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BRAIN TINGLES AND SCARY HOLES: ASMR, TRYPHOBIA, AND THE SENSORIAL WEB

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There has been a renewed interest in embodied, sensory experiences of everyday life, particularly within the fields of sociology and anthropology (Howes, 2003; Low, 2013; Parisi, 2008; Pink, 2009; Porcello, Meintjes, Ochoa, & Samuels, 2010). Likewise, within new media studies there has been interest in refocusing our investigations of online environments through the lens of materiality (Lievrouw, 2014) and affect (Garde-Hansen & Gorton, 2013). Such approaches are much needed course corrections if we are to counter the discourse of digital dualism which has often dominated media and popular rhetoric when discussing life “online” (Jurgenson, 2011). They are especially important if we wish to engage in deeper explorations of phenomena that seem at first glance odd or peculiar, as they provide a non-judgmental sensitizing framework for unpacking the complexities of human experience. Two such phenomena, autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR) and trypophobia, serve as case studies for understanding the ways in which individuals experience and make use of the web as a sensorial playground.

ASMR, or “sounds that feel good,” is described as a kind of brain tingling that occurs when listening to certain sounds. ASMR communities, such as www.reddit.com/r/asmr, consist of the making, sharing, and discussion of videos said to trigger ASMR feelings: the sounds of quiet whispering, crinkling or tapping. Most ASMR videos feature an individual (usually female) doing mundane tasks like folding towels or unboxing makeup or mixing drinks. Bob Ross’ *Joy of Painting*, a popular PBS television series from the 1980s and early 90s, is considered the quintessential ASMR trigger. It features the painter quietly encouraging the viewer that their work is lovely (filled with “little happy trees”), softly mixing paints, and gently applying them to canvas with a palette knife (Abbruzzese, 2015).

Trypophobia, on the other hand, is a “phobic” aversion to images (static or animated) of holes or cracks. Some argue that the strong feelings that these images inspire may be rooted in evolutionary development, as holes are often a sign of disease or illness (Cole & Wilkins, 2013). And, while it’s true that some of the images shared on Reddit’s trypophobia subreddit ([/r/trypophobia](http://r/trypophobia)) and other forums feature those found in nature (lotus seed pods or corals, for example, are common triggers), other images are

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photographic manipulations, such as a picture of a person's hand with seed pods superimposed onto the skin. The creation and sharing of these kinds of images suggest a fascination with and complex desire to experience the grotesque – and in, particular, create a kind of dual feeling of both attraction and repulsion in the viewer (Edwards & Graulund, 2013).

The commentary about both phenomena is similar, albeit inspiring opposite affective reactions. ASMR discussions revolve around the feelings of pleasure that certain videos offer, specifically detailing the sense of calmness, or tingly feelings that a person's soft voice or the sounds of a quiet activity in which they are engaging inspires in the viewer. For those triggered by ASMR, the videos are popular folk cures for insomnia. Likewise, trypophobia triggers inspire conversation about the intense feelings of revulsion, with specific discussions of how unsettling and disturbing a particular image is. Trypophobia sufferers often discuss how particular images will cause itching or intense feelings of nausea. Both suggest that the feelings triggered by a particular ASMR video or trypophobia image last far longer than the actual exposure, somehow tapping into a primitive aspect of human experience that can stay with one throughout the day. Likewise, both ASMR and trypophobia as phenomena are uniquely suited to the web. They are fundamentally social, memetic experiences (unsurprisingly, both have their own *Know Your Meme* entries). Neither phenomenon is recognized officially, although both are starting to be discussed by neurologists and medical professionals (Ahuja, 2013; Cole & Wilkins, 2013; Fairington, 2014).

Using a mixture of psychoanalytic (Lacan, 2002) and feminist theory (Creed, 1993; Price & Shildrick, 1999), I argue that both ASMR and trypophobia are more than just sociogenic illnesses (Bartholomew & Wessley, 2002). They reflect a desire within us to collectively experience the affective, sensorial web: both the grotesque (in the case of trypophobia) and the pleasurable (in the case of ASMR). They are also demonstrations of what Mark Dery (1999) called the pyrotechnic insanitarium – the carnivalesque, postmodern moment in which American culture finds itself currently. Likewise, both have interesting gendered dimensions worth probing: holes that can be read as representing aspects of the monstrous feminine and whereas feminine voice and affect are often valorized in ASMR videos. And the communities that create, share, and revel in this kind of material offer new possibilities for understanding the complexities of how online experiences are fundamentally embodied and sensory.

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WHO <3'S SLENDY? MAKING SENSE OF SLENDER MAN FANDOM

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The Slender Man Mythos

Since 2009, the Slender Man has been a popular Internet mythology. Beginning on the irreverent web forum, Something Awful, the character was crowd-sourced in a "Make Paranormal Images" thread, and quickly became popular, with web series such as *Marble Hornets*, *TribeTwelve*, *EverymanHYBRID*, and *DarkHarvest*. The meme also traveled in other directions, sparking the popular game *Slender: The 8 Pages* (and its follow-up, *Slender: The Arrival*). Versions of the myth appear on web sites such as Creepypasta, SlenderNation, and have sparked several reddit threads (AUTHOR, YEAR). In the past year, the Slender Man has gotten significant attention for potentially sparking an attempted murder (Dewey, 2014).

The characteristics of this supernatural horror character vary, but have some consistent elements: he is always unnaturally tall, has no face, has long arms or several tendrils, and an unearthly presence. While his specific modus operandi is unknown, early versions of the story had him stalking children – later versions also involved young adults. Often, the Slender Man drives his victims insane, or else they go missing. Variations of the story can be understood as a kind of "open-sourcing" (Reagle, 2004) of the horror genre, and as the Slender Man continued to develop, audiences found new and compelling ways to understand him (AUTHOR, YEAR).

This process of the open-sourcing of a character means that there is no centralized control over how a character becomes reinterpreted by discursive audiences. As the meme continued to develop, so have versions of the Slender Man that exist in peculiar pockets of fandom – groups and individuals have found ways to interpret, re-interpret, and re-shape this once figure of horror into versions where he is a love interest, a sympathetic character, and a father figure.

In many ways these re-interpretations might seem to disrupt the original. Yet, the character, as an offset of fan communities makes sense of itself; the faceless Slender Man can be interpreted and understood as anything or anyone. A faceless character gets to be re-constructed by fan communities based on their own desires and insecurities. A faceless Slender Man gets to have whatever face the fan chooses.

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Slender Fandom

Fan studies is a well-established field which contextualizes how fans reinterpret and repurpose film, television, and other forms of media to better understand primary texts, community actions, socio-political implications, and audience reception of media objects (Hellekson & Busse 2014). According to Henry Jenkins (1992), fan fiction writers use methods of “textual poaching” (as originally described by Michel de Certeau) to appropriate a fictional text and “reread them in a fashion that serves different interests, as spectators who transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture” (Jenkins 1992, p. 23).

One issue in studying digitally crowd-sourced works, such as the Slender Man, is a distinct lack of canon, as works are generated *through* fan communities, not in spite of them. The minimal canon the to Slender Man myth creates a complex problem in terms of fan studies. While, on the one hand, the original story was only two sentences and two photographs (Chess, 2012), the majority of earlier fans *chose* to continue developing the myth in terms of horror themes. As the popularity of the character expanded, the meme also began to take on elements of parody. Booth (2013) suggests that fan-created parodies help highlight the playfulness of fan-created works. Popular Slender Man parodies include the existence of so-called siblings, such as his fashionable brother “Trender Man” and the effusive “Splendor Man” (Chess & Newsom, 2014).

As the character developed in *expected* ways, new versions of the Slender Man began to find their home in places such as FanFiction.net, Tumblr, YouTube, DeviantArt, and even crafting spaces such as Etsy. Alternative versions of the Slender Man vary dramatically from the originals: he is often positioned as a love interest, a father figure, or a sympathetic character.

The following examples help to give an overview of the range of stories, videos, and images I intend to use as examples during my talk:

- The short story “When Your Dad is Slender Man” explores the inner life of the Slender Man’s daughter.
- Stories such as “The Origin of Slender” and YouTube Videos such as those in the “Slenderman Horror Movie” series tell stories a bullied child who ultimately becomes the Slender Man.
- Multi-chapter fan fiction such as “Cold and Dark” and “Bold and Daring” both enter the world of a young blind girl named Aurora whose sight is returned by the Slender Man’s magic. The Slender Man becomes a father figure to Aurora but forces her to commit murders on his behalf.
- “A Slender Chance” tells the story of a young woman who becomes the Slender Man’s girlfriend. In one scene, she makes him breakfast (pancakes).

It is common to find lovable pictures of the Slender Man on web sites such as DeviantArt, or crafting web sites such as Etsy. These versions of Slender Man fandom are entirely different from the original ways that the Slender Man meme was popularized. While the original character was a representation of the uncanny horrific, this character is a friend and a lover.

Making Sense of Slender Love

The Slender Man mythos should make us question our approach to canon as it relates to Internet fandom. As an online, crowd-sourced text with minimal materials in the original iteration, the original story was built with interpretation and re-interpretation in its intention. Busse (2013) has documented that feminine modes of fandom are often de-privileged in comparison to masculine fandom. So while male-centric web series (such as *Marble Hornets*) are lauded, love stories based on the Slender Man – such as those mentioned above (that rely on feminine protagonists) are dismissed. As Internet-based folklore, the Slender Man allows us to reconsider how fan-making practices might maintain gendered fan privileges, and uproot our notions of canon when a text is entirely crowd-sourced.

As many scholars of fandom have observed in the past, fan practices can be discursive and difficult to understand. It would be easy to be dismissive of the kind of fan materials listed above. The fan fiction versions of the Slender Man mythos, from a perspective of the horror genre seems unnerving – why would so many people attach romantic or sympathetic significance to this character? But as already noted, as a faceless villain, it seems apropos that consumers of the text would read it in ways that reveal their personal desires and insecurities. Having no face means that he can be re-faced with whatever the reader/viewer wants to see him as.

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/R/ALIENPUMASPACE TRAIN AND COMMUNAL CULTIVATION OF MYSTERY

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In November 2013, Reddit user TramStopDan posted a series of 102 images to the image-sharing site Imgur and the subreddit */r/WhatsinThisThing* that allegedly showed the contents of a wooden box found beside a trash bin in Asheville, NC. The images, many bearing the signature Daniel Christiansen, began with a series of neatly handwritten treatises on the book of Ezekiel, lenticular clouds, steam power, and unidentified flying objects; immaculately drawn periodic tables and world maps; a ball bearing patent design; and various ephemera bearing handwriting in Danish. The interest of Reddit was fully piqued by the remaining images, which illustrated an otherworldly encounter experienced by Christiansen in Tampa, FL, 1977, wherein four flying wheels and four-faced angelic creatures descended from a tornado cloud, the creatures appearing, Christiansen wrote, as described "in the scriptures of old." Christiansen detailed this experience in distanced, analytical paragraphs beneath finely detailed technical drawings of the funnel cloud, wheels, and creatures. Numerous pages that followed rendered the angelic visitors from multiple angles, alongside other strange and uncanny inventions, objects, and plans for room-sized installations, all bearing the visual motifs of the celestial vision, and all in the same meticulous, ordered drawing style that typified the collection.

The popularity of the initial post led to a new subreddit, */r/alienpumaspacetrain*, named after one of the strange devices seen in Christiansen's drawings. There, Reddit users—including 3,000 regular subscribers—congregated to transcribe and analyze the contents of the box, which were now easily sharable, replicable, spreadable (Jenkins, 2013). For just over a year, a community of users posted regularly in attempts to make meaning of the mysterious images, before, its users having exhausted many avenues of inquiry and conversation, activity on the subreddit dwindled. This paper examines the results and nature of that year of regular activity, which saw pre-digital hand-created ephemera mediated into an object of mass spectacle through digitalization and distribution, and the formation of a collective dedicated to cultivating, rather than solving, the mystery of the drawings found in what came to be affectionately known as "The Box of Crazy."

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Participation followed a model afforded by the digital technology through which the collective communicated (Bruns, 2007). Once the materials of the box had been digitized in high resolution, participation in the investigation became open to all who were willing to follow a link to the original album or one of several mirrors. The richness of */r/alienpumaspacetrain* as a case study partially lies in the variety of perspectives brought to the material. Because of the unique subject matter of the box and the situation of its recovery, inquiries came from a spectrum of interests and users both professional and hobbyist in the approaches they took: Biblical scholars examined the Ezekiel analyses, translators transcribed and converted Danish writings to English, handwriting analysts questioned whether Christiansen suffered from arthritis, illustrators color-corrected the scans and reproduced technical drawings in vector form, paranormal enthusiasts opined on the angel creatures being von Daniken-influenced aliens, engineers developed 3D models of the various devices and components seen in the drawings, historians traced biographical information and relatives of Christiansen, organizers tried to build a life-sized version of the train at the Burning Man festival, and numerous others provided supportive cheerleading, community maintenance, and, occasionally, a theory about what the drawings might actually be. Constant turnover of fringe users was offset by new participants who were late in encountering the material or discovering the subreddit. New lines of inquiry that expanded the mystery arose from the intersection of research—for instance, an identification of one rendered building as the St. Pete Pier coupled with newspaper searches yielded no results for tornadoes around the date of the supposed occurrence, but suggested the potential influence of a laser-based installation art piece.

As an investigative body, Reddit has a poor track record, becoming international news when they collectively botched identification of a Boston Marathon bombing suspect. Similar to earlier digital communities that approached real-life tragedies as puzzle games to be solved (McGonigal, 2003), Reddit users employed the language of competition when falsely accusing a college student who later was found to have committed suicide, declaring their crowd-sourced sleuthing efforts to be a, "significant, game-changing victory" (Tapia, et al, 2013). Other Reddit-based collectives dedicated to investigation have disappointed in cases with lower stakes, including the Geraldo Rivera-esque ending following months of speculation on "What's in the Safe?" and the fervent over-analysis of the HBO series *True Detective* that led to widespread mocking and parody of Reddit users' far-fetched theories (Crouch, 2014). The */r/alienpumaspacetrain* mystery is different, however, as all verifiable answers exist in the initial 102-image post. Further inquiry may provide context or biographical history of the creator, but, barring a return visit from celestial beings or the emergence of an undiscovered Christansen diary, the potential for true closure is null.

Thus, the */r/alienpumaspacetrain* community was formed not for genuine pursuit of conclusive answers, but in celebration of the wonderment inspired by encountering the material. Though they avowed themselves as investigators, users of the subreddit instead became annotators and archivists, simultaneously curating Christiansen's materials and nurturing the mystery that makes them worth curating. Previous found materials and work by non-traditional creators—like Henry Darger—have been elevated

to art status by critics, galleries, academics, estates, and otherwise financially interested parties. Documenting the existence of such work necessarily increases its commercial value (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 1988). Here, however, documentation has been provided by a digital crowd that, aside perhaps from the initial poster, made no profit from their documentary efforts. Though a collection of the papers did eventually see display in a gallery, the initial digitalization of the Christiansen materials makes them inherently experiential: they are not art to be visited and admired, but artifacts to be distributed and examined. The profit for members of /r/alienpumaspacetrain is in cultivating the mystique, wearing the guise of researcher while reveling in the weird. Potentially plausible explanations (like the laser show mentioned above) for the material's meaning and existence were routinely rejected, the community instead favoring narratives that allowed for supernatural, uncanny possibilities that justified further exploration. As fewer opportunities emerged to expand the mystery, activity accordingly slowed. Though the subreddit still sees new posts, they come now at a rate of roughly one per month.

The entry point to this case study involves intricate drawings of heavenly mechanisms, but more important implications lie in the mechanism of the digital collective working to explore, preserve, and publicize the materials. /r/alienpumaspacetrain offers an opportunity to observe how community was formed and developed around a center of the unexplainable, and the role that cultivating mystery played in maintaining that community.

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WEIRD TO WHOM, OBSCENE TO WHOM?: FOLKLORIC APPROACHES TO AMBIVALENT ONLINE BEHAVIOR

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In this paper, we will consider how best to identify and analyze online behaviors that seem strange, creepy, or obscene to outsiders, but which are perfectly normal to participants. We are particularly interested in the space between play and hate: behaviors that are not harmless but are also not straightforwardly negative. This behavioral category includes crass joking, identity experimentation on social media platforms, and ambiguous engagement with digitally mediated content (memes, hashtags, and other visual cultural content). Such behaviors are often difficult to classify, let alone analyze. This is due to the polysemy of the content, the frequent anonymity or pseudonymity of participants, the ephemeral nature of much of the content participants create, and the fact that, even if a researcher is able to track down the responsible parties and collect all relevant data, participants are often unwilling to disclose their motivations.

It is our contention that internet researchers can learn a great deal about emergent online behaviors by considering the embodied, pre-internet spaces and communities analyzed in traditional folkloric literature. Not only do these early folkloric studies provide striking behavioral precedent for more contemporary online behavior, the discipline of folklore houses a number of robust, flexible frameworks perfectly calibrated to identify and analyze online ambivalence.

Four folkloric frameworks particularly applicable to the digitally mediated space include the twin laws of conservatism and dynamism, the process by which certain aspects of a given tradition remain static while other aspects are subject to change (Toelken 1996); notions of liminality, that which is fundamentally “in between” (Turner 1982); bricolage, the creative use of found materials (Lévi-Strauss 1962); folkloric paradigms of play and performance, which focus intently on who is observing a given event for what reasons (Schechner 2003); and emic analytic approaches, which take the terminology

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and cultural logics of a given group into account before attempting to make universalizing claims about what a given set of behaviors mean (Shoemaker 1990).

Given their flexibility, explanatory power, and the fact that they can be applied to such a wide range of behaviors, these four frameworks provide an invaluable entry point when approaching subjects that otherwise might seem strange or indecipherable. They are especially helpful when attempting to analyze ambivalent online behaviors and the communities that engage with (share, remix, creatively reappropriate) digitally mediated content, since as mentioned above, these spaces, communities, and behaviors can be extremely difficult to pin down. Not only do folkloric frameworks encourage researchers to focus on the always-evolving verb of online culture (e.g. what people are doing) rather than the nouns (e.g. the specific things that get produced), they allow researchers to approach these subjects using terminology and perspectives indigenous to the group itself. Externally imposed systems of classification might describe an event in terms that make sense to the researcher, but aren't designed to take the group's understanding of the event into account. In fact, the outsider's description might baffle the group's participants, who understand their behaviors entirely differently (Shoemaker 1990), certainly not as being "weird" or "obscene." Weird to whom, obscene to whom—these are the questions that careful folkloric analyses can help unearth, in the process revealing a great deal not just about individual participants but about the culture(s) in which the behaviors occur.

Folklore's push for emic analyses also helps explain why traditional folklore studies frequently contain descriptions of ambivalent language and behavior, making them all the better prepared to deal with online ambivalence. Folklorist Barre Toelken suggests that the vast majority of orally transmitted material captured by folklorists—up to 80% in his estimation—would be regarded as crude or inappropriate if encountered out of context (xii). He forwards a defense of "the so-called obscene elements that are so characteristic of folklore" (ibid) not to "champion 'obscene' materials per se, but to point out that all folklore is phrased in terms appropriate to—and usually demanded by—the group in which it is performed" (8). What one community might regard as commonplace and perfectly acceptable might be obscene, ambivalent, or odd to formal or official culture; but folklore is less interested in formal or official culture, except to the extent that communities engage with, negotiate, or reject mainstream normativity. This ties into another reason folklore so often engages with "strange" content: the fact that research informants ("the folk") frequently operate outside mainstream channels, increasing the likelihood that apparently non-normative (or at least not officially sanctioned) behavior will proliferate (Toelken 1996).

By exploring traditional folkloric analyses, internet researchers seeking to identify, analyze, and demystify esoteric online discourses are thus able to draw from ample behavioral precedent and methodological work-around strategies. Examples of this—perhaps surprising—overlap abound. The creation and transmission of co-called photocopier art as described by Dundes and Pagter (1978), for example, is directly comparable to the process by which internet memes are created and transmitted. Peter Naravez' exploration of seemingly profane behaviors at turn-of-the-century

Newfoundland funeral wakes, coupled with Elliott Oring's analysis of the "tasteless and cruel" humor in the wake of the 1986 Challenger space disaster (1987) as well as Timothy Tangherlini's ethnography of Bay Area medics' disaster humor and storytelling (1998) help contextualize the emergence of Facebook memorial page trolling and other forms of extreme online aggression. Alan Dundes' study of latrinalia—e.g. bathroom wall graffiti—found primarily in and around UC Berkeley's campus (1965) is directly analogous to discussions of nasty online commentary. And there are, of course, other connections to establish; our argument is that internet researchers have a rich tradition from which to draw. Certain details might change—where the behaviors occur, for example, how they are mediated, and who engages in them—but the tone, objectives, and pleasures of ambivalent behaviors have remained consistent across time, space, and media, and are therefore ripe for comparative analyses.

This is not to downplay the differences between "online" and "offline" behaviors. One significant difference between the analog and digital landscape is that digitally mediated content is easily archived, can exist in more than one location, and if search indexed, is accessible to any and all interested parties. This allows information to be shared freely between networks and engaged with by a variety of unintended audiences, which can either be very good or very bad, depending on what kind of information it is. Not only do these details have a profound impact on the ethical implications of a given set of behaviors (both for active participants and for observers), they also complicate the basic logistics of ethnographic data collection. That said, the demonstrable behavioral and methodological overlap between contemporary digital and more traditional folkloric studies can help contextualize and lend historical nuance to emergent online ambivalence. Which, when considered through a folkloric lens, aren't emergent as much as precedented—though perhaps mediated in novel ways.

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PLAYING AROUND TWITCHPLAYSPOKEMON: AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION OF INTERNET FOLKLORE AND PEER-PRODUCED NARRATIVE

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This paper seeks to contribute to our understanding of peer-produced creative work, narrative collaborations, and emergent collective phenomena brought up by networked technologies. In February 2014, an anonymous Australian programmer uploaded an emulated version of Pokémon Red Version (1996) to Twitch, a popular video game livestream service, creating TwitchPlaysPokemon (Leavitt 2015; Margel 2014), which later became a crowd-driven game sensation. The unique twist that the programmer added was a feature in which any person watching the livestreamed video could input a Gameboy command into the Twitch chat interface, which would then be transferred to the emulated game, triggering actions in the game. Over the course of 16 days, hundreds of thousands of individuals visited the stream channel to input commands, and millions more watched and contributed to a vibrant online community, aggregating its content primarily in the /r/TwitchPlaysPokemon forum on reddit.com. In those two weeks, hundreds of pieces of fan art, memes, and other celebratory content were created, bursting forth a rapid (though momentary) folklore around this experimental crowd experience (for example, around the religion-inflected "Helix" following or characters such as "Digrat" and "Bird Jesus").

How do emergent collaborative narratives evolve? Further, how can we understand internet phenomena and folklore through the precise tracking of online community trace data? Can we investigate the collaborative efforts of disparate but networked individuals to see how folk narratives evolve and what factors play into dominant themes' adoption? What role do visibility, leadership, collective intelligence, and mediation (e.g., algorithms) play in the propagation of online phenomena?

TwitchPlaysPokemon thrives on the collective contributions of disconnected individuals. Peer production (Benkler 2006) – and its related concepts of participatory culture (Jenkins 2006), produsage (Bruns 2008, and collective action (Poteete, Janssen, & Ostrom 2010) – drives many active content communities on the internet. The collaborations between distant individuals united through networked communication technologies have produced impactful projects such as open-source software and

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Wikipedia as well as emergent information phenomena, such as breaking news reporting (Weller et al. 2013). One aspect of peer production, the distributed, networked creation of creative works (such as film, music, and video games) manifests to a lesser degree and attracts less academic attention. But in the past decade, numerous peer-produced creative works have set the stage for a new type of collaborative cultural creation distinct from the traditional hierarchies of the creative and entertainment industries. Examples such as Hatsune Miku (a Japanese peer-produced music franchise; Condry 2011) and Minecraft (a video game that draws from thousands of mods and pieces of ancillary media) demonstrate the potential that user-generated content can have for successful creative media artifacts and franchises.

The manifestation of experimental peer-produced creative works presents novel opportunities to study how these collaborations emerge. Most academic investigations into the emergence and evolution of collaborative narrative has been studied through anecdote and observation (specifically in digital folklore literature; see for example, Blank 2009 and Howard 2008). Few have investigated collaborative narrative on a quantitative level, demonstrating the exact processes behind how a particular storyworld has developed over time at the intersection of multiple individuals' contributions. However, with increased in storage of and access to digital data traces, narratives (or pieces of them) are increasingly able to be traced and mapped (for instance, see Leskovec, Backstrom, & Kleinberg 2009 on the evolution of linguistic memes, or Vis 2014 on the spread of misinformation).

The analysis for this investigation draws from an empirical data analysis scraped from online communities and contextualized by ethnographic methods (participant observation and close reading of online trace data; Geiger & Ribes 2011). I synthesize a variety of data sources: first, 15,702,790 chat messages posted to the Twitch live stream chat channel; second, 40,711 posts and 358,380 comments (along with textual, temporal, and user metadata) posted to the /r/TwitchPlaysPokemon subreddit; and finally, a scale-based and open-ended survey (N = 1437) of TwitchPlaysPokemon participants and viewers. In blending these unique, disconnected data sources, I aim to track the precise moments when various folkloric narrative trends emerged and were adopted by the larger community to later become notable themes in the constructed storyworld. Further, I draw insights from the survey to contextualize issues of viewership, interactivity, fandom, and especially sociocultural inflections like nostalgia on this involved-yet-audience-driven experience.

While the data analysis is not yet complete, ideas about audience and visibility (Szabo & Huberman 2010) play a large role in the initial findings from the data. Initial insights point to a surprising lack of coordination amongst participants, but bursts of information around particular emergent events and coordinated groupthink (Esser 1998) seem to ensure that seemingly random ideas stick in the shared imagination of this collective's evolving narrative. Future steps in the analysis will focus on modeling the timing and adoption of particular folklore themes within this community and will reflect on the role of online community participation and affordances (particularly across audiences and platforms) to result in the spirited phenomenon that became TwitchPlaysPokemon.

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