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Ostension and Extra-Textual Production in Minecraft

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Abstract
Combining game studies and folklore studies, this article examines the origin of Herobrine, a fan-created legend in the popular video game Minecraft. By linking the creation and dissemination of the legend to both fan-production in game studies and the semiotic concept of ostension as utilised in folklore studies the article will give an overview of the different methods of remediation that are being employed in the spread and retelling of the legend. Addressing the nature of virtual game space, the article will discuss the relationship of space and legend creation and thereby comment on the productive potential of the act of play. Minecraft’s Herobrine is of special significance in this regard because, in a rare occurrence, this legend was conceived not by the developers of the game but emerged from the player community itself. As such it is ample evidence of player production and gives insight into the player-driven creation of meaning in video games and how their creations renegotiate the concept of the real within the liminoid space of the game.

Keywords
Folklore Studies, Game Studies, Legends, Ostension, Fan production, Gamespace, Creepypasta, Game culture

1 Introduction
When the Beta 1.9 version of Minecraft released, it ended the debate about whether Minecraft was a game or a toy by introducing a culminate challenge for the player to overcome: the Enderdragon. However, the Enderdragon and the new player progression system were met with a lukewarm response. This was not due to unpopular visual design or high difficulty, but rather because these challenges failed to involve the feature of Minecraft that players found most fascinating: The
borderline endless possibilities in crafting and building, through which they express themselves within the game and beyond.

Instead of the Enderdragon, fans had already conceived an antagonist more fitting to Minecraft’s unique gameplay and were already battling this foe in their minds: **Herobrine**. Herobrine is a fan created legend that describes the character as a ghostly avatar who haunts the world of Minecraft and, depending on the variant of the legend, meddles with the players’ creations, commandeers normal enemies to do his bidding, or even outright attacks the player himself. This behaviour, in line with some of the normal enemies in the game, is in direct relationship to the modes of creative expression in Minecraft and thereby the main draw of the game. As an antagonist, Herobrine has eclipsed both the Enderdragon and the later introduced Wither in popularity as well as in mechanical terms despite being ‘just’ being a legend.

To understand how legends such as Herobrine can impact play, we must understand the nature of legend creation within games, and the how legends can be enacted and remediated in regards to the specifics of video games as a medium. This includes, more so than in other media, the inclusion of para-texts and fan creations, the player – game relationship and the possibilities of the medium for re-enacting legends. As an emerging phenomenon, players seek out and fabricate mystical tales that incorporate video games. Unlike other forms of folklore, games possess a unique potential for transporting and reproducing legends. Therefore this essay aims to shed light on this new development in games, explain the link between folklore creation and gameplay and follow up on the particularities that define game-based folklore.

### 1.1 Legends and Games Studies

“The otherworld is not a playful possibility to be manipulated by the real, as it often is in utopian fiction; rather, it is the absent and controlling hand that guides the present situation.” (Stewart, 1982)

“In games,” as Huizinga reminds us, “there is something “at play” which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action” (Huizinga, 1949, p. 1). Like fairy tales, games have the ability to conjure an effect that can have meaning beyond its own micro cosmos and impact the whole of our being and lives. Even after engaging in the immediate act of play we still ponder on the experience and carry with us the marks of encounters in the game space. This becomes especially visible when informing our daily lives, our conversations and our stories.

The impactful nature of play experiences has been analysed from different angles, ranging from the infamous discussion about aggression and violence (Kontour, 2009) to recent studies on shifting worldviews through play (Laycock, 2015) and emergent religious motifs that sprawl out of the game space they were once conceived in (Lindsey, 2015). Additionally the immediate
surroundings of the play activity have come into focus of game scholars and anthropologists alike and more often than not, they exclaim “playfulness” for those activities that performed outside of the game space but are inseparably linked to game experience (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2007; Malaby, 2007; Taylor, 2009; Bergstrom, et al., 2015; Hong, 2015).

The link between the actual play and the meta-play (Downs, et al., 2013) is of varying degrees of importance depending on the game, and can take many shapes and forms. Some games actively entangle both forms of play, making it part of the game. In others it becomes an additional layer of world building or a social dimension in which players engage with each other outside of the game. In an increasingly common scenario, it contextualises the productive practices that players engage in related to the game (Pearce, 2006; Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2007; Gu, 2014).

Huizinga, as well as Caillois, has stated that play is fundamentally unproductive (Huizinga, 1949; Caillois, 1961). The separation between work and play has consequentially been a cornerstone of games studies for a long time. Recently however this notion has been contested more and more as scholars aim to redefine games and play (Pearce, 2006; Malaby, 2007; Bergstrom, et al., 2015). In that spirit it is worth mentioning that, Taylor’s call for a holistic analysis of games (Taylor, 2009) is still an important guide for games research: Her application of Latour’s Assemblage enables a much needed widening in scope for game studies and directs us to investigate beyond the narrow focus of controller and screen.

1.2 Legends and Games

“Games and digital media are increasingly significant, or even primary, modes of exposure to present pasts.” (Hong, 2015, p. 36)

There are plenty of legends and rumours surrounding video games. They originate from speculation about easter eggs¹, creepypastas² or are based on pre-existing stories (Krzywinska, 2006). The majority of folklore that is mediated in games has been consciously implemented, utilising the potential of games to remediate and expand the folkloristic body of a certain legend. Some legends and myths however, are the product of a game and its surrounding culture. And curiously enough some have even been fabricated by players without any direct incentive from within the game itself. Thusly, there is a general distinction to be made between the game related legends that are

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¹ Easter eggs are hidden objects or scenes in published videogames. Often in-jokes or references to other games, they are put in by the developers to be eventually found by explorative players.

² Derived from the narrative form copy pasta, the creepypasta is a scary short story that is circulated on special interest sites and forums on the web.
circulating in their respective communities: There are legends that have spawned games, and legends that have arisen from within existing games.

As they are inherently prone to transgress the borders of the game, either by referencing an existing legend or conceiving its own, a holistic approach to these phenomena has to be multifaceted. Previous research has located this at the intersection of game studies and folklore studies (Cragoe, 2015) and this essay will follow this trail while highlighting the useful concepts that shine light on the greater context that informs play and vice versa. In particular the concept of ostension (Eco, 1979; Bird, 1994; Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2007), that uniquely enables us to adequately describe the ways in which myths are reproduced and remediated in games.

Since the existing research has so far focussed on how existing legends and myths carry over into games and are remediated, presented and utilised (Krzywinska, 2006; Hong, 2015), this paper will focus on the latter category of player created myths. Searching for the origin of legends in games we also come to ask questions about the games that they rise from, and about the players that create them. This essay aims to shed some light on both of these questions while also examining the remediation and retelling of legends itself.

Since video games and digital media (together with the television) became an increasingly important part of the collective conscious, folklore has begun to involve these forms not just as a means of retelling and dissemination (Cragoe, 2015; Hong, 2015), but also as the subject of its tales (Manivannan, 2012; Henrikson, 2013). There is an observable evolution of media in folklore that develops in parallel to the real life technological advancement. A movie like “Ringu” (Ringu, 1998) for example, portrays a VHS cassette as cursed and evil, today’s Creepypasta attribute the same characteristics to “smile.jpg”, a data format (Henrikson, 2013). While Jumanji (Jumanji, 1995) featured a magical board game, similar properties were soon attributed to video games. See for example an episode of the popular television show X Files centred on first person shooters (X Files - First Person Shooter, 2000). So we see that the invasion of techno-horror has not spared the domain of video games (Pearce, 2006; Conway, 2010). Creepypasta that feature games are abundant and prove effectual on those familiar with the games in question (Conway, 2010). But in some cases, these stories take advantage of the mediums specific features and transgress into the sphere of interactivity by making the horror playable.

There are a number of examples of spooky folklore that has formed from play, including eerie children gatherings in World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) and Bigfoot sightings in Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas (Rockstar Games, 2004). In either case, players had observed or claimed to have observed unusual behaviour of the computer controlled entities that were inexplicable by game logic. With little or no comment on part of the developers, players made up their own theories on the nature of these occurrences. However, the by far the most prominent
The legend is the tale of Herobrine. Unprecedented in its spread and scope this legend has eclipsed most of the other stories that emerged from Minecraft (Mojang, 2010) and is one of the major identifiers of the game. Never before has player folklore from a game gained so much widespread attention and thusly it serves as an extraordinary example to discuss the legend creation process with.

Before discussing the Herobrine example in detail, the following section will introduce relevant concepts and terms from games studies and folklore studies. Following onward, the concepts will be tested against the traces of remediation that are left by the various means of retelling legends and folklore in games. For the purpose of this study, accounts of play in various formats (write-ups, audio-visual recordings) were examined as well as public statements about the existence and “sightings” of Herobrine.

1.3 Extra-textual production

"By scrutinising the practises and activities that support and surround videogame play, we begin to glimpse the creativity that emerges from play, and the new forms of playfulness that sustain videogames and give them longevity beyond the ever-decreasing shelf-lives that characterise the contemporary industry." (Newman, 2005, p. 65)

The discussion about playful engagement with video games outside the designated game space has become increasingly harder to put off: The rise of fast, ubiquitous internet access and the broadening of certain platforms have led to an increased visibility of alternative modes of playing (with) videogames (Newman, 2005). This in turn led more and more scholars to challenge the separation of play and work into different spheres and to merge established concepts with the integration of production (Juul, 2011). Analysing the productive practise, they comment on the way video game consumers materialise their fantasies (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2007) as a way of “actualizing” the products they want.

Newman comments on the commercial implications of the manifest player creativity and takes a critical look on the player – developer relationship in respect to players policing the canon of a game franchise (Newman, 2005). He offers an overview of the different outlets of player creativity that manifest outside the game with a focus on video production. Many of the small scale efforts mentioned by him have since been transformed into areas of interest for a greater audience as many emergent YouTube channels that enact and commodify these pursuits have been met with great commercial success (Gu, 2014; MacCallum-Stewart, 2014). Examining the particular case of Minecraft (Mojang, 2010), McCallum describes the “new type of gaming experience” (MacCallum-Stewart, 2014) that has emerged from fusing recordings of video games with commentary and narration. It is undoubtedly with Minecraft (Mojang, 2010) that this form has reached widespread
dissemination (MacCallum-Stewart, 2014). This form is a crucial part of gaming “beyond the game” (MacCallum-Stewart, 2014) and one of the main forms of transporting the legend of Herobrine (Gu, 2014).

1.4 Playful ostension and re-enactment

“Such legend quests constitute a sort of ostensive play, an improvised drama in which the players, visiting the site of a haunting or the scene of a crime, take on, by turn, the roles of legend villains and victims as they both recreate the storied events and simultaneously expand the tale by adding their experiences to the core narrative” (Lindahl, 2005, p. 165)

Folklore studies’ concept of ostension can serve as a means of tying together the different forms of extra-textual and actual play when it comes to the mediation of legends and general folklore. While fan-produced para-texts show one level of engagement with the legend, they in turn enable multiple other levels of interaction with the legend in a game specific way.

Adapting Eco’s take on Ostension (Eco, 1979), Dégh and Vázsonyi describe four types of sign-less presentation in the transportation and dissemination of legends\(^3\): pseudo-ostension, quasi-ostension, false ostension and ostensive action (Dégh & Vázsonyi, 1983). Using these four definitions, any form of action that is inspired by folklore, either consciously or subconsciously, can be classified as an ostensive act. The concept has since been reiterated by folklorists (McDowell, 1982; Ellis, 1989; Bird, 1994) and sequentially been adapted by media scholars for describe folkloristic performance in ‘vernacular media’ (Bird, 2006; Koven, 2008; Tosenberger, 2010), but the basic formula remains:

\[\text{Pseudo ostension}\] describes the telling when it is through a fake performance of the legend in order to deceive an observer.

\[\text{Quasi-ostension}\] is happening when the performance is in fact imaginary and therefore only perceived subjectively.

\[\text{False ostension}\] describes when the performance is knowingly fabricated and the retelling is a conscious, but not necessarily malicious, lie.

\[\text{Ostensive action}\] means a performance that is true to the legend and therefore indistinguishable from it.

\(^3\) In line with common conventions in folklore studies, I follow Bascom’s definition of legend as a potentially ongoing narrative (Bascom, 1984), a tale that describes happenings after the myths of the creation have concluded. While the term is defined differently throughout folkloristic literature, one undisputed attribute is that the legend is always potentially true (Bascom, 1984) (Bird, 1994) (Lindahl, 2005).
Of the many acts that classify as ostension, the phenomenon of “legend tripping” deserves special attention. It describes the act of voluntarily seeking out a location of folkloristic importance in order to experience the legend first hand (Bird, 1994). As legends, per definition, always have an inherent potential for truth (Bascom, 1984; Bird, 1994; Lindahl, 2005), they are most prone to evoke this kind of behaviour (Bird, 1994; Lindahl, 2005; Koven, 2008). As with any form of ostension, the participants become part of a re-enactment (Bird, 1994; Lindahl, 2005). This performance, also called playful ostension, conjures a liminal state which “[...] suspends the normal laws of the real world, and [to] enter a world of heightened reality, or fantasy, much as dedicated players of fantasy games do” (Bird, 1994, p. 202).

1.5 Realness, space and the arrivant

Tapping into the discourse in contemporary game studies regarding realness of game space and Turner’s concept of liminoid spaces (Corliss, 2011; Green, 2011; Hong, 2015) we see that legends offer a chance for re-negotiation of this realness. While the degree to which rampant computer ghosts and multimedial horrors can be conjured in “reality” is admittedly debateable, the actual, or tangible, realness might not be the most important factor. Evoking Baudrillard, Hong discusses what Žižek calls the “effect of the real”:

“The passion for the Real ends up in the pure semblance of the spectacular effect of the Real . . . [and] the “postmodern” passion for the semblance ends up in a violent return to the passion for the Real.” (Hong, 2015, p. 37)

The realness is also discussed by Henrikson’s work on creepypasta. Stating that the reference of the real is a common cliché in these stories, by which they bridge the space between the virtual and the real, or as Henrikson calls it: “the meatspace of flesh-and-blood creepypasta readers” (Henrikson, 2013, p. 416). The readers then, in tune with the protagonists of the stories, engage in a “danse macabre” with the “arrivant” they summon (Henrikson, 2013). This dance is accompanied by a loss of control on part of the readers whose initial decision to seek out the story becomes the story itself (Henrikson, 2013). This then, leads us back to ostension, where the stories precedes the manifestation and monsters turn real (Dégh & Vázsonyi, 1983) as the participants experience a limited loss of control (Bird, 1994).
2 Discussing Herobrine

Herobrine isn't real in any way, no.


Removed Herobrine

Minecraft Changelog v1.6.6 – 31. May 2011 (Mojang, 2011)

2.1 Herobrine – The phantom of Minecraft

Minecraft (Mojang, 2010) was a forerunner in community accompanied production. Officially released as a full game in 2010, it had already millions of players before that, as its alpha and beta versions were sold in a model that would soon become known as “early access”. About a year prior to the game’s first full release the first “sightings” of an unknown entity called Herobrine in the game were uploaded to YouTube. Herobrine has since gained unparalleled popularity in the Minecraft community, going as far as to being described as an “icon” (MinecraftWiki, 2015), and being featured in official promo art (MinecraftWiki, 2015).

Herobrine’s appearance is one of the most constant features of the legend: Eerily similar to the default skin that every new player started out with at the time of Herobrine’s conception. The notable difference is that he is missing the black pixels that resemble pupils and has instead completely white eyes (MinecraftWiki, 2015).

The original source that described Herobrine heavily implies him to be Markus Persson’s, Minecraft’s designer, deceased brother’s ghost that is haunting the game space. The motif of the deceased returning to interfere with the living is of course a commonly encountered trope in legends, but with the connection to the developer there is also a connection to common structures in fan texts: Newman noted that the involvement of game developers in fan produced para-texts mirrors established patterns in other media and fanfiction (Newman, 2005).

In the main legend body, Herobrine’s role in the world of Minecraft is to stalk and maliciously harass the players. Additionally he is attributed to be the ‘Lord of the mobs’, commandeering the various harmful creatures that roam the world in Minecraft and cause damage to the players and their creations (MinecraftWiki, 2015). In this function he resembles a classic cliché of video game antagonists, which are more often than not an evil overlord with a number of minions at their disposal.

Another prominently attributed behaviour of Herobrine is the act of destroying player’s creations in the game. While also common to a few mobs that behaviour is most
prominently exhibited by fellow players on multiplayer servers. This form of play that is commonly called ‘griefing’ is considered to be extremely deviant and is routinely sanctioned; often resulting is the players in question being prohibited from further play on that server (MinecraftWiki, 2015). Again this is a property that constitutes a mechanical antagonism to the pursuit of the player of creating structures and expressing themselves with the means of the game, much like a main video game antagonist would.

*MINECRAFT*

I had recently spawned a new world in single-player Minecraft. Everything was normal at first as I began chopping down trees and crafting a workbench. I noticed something move amongst the dense fog. I thought it was a cow, so I pursued it, hoping to grab some hides for armor.

It wasn’t a cow though. Looking back at me was another character with the default skin, but his eyes were empty. I saw no name pop-up, and I double-checked to make sure I wasn’t in multiplayer mode. He didn’t stay long, he looked at me and quickly ran into the fog. I pursued out of curiosity, but he was gone.

I continued on with the game, not sure what to think. As I expanded the world I saw things that seemed out of place for the random map generator to make: 2×2 tunnels in the rocks, small perfect pyramids made of sand in the ocean, and pools of trees with all their leaves cut off. I would constantly think I saw the other ‘player’ in the deep fog, but I never got a better look at him. I tried increasing my render distance to far whenever I thought I saw him, but to no avail.

I saved the map and went on the forums to see if anyone else had found the pseudo-player. There were none. I created my own topic telling of the man and asking if anyone had a similar experience. The post was deleted within five minutes. Tried again, and the topic was deleted even faster. I received a PM from username ‘Herobrine’ containing one word: ‘Stop.’ When I went to look at Herobrine’s profile, the page 404’d.

I received an email from another forum user. He claimed the mods can read the forum user messages, so we were safer using email. The emailer claimed that he had seen the mystery player too, and had a small ‘directory’ of other users who had seen him as well. Their worlds were littered with obviously man-made features as well, and described the mystery player to have no pupils.

About a month passed until I heard from my informant again. Some of the people who had encountered the mystery man had looked into the name Herobrine and found that name to be frequently used by a Swedish gamer. After some further information gathering, it was revealed to be the brother of Notch, the game’s developer. Personally emailed Notch, and asked him if he had a brother. It took him a while, but he emailed back a very short message.

‘I did, but he is no longer with us.’
-Notch

I haven’t seen the mystery man since our first encounter, and I haven’t noticed any changes to the world other than my own. I was able to press ‘print screen’ when I first saw him. Here’s the only evidence I have of his existence.

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**Figure 1**
The first documentation of Herobrine was posted on the /v/ discussion board of 4chan (Figure 1). It was presented as an account of an encounter by a player in single player mode. The anonymous player posted a description of his or her play session that suddenly gets intruded by a mysterious and eerie figure that lingers at the border of visibility and watches the player. The author utilises a well-known format, the written account of a play session, to transport the disturbing narrative. This approach links the document to the popular narrative format of creepypasta, that often make use of the same structure (Henrikson, 2013). The story itself gives an unsettling narrative in which the author starts out chasing the mysterious figure, only to be evaded in the process. It is then that the roles switch and the author finds him or herself unable to shake off the surveillance of the self-identified Herobrine. Much like other protagonists of creepypasta, the initial curiosity dooms the protagonist to an ongoing relationship, or danse macabre, with the arrivant.

In a curious twist, the dance continues outside the game as the protagonist seeks information on the phenomenon in forums. The mysterious figure transgresses the boundaries of the game, escaping the confines of the porous game space because such is the nature of the arrivant (Henrikson, 2013). The protagonist’s inquiries lead him or her to learning about the lead developer’s deceased brother. The write-up closes with an ominous screenshot that shows the faint figure in the fog. The author thereby plants the seed for further inquiry and implicit self-inflicted doom on behalf of the readers (Henrikson, 2013).

While the original post did not immediately spawn widespread interest it caught the attention of the YouTube producer Copeland. After an initial appearance in one of Copeland’s videos that was met with huge interest, Herobrine proved to be hugely popular. He was then featured as a story element in more and more Minecraft YouTube videos (Gu, 2014; MacCallum-Stewart, 2014). Expanding into other forms of creative expression from there, he is now found in a multitude of media related to Minecraft (Gu, 2014). Just like the dissemination of myths and legends in print culture, the technological transmission unhinges the connection between the recipient and the transmitter (Cragoe, 2015). While the origin of the narrative is not obscured, but is in fact much more retraceable than it used to be in an offline culture, the individual finds itself in a situation of ubiquitous confirmation (Tolbert, 2014).

While the core of the legend of Herobrine remains largely unchanged, the individual details of the depictions vary from retelling to retelling. Additionally the context and the perspective from which the retelling arises are informing the nuances of each reproduction. The most prevalent forms of telling the tale of Herobrine are YouTube videos (Gu, 2014; MacCallum-Stewart, 2014). Far more than mere video recordings of play (Newman, 2005) they also transport the legends. Depending on the recording, this retelling can take the shape of pseudo-ostension.
In a common form of video, the ‘sightings’, viewers are following the performer(s) (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2007) in either a seemingly normal play session that is interrupted by the appearance of Herobrine or an attempt to summon Herobrine through an elaborate ritual. While some of these videos address the fictitious nature of the performance in an accompanying comment or in the video itself, some omit this caveat and aim to present an ‘honest account’. Due to its deceptive nature the latter category is a case of pseudo-ostension. Another widespread form of video is closely related. In this the video producers lure others players onto their server and perform as Herobrine in that world. Here the viewer is complicit with the performers and other players are the victims of the deceit. Therefore this format can also be classified as pseudo-ostension.

After the release of the first mods, Let’s Plays have surfaced that explore the mods and comment on the relation between mod and legend. Hence the mediation takes on a triple layered quality: The authored version represented by the mod, the version carried into the mod by the (let’s) players and the viewer’s own, represented by the ever present comment section (Friedman, 1995; Gu, 2014). Let’s plays and related video formats have been very important in popularising Minecraft (Gu, 2014; MacCallum-Stewart, 2014). Players use recordings of their play sessions to show their creations and, implicitly and explicitly, teach others their way of playing the game (MacCallum-Stewart, 2014). Remediating the legend in these video adds another layer of play onto the activity (Newman, 2005; Taylor, 2009).

Due to its open structure Minecraft lends itself well to being modded. Before long, Herobrine mods were published that introduce an artificial intelligence into the game that plays the role of Herobrine. In making these mods, the producers solidify a particular instance of the legend. Authoring a mod becomes a statement that can be hugely influential in the mediation of the legend by offering experiential proof of the legend (Friedman, 1995). By providing “the rules-bound, participatory framework of play and ritual” (Hong, 2015, p. 37) they set the scene for a creative interplay between player and AI. This form of retelling the legend is unique to games. Players are able to interact with the legend on a systemic basis – they can play with the legend. This interaction then becomes part of the retelling again as it commonly spawns new videos of players recording themselves playing these mods.

In this situation the players are able to contrast their own version of the legend with the one presented by the mod, re-negotiating their imagination (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2007). Despite the fact that users are aware of playing a mod, and therefore are not encountering the “real” Herobrine, this represents factual ostension nevertheless. Players are wilfully engaging in pseudo-ostension with the program on a highly interactive level. By entering the liminoid space of the mod

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4 From *mod*, short for modification: A fan-made alteration of the original game that changes the visual experience or key gameplay mechanics that is usually freely available and distributed through the internet.
they wilfully inquire into the nature of the legend, thereby evoking the accompanying, transgressive nature of the imagined monster: “the Real can be something we dream of, a manufactured effect, which is effective precisely in its difference to lived, everyday reality.” (Hong, 2015, p. 37). By being in the virtual but liminoid space, the Herobrine encountered in the mod is as ‘real’ as it needs to be.

Mojang has repeatedly fuelled the legend of Herobrine. While continuously denying its existence, Minecraft’s lead designer Markus Persson has often stated his appreciation for the legend and hinted at a possible inclusion of the entity in a future update, thereby suggesting a potential ostensive action on his part (MinecraftWiki, 2015). Fostering the legend is certainly in the commercial interest of Mojang. As stated by Newman, fan-produced para-texts have the ability to extend a game’s lifetime and are crucial in sustaining a large fan base (Newman, 2005; Krzywinska, 2006; Corliss, 2011; Bergstrom, et al., 2015; Hong, 2015). Consequentially, Herobrine has been featured on a number of promotional posters and artwork, often depicted in the background without special highlighting, therefore being in tune with the legend’s supposed lingering presence. But most importantly, as a running joke, several update logs of the game have included variations of the phrase “Removed Herobrine” (Mojang, 2011). Thus further perpetuating the mystique of the legend and in turn inspiring more belief on part of the players, eventually triggering a cycle of mutual reinforcement.

Through this elevation on part of the developer, Herobrine has become an effectual sign that can be decoded by those “in-the-know”. Thereby it enables a sense of belonging through common knowledge, that is often a characteristic of folklore (Cragoe, 2015). There is a vast amount of additional para-texts through which the legend gets continuously reshaped and reiterated. These forms are common also in general folklore as they fall into the more traditional categories of remediating legends in non-verbal but instead written forms such as fanfiction or discussions in forums and social networks (including Minecraft’s own Minebook) (Tosenberger, 2010).

Herobrine has become the subject of several novels, and countless stories posted online. The quiz and fanfiction portal Qoutev lists a number of stories and self-evaluation quizzes in regards to Herobrine. Furthermore there are forums, wikis and social network pages dedicated to the character. These forms, though not exclusively related to the video game medium, still factor into the general “playful activity” that is the remediation of the tale of Herobrine (Newman, 2005). They present different takes and variations on the character, such as suggesting the potential for friendship or romance with Herobrine. Akin to the transformation that is often observable in other fan-, and slashfiction, the character is interpreted differently by emphasising their sexuality, while often renegotiating their gender in the process (Tosenberger, 2010). In this they transform the malicious character, and reinterpret the ‘arrivant’ as a pleasant companion (Henrikson, 2013).
3 Space, video game folklore and the case of Minecraft

Minecraft lends itself to Hong’s description of a wide, intertextual, liminoid space. The game has been noted for its “blankness” (Gu, 2014). The game provides neither narrative, nor backstory; it presents itself as an untouched canvas that can be used at will. As noted by folklorists, the structure of space has a large effect on the emergence of folklore and myths (Green, 2011; Cragoe, 2015). As a form of mediating shared experience, folklore is often observed to arise from groups that share a space or common history (Cragoe, 2015). While video games usually offer more individualistic experiences, Minecraft has nevertheless evolved into a state of constant telling and retelling of adventures, achievements and experiences. The staggering amount of fan-produced para-texts offers a shared backstory to the potential of experiences in the game, creating a body of tales and backstories that, unlike in many other games, is entirely crafted by the players themselves (Myers, 2014; Cragoe, 2015). Much like creepypastas function as a means to pull in the reader and making the monster transgress into their reality (Henrikson, 2013), the porous quality of the liminoid space allows for the same spatial violation in video games. Minecraft’s emphasis on the player – game space relationship makes it especially prone to an invading force on this intimacy – like the arrivant (Henrikson, 2013).

Players of Minecraft experience this vast world individually or collectively. Even in single player, through the ubiquitous accounts of others play experiences, playing the game becomes a shared experience of many (Gu, 2014). This is essential to the collective haunting of the intruding arrivant (Henrikson, 2013). In addition to establishing a common background and lingo (Bascom, 1984) the shared space is enabling a sense of connectedness that allows for the intertextual web woven by the players (Green, 2011; Cragoe, 2015).

As it is the case with unchartered territory, there is an ambiguity of curiosity and caution on behalf of the explorer (Henrikson, 2013) and players in Minecraft are explorers by default. More than that, in remodelling the space and building shelter, players are effectively conquering the land, domesticating a part of the world in an “explorative choreography” (Henrikson, 2013). It is in this action, that they are likely to encounter an arrivant, that plays, or dances, with them (Green, 2011; Henrikson, 2013).
4 Conclusion

“To assume that the text does not have consequence in the world of the everyday, that its outcomes will not in turn affect the shape of the real, is a necessary fiction by which we gain free access to the fiction itself. “ (Stewart, 1982, p. 36)

The mediation of folklore in video games is an important subject for the further exploration of games. Not only does it show the specific potential of video games in direct comparison with other forms of mediated communication, it also leads to interesting conclusions on the very nature of the play experience. As evident by the emergence of Herobrine and similar entities, video games are not merely consumed but inspire extra-textual production that can influence other forms of media, leading to a pan-media phenomenon. In an act reminiscent of accidental ‘playbour’ such occurrences can be fostered by developers for promotional and commercial purposes (Bergstrom, et al., 2015). Games have a unique potential for players to interact with legends, thereby re-negotiating their version of the legend in a way that no other medium provides. The virtuality of the experience does not diminish the effect, as the interaction itself is as real as it needs to be in the liminoid space of the game.

Legend creations in games suggest that the liminoid and the productive process don’t exclude each other. Much like other forms of para-text production, legend creation in games is evidence of the productiveness in play and in fact resembles the “actualization of imagination” described by Denegri-Knott and Molesworth (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2007). Furthermore as a description of space, the liminoid serves as a viable model to describe the curious relationship between players and their established legends, akin to Henrikson’s “danse macabre” (Henrikson, 2013).

Herobrine may have never been coded into Minecraft the software, but it is clear that he has encoded himself into Minecraft the shared experience. The effects are broad and ubiquitous, and he transgresses from the virtual into the real as he shapes discussion, perception and fuels an ongoing relationship between players, fan-producers and developers offering a shared experience for all.

**Literature**


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**Biography**

ROMAN OHLENDORF is a master’s student at the College of Business Arts and Social Sciences at Brunel University London, United Kingdom. His previous research covers the materiality of virtual objects and the cultural significance of data formats to software piracy groups. His interests include the role of games in society and their potential for emergent behaviour.

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