topical cream and discharges Justine. Far from heeding the warning from her body, Justine finds herself unable to quench her newfound craving for meat. She quickly progresses to stealing hamburgers in the cafeteria to sneaking off campus to eat kebabs to gnawing raw chicken in the middle of the night. Her participation in the consumptive economy,

initially just a response to a need to belong as a new veterinary student, soon transforms into a dangerous obsession for ingesting flesh.

As Justine's carnivorism progresses, she learns the limitations of the economy of consumption in which she now finds herself participating. Her vegetarianism initially served as a source of ridicule; her dedication to animal rights and her refusal to eat the rabbit kidney threaten to brand her as an outcast. When she expresses remorse for eating the kidney and shows Alexia her rash, Alexia retorts, "Let it go! It was that or you were a reject." She still exhibits shame as indicated by her desire to hide her meat eating. She chews her own hair to suppress her cravings, then vomits to purge herself not of what she ate but of the urge to eat at all. After one of these incidents, Justine encounters a fellow student in the bathroom. The woman, dressed in a lacy white dress, smilingly advises Justine, "Two fingers will make it come up faster," before primping in the mirror and admiring her reflection. This random student, whom we never see again and whose name we never learn, informs Justine of the limitations of the consumptive economy. Justine may consume whatever she wants, but only in quantities that will not diminish her physical appearance. The woman's casually offered tips for bulimic success show Justine how a woman must behave within the consumptive economy. She must eat to belong, but she must not eat so much that it threatens her sexual desirability.

Rather than heed this advice, Justine delves deeper into consumption and eventually gives in to her ultimate desire: eating human flesh. During another traditional ritual of femininity – the bikini wax – Justine accidentally cuts off Alexia's finger. Alexia faints in disgust at the site of her bloody hand. Justine finds the stump of Alexia's finger, licks the dripping blood, and eats it. The way in which Ducournau frames this scene reveals a twisted conflation of romance and consumption. While Alexia waxes Justine to prepare her younger sister for her first sexual encounter, a foreboding soundtrack accompanies a scene that could otherwise appear in any romantic comedy's mandatory makeover sequence. In contrast, a simple, melodic acoustic guitar score plays while Justine consumes the severed finger. Ducournau frames this initial moment of succumbing to cannibalistic desire as another filmmaker would design a love scene, or at least a scene depicting oral sex. In pairing these drastically different moments with opposing soundtracks, Ducournau exposes the violence within the compulsory feminine beautification and self-creation process and simultaneously converts a scene of absolute abjection into a romantic interlude. We are left to wonder which

is really more repulsive: the bikini wax or the consumption of a human finger. The answer may seem obvious, but any woman who has experienced a bikini wax will legitimately pause at this question. Ducournau acknowledges the abjection to which a woman must expose herself to participate in the sexual economy.

The incident with the finger forces Justine to confront her growing monstrosity and the possible consequences of excessive meat consumption. She and Alexia tell their parents that Alexia's dog, Quickey, ate the finger, and when Justine protests to her father's insistence that the dog be immediately euthanized, he responds, "They have to. An animal that has tasted human flesh isn't safe. If he likes it, he'll bite again." Despite this implied warning, Justine dives deeper into her newfound cannibalistic and sexual urges. Cannibalism and sex remain firmly intermingled throughout the rest of the film, as Justine's carnal desires apply both to literal and sexual consumption of human flesh. She more willingly participates in the sexualized aspects of her hazing, but when her cannibalistic urges reveal themselves during her sexual encounters, she finds herself shunned. She initiates a sexual encounter with a stranger but becomes an object of fear when she bites a chunk out of his lip. She loses her virginity to her roommate, Adrien, and bites herself to the point of bleeding during climax. Alexia, who shares Justine's cravings for human flesh and becomes increasingly desperate for fresh meat as the film progresses, publicizes a video of Justine taken at a party, in which Alexia dangles a cadaver arm in front of a heavily intoxicated Justine, who crawls on the ground and tries to bite the arm like an animal. Unable to contain her desires any longer, Alexia murders Adrien and consumes his flesh. The final shot we see of Alexia is in a prison cell, caged like a rabid animal.

What began as innocent-enough participation in a hazing ritual, symbolic of Justine's initiation into a community and her structural buy-in to the existing order of her new school, ultimately unleashes Justine's latent desire to consume human flesh. She became an object of torment because of her lack of inclination to go to parties or clubs, and she risked losing her place in the fraternity of veterinary students when she refused to eat meat. This act of meat eating was a necessary precondition for Justine's membership in the community, so her subsequent desire to consume additional meat products should have been a source of pride rather than shame. The image of a blood-soaked Justine consuming a raw animal organ mimics Yeong-hye's description of the abjectly horrifying dream that compelled her to stop consuming meat altogether, but Justine's reaction to this gory scene is not just to accept it, but to revel in it. The desire and pleasure that she experiences when she

eats meat, particularly human flesh, so far exceeds the proper boundaries of proper female consumption that she transforms into a twisted, hunkered, rabid monster.

Conclusion

Few women have an uncomplicated relationship with food. *Celebrities Eating Things* shows that even the most glamorized or esteemed woman cannot eat a burrito without someone feeling the need and the right to comment on it. Many contemporary women authors grapple with the tension between the pleasure of eating and the social regulations that a patriarchal system places on female acts of consumption. In particular, Roxane Gay's *Hunger*, the British comedy-drama series *My Mad Fat Diary*, and Sarai Walker's novel *Dietland* and its AMC television adaptation engage with the notion of the female body as an instrument of patriarchal political and social control, and their characters rebel in various ways against that control. This rich new body of texts, in which we can count *The Vegetarian*, "Lobster Dinner," and *Raw*, questions whether women actually possess the freedom to make independent consumptive choices in a society that places so many explicit and hidden restrictions on these choices. The consumer feminist discourse would argue that the modern woman possesses free choice within the marketplace and that this freedom to choose signals the achievement of gender equality. After all, feminism itself has become easily consumable as a mainstream discourse, with its proliferation and commodification as a trendy way for women to express their independence with "Girl Power" t-shirts and "Nasty Woman" stickers. Even within this economy in which women can theoretically consume anything, even feminism, women only enjoy the limited socially approved choices that the patriarchy has delimited. Yeong-hye, Anne-Marie, and Justine take the critiques found in Gay and Walker to the extreme, as they unveil the monstrosity that undergirds the consumptive economy and reveal how women within this economy will inevitably be rendered monstrous.

Clearly, a concern that women will literally transform into cannibalistic monsters should not form the primary basis for critiquing the economy of consumption. However, these intentionally and hyperbolically gory depictions of consuming female monsters play into the deep-seated patriarchal fear of woman's fundamental difference and searingly deconstruct the postfeminist tenet of gender equality through free choice. Postfeminism's conflation of women's independence, gender equality, and consumerism raises existential questions about the nature of

contemporary feminism and feminist identities. As Cole and Crossley claim, “Although feminist identities are multi-dimensional, nuanced, and often times individualist, consumption in a capitalist context is a fundamentally un-feminist thing” (4). Any participant in the American economic marketplace can see that feminism is more prominent and popular than ever. Taylor Swift touts the autonomy and industry power of her “girl squad” and Target sells pins that proudly proclaim, “Nevertheless, she persisted.” But feminism’s pop culture explosion has done little to solve the actual political and social issues that troubled past generations of feminists. As Zeisler states, “Marketplace feminism is seductive. But marketplace feminism itself is not equality” (253). Yeong-hye, Anne-Marie, and Justine involve themselves in the alluring world of marketplace feminism to different degrees: Yeong-hye makes the unacceptable choice to withdraw, Anne-Marie follows society’s mandates for proper feminine consumption to the letter, and Justine far exceeds the bounds of her required consumption to transform into a gluttonous cannibal. These women expose the continued need to question the self-satisfied assumption that free choice indicates gender equality or is even free in the first place. Otherwise, we succumb to the temptation of consumption under the misplaced faith in our ability to do so freely, only to find ourselves confronted with the marketplace’s inherent abjection and monstrosity.

Works Cited

- Asma, Stephen T. *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*. Oxford UP, 2009.
- Bacchi, Carol Lee. *Women, Policy, and Politics: The Construction of Policy Problems*. Sage, 1999.
- Baker, Alexis. “Feeding the self: Representations of nourishment and female bodies in Holocaust art.” *Food, Feminisms, Rhetorics*, edited by Melissa A. Goldthwaite, Southern Illinois UP, 2017, pp. 200-11.
- Banet-Weiser, Sarah. “Postfeminism and popular feminism.” *Feminist Media Histories*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2018, pp. 152-6.
- . “What’s your flava? Race and postfeminism in media culture.” *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, edited by Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, Duke UP, 2007, pp. 201-26.
- Bell, Katherine. “Obvie, we’re the ladies!: Postfeminism, privilege, and HBO’s newest *Girls*.” *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2013, pp. 363-6.

- Bolotin, Susan. "Voices from the post-feminist generation." *New York Times Magazine*, 17 Oct. 1982, section 6, p. 29.
- Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. U California P, 2003.
- Boyd, Patricia R. "Paradoxes of postfeminism." *Feminist Theory and Pop Culture*, edited by Adrienne Trier-Bieniek, Sense Publishers, 2015, pp. 103-14.
- Buschman, Joan K. and Silvo Lenart. "I am not a feminist, but...: College women, feminism, and negative experiences." *Political Psychology*, vol. 17, 1996, pp. 59-75.
- Butler, Jess. "For white girls only? Postfeminism and the politics of inclusion." *Feminist Formations*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2013, pp. 35-58.
- Cole, Nicki Lisa and Alison Dahl Crossley. "On feminism in the age of consumption." *Consumers, Commodities, and Consumption* vol. 11, no. 1, 2009, pp. 1-4.
- Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis*. Routledge, 1993.
- . *Phallic Panic: Film, Horror, and the Primal Uncanny*. Melbourne UP, 2005.
- Eisenstein, Zillah R. "Developing a theory of capitalist patriarchy and socialist formation." *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*, edited by Zillah R. Eisenstein, Monthly Review Press, 1979, pp. 5-40.
- Epstein, Barbara. "What happened to the women's movement?" *Monthly Review*, vol. 53, 2001, pp. 1-13.
- Faludi, Susan. *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. Crown Publishing Group, 1991.
- Fraser, Nancy. *Fortunes of Feminism*. Verso Books, 2013.
- Gamble, Sarah. "Postfeminism." *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, edited by Gamble, Routledge, 2001, pp. 43-54.
- Gear, Rachel. "All those nasty womanly things: Women artists, technology, and the monstrous-feminine." *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 24, no. 3-4, 2001, pp. 321-33.
- Gerhard, Jane. "Sex and the City, feminist media studies." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 5, 2006, pp. 37-49.
- Gengler, Amanda M. "Selling feminism, consuming femininity." *Contexts*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2011, pp. 68-9.
- Gill, Rosalind. "Post-postfeminism?: New feminist visibilities in postfeminist times." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 16, no. 4, 2016, pp. 610-30.

- Gill, Rosalind and Ana Sofia Elias. "'Awaken your incredible': Love your body discourses and postfeminist contradictions." *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2014, pp. 179-88.
- Goldthwaite, Melissa. "Preparation and ingredients: An introduction to *Food, Feminisms, Rhetorics*." *Food, Feminisms, Rhetorics*, edited by Melissa A. Goldthwaite, Southern Illinois UP, 2017, pp. 1-14.
- Halberstam, J. Jack. *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal*. Beacon Press, 2013.
- . *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*. Duke UP, 1995.
- Hall, Elaine J. and Marnie Salupo Rodriguez. "The myth of postfeminism." *Gender and Society*, vol. 17, no. 6, 2003, pp. 878-902.
- Hennefeld, Maggie and Nicholas Sammond. "Not it, or, the abject objection." *Abjection Incorporated: Mediating the Politics of Pleasure and Violence*, edited by Maggie Hennefeld and Nicholas Sammond, Duke UP, 2020, pp. 1-32.
- Ingalls, Rebecca. "Reconstructing the female food-body: Profanity, purity, and the Bakhtinian grotesque in *Skinny Bitch*." *Food, Feminisms, Rhetorics*, edited by Melissa A. Goldthwaite, Southern Illinois UP, 2017, pp. 222-36.
- Inness, Sherrie. *Kitchen Culture in America: Popular Representations of Food, Gender, and Race*. U Pennsylvania P, 2001.
- Isbister, Georgina. "Sex and the City: A postfeminist fairy tale." *Annual Conference of the Cultural Studies Association of Australia, Adelaide*, 6-8 Dec. 2007, www.unisa.edu/au/com/minisites/csaa/files/Isbister_edited_version.pdf.
- Jones, Amelia. "Feminism, incorporated: Reading 'Postfeminism' in an anti-feminist age." *Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, edited by Amelia Jones, Routledge, 2003, pp. 314-29.
- Kang, Han. *The Vegetarian*. Translated by Deborah Smith. Hogarth, 2015.
- Kennedy, Tanya Ann. *Historicizing Post-Discourses: Postfeminism and Postracialism in United States Culture*. SUNY Press, 2017.
- Kleeman, Alexandra. *Intimations: Stories*. Harper Perennial, 2016.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Columbia University Press, 1982.
- Lebovic, Anna. "Refashioning feminism: American *Vogue*, the second wave, and the transition to postfeminism." *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2019, pp. 109-32.

- Lotringer, Sylvere. "The politics of abjection." *Abjection Incorporated: Mediating the Politics of Pleasure and Violence*, edited by Maggie Hennefeld and Nicholas Sammond, Duke UP, 2020, pp. 33-42.
- Lupton, Deborah. *Food, the Body and the Self*. SAGE Publications, 1996.
- Mandel, Ernest. *Late Capitalism*. 1975. Verso Classics, 1999.
- McNamara, Gigi. "Coveting Sarah Parker: When postfeminism meets commodity fetishism." *Fan Girls and the Media: Creating Characters, Consuming Culture*, edited by Adrienne Trier-Bieniek, Lexington Books, 2015, pp. 43-55.
- McRobbie, Angela. "Post-feminism and popular culture." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2004, pp. 255-64.
- Middleton, Jason. "A rather crude feminism: Amy Schumer, postfeminism, and abjection." *Feminist Media Histories*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2017, pp. 121-40.
- Ng, Andrew Hock-Soon. *Dimensions of Monstrosity in Contemporary Narratives*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2004.
- Patrick, Stephanie. "Breaking free? Domesticity, entrapment, and postfeminism in *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*." *Journal of American Culture*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2017, pp. 235-48.
- Poole, W. Scott. *Monsters in America: Our Historical Obsession with the Hideous and the Haunting*. Baylor UP, 2011.
- Projansky, Sarah. "Mass magazine cover girls: Some reflections in postfeminist girls and postfeminism's daughters." *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, edited by Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, Duke UP, 2007, pp. 40-72.
- . *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture*. New York UP, 2001.
- Raw*. Directed by Julia Ducournau, Petit Film and Rouge International, 2017.
- Tasker, Yvonne and Diane Negra. "Introduction: Feminist politics and postfeminist culture." *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*, edited by Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, Duke UP, 2007, pp. 1-26.
- "The One With the Soap Opera Party." *Friends: The Complete Ninth Season*, written by David Crane, Marta Kauffman, and Andrew Reich, directed by Sheldon Epps, Warner Brothers, 2004.
- Vaid, Urvashi, Naomi Wolf, Gloria Steinem, and bell hooks. "Let's get real about feminism: The backlash, the myths, the movement." *Ms*, vol. 5, 1993, pp. 34-43.

- Vavrus, Mary Douglas. "Unhitching the 'post' (of postfeminism)." *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2010, pp. 222-7.
- Wallis, Claudia. "Onward women!" *Time*, 4 Dec. 1989, pp. 80-9.
- Weeks, Kathi. "Life within and against work: Affective labor, feminist critique, and post-Fordist politics." *Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organization*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2007, pp. 233-49.
- Whelehan, Imelda. "Remaking feminism: Or why is postfeminism so boring?" *Nordic Journal of English Studies*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2010, pp. 155-72.
- Williams, Linda. "Film bodies: Gender, genre, and excess." *Film Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 4, 1991, pp. 2-13.
- Zeisler, Andi. *Feminism and Pop Culture*. Seal Press, 2008.
- . *We Were Feminists Once*. Public Affairs, 2017.

The *Popular Culture Studies Journal* Reviews: Introduction

CHRISTOPHER J. OLSON

Popular culture remains constantly in flux because things tend to fall in and out of fashion quickly and routinely. Indeed, something that is considered “wired” today can soon become “tired” (and vice versa) based entirely on the whims of audiences and consumers. This propensity can be seen in the rise and fall of one-time social media giants such as Myspace and Friendster, the trajectory of high-waisted “mom jeans” from cultural punchline to trendy fashion statement, and the avalanche of Netflix movies that generate buzz for a week before fading almost entirely from the collective memory.

These examples all demonstrate that popular culture is both diverse and dynamic, not to mention difficult to define and encapsulate. Over the years, researchers have applied the term “popular culture” to numerous texts and concepts, from books to films, from fashion to football games, and from video games to social media sites such as Facebook and TikTok. The various specimens listed here serve to reveal that people have very different ideas of what is popular and what is not, as well as what exactly constitutes culture. Ultimately (and, possibly, obviously), the very notion of “popular culture” may be every bit as fluid and varied as the texts and societies that comprise our understanding of the concept; at its core, popular culture refers to those things that different people consider fashionable at different times throughout history and in different places around the world.

The reviews in this issue of the *Popular Culture Studies Journal* reflect that diversity as they look at books, films, and games that cover a wide breadth of topics, issues, and stories. Angela M. Nelson and Matthew L. Miller discuss books that consider the cultural histories of comic book superheroes Batman and Superman. Jackson Reinhardt, meanwhile, writes about a book that analyzes how religion and myth manifest in the adventures of the films that comprise the Marvel Cinematic Universe, while Elizabeth Shiller takes a deep dive into the adventures of one of the cornerstones of the MCU with her review of the film *Black Widow* (Cate Shortland, 2021). Dakota J. Sandras shifts the focus to the small screen by reviewing Taylor Nygaard and Jorie Lagerwey’s examination of what the authors term “Horrible White People” television shows. Navid Darvishzadeh and Melissa

Beattie each turn an eye toward global screen cultures as they review new books about Iranian cinema and global television respectively. Moving from film and television screens to computer screens, David Kocik, Grace Wilsey, and Mridula Sharma all discuss books examining issues in digital spaces. Kocik looks at Amanda C. Cote's study of sexism in the gaming industry, Wilsey explores Susanna Paaonen's book about affective formations in networked media, and Sharma offers insight into Rebecca Saunders' monograph looking at sex and labor in the digital age. Finally, CarrieLynn D. Reinhard discusses a video game that adapts real-life situations into a digital setting, while Christopher J. Olson reviews a board game based on the theories of pioneering media scholar Marshall McLuhan.

As always, I wish to thank my assistant editor, Sarah Pawlak Stanley, for her dedication in helping me ensure that these reviews are clear, concise, and as free from grammatical and mechanical errors as possible. I also want to thank all the contributors for their hard work on these reviews; without them, this section would not exist. Thanks also to CarrieLynn D. Reinhard for occasionally acting as a backup assistant editor who lends another set of eyes to look at these pieces before they head off for publication. Finally, thanks to you, the readers, for taking the time to read these reviews. I hope you find them useful and that they point you in the direction of scholarship and texts that assist you in your own academic endeavors.

Book Reviews

Brown, Jeffrey A. *Batman and the Multiplicity of Identity: The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero as Cultural Nexus*. Routledge, 2019.

The superhero genre and its diverse media formats – comic books, video games, film, television, toys, and books – is a multi-billion-dollar enterprise in the United States of America and throughout the world. Jeffrey A. Brown's 2019 monograph *Batman and the Multiplicity of Identity* lays a solid foundation for understanding the ubiquity of Batman not only in American popular culture but in global popular culture. Brown's main thesis is that the contemporary comic book Batman encompasses a multiplicity of identities that allow for the representation and discussion of socially relevant issues. Batman's character- and narrative-multiplicity hinges on fan identification, character stability, and character flexibility. While Brown views Batman as an agent of hegemony, he also considers how Batman constructs, reinforces, and challenges dominant ideas beyond his core mission of fighting criminals to enforce modern property laws and a specific notion of justice. Brown is concerned with such dominant ideas as familial relations, sexuality, ethnic representation, violence, and morality, as well as mass-mediated intertextuality and consumerism. Batman's multiplicity of identities is the link, or the nexus, connecting contentious social issues to the comic book character Batman. Brown achieves his stated thesis with a strong conceptual framework, quality evidence, and pertinent examples.

Following the introduction, in chapter 2, Brown traces the establishment of the current conception of the core Batman as a dark and brooding figure – Batman Prime – and how this notion of a basic Batman identity functions as a semiotic grounding point for variations across time, imaginative realities, media formats, individual creators, and social issues. In the third chapter, "Batman and Sexuality," Brown considers how Batman has interacted with issues of sexual representation including homosexuality and heterosexuality. In chapter 4, "Batman and Sons," Brown interprets Batman's position as both a literal and figurative father. Chapter 5 focuses on the two central women who assume the Bat symbol and name, Batgirl and Batwoman.

In chapter 6, Brown explores Batman's hegemonic status as a white able-bodied wealthy heterosexual American male and as a racially "colorblind" superhero. He also focuses on the depiction of African American superheroes through Batman's protégés Batwing and The Signal, and through Marvel Comic's Batman analogue Nighthawk. Chapter 7, "Batman and Villainy," addresses Batman's association with the darker side of the central superhero dichotomy between good and evil. Here, Brown interprets Batman as an antihero and details Batman's relationship with The Joker, Superman, and three villainous Batman analogues, Owlman, Wrath, and Nemesis. The final chapter "I'm the Goshdarn Batman!" examines the depiction of Batman as "cute," the cute trend in general, and how the cute trend relates to Batman specifically as a derivative of Japanese "kawaii" aesthetics that facilitates a character/consumer affect of endearment, innocence, and protectionism.

One of Brown's strengths is his expansive knowledge of Batman's 80-year comic book presence. For example, all chapters include detailed representative comic book examples related to the social issue under discussion. Further, Brown incorporates detailed representative comic book examples from every decade of Batman's existence beginning with 1939. Another strength is Brown's insightful and discerning interpretation of the cute superhero. I found it to be one of the most intriguing analyses in the book. Brown clearly and precisely explains how a hypermasculine, brooding, violent Batman translates into a diminutive, happy passive one, describes the cultural resonance the cute Batman embodies, and delineates how the film *The Lego Batman Movie* spoofs and unpacks Batman's model of dominant masculinity.

Although *Batman and the Multiplicity of Identity* ends with one of the most rigorously written chapters in the book, it would have been helpful instead if Brown ended the book with a short epilogue summarizing his findings. Even a brief final assessment would have satisfied my need for critical closure to the multiple social issues surveyed. Another weakness was Brown's lack of consistency regarding Batman's relationship to the idea of hypermasculinity, the exaggerated forms of male stereotypical behavior such as aggression, emotional self-control, physical strength, sexuality, violence, and virility. Brown uses a variety of adjectives to describe the masculinity portrayed by Batman. "Excessive machismo," "overblown performance of masculinity," "masculine bravado," "masculine supremacy," "toxic masculinity," "exaggerated machismo," "excessively masculine." Therefore, it is not that Brown does not consistently engage with the concept of masculinity in

relationship to Batman throughout the book, he does. The point I am stressing is that the use of hypermasculinity (appearing first on page 10) would have been a simpler and more consistent, condensed conceptual anchor for understanding this aspect of the comic book Batman's multiplicity and cultural sustainability. Because Brown did not foreground the idea of hypermasculinity, the concept appeared to be up for critical debate as to its central importance in interpreting Batman (and all other superpowered women and men).

Despite this, Brown's facility with the comic book genre and superhero genre is evident throughout *Batman and the Multiplicity of Identity*. He has immersed himself in the aesthetic, corporate, formulaic, generic, institutional, legal features, and genealogies of Batman. His immersion into the corporate, institutional, and legal facets of Batman is noteworthy since comics creatives work in tandem with comics industry brokers and comics management. Ultimately, knowing all about Batman in his fullness, depth, width, and breadth made this book possible. Brown's analysis of Batman demonstrates how a popular cultural production reflects national structures, systems, institutions, beliefs, values, histories, traditions, and practices of creativity, ingenuity, domination, oppression, suppression, marginalization, privilege, and entitlement. Overall, Brown's study of the contemporary comic book Batman as cultural nexus makes a positive and excellent addition to comics, gender, sexuality, and media studies.

Angela M. Nelson
Bowling Green State University

Cote, Amanda C. *Gaming Sexism: Gender and Identity in the Era of Casual Video Games*. New York UP, 2020.

In Summer 2021, California's Department of Fair Employment and Housing sued AAA game development company Activision-Blizzard for repeated violations of sexual harassment and discriminatory practices against women. During the same week, several former and current employees of indie darling Fullbright shared their experiences of sexist microaggressions at the studio. The explicit and implicit sexism at both large and small studios reflects the experiences shared through interviews with women gamers in Amanda C. Cote's *Gaming Sexism: Gender and Identity in the Era of Casual Video Games*. A harrowing reminder of the discrimination of women throughout the texts, industries, and communities of

games, Cote's book soberly illustrates the progress still needed to foster gender equity in gaming circles.

As Cote states in the book's introduction, her work is deliberately broad, asking how the rise of casual games targeted to women in the early 2010s affects hegemonic definitions of who counts as a gamer. In the Introduction and chapter 1, Cote explores how gaming companies historically focused on male gamers to rebound from the market crash in the early 1980s. Since then, gaming in the US has been traditionally associated with masculinity, and movements that explicitly encouraged women to play games had little sustained success. As companies expanded their markets and game offerings to reach women, discourses in a variety of gaming spaces constructed the first-person shooter, role-playing game, and other masculinized game genres as "core" while games played in short bursts or free-to-play online games were considered "casual." Unsurprisingly, most core games feature few women, and those that are depicted are often portrayed as sexualized objects. Meanwhile, casual games that are targeted for female audiences often feature stereotypically girly traits and aesthetics, as Cote discusses in chapter 3. As the casual market expanded and even AAA studios moved to target women, more men found their hegemonic dominance in gaming spaces threatened. The term "gamer" has historically been constructed as white, straight, cis, and male, thereby gatekeeping people of color, LGBTQ+ people, and women. Drawing from Antonio Gramsci, Cote argues video game spaces are currently experiencing a crisis of authority, whereby the rise of casual games threatens hegemonic masculinized "core" games, leading men to engage in more explicitly sexist harassment to hedge their authority as gamers.

Through illuminating interviews with several women gamers, Cote explores how the historical moment of the rise of casual games operates within the upsurge of sexist harassment and microaggressions in gaming spaces. Chapters 2 and 3 include conversations about the overt and inferential sexism these women experience from different gaming communities. Cote approaches these interviews with nuance, noting that even though most women belong to several of the same demographics, their experiences, attitudes, and beliefs about their identities varied greatly. Most of the women identified chiefly as gamers, while some subscribed to the belief that because they played casual games, they weren't "real" gamers. Several of Cote's interviewees expressed frustration, fear, and anger over the overt harassment they experience when playing online with male players, while others felt the representations of women in dominant video game series such as *Grand*

Theft Auto contributed to sexist gaming cultures. In chapter 4, Cote describes how several women took explicitly feminist stances against this behavior, proudly proclaiming themselves as competent and competitive women in online spaces. Other women players, like those in chapter 5, were more comfortable hiding their identities during online play to avoid any direct name-calling or sexual advances. Some even avoided online spaces altogether to forego any potential negative situations. Cote also includes follow-up interviews with several women years after the original in chapter 6, showing how women gamers may change how they negotiate their gamer and female identities across gaming spaces. After exploring how these women dealt with sexism in gaming in different ways, Cote posits a powerful argument: no matter how individual women cope with sexism, their actions alone cannot bring about equity in gaming cultures. Broader cultural shifts are necessary, from accountable game moderation to the active recruitment of women into core gaming environments. Most cogent to Cote's work, casual games should not be seen as the downfall of core games, but rather as another form of video games for all players to enjoy. Similarly, women should be recognized as part of the core gaming demographic since the popularization of video games, not just as an ancillary group that only plays feminized casual games.

Gaming Sexism provides a powerful account of women's experiences with sexism, harassment, and discrimination in gaming spaces, and, like all great research, can be built upon to further investigate gaming communities and address some of the areas lacking from Cote's study. While Cote focused mostly on women who game, further analysis could explore how women encounter and deal with sexism in ancillary online game environments, such as YouTube reviews and Twitch streams. More work should also investigate how women experience and navigate sexual discrimination and harassment in video game work environments, particularly as more stories come out regarding workplace harassment from both AAA and indie studios. As Cote mentions in the conclusion, her work mostly discusses the experiences of women from the US and Europe who play games from the same regions. Games researchers should expand the scope of these projects to include and focus on women, LGBTQ+, disabled individuals, and/or people of color from different areas around the globe to provide a more nuanced picture of how sexism and other forms of discrimination are perpetuated in gaming spaces. Despite these omissions, *Gaming Sexism* serves as a worthy starting point for such discussions.

David Kocik
University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee

Langford, Michelle. *Allegory in Iranian Cinema: The Aesthetics of Poetry and Resistance*. Bloomsbury, 2021.

In the last two decades, several scholars have placed allegory at the center of their study of Iranian cinema. Most of them, such as Negar Mottahedeh in *Displaced Allegories*, limit their case studies to a handful of auteurs or films from the post-revolutionary Iranian cinema. Michelle Langford's strong background in studying cinematic allegory, however, allows her to extend her case studies to a selection of films from the early years of feature film production in the 1930s, pre-revolutionary genre films of the 1960s, and the dissident new wave cinema of the 1970s. Langford adds to Mottahedeh's argument of "displaced allegories," expanding the study of allegories in Iranian cinema beyond the mere result of censorship. She thereby argues for a more complex approach to allegorical aesthetics as an essential part of the poetics of Iranian cinema.

Langford opens the first chapter of her book with the study of allegory in Ovanes Ohanian's *Mr. Haji the Movie Actor* (*Haji Aqa Aktor-e Sinema*, 1933). She argues that this self-reflexive silent film allegorizes the tensions between tradition and modernity ushered by new modern media, such as cinema. Langford compares this optimistic approach to modernity with the pessimistic approach that permeates the new wave cinema. She contends that if films such as *Mr. Haji* inadvertently promoted the modernizing agenda of the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, Reza Shah, then the new wave films and some genre films benefited from utilizing allegory for attacking and criticizing the modernizing project of the last king of the Pahlavi dynasty, Mohammad Reza Shah.

In chapter two, Langford studies the different ways Iranian films allegorically use the figure of the child to promote or to resist the political agenda of their times. She examines Kamran Shirdel's pre-revolutionary documentary *The Night It Rained* (*Un Shab Keh Barun Umad*, 1967) as a bridge to explore the role of child-centered films in post-revolutionary cinema. At the center of this analysis lies the claim that Shirdel deploys the child actor to allegorically criticize the role of the modern media, including cinema, in Shah's mythic and heroic nation-building project. Langford studies Jafar Panahi's *The Mirror* (*Ayneh*, 1997) as a post-revolutionary counterpart to *The Night* and discusses the different ways the film

allegorically questions the Islamicate values through a child-centered (non)film by hinging on the disconnect between reality and representation.

In chapter three, Langford considers Marziyeh Meshkini's *The Day I Became a Woman* (*Ruzi Keh Zan Shodam*, 2000). The author reads this film as an allegory of Iranian post-revolutionary cinema that challenges the Islamicate values imposed by the rigorous codes of modesty. Building on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of "becoming," Langford claims that beyond the evident allegory, the film also registers an affective becoming-woman through allegorical aesthetics. This process of affective becoming-woman is formed between the viewer and the film and becomes possible in scenes where the viewer is a necessary part of the filmic assemblage.

In chapter four, Langford discusses cine-poetics by examining Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *A Time for Love* (*Nobat-e Asheghi*, 1990) and Majid Majidi's *Baran* (1999). For Langford, the poetics of cinema are not simply reduced to the citation of poems but are extended to cinema's unique potential in forming its own poetics. In developing her claim, she draws upon Persian *ghazal*, a form of lyrical love poetry, and coins the term "cinematic ghazal" (136) to characterize certain moments in her case studies where poetic modes of expression are privileged over narrative. Langford mainly locates such moments in the scenes pervaded with sensual imagery that present love as concurrently pleasurable and painful.

Chapter 5 focuses on cinematic allegory in Iranian post-revolutionary war cinema. Here, Langford predominantly confines her attention to Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's *Gilaneh* (2005). She argues that *Gilaneh* goes against the trend of Iranian war cinema because of its preoccupation with narrative from a maternal perspective, and its refusal of idealizing the martyrdom modeled on the Karbala paradigm. Langford claims that in this film the main maternal character, Gilaneh herself, is the allegorical manifestation of *vatan* (homeland), not as the female geobody of the nation in need of protection but rather the melancholic urgency of attending to the nation's forsaken wounds.

In the final chapter, Langford studies Asghar Farhadi's *About Elly* (*Darbare-ye Elly*, 2009) in the context of Benjaminian *Trauerspiel* (mourning play). Langford argues that *About Elly*'s refusal to serve the mythic and transcendent function of the Karbala-paradigm-based mourning, and its resistance to didacticism, align it with Benjaminian *Trauerspiel* rather than traditional Iranian *ta'ziyeh*, a traditional Iranian form of religious theater. Langford zeros in on the significance of sadness and mourning in Iranian culture and claims that the collective protagonist of *About*

Elly symbolizes a generation that deals with these post-revolutionary ideological discourses through dissimulation. She contends that Farhadi uses “dissimulating camera” (194) as an essential allegorical procedure to harmonize form with content.

Langford advances her argument to the coda, claiming that as the new wave films of the 1970s signaled the dream of the future anti-Shah revolution, films like *About Elly* and *Mirror* herald the future protests in the new millennium. Langford discusses little Mina (the protagonist of *The Mirror* who removed her headscarf and stubbornly declared she didn’t want to act anymore) and wonders whether the real Mina (the actress, Mina Mohammadkhani) also does not want to “act” according to the Islamic Republic’s compulsory hijab laws. Langford ignores the fact that many youths of this generation, including the defiant Mohammadkhani, divert their energy from acting against the grain of the society through dissimulation to emigrate to other more democratic countries where they are not forced to act in the constraints of the Islamic values.

In unpacking the multiple layers of meaning in Iranian films, Langford demonstrates a deep understanding of the specificities of the Iranian social, cultural, and political context. Yet the mastery of Iranian culture and history, in some parts, prompts the reader to wonder how far the author can go in the study of allegory if the symbolic figures, actions, imagery, or events of the allegory are not necessarily born out of filmmakers’ deliberate artistic decision-making but are imposed on them and are fait accompli. For instance, in her study of *The Mirror*, Langford discusses the allegorical role of the street names – all of which are political names – traversed by little Mina in her attempt to return home. Considering that almost all the major streets in the capital city of Tehran were renamed after the Islamic Revolution to remove any sign of the Pahlavi Dynasty from the city, the use of the names – such as Baharestan, Jomhuri, Enqelab, etc. – in the film is not the result of Panahi’s decision-making and are instead inseparable parts of the realist films that follow a *flaneur*.

Overall, *Allegory in Iranian Cinema* is a well-researched, articulate, and detailed book that would contribute toward thinking of allegory in Iranian cinema outside the restraints of censorship. The extension of the case studies to both sides of the pivotal revolution of 1979 clearly demonstrates the allegorical aesthetics as an integral part of the poetics of Iranian cinema. Moreover, the comprehensive and close analysis of selected primary films, and the brief discussion of several secondary films infused with theoretically savvy arguments, results in a scholarly piece of work that yields an enriching and informative reading experience.

Navid Darvishzadeh
Georgia State University

Works Cited

- Benjamin, Walter. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Translated by John Osborne, Verso, 2009.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Guattari Félix. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Translated by Brian Massumi, U Minnesota P, 1987.
- Mottahedeh, Negar. *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema*. Duke UP, 2008.
- Nichols, Michael D. *Religion and Myth in the Marvel Cinematic Universe*. McFarland, 2020.

Comparing, conflating, and contrasting the heroes and stories of ancient myth with the box-paneled (or cinematized) adventures of contemporary superheroes has a long history. Since the boom of the superhero genre, a publishing cottage industry provides academic and popular expositions on the types, meanings, and significance of such transhistorical narrative affinities between legend and caped crusaders (see Reynolds 1994; Dalton 2011; Morrison 2012). In *Religion and Myth in the Marvel Cinematic Universe*, Michael D. Nichols continues this comparative focus towards, specifically, the “Infinity Saga” of the perennially popular Marvel Cinematic Universe, which comprises twenty-two films (presented through three “Phases”) released between 2008 and 2019. This book is the first, to my knowledge, to provide an extended comparative mythic analysis to the entirety of the MCU during the Infinity Saga, a “self-contained mythic text” (Nichols 10).

The introduction to *Religion and Myth* lays the methodological groundwork for the analysis that follows. Nichols believes that the MCU films “tap into the fundamental questions about what it means to be human,” queries best deduced by “delv[ing] into the symbolic layers of such stories” (7). His goal is to “use broad cross-cultural comparison to illuminate the ways in which the MCU delves into timeless themes, symbols, and issues akin to more ancient religious and mythic narrative...and thus express[es] something proud about the human condition” (7). Nichols breaks with postmodern theorists who posit that either “myth” is an

unstable discursive concept without a legitimate referent (8) and/or that the comparative method is merely a construction of decontextualized patterns only viable within the eye of the comparer. Instead, Nichols notes not only the human propensity to “categorize” but also the legitimacy of an approach which simply denotes “correspondences and resemblances” between traditions of our “common humanity” (8). Thus, each succeeding chapter compares a theme/concept/symbol found in several pertinent ancient texts with its supposed appearance in a specific MCU “Phase” or set of films.

Chapter 1 examines “Phase One” of the MCU, connecting the origin stories of superheroes such as Iron Man, Captain America, Thor, etc. to the concepts of the rite of passage, which signifies “a person’s movement from one state of life to another” (17). Here, Nichols explicitly describes the MCU heroes as resembling the shaman (elsewhere, he describes the Marvel characters, in similar definitional terms, as “religious virtuosos,” 13), a religious figure who in many ancient cultures acted as a mediator between the human and supernatural realm. Shamans went through rites of passage to acquire and develop their divinatory “powers.” Both the shaman and religious virtuosos are gifted with the ability to “handle the sacred and dangerous powers which populate the universe” (13). By going through a process of initiation whereby they experience the death of their old “self” (e.g., Tony Stark, Bruce Banner, Steve Rogers) into their new, not-quite-human being (i.e., Iron Man, the Hulk, Captain America), MCU characters are thus marked, like the shaman, as powerful and possessing enhanced supernormal abilities through scientific or magical means. Nevertheless, like the shaman, these heroes are simultaneously liminal, unstable, and mortal creatures. These traits follow the superheroes throughout the Infinity Saga, fueling tension in narratives and between characters.

In chapter 2, Nichols discusses the villains of the MCU and their relationship to the protagonists, employing two concepts in religious studies discourse: the shadow-self and monster theory. The former, proposed by Carl Jung, is a facet of the individual which represents “everything negative that the subject refuses to recognize about [themselves] and yet is always thrusting itself upon him...directly or indirectly” (39). The latter typically examines the appearance of the monster in all forms of literature, noting the monstrous “represents a disruption of the perceived natural or cultural order” (40). To Nichols, significant figures in mythic traditions (e.g., Buddha, Beowulf, Jesus) and the MCU heroes face off against opponents who are both monstrous agents of discordance and evil, inverted representatives of the individuals themselves.

Chapter 3 focuses on the notions of “pollution” and “impurity” within the second Phase of the MCU. With frequent reference to seminal scholarship in the subject of ritual purity, as well as influential ritualistic traditions from the Hebrews to the Greeks, Nichols defines impurity/pollution as “matter out of place,” the very breakdown of preconceived notions of order and other. In both mythic and MCU narratives, when liminal figures (those existing between distinct conceptual spaces) and their dangerous potentialities are left unchecked, it can “produce situations of impurity which are liable to spread...to the nearest liminal individual, then society at large” (73). Thus, as the MCU protagonists move beyond their origins and begin to function as everyday heroes the films shift focus to themes of infection, contamination, and corruption, such as the infiltration of SHIELD by Hydra in *Captain America: Winter Soldier* or the “Extremis” virus in *Iron Man 3*.

In chapter 4, this impurity/pollution thread continues to discuss Phase Three films that depict the Marvel heroes fighting, not contra villains or monsters, but against themselves or their “families.” Comparing with works such as the *Iliad* and *Theogony*, Nichols examines how the superheroes’ liminal, ambiguous, and supernatural-destructive impulses, when combined with the increasing narrative tensions and destabilization of the initial Phases, leads to internecine and intrafamilial conflict. This strife is between the Avengers themselves or specific heroes against villains revealed to be family. These conflicts, which often result in the deaths of loved ones, signify another transition for the hero: either a reaffirmation of their identity or a new path forward.

Chapters 5 and 6 examine the final two *Avengers* films, the villain Thanos, and the phenomena of death in religious and mythic discourse. The name Thanos, Nichols is quick to note, is from the Greek word for death (*thanatos*), and thus the imposing antagonist is the very personification of death for the entire MCU series, especially in the final *Avengers* entries. The former chapter focuses on the figure Thanos and comparable mythic personifications of death in Mayan, Abrahamic, and Indian lore. Both religious and MCU narratives share a common perspective on death: “irresistible chaos and the fear of life's instability” (16). In the latter chapter, Nichols discusses the appearance of both an “underworld journey” and apocalyptic battle in the final MCU Infinity Saga film *Avengers: Endgame*. In the final battle in which the entirety of the Marvel league destroys Thanos, Nichols finds the narrative end and moral arc of the entire Infinity Saga: “death haunts us all as a fact of the human condition, but by opposing it and defining oneself against it, a kind of peace is possible” (16). The conclusion to *Religion and Myth* reiterates

the main argument and methodology of the book, as well as contending that the MCU's films will serve as new mythic guides for future audiences in their own quests for meaning.

Overall, *Religion and Myth* is a well-written, engaging work that illuminates the shared themes, concepts, and narrative progressions between the MCU and humanity's oldest surviving myths and religious histories. Nichols surveys a wide variety of ancient mythic material. Thus, comparisons with the MCU never appear forced or contrived as he gives each religious element thorough comparative attention and extensive primary source citation. Additionally, Nichols has successfully refuted voices (such as George R. R. Martin quoted in chapter 2, 39) that portray the MCU canon as mindless blockbuster fodder. The author has elaborated a unique perspective that is a valuable individual and scholarly tool when critically interacting with these films. While I remain skeptical of his broader claim that the religious themes in the franchise are the reason for their global popularity, I am not at all wary of utilizing his interpretations and interpretive approach in future viewings or analyses. As Marvel begins a new, ambitious phase of releases, the methods and notions Nichols has eruditely explicated will surely be helpful.

One issue that Nichols could have dealt with more is countering the claims of the postmodern/"anti-comparative" tendency. In both the introduction and conclusion, he emphasizes that humans have a cognitive desire to categorize: "the human brain cannot function without categories and to put information and data into categories requires comparison" (9, cf. 162). This is a weak justification because it fails to address the root of the postmodernists' problems: the very categories employed. While thinkers like Jonathan K. Smith are opposed to the comparative approach, these scholars compared the positions, arguments, and ideas of thinkers, religions, and texts. They did not compare ideations and narratives of, say, oral traditions of an oral language filtered through a tenured academic's conceptual *weltanschauung* and linguistic apparatus with other such ideations and narratives. While Nichols' project is not in vain, I cannot see this work utilized by scholars outside of the comparative approach without a more robust defense of his method.

Religion and Myth has a potentially broad audience. This work lacks overly sophisticated academic terminology or prose, making it accessible for casual or general readers (i.e., those outside the religious studies guild or academia altogether). They will indeed find an interesting method by which to watch either

past or new comic book adaptations. Students in cultural or religious studies may find this book helpful if their research deals with superhero reception, the contemporary relevance of myth, etc. Professors may feel this book is useful for assigned reading classes on superheroes and religion, myth, or theology. However, if one is opposed to the comparative approach, this work might be methodologically flawed beyond repair.

Jackson Reinhardt
Independent Scholar

Works Cited

Dalton, Russell W. *Marvelous Myths: Marvel Superheroes and Everyday Faith*. Chalice Press, 2011.

Morrison, Grant. *Supergods: What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous Mutants, and a Sun God from Smallville Can Teach Us About Being Human*. Random House, 2012.

Reynolds, Richard. *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*. U Mississippi P, 1994.

Nygaard, Taylor and Lagerwey, Jorie. *Horrible White People: Gender, Genre, and Television's Precarious Whiteness*. New York UP, 2020.

As most viewers will likely acknowledge, the days of mainstream television shows evading sociocultural commentary for the sake of allegedly apolitical entertainment are over. In their book, *Horrible White People: Gender, Genre, and Television's Precarious Whiteness*, Taylor Nygaard and Jorie Lagerwey explore the unavoidable complexities of these cultural transformations, attending primarily to the ways the white left has become obsessed with its own anxiety and suffering. They make a compelling case for taking seriously the sociocultural repercussions that result from the production and consumption of television shows, particularly in the mobilization and reification of white supremacy. More specifically, they articulate how distribution, genre, aesthetics, and representation “work together to culturally recenter liberal White failure and victimhood while usurping attention from the plight of minorities whom these liberal and progressive White people supposedly seek to help” (9).

Nygaard and Lagerwey set up their book as a series of analyses examining what they deem to be “Horrible White People” shows. According to the authors, this designation pertains primarily to upmarket comedies such as *Broad City*, *Fleabag*, *Transparent*, *Insecure*, and *Master of None*. They argue that this subgenre proliferated after the Great Recession and peaked between 2014 and 2016. The examples they examine are all comedies or satires starring mostly white actors who regularly engage with discourses of liberal progressivism and racial equality. Many of these shows prioritize emergent feminist storylines around sex, gender, and relationships. As the authors argue, what is most striking about these shows is the “bleak grimness, black humor, and ethos of failure” that unites them as they center white precarity (5). To define this genre, they analyze 32 television shows and identify an insidious iteration of an intersectional, “woke” version of whiteness uniting them. Throughout the text, Nygaard and Lagerwey ultimately argue that Horrible White People characters – those who are obsessed with their own suffering – are representative of the liberal white populace that ultimately came to invest and participate in the maintenance of the social systems they supposedly claim to critique.

In the first chapter, Nygaard and Lagerwey explain how the emergence of streaming services and on-demand viewing options accelerated distribution of these shows and contributed to the rise of Horrible White People programs. In short, they argue that these shows and their characters reflect desirable logics for presumably white, liberal audiences in the twenty-first century industry and, thus, they sell well across the Atlantic too. This observation matters most because it demonstrates how the investments of said series transcend national contexts. In the second chapter, the authors consider the various ways Horrible White People shows challenge the raced and gendered familial norms and ideologies typically found in sitcoms. Through discussing issues like the loss of access to privileged experience, featuring “bad” protagonists, and presenting alternative forms of family, these shows recentralize “White suffering under the seemingly protective guise of liberal social critique” (76). The third chapter attends to the unique way female friendships are mobilized in Horrible White People shows to absolve white girls of their responsibilities for participating in or benefitting from systems of privilege. A purportedly feminist undercurrent can be found within the multitudinous examples the authors share as they observe how precarity and empathetic girlfriends are employed to excuse women of various performances of socially abject behavior. In the fourth and final chapter, Nygaard and Lagerwey turn to another genre that has

developed alongside *Horrible White People* shows, which they refer to as “Diverse Quality Comedies.” While the two genres are quite similar, they are nevertheless distinct in the sense that the latter have creators and casts of color. Yet the authors argue that despite their own innovations and complexities, these shows still adhere to the same aesthetics of whiteness. Ultimately, the analysis in this chapter demonstrates how diversity serves to make the shows appear progressive while also helping them reach untapped audiences for new profits, thereby reaffirming the capitalist interests of the industry. Although *Diverse Quality Comedies* resemble *Horrible White People* shows in various significant ways, they do offer some hope for progressive change since they make whiteness and white supremacy visible. Nygaard and Lagerwey conclude the book by turning to explicitly conservative, mass-market, male-centered programming to emphasize that white precarity and supremacy indeed continue to structure all of television and not just niche comedies.

Throughout the entire text, Nygaard and Lagerwey demonstrate a consistent commitment to critical feminist and anti-racist methodologies. Though such an orientation is arguably an imperative for this sort of work within media studies, it undoubtedly deepens their conclusions. Their attention to dualities within the comedies is also laudable, particularly since shows that present themselves as progressive are often riddled with unique tensions. Importantly, the authors recognize that not everything about the given shows is harmful; in fact, in some ways, they can be quite productive. However, their narratives can also serve as the Trojan horses for their more sinister effects. My personal critique of the book is predominantly rooted in its organization. The authors certainly took on a daunting task by taking more than thirty television shows into consideration. While I recognize that this move contributed to their argument about the ubiquity of these comedies as almost an entirely new genre of its own, it did make their more precise observations somewhat difficult to follow. Despite its rather convoluted structure, *Horrible White People* insightfully addresses both the dangers and potentials which seem to be arising as contemporary television begins to contend with its own whiteness. While it is possible that “*Horrible White People* shows” may never be formally recognized by wider audiences as their own genre, Nygaard and Lagerwey’s observations nevertheless allow readers to embrace a keener eye toward both the critique and consumption of contemporary media that covertly affirms structures of oppression all the while claiming to challenge them.

Dakota J. Sandras
University of Nebraska – Lincoln

Paasonen, Susanna. *Dependent, Distracted, Bored: Affective Formations in Networked Media*. MIT Press, 2021.

With *Dependent, Distracted, Bored: Affective Formations in Networked Media*, Susanna Paasonen provides a check to many of the common narratives about networked technology. Paasonen, a Professor of Media Studies at the University of Turku in Finland and a leading scholar in the field of affect theory, takes a nuanced approach in her study of networked connectivity as the infrastructure of our modern-day lives, questioning assumptions purported by outlets such as the news media that “we are hopelessly addicted to devices and apps that distract us to boredom” (4). Instead, Paasonen examines how technological systems such as social media have become interwoven in our lives and analyzes the complex and oscillating affective formations attached to these systems. She takes a mixed method approach, combining excerpts from a large collection of student essays on the topic of technology and daily life, with robust research in media theory from such scholars as Raymond Williams, Bruno Latour, Lauren Berlant, and Wendy Hui Kyong Chun. Acknowledging the complex role social media has played during the COVID-19 pandemic and in our lives beforehand – as both disseminator of information and means of social connection – Paasonen brings together the lived experiences of her sample of students with affect and media industry theories to better understand the “complexity, contradiction, and ambiguity” (7) of networked living in affluent countries.

Each chapter investigates a widespread assumption about networked technology, taking on questions of dependency, distraction, boredom, and nostalgia in turn. After the introduction, which lays out the premise and theoretical basis of the book, Paasonen centers the second chapter, “Dependent: Agency and Infrastructure,” on questioning the well-established media rhetoric that equates reliance on networked technologies to addiction. This chapter focuses the most heavily on analyzing excerpts from student essays, a major highlight of the book. Though Paasonen is careful to provide a caveat to the inclusion of this research by acknowledging its limited sample comprised of Finnish university students, she draws helpful connections between the detailed experiences the students report regarding their internet habits and larger societal trends. Paasonen ultimately draws

from a complex web of perspectives to bring the point home that narratives of dependency often fail to capture the complexities of human-technology interaction.

The third chapter, “Distracted: Affective Value and Fickle Focus,” similarly seeks to debunk narratives that cast networked media as purely a form of distraction, but in this case, Paasonen relies more heavily on media theory, drawing on the work of Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and others. As Paasonen explores themes of value, attention, and scarcity on the internet and poses some complex questions about internet usage – for example, is our attention span on social media like that of a goldfish? (65) – she demonstrates an expansive knowledge of media theory. Occasionally, this comes at the expense of the chapter’s through line argument, which at times can be hard to decipher within the many complex connections being made. This may however serve the point, as Paasonen concludes the chapter by discussing the complexities of distraction as an affective formation which oscillates on an attention spectrum.

In the fourth chapter, “Bored: Flatness and Enchantment,” Paasonen considers boredom as an affective formation, questioning the common narrative that life was fuller and more meaningful before the internet and debunking the concept that boredom is a modern phenomenon that leads to cognitive decline. In a similar fashion to the previous chapter, she concludes that boredom also falls on a spectrum of “fascination, enchantment, interest, and excitement” and that these – along with boredom – are all a part of the networked media experience (138). She connects this to an insightful argument about the possibilities for using technology in the university classroom, which I found quite convincing. Much as this chapter prompts the academic reader to rethink how technology can be reevaluated as a pedagogical tool, the concluding chapter, “Nostalgia: A Toxic Pursuit,” beckons the reader to reevaluate the way networked media is often cast in a negative light through the draw of nostalgic memorializing of the pre-digital past. Here Paasonen reminds the reader of the many forms of social progress in recent years and suggests that considering the past as simpler than the present presupposes a white male subject position. Paasonen writes that, “critiques of the contemporary, for which there is certainly much need, should build on something other than wistful nostalgia if they are to hold critical edge” (146), serving as yet another pointed critique of the ways in which our modern society often attempts to explain the cultural implications of networked technology through overly simplified frameworks.

Dependent, Distracted, Bored calls out many of the key biases in rhetoric circulating about the internet in (affluent) society today. Paasonen maintains a

somewhat ambivalent tone about networked technology in relation to social good, emphasizing how deeply it has become ingrained in our contemporary way of living. For a media scholar such as myself who often considers the cultural harms of social media in my research, this serves as a corrective, with its reminder of the many ways in which I enjoy the benefits of social media in my own life. The call of the book seems to be to move beyond making value judgments of networked technology so that we can focus on exploring the complexities, the nuances, and the wealth of affective experiences that come with going online; there is a richness in the uncertainty.

Grace Wilsey
University of Michigan

Saunders, Rebecca. *Bodies of Work: The Labor of Sex in the Digital Age*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

The importance of digital systems cannot be understated. The slogan of Occupy, for instance, demonstrates how corporate elite control advanced technology to dominate precarious workers across the globe. Given that the “conjunction of automation and globalization enabled by information technology” has reconstituted capitalism and made “labor available to capital on a planetary scale,” Nick Dyer-Witford proposes the notion of a “cyber-proletariat” to define a “global proletariat caught up in a cybernetic vortex” (15). Caroline C. Perez’ analysis of data bias is similarly indicative of the systemic denial of women as social and economic actors. Her work demonstrates that research, which informs and is informed by data, utilizes a “male-unless-otherwise-indicated” cognitive approach and subsequently produces gender data gap (13). Additionally, since digital value chains emphasize capital’s contingency on women’s performance of neo-Taylorized clerical work, which exists in combination with their unpaid domestic labor, the emergence of what Ursula Huws calls “cybertariat” becomes inevitable.

It is in the intersection of class, gender, and digital economy that Rebecca Saunders’ *Bodies of Work* addresses digital pornography. Titled “Digital Labor and the Porn User,” Part I exhibits how visual technologies and strategies exploited in the production of pornography are conducive for capital accumulation. According to Saunders, the economic utility of heterosexual intercourse lies in its potential to perform successful reproduction. Pornography emphasizes the depiction of

decisively non-reproductive intercourse, which makes it unproductive for capitalist economic systems. Digital pornography becomes amenable to capitalism due to its economization of the “unproductive” pornographic act. Consequently, the monetization of unproductive temporalities depicts the economic governance and reconstitution of sexual desire.

Saunders points out that “excess” configures the relationship between desire and capitalism. On VividCams, for instance, viewers can view in real time a naked female performer whose body directs the viewers’ desire “not only to her image and the prospect of its greater revelation but to the woman’s sexual pleasure” (33). The controlled revelation of the performer’s body and its potential for visible orgasm creates an opportunity to capitalize on viewers’ libidinal energy and attention. Saunders outlines other similar modes of extending the users’ engagement with pornographic content by the tantalizing promise of masturbatory and sexual fulfillment.

Part II shifts its focus to “datafication of desire” and the visuality of productive labor. It begins with the analysis of hyper-categorization in pornographic content (58). By codifying sexual impulses in definitive organizational systems, digital pornography performs the bureaucratic function of disciplining desire into determinable taxonomies. That anatomical categorization is absent in the depiction of male bodies testifies to the penetration of gender biases in visual registers. The patriarchal architecture of digital pornography is complemented by its heteronormative subculture, which is established by nomenclative “Othering” of trans-performers and androcentric portrayal of female homosexuality.

A discussion on speed and bodily discipline in hard-core pornography follows next. When pornographic films chart pleasure, they illustrate the material performative labor of participating sexual bodies. Male performance is measured by the consistent maintenance of rhythmic penetration while female arousal is characterized by passive endurance of the penetrating penis. Saunders insists that the visible “sexual athleticism” of the performers is indicative of “culturo-capital imperatives of digital acceleration and categorization” (113; 109). Since the apparatus of digital pornography expects the athletic bodies of the performers to “work,” it effectively celebrates their libidinal labor as workers.

Labor produces eroticism for the implied viewers, which is why the female body becomes highly susceptible to disembodiment. The concluding sections of chapter 4 and the totality of chapter 5 delineate the repercussions of the erasure of women’s physicality. Anal gaping, for instance, demands labor from the female

body to offer “maximum visibility” to the viewers (136). The resultant dissection functions to simultaneously penetrate the anatomical gape and make visible its reality, reproducing in iconography the oppositional iterations associated with the female body. The final chapter of Part II introduces the notion of “the capitalist grotesque” in the context of pornographic systems.

It is in Part III that Saunders offers to the readers a thorough analysis of contemporary interventions in pornography and their avowed relationship with anti-capitalism. Alternative pornographies, for instance, reject labor intensity and material productivity to offer performative spontaneity to the spectators. Homogenized taxonomies are replaced by labels that seek to redefine categorization of desire at both linguistic and conceptual levels. The synonymy between sexual experience and the pornographic film, however, makes economic alienation probable and increases labor time for the productive sexual body. Consequently, the problematic dismissal of labor erases the boundary between the performative self and the self, making productivity itself a characteristic of the self.

Interventionist pornography overcomes, in some measure, the frailties of alternative pornographies, particularly the corporate emphasis on consumptive and aesthetic output. Its emphasis on collective ownership distinguishes it from the commemorative vocabulary of alternative pornographies. Saunders focuses on Shine Louise Houston’s Pink and White Productions to explicate its distinct approach to labor. Though Houston’s company films sexual interaction for the performers, the filmic output provides the spectators access to implied pleasure. Here, the social relations between the performers can serve the function of cultivating communities, which, according to Saunders, can typify the transcendence of “capitalist co-optation of community” (277).

The book’s approach to capitalism and digital pornography fosters new understandings that cross disciplinary borders. Its theoretical vocabulary contributes to emergent interventions into debates concerning the labor of pornography and its association with capitalism in contemporary digital culture. *Bodies of Work* is undoubtedly a remarkable academic achievement.

Mridula Sharma
University of Delhi

Works Cited

Dyer-Witford, Nick. *Cyber-Proletariat: Global Labor in the Digital Vortex*. Pluto Press, 2015.

Huws, Ursula. *The Making of a Cybertariat: Virtual Work in a Real World*. Monthly Review, 2003.

Perez, Caroline C. *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*. Abrams Press, 2019.

Schwartz, Roy. *Is Superman Circumcised? The Complete Jewish History of the World's Greatest Hero*. McFarland, 2021.

As a comics scholar, I have read many books that claim to offer extensive analyses of graphic narratives and their place(s) in American culture. Most fall short in achieving that goal. Roy Schwartz's *Is Superman Circumcised?* stands as a stark exception. This work contains some of the best analysis, history, and sociology pertaining to comics I have ever read. Indeed, Schwartz's title question is provocative, prompting the reader to jump quickly into this book (perhaps not as fast as a speeding bullet, but certainly quickly).

The book is organized around four parts, tracing the ancient origins of this hero to the current, postmodern meaning of Superman. Each part is subdivided into key chapters that address specific topics in this history. The "Postwar to Postmodern" section is particularly strong with its discussion of Superman through the "Silver Age," the "Bronze Age," a "Dark Age" (around his highly publicized "death" in the 1990s), and the "Modern Age." Schwartz also offers important interpretations of Hebrew parallels in both name and backstory for Superman. Especially impressive is Schwartz's incredible textual depth as he moves between the different mythos competing between the original Siegel and Shuster comics, the later DC-corporate writings, and the popular TV and film versions of the character. This depth not only offers a wide view of Superman and his impact within our culture but provides a blueprint for scholars to examine such longstanding characters.

The book is peppered with pictures to visually punctuate the comparisons Schwartz finds across storylines and depictions. His discussion of the milieu surrounding Superman's creation as a cultural response to the anti-Semitism in Western culture is important and necessary for all readers to understand. Moreover, Superman, as Schwartz proves, sometimes represents other political situations, like the New Deal and various immigration policies throughout the twentieth century. Schwartz also develops a comprehensive history of Jewish-American comics artists

and writers in the industry from the 1930s to today. He chronicles the publishing history and sales figures for Superman and the other comics throughout the various “Ages” in the Superman universe. He also explains Superman’s significance within the Jewish-American community and for oppressed peoples around the world. To quote the author, “Superman’s true superpower isn’t his strength or speed, it’s his iconicity. He’s so archetypal that, within the framework of his lore, he’s essentially a *tabula rasa*” (126). The character thus represents the best qualities for all peoples; he is the aspirational hero for humankind. Perhaps this is why the book contains numerous excerpts from comics detailing Superman’s battles against Hitler and other enemies throughout the twentieth century.

At the core of this work are philosophical arguments around the Man of Steel. Schwartz’s interpretations of archetypes (e.g., for Superman, for Clark Kent, and for Lois Lane) are especially strong and compelling. Schwartz employs Nietzsche and Jung to reinforce the biblical overtures to Superman’s qualities and symbolism (though he avoids digging into the former’s more problematic elements, such as his influence on the eugenics movement). The author also returns to the politics, morality, and identity concerns that lie at the heart of Superman’s (many) storylines. One of the most important distinctions this book makes is its focus on postwar and contemporary versions/plots around Superman. The depth of this discussion is truly remarkable and fruitful, allowing readers to grasp the evolution of this beloved superhero, especially in the current period where his character battles for relevance more than ever. We all can learn from the character and the author because “Superman is an alien in all senses of the word – extraterrestrial, foreigner, outsider – who not only personifies the best immigrant but all the best in America” (139).

Still, Schwartz does not venture far from his discussion of Jewish connections to the comics and the character, including the parallels between Superman’s “passing” as a waspy Americanized immigrant like many of his creators. In many ways, this skillful discussion of identity is the book’s true superpower. For instance, Schwartz explains that once Jack Kirby emigrates from Marvel to DC and joins the Superman team, he reinvents Jimmy Olsen’s backstory as an homage to his Jewish childhood and he infuses Jewish iconography into the comic art. Schwartz also turns attention to Superman’s legacy throughout popular culture, paying close attention to the film versions.

As a work of academic research and popular engagement, this book succeeds on multiple levels. With nearly forty pages of notes and a wealth of sources, this

book achieves monumental status as a scholarly endeavor. Yet this work is not stuffy, pedantic, or banal. Its prose is exciting and engaging, which makes it hard to put down. While not as vibrant as the comics themselves (for no book can be), this monograph animates Superman as a character that jumps off its pages and comes to life in every discussion about him. Indeed, as Schwartz notes, “Superman was like nothing seen before and everything seen thereafter” (89). I feel the same way about this extensive book.

Matthew L. Miller
University of South Carolina Aiken

Shimpach, Shawn (ed.). *The Routledge Companion to Global Television*. Routledge, 2020.

Companion guides are much like *Doctor Who* companions in that they are valuable, underappreciated, and yet never quite seem to satisfy everyone. Much like *Who* companions of late, Shimpach’s team approach, utilizing a broad collection of 41 chapters, covers most of the bases with this guide. Shimpach notes in his introduction that “Constituting television in global terms... involves attending to it all over the world without privileging a version of it in any one place in the world” (7). Understandably admitting the human limitations of such a Doctor-like impossible task, he further states that “This Companion is not an introduction to global television or global television studies, nor is it a completely comprehensive account of everything that is happening, everywhere in the world” (10). Yet the book mostly succeeds in its goals, and Shimpach has assembled a masterful range of scholars and perspectives. In this review, I shall discuss each section in brief, highlighting the most important contributions in each.

The first section, “Objects and Ideas,” both sets the foundation of TV Studies as used in the book while also setting up its typical pattern. John Hartley’s initial chapter sets up the general (yet monumentally important) question “What Is Television? A Guide for Knowing Subjects.” His focus on technology permeates several other papers in the section. Both Purnima Mankekar and Jorge A. Gonzalez eschew discussion of the physical object of a screen with Mankekar more interested in affect and Gonzalez focusing more upon the impact of social inequality upon dissemination. Gonzalez’ contribution (and, indeed, those of scholars from and of the Global South more generally) is especially welcome in a companion like this as

the very white, middle-class, and Western/Global Northern state of media studies can often lead to assumptions about the availability of technology and/or infrastructure.

In the rest of the section, Timothy Havens, Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, and Lothar Mikos all focus on history and context, taking the reader carefully through the complicated nuances of the interactions between and among state(s) and broadcast systems. Toby Miller ends the section by looking ahead and, in so doing, helping (re-)establish television as an object of study, despite its frequent ostensible deaths.

The second section focuses on audiences. As above, the pattern emerges of moving from the general to the specific, with several later chapters in the section consisting of case studies of specific genres. A focus on terminology and a reprise of concerns over technology and its impact also feature heavily in this section. Thus, while “Audiences” begins with an appeal to move past the “active v passive audience” argument (Shanti Kumar) it ends with work on both children’s TV (Anna Potter and Jeanette Steemers) and reality TV (Annette Hill) and their respective appeals to the audiences who enjoy them (Esther Milne and Aneta Podkalicka). Among these are concerns about the ethics of audience data-gathering (Jonathan Corpus Ong and Ranjana Das) and measurements of engagement via the peplemetre (Jerome Bourdon and Cécile Méadel). The most interesting chapter of the section is perhaps the one by Andy Ruddock; he argues that audiences may themselves become an archive for future researchers. That idea of audience-as-archive evokes oral and anthropological histories that can benefit (and benefit from interacting with) its sister discipline of media and cultural studies.

Section three of the book considers “Information, Programs and Spectacle.” It is in this section that the book starts to especially shine even as the sections themselves grow ever larger. Case studies become the norm, allowing for deep dives into specific areas of study. Of particular interest is Susan Turnbull and Marion McCutcheon’s work looking at the transnational movement and interpretation of Nordic Noir, as well as David Rowe’s looking at sports media distribution. The various chapters that look at how media intersects with the rise of populist movements and leaders in Turkey (Ergin Bulut and Nurçin Ýleri) and the US (Douglas Kellner, who positions the situation in the context of horror and spectacle) are also well executed. Black culture and its representation are also featured in two strong chapters (Ousmane K. Power-Greene arguing for *Roots* as historiography and Ayanna Dozier looking at Beyonce’s *Lemonade* as a

representation of race and gender in a globalized context). Asha Nadkarni's chapter on the American-produced, India-set sitcom *Outsourced* is a great examination of the complexities and nuances of both representation and of economic inequality. Esther Hamburger and Pawan Singh both examine different aspects of resilience in the global media industry, with Hamburger focusing on telenovelas and Singh on the international success of Priyanka Chopra.

The fourth section looks at cultures and communities. It essentially examines why and how people do things with television. This is a truly invaluable section for anyone who specializes in sociocultural theory relating to media as it covers everything from citizenship (Graeme Turner) and identity (Alexander Dhoest) to localization (Frederic Chaume) and diversity (Ana-Christina Ramón and Darnell Hunt). Looking at the concepts of gaming (Divya McMillin, focusing on India) and fun (Ruoyun Bai, looking at China) in the context of non-Western television are also key contributions. Nomusa Makhubu is one of the most important chapters in the volume, as the chapter looks not only at television as art (itself a worthy topic) but also views this through a postcolonial lens.

The final section examines systems, structures, and industries. Much like the earlier sections, this one begins generally, with Jean K. Chalaby's chapter on media globalization as a function of value. It then moves on to regional media in a broadly chronological progression (Aniko Imre on Eastern European media in the Cold War, Joe F. Khalil on Arab TV, Guillermo Mastrini and María Trinidad García Leiva on Ibero-American TV industries, and Lyombe Eko on African TV and convergence). China (Ying Zhu) and Turkey (Ece Algan) are both given as case studies relating to politics and media control while South African TV's industrial progression is placed in a global context (Ruth Teer-Tomaselli). The final three chapters are some of the more interesting case studies as they focus on digital media. Both Martin Fredriksson and Ramon Lobato take as their foci illegal downloads and other "informal distribution" (Lobato) networks. These are critically important in understanding globalization as it pertains to media, yet they can often be overlooked. Aymar Jean Christian rounds out the book by looking at the production and distribution of webseries, another important aspect of contemporary television.

Though edited collections can somewhat vary in quality across their chapters, this book is uniformly excellent. It makes for a strong, solid guide that can be used as student readings as well as for scholarly work. I might have liked to see more

space given over to Latin America or Asia outside India and China, but overall, this Companion is, in a (*Who*) word, fantastic.

Melissa Beattie
America University of Armenia

Film and Game Reviews

Black Widow. Dir. Cate Shortland. Screenplay by Eric Pearson. Perf. Scarlett Johansson, Florence Pugh, David Harbour, and Rachel Weisz. Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2021.

The recently released *Black Widow* film gives followers of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) a look at where Natasha Romanoff, AKA Black Widow, has been between *Captain America: Civil War* (Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, 2016) and *Avengers: Infinity War* (Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, 2018). The character seemed to be MIA during this time and when we see her again, she has adopted a platinum blonde bob (*Captain America: Civil War* and *Avengers: Infinity War*). Yet that is not all that was different. I could not quite put my finger on it then, but Natasha had more of a presence to her, something that, after viewing her solo film, clicked with me...she was not a new character, she was her own character. She had found her identity in this absence.

Natasha (Scarlett Johansson) seems different because she is free. She is finally free from the psychological control of the Red Room. Since joining The Avengers, she has developed agency, and in exercising that agency she followed her gut, which, in this case, meant betraying the US government and going on the run, seemingly losing her super-heroic family in the process. This is where *Black Widow* picks up.

Prefacing the opening credits, viewers see a snapshot of Natasha's childhood Before Red Room (BRR). This film gives viewers a "before and after" of Natasha, revealing that she was placed with a "family" in Ohio consisting of Alexei (David Harbour), Melina (Rachel Weisz), and Yelena (Florence Pugh), all similarly controlled by Dreykov (Ray Winstone), the vicious director of the Red Room. BRR Natasha had blue hair, converse sneakers and just wanted to be a kid and play with her little "sister." While viewers do not see how Natasha originally landed in Dreykov's grasp, the film implies that she, like many young, forgotten girls, was trafficked. The film does an excellent job of homing in on the reality of the danger of human trafficking with the help of an eerie cover of Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit." After Red Room (ARR) Natasha underwent intense psychological control that, with the help of Hawkeye, she managed to wake up from. Over the course of the MCU films, viewers have seen Natasha deal with the aftermath of the Red

Room, and it is frustrating to know that she will never fully rid herself of what happened to her.

Viewers are then brought back to 2016, with Natasha on the run after the Avengers disbanded. Changes to her character are obvious; she no longer wears a uniform or a disguise, and she is not running around in heels. She wears her hair up and dresses in more comfortable clothing. This new style is still technically a disguise, but her mission now is comfort and relaxation, something viewers have not seen from her in previous films.

Following an epic fight scene with a brain-washed adult Yelena, Natasha learns that Dreykov still lives and is mass producing Widows. Until now, Natasha thought that she had killed Dreykov. The shift in her demeanor is evident and viewers see the world around her stop as she is forced to confront her past. She knows she must finish the job this time. I cannot help but think that this film would have been drastically different or maybe not exist at all had Natasha confirmed her kill all those years ago. It seems out of character for her, especially fresh from Dreykov's control, to miss a detail like that. This film does answer the question of what Natasha and Clint mean whenever they reference Budapest, but not why they would just assume someone of Dreykov's status to be dead instead of confirming it.

In her second chance to kill Dreykov, Natasha enlists her BRR "family." Despite not being related by blood, the bond they created was strong and it was nice to see Natasha interact with a mother figure. I honestly did not see the collaboration coming, though, as I thought Melina was going to betray her. It was just sad that Natasha was not more compassionate about Yelena's realization that her family was not real. Yelena's reunion with Alexei (aka the Soviet super soldier Red Guardian) makes for a wonderful "father-daughter" moment, but the film sort of pushes Natasha aside at that point to focus on Florence Pugh's acting skills. While this shift in focus is only really evident for this moment, why would the producers choose to let someone emotionally overshadow Natasha in her own film? She knew the family was not real but could have at least done something other than just sit there.

Later, during the film's climactic extended battle sequence, Natasha attempts to kill Dreykov once and for all but discovers that a pheromone lock prevents her from hurting him. Dreykov then falls into the typical villain monologue, revealing his plan. Natasha, determined to wipe her ledger clean, resorts to breaking her own nose to bypass the pheromone lock and thus attack Dreykov. This is an interesting and refreshing choice for Natasha as the MCU has previously avoided injuring her

face with more than just a scratch. She kills Dreykov by using her intellect rather than her sexy fighting pose, though it must be noted that she only gains the ability to defeat him through self-harm.

Now that Dreykov is dead and the Widows are free, Natasha leans into her agency even further by dying her hair blonde. This physical transformation recalls the start of the film, indicating that Natasha has come full circle and can finally be at peace. She now keeps her hair out of her face and seems to have retired the heels for good, which is much different from when we first meet Natasha in *Iron Man 2* (Jon Favreau, 2010). She looks more like a fighter than a model now. Natasha leaves her past behind to head back to her Avengers family and, well, we know what happens next (as detailed in *Avengers: Endgame*, 2019, directed by Anthony Russo and Joe Russo).

A *Black Widow* solo film has been in development since 2004, long before Scarlett Johansson was even cast, and while the delay was unacceptably long, backing the film with a female-led crew made the whole endeavor worth the wait. *Black Widow* was finally released July 9, 2021, simultaneously in U.S. theaters and on Disney+ after multiple delays due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This film gave Natasha the strength to separate herself from her past, proving that her identity is more than the sum of her trauma. Yes, she was a Widow, but her solo outing proves that she is no longer an unthinking assassin beholden to the whims of evil men. She is taking her training and skills and using them how she feels they should be used, not how she is ordered to use them (echoing her decision to go rogue in *Captain America: Civil War*).

Scarlett Johansson also came into her own with this film. She proved that she is not just the token girl Avenger or the sexy one; she is a leading actress who fronted a successful solo film and found the courage to fight Disney for their breach in contract (Los Angeles Superior Court). It appears Disney tried to shorthand Johansson on her salary when they decided to simultaneously release the film through Disney+ as well as in theaters without renegotiating her contract. The lawsuit was settled for a reported sum of \$40 million (see Hughes), but it stirred up enough buzz for other actors and actresses to reread their contracts and push back against Disney's denial (Lapreziosa).

By the end of the film, the title character no longer wears heels or a low-cut catsuit to battle, nor does she pretend her luscious locks are not getting in her face. Johansson helped make those decisions, ensuring she no longer appears on screen to appease the male gaze; Natasha is not there to complement a man's story and she

certainly is not only there to be half of a lazy romantic storyline. *Black Widow* is her story. She is Natasha Romanoff. Avenger.

Elizabeth Shiller
Ohio University

Works Cited

Hughes, William. "UPDATE: Scarlett Johansson reportedly got \$40 million in *Black Widow* settlement." *AVClub*, 1 Oct. 2021, <https://www.avclub.com/disney-and-scarjo-suddenly-settle-their-big-black-widow-1847779316>.

Lapreziosa, Madeline. "Every way Scarlett Johansson's *Black Widow* Lawsuit Has Impacted Disney & MCU." *ScreenRant*, 11 Sept. 2021, screenrant.com/scarlett-johansson-black-widow-lawsuit-disney-marvel-changes.

Los Angeles Superior Court. Periwinkle Entertainment, Inc., f/s/o Scarlett Johansson v. The Walt Disney Company, Kasowitz Benson Torres LLP Attorneys at Law, 2021, pp. 1-18. *Deadline.com*, deadline.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Complaint_Black-Widow-1-WM.pdf.

Cosmic Top Secret, Klassefilm and Those Eyes, Nintendo Switch, 2021.

The history of mass media entertainment is replete with adaptations of literary works into film and television; within the past several decades, adaptations of video games into films have met with uneven success. Adaptations of literary works into video games occur, although less frequently. Far less common is the adaptation of a real-life story or documentary into a video game. Danish game company Klassefilm produced one of these rarities in 2018, and its release on the Nintendo Switch in 2021 means the game is now widely available for game scholars and students to experience this unique metaphor for uncovering and dealing with secrets.

Developed by Trine Laier in 2012 while she attended the National Film School of Denmark, the game *Cosmic Top Secret* began as an animated documentary titled *Yderst Hemmeligt (Extremely Secret)* (Dam; Stidsing; Vesti); the next year, the

Danish Film Institute provided additional funding to develop the idea into an adventure game (Stidsing). While the project began as an animated documentary, Laier wanted it to become a game as she believes they “have a huge potential for communicating documentary material” (Dam). As director and screenwriter, Laier presents stories from her life, her parents’ lives, and her country’s government, moving deeper into classified material as the story unfolds. The result is what game producing companies Klassefilm and Those Eyes call a “‘docu-game’ that will appeal to any gamer.”

Cosmic Top Secret follows Danish woman T, for Trine, as she investigates her father’s work with the Danish Defense Intelligence Service during the Cold War. However, with a tagline of “Do we really know each other?” Laier presents the game more as “an autobiographical adventure video game” where “surreal elements, human relationships, history, and secrecy come together to form a complex gaming experience.” The surrealness emerges first in the aesthetics, as the game design mixes photographs with cardboard cut-outs to create a look that is, at times, simultaneously cartoonish and serious.

This approach expands over the course of the game through different levels to produce T’s subjectivity as she works to understand her parents, her history, and her future (which includes giving birth, as the game eventually reveals that she is pregnant). Laier describes the game’s overall design and narrative as the need for a family and a society to deal with their “‘baggage’” as people wrestle with what is “‘worth passing on to our children and future generations’” (Dam). When T becomes depressed, her cardboard body falls apart, and the player must drag her body parts back together to help her get going again. When worried about her elderly father’s depression, the entire world around him goes grayscale, and T must find a way to bring light back into his life. Using surrealism to produce the main character’s subjective experience of events and the narrative is common in film and television, and indeed has become more frequent in independent games, especially those made by women.

What makes *Cosmic Top Secret* unique in this subgenre of independent games is the attempt to replicate the experience of a documentarian or historian attempting to uncover the truth of past events. In seeking to connect with her parents as she is about to become one herself, T conducts interviews and gathers documents and artifacts to understand the work that her father performed with the first electronic computer operated by the Danish government, DASK. Through six levels of play, players learn the history of T’s parents, uncovering secrets along with T about her

parents' lives before she was born as well as about the Danish government's activities during the height of the Cold War. Each level requires players to gather nine pieces of intelligence, and each piece of intelligence is a photograph or document that Laier gathered during her research. The paper collage aesthetic, then, also reflects Laier's work to piece together her family's history through physical media.

In a sense, the game adapts the experiences of watching a documentary, engaging in an archeological dig, and playing a puzzle. Because of its interesting convergent nature, the game would be usefully employed in a course on Danish history. As those do not occur much outside of Denmark, the game is perhaps more interesting for those game scholars and students exploring alternative approaches to develop play experiences. Additionally, digital media scholars would find investigating the blurred genres and authorial intentions of this game fascinating. Serious games are an increasingly important segment of the gaming world, and this game would help address questions of how to balance the fun of play with the seriousness of learning. In some ways, the cartoonish visuals undercut the seriousness of discussing nuclear war and death, but having the entire game be extremely photorealistic would diminish the desire to engage with the game. A final possibility for further investigating this game would be to consider what happens when a livestreamer plays it as a Let's Play video: at that point, are the livestreamer's viewers just watching a documentary, one that has commentary from the livestreamer never intended by the original game's authors?

The game is available on Steam, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch, and Apple and Android app stores. When playing it, be mindful of the "paper-like" controls, as T moves by transforming into a crumpled paper ball that can also essentially fly around when jumping (and, when taking the form of a paper airplane, actually does fly around). It may be that the Nintendo Switch Joy Cons were suffering from left stick drift, but I found the controls very touchy and requiring delicate operations to work properly, suggesting that patience is another learning experience received from this altogether fascinating game.

CarrieLynn D. Reinhard,
Dominican University

Works Cited

- Dam, Freja. "Espionage and cutouts." *Det Dansk Filminstitut*, 8 Nov. 2017, www.dfi.dk/en/english/news/espionage-and-cutouts.
- Klassefilm and Those Eyes. *Cosmic Top Secret*, www.cosmictopsecretgame.com, accessed 3 Sept. 2021.
- Stidsing, Dorte R. "Extremely secret – Adventure game in development." *Det Dansk Filminstitut*, 20 June 2013, www.dfi.dk/nyheder/yderst-hemmeligt-adventurespil-i-udvikling.
- Vesti, Rasmus. "Cosmic Top Secret: Calling all agents!" *Det Dansk Filminstitut*, 14 Nov. 2018, www.dfi.dk/nyheder/cosmic-top-secret-kalder-alle-agenter.

The Medium, Paolo Granata, 2021.

For Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, successful game design hinges on the notion of meaningful play, a concept they borrow from Johann Huizinga. Salen and Zimmerman explain that all game systems are "designed to support meaningful kinds of choice making" whereby all choices affect "the overall system of the game" (33). Meaningful play arises from "the relationship between player action and system outcome," and therefore the most successful games are those in which the "relationships between actions and outcomes [...] are both *discernible* and *integrated* into the larger context of the game" (34, italics in original). According to Salen and Zimmerman, successful games provide players with discernible and integrated feedback that lets them know they are on the right track and that their choices and actions have meaning. Yet good games also incorporate negative feedback loops to bring balance to the system and prevent players from experiencing boredom; for instance, the *Mario Kart* games introduced the dreaded blue shell to shake things up and put both novice and expert players on a somewhat even playing field. Paolo Granata, a cross-disciplinary media scholar at the University of Toronto, and his students in the Book & Media Studies program were clearly aware of these ideas when they developed *The Medium*, a mostly successful attempt to adapt Marshall McLuhan's book (co-written with his son, Eric) *Laws of Media* into the board game medium.

According to the back of the box, *The Medium* provides players with a "thought-provoking experience [that] encourages us to become aware of the media environment by recognizing its unintended and invisible functions and/or implications." Incorporating elements of both *Catch Phrase* (trying to get your teammate to guess a word or phrase) and the recent board game *Gravwell*

(specifically in the design of the board), *The Medium* uses McLuhan's tetrad (i.e., four questions that can be asked to understand the effects of a given medium) to drive the gameplay. The tetrad consists of the following questions:

1. What does the medium enhance or improve?
2. What does it replace or make obsolete?
3. What does it retrieve or bring back from the past?
4. What does it reverse or flip into? What are its unintended complications?

In addition, *The Medium* draws heavily on McLuhan's concept of the maelstrom (lifted from Edgar Allan Poe's short story "A Descent into the Maelstrom"), which likens contemporary culture to a complex and inescapable vortex that sweeps up everyone and everything. In this context, the vortex serves as the main element of negative feedback (and the game's primary frustration).

The game's components consist of a game board designed to represent the maelstrom (depicted as a colorful swirl), four game pawns, 64 medium cards, eight wild cards (each of which features a quote from McLuhan along with an accompanying explanation), a one-minute timer, a six-sided die, and a clearly and concisely written rulebook. Here it is useful to quote at length the game description provided in the instructions:

The game is played in teams of two or more players. Each round, one team member tries to get their team to guess the medium on the card. Clues take the form of answers to the four questions of the McLuhans' Laws of Media. Teams move along the board when a medium is guessed correctly, pulling themselves out of the maelstrom.

To win the game, players must answer enough questions to escape the maelstrom and cross the finish line. At the start of each turn, each team choose a messenger who draws a card and keeps it secret from all other players. They then roll the die to determine which Laws of Media they will use to provide their teammate(s) with clues about the medium or technology listed on the card within the one-minute time limit. Messengers can give only one clue while their teammates, who may confer with one another, can offer only one response. If they guess correctly, they move forward, but if they guess incorrectly, they pass the card to the next team who must use the next law of media listed counterclockwise on the board. If all teams fail to guess the medium or technology on the card, everyone must move their pieces back one space. The first team to cross the finish line of their track wins the game.

The Medium, which supports two or more players (with no upper limit), does a fine job of mixing learning with enjoyable gameplay, though it often seems more suited for the classroom environment rather than a casual game night with friends (especially if they are of the non-academic variety). A member of my gaming group remarked that the game is fun, but it is not necessarily the first game they would reach for during our regular weekend play sessions. Nevertheless, *The Medium* offers players of all stripes a pleasurable experience thanks to its highly communal nature. Social interaction emerges as perhaps the game's greatest strength, making it an ideal icebreaker activity in nearly any media studies course. *The Medium* promotes and rewards communication between players whether they are on a team or competing with one another, and it encourages active listening so players can build on one another's clues. Moreover, it inspires a great deal of amusing silliness as players struggle to come up with clues or provide incorrect answers.

The Medium's primary drawback is that it might contain too much negative feedback. Between the rule that forces players to move back one space should everyone fail to guess the medium or technology and the Whirlpool Spaces, which send players to a different track several spaces back from their original location, play sessions can be prolonged well past the point of fun (a weakness the game shares with *Monopoly*). This downside might inspire players to implement house rules that remove the rule about moving back one space (my group eventually ignored that rule and just advanced to the next turn without moving back a space). It could also prove detrimental to using the game in the classroom given the time constraints imposed on both teachers and students. Of course, it could be argued that the game successfully adapts McLuhan's writings as it vacillates between pleasurable and frustrating. Despite that one (admittedly rather large) shortcoming, *The Medium* is both fun and educational, offering players an overall pleasant gaming experience while teaching them about the media ecology. In that regard, it achieves a sense of meaningful play.

Christopher J. Olson
University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee

Works Cited

Salen, Katie, and Eric Zimmerman. *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. MIT Press, 2004.

POPULAR CULTURE STUDIES JOURNAL

ABOUT

The *Popular Culture Studies Journal* is an academic, peer-reviewed, refereed journal for scholars, academics, and students from the many disciplines that study popular culture. The journal serves the MPCA/ACA membership, as well as scholars globally who recognize and support its mission based on expanding the way we view popular culture as a fundamental component within the contemporary world.

AIMS AND SCOPE

Popular culture is at the heart of democratic citizenship. It serves as an engine driving technology, innovation, and information, as well as a methodological lens employed by the many fields that examine culture, often from an interdisciplinary perspective. Managed by The Midwest Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association (MPCA/ACA), The *Popular Culture Studies Journal (PCSJ)* is an academic, refereed journal for scholars, academics, and students from the many disciplines that study America and American culture. The journal serves its membership and scholars globally who recognize and support its mission based on expanding the way we view popular culture as a fundamental component within the contemporary world.

MICHAEL T. MARSDEN AWARD

Each year, the *Popular Culture Studies Journal* awards one original research paper published in either issue with the Michael T. Marsden Award for outstanding original contribution to the field of popular culture studies. Marsden earned his Ph.D. in 1972 from Bowling Green State University, joining his mentor, Ray Browne, who had just established the Center for the Study of Popular Culture. Marsden was an early proponent of this journal, and we recognize his help and support with this annual award, presented every October at the MPCA/ACA conference. Winning articles are also labeled on this website.

EDITOR

CarrieLynn D. Reinhard, Ph.D.
pcsj@mpcaaca.org

FOR SUBMITTING ARTICLES

The *Popular Culture Studies Journal* is an academic, peer-reviewed, refereed journal for scholars, academics, and students from the many disciplines that study popular culture. The journal serves the MPCA/ACA membership, as well as scholars globally who recognize and support its mission based on expanding the way we view popular culture as a fundamental component within the contemporary world.

TOPICS COVERED:

Based on analysis of the proceedings of the Midwest PCA/ACA and the national organization reveals that most popular culture scholars are interested in American-based:

- Film
- Music and Dance
- Television
- Sports
- Celebrities and Brands
- Literature
- Comics/Graphic Novels
- Games
- Animation
- Theater
- Fashion
- Computers
- Social Media
- World Wide Web
- Mobile Computers
- Professional Wrestling
- Archives and Museums
- Food and Drink
- Fairs, Festivals, and Carnivals
- Toys
- DIY and Crafting

However, many scholars approach these topics from an interdisciplinary perspective, which adds significant value over single-issue or more focused/specialized journals.

All contributions to the *Popular Culture Studies Journal* will be forwarded to members of the Editorial Board or other reviewers for comment. Manuscripts must not be previously published, nor should they be submitted for publication elsewhere while being reviewed by the *PCSJ*'s Editorial Board.

Submissions (three documents, MS WORD, MLA) should be submitted via our [PCSJ Google Forms](#).

1) Short Bio: On a separate document, please also include a short (100 words) bio. We will include this upon acceptance and publication.

2) Title Page: A single title page must accompany the email, containing complete contact information (address, phone number, e-mail address).

3) Manuscript: On the first page of the manuscript, only include the article's title, being sure not to include the author's name. The journal employs a "blind review" process, meaning that a copy of the article will be sent to reviewers without revealing the author's name. Please include the works cited with your manuscript.

Essays should range between 15-25 pages of double-spaced text in 12 pt. Times New Roman font, including all images, endnotes, and Works Cited pages. Please note that the 15-page minimum should be 15 pages of written article material. Less than 15 pages of written material will be rejected and the author asked to develop the article further. Essays should also be written in clear US English in the active voice and third person, in a style accessible to the broadest possible audience. Authors should be sensitive to the social implications of language and choose wording free of discriminatory overtones.

For documentation, the *Popular Culture Studies Journal* follows the Modern Language Association style, as articulated by Joseph Gibaldi and Walter S. Achtert in the paperback *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (New York: MLA), and in *The MLA Style Manual* (New York: MLA). The most current editions of both guides will be the requested editions for use. This style calls for a Works Cited list, with parenthetical author/page references in the text. This approach reduces the number of notes, which provide further references or explanation.

For punctuation, capitalization, hyphenation, and other matters of style, follow the most recent *MLA Handbook* and the *MLA Style Manual*, supplemented as

necessary by *The Chicago Manual of Style* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press). The most current edition of the guide will be the requested edition for use.

It is essential for authors to check, correct, and bring manuscripts up to date before final submission. Authors should verify facts, names of people, places, and dates, and double-check all direct quotations and entries in the Works Cited list. Manuscripts not in MLA style will be returned without review.

We are happy to receive digital artwork. Please save line artwork (vector graphics) as Encapsulated PostScript (EPS) and bitmap files (halftones or photographic images) as Tagged Image Format (TIFF), with a resolution of at least 300 dpi at final size. Do not send native file formats. Please contact the editor for discussion of including artwork.

Upon acceptance of a manuscript, authors are required to sign a form transferring the copyright from the author to the publisher. A copy will be sent to authors at the time of acceptance.

Before final submission, the author will be responsible for obtaining letters of permission for illustrations and for quotations that go beyond “fair use,” as defined by current copyright law.

FOR SUBMITTING REVIEWS

The *Popular Culture Studies Journal* is seeking authors to review works on any aspect of U.S. or international popular culture. In particular, we are interested in books, films, videos, websites, or any other works that critically engage popular culture that have been published, released, or posted in the last two years. We will also consider older seminal pieces that deserve a second look. If you submit a review of the latter, a rationale for the relevance of the review today will be expected.

Reviews should adhere to the ethos of the *PCSJ* and be largely positive with any criticism of the work being constructive in nature. For more information about this journal, please visit: mpcaaca.org/the-popular-culture-studies-journal.

Written reviews should be roughly 800-1,000 words and should be typed, double-spaced with 12 pt. Times New Roman font. Research and documentation must adhere to *The MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* and *The MLA Style Manual*, 8th edition, which requires a Works Cited list, with parenthetical author/page references in the text. Punctuation, capitalization, hyphenation, and other matters of style must also follow *The MLA Handbook* and *The MLA Style Manual*. If you are interested in submitting any alternative form of review, please contact the reviews editor directly with your proposed format. Guidelines will be determined depending on the proposed format.

Reviews should be sent electronically to Christopher J. Olson at olson429@uwm.edu with **PCSJ Review and the author's last name in the subject line**. Reviews should include both the review and the reviewer's complete contact information (name, university affiliation, address and email). Reviews should be sent as Microsoft Word attachments in .doc or .docx format, unless an alternative format has been approved by the editor.

If you are interested in reviewing for the *Popular Culture Studies Journal* or if you are an author or publisher with a work you would like to have reviewed, then please contact Christopher at the following address or email:

Christopher J. Olson, Reviews Editor
Email: olson429@uwm.edu

FOR REVIEWING ARTICLES

Our reviewers are important to us. We appreciate their service as well as the significant role our reviews play in ensuring quality of our publication.

If you are interested in being part of the *Popular Culture Studies Journal* as a reviewer, please complete our online form (mpcaaca.org/the-popular-culture-studies-journal/for-article-reviewers).

For our reviewers who would like a certificate for service, please complete our online form (mpcaaca.org/the-popular-culture-studies-journal/for-article-reviewers).

UPCOMING SPECIAL ISSUES

In addition to *PCSJ* calls for ongoing journal and reviews submissions (above), we are also planning for special issues. In other words, the special issues will appear alongside *PCSJ* articles and reviews in upcoming volumes. If you have an idea of a special issue, please contact CarrieLynn D. Reinhard at pcsj@mpcaaca.org.

APRIL 2022: FOOD, POPULAR CULTURE, AND THE PANDEMIC

TBA: MENTAL HEALTH AND FANDOM

MidwestPCA/ACA

The Midwest Popular Culture Association / American Culture Association is a regional branch of the Popular Culture Association / American Culture Association. The organization held its first conference in Duluth, Minnesota, in 1973. After a five-year hiatus during the 1990s, the organization held a come-back conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 2002.

MPCA/ACA usually holds its annual conference in a large Midwestern city in the United States. In the last several years, conferences have been held in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Ohio. Upcoming conferences will be held in Missouri and Indiana. The conference typically is held in October.

Anyone is welcome to join and submit proposals for consideration at the MPCA/ACA conference. Membership in MPCA/ACA is by no means limited to those working or living in the Midwest or even the United States. In fact, presenters have come from as far away as Florida and California, and Norway and Australia.

mpcaaca.org

POPULAR CULTURE STUDIES JOURNAL

VOLUME 9

ISSUE 2

2021

Editorial Introduction: Livestreaming and Television

CARRIELYNN D. REINHARD

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLES:

Serious Play: Livestreaming, Community, and Popular Culture

Introduction to the Special Issue on Livestreaming as Popular Culture

ERIK KERSTING, JANELLE MALAGON, AND CHRISTOPHER J. OLSON

Before You Step into the Stream

ERIK KERSTING, JANELLE MALAGON, AND STUART MOULTHROP

Live Streaming and Archiving the Hegemony of Play

TAYLORE WOODHOUSE

From Parallel Play to Co-Play: Forms of Play in Live Streaming Labor

KYLE BOHUNICKY, LINDSAY WATKINS, AND JEREMY FRUSCO

Metagamining Attention: Defining the Metagame Through the Economy of Attention on Twitch

AILEA MERRIAM-PIGG

Watch Me Make History: Reenacting and Remaking the Past in Historical Game Live Streams

KIRK LUNDBLADE

Intimacy Games: *Critical Role*'s Struggle to Maintain Its Tabletop Authenticity

ERIK KERSTING

The Video Video Game: On Watching Let's Plays

MELANIE OBERG

"No Gods, No Kings, Only Mon!": *Twitch Plays Pokémon* as a Case Study in Folkloric Recreation

PETER CULLEN BRYAN

Not Going Viral: Amateur Livestreamers, Volunteerism, and Privacy on Discord

NICHOLAS-BRIE GUARRIELLO

Moving the Show Online: An Analysis of DIY Virtual Venues

PETER J. WOODS

ARTICLES: REGULAR SUBMISSIONS

"Just Jessica Jones": Challenging Trauma Representation and New Trauma Metaphors in Melissa Rosenberg's *Jessica Jones*

SEAN TRAVERS

Conceptual Blending in Presidential Politics: How *The Great Gatsby* Explained Donald Trump, 2015-2018

E. FLETCHER MCCLELLAN AND KAYLA GRUBER

***Apocalypse Now*: Performing Imperialism and the Apocalypse**

AMANDA DAWSON

The Coffeehouse, The Diner, The Bar: The Rise and Fall of Television's Favorite Third Places

EMMA J. GIST

Singing Truth to Power: Folk Music and Political Resistance in Steven Conrad's *Patriot*

LYNN D. ZIMMERMAN

ARTICLES: STUDENT SHOWCASE

"Hey, What's the Matter with Your Friend?": Disability and Productive Staring in *The X-Files*

MITCH PLOSKONKA

Love is (Color)Blind: Constructing Race Non-Visually on Reality TV

KENDALL ARTZ

We Ate Them to Destroy Them: Carnivores, Cannibals, and the Critique of Mass-Market Feminism in the Age of Consumption

EMILY NASER-HALL

The *Popular Culture Studies Journal* Reviews: Introduction

CHRISTOPHER J. OLSON

REVIEWS: BOOK, FILM, AND GAME

ABOUT THE JOURNAL